

SPYING OUT THE LAND



THE children of Israel remained in the vicinity of the mountain called Sinai for some time while the tabernacle was being built. Then God indicated that he wanted them to continue their journey toward the Promised Land of Canaan. God caused a cloud to float in the air over the tabernacle, which was his way of telling the Israelites that he would protect them. When it was time for them to continue their journey he made this cloud move away from the tabernacle, and in the direction he wanted the people to go. The tabernacle was built in many sections and could be taken apart and moved.

Well, that cloud kept moving day by day, until it led the children of Israel very near to the border of Canaan, to a place called Kadesh-barnea. There the cloud stopped moving, and the people knew that God wanted them to stay there for awhile.

Then God told Moses to choose twelve chief men, or rulers, from among the people, and send them over into the land of Canaan to find out what kind of country it was, and to see what the people were like. You remember, don't you, that Jacob had twelve sons. Now the Israelites were divided into twelve large families, or tribes,

each tribe being descendants of one of Jacob's sons. So Moses selected a ruler from each of the twelve tribes and sent them into Canaan to spy out the land.

Even now, in times of war, nations send spies into other countries to find out all they can, don't they? The land of Canaan really belonged to the Israelites, but during the long time they had been slaves in Egypt other people had lived in it. Now it was necessary for the Israelites to conquer these other people in order to get the land that belonged to them, and it seemed very wise to send these spies into the country to obtain all the information possible.

So the twelve spies crossed over the border of Canaan into the Promised Land. They traveled up and down the country. They found it to be a very wonderful country. Food of all kinds was growing there in great abundance. The spies remained in Canaan for forty days, so you see they had plenty of time to find out all they needed to know.

Just as the spies were ready to return to the Israelites with their report, they picked a cluster of grapes in Canaan, and it was so large that it required two of them to carry it. Wouldn't you like to have had some of those grapes to eat? When they showed this large cluster of grapes to the Israelites you can imagine how surprised they must have been!

The spies all agreed that Canaan was a wonderful country, and that it would be a great place for the Israelites to live, but all except two of them were afraid of the Canaanites. They told Moses and the Israelites that the people who lived in the land were very powerful; that they were mighty warriors. Why, they said, some of them were great giants! The spies said they felt as small as grasshoppers when they stood beside those giants. The spies surely were frightened.

What do you suppose happened then? Why, ten of the spies advised Moses and the Israelites not even to try entering the land, because if they did they would surely be defeated. They were sure that all the men of Israel would be killed and that the women and children would again become slaves.

There were only two of the twelve spies who didn't agree with this advice. These were Joshua and Caleb. They had great faith in God, and believed that God would help them conquer the people of Canaan. So they advised the Israelites not to be afraid, but to go in and possess the land.

But most of the Israelites didn't have very much faith in God. They knew that God had done wonderful things for them. They knew how he had saved them from the plagues in Egypt. They remembered the wonderful way he had brought them through the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army which tried to capture them. They knew that he was sending them bread from heaven which they called manna. Yet they didn't believe God would be able to help them conquer the people of Canaan, so they decided not to follow the advice of the two spies who believed in God.

The Bible tells us that the Israelites were a "stiff-necked" people, which means that they were stubborn and disobedient to God. Well, we can see why God called them stiff-necked, can't we? He had done all those wonderful things for them—he had delivered them from Egyptian bondage and brought them safely to the border of the Promised Land, and now they were afraid to move into the land.

And not only that, but the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt. Yes, some of them talked things over and decided that they would select a new leader who would show them the way back to the land of bondage.

Surely the Israelites were very disobedient to God, but God loved them, so he wouldn't let them select a new leader and go back to Egypt. That night God spoke to Moses from the tabernacle, saying that the Israelites would have to remain in the wilderness for forty years! Just as the spies had spent forty days spying out the land of Canaan, so now God's people would have to remain in the wilderness forty years. God told Moses that during these forty years all the Israelites would die who were then twenty years old or more. You see, it was these grown-up folks who had rebelled against God, so God didn't want them to enter the Promised Land at all.

God told Moses that there were only two men of all the Israelites who were then twenty years old or more who would still be living at the close of the forty years in the wilderness, and they would be Caleb and Joshua, the two spies who advised the people to trust God. They believed that God would help them to conquer the people of Canaan and take possession of the land. God was pleased that these two men believed in him. God is always pleased with us when we believe him.

When Moses told the Israelites that God had decided they would have to remain in the wilderness, they changed their minds and wanted to go right into Canaan. Weren't they stubborn! And they tried to do it, but because God did not help the Israelites the Canaanites were able to defeat them and drive them back. This really did frighten the Israelites, so they settled down for their long stay in the wilderness.

We should always remember that if we try to do what God wants us to do he will help us, but if we try to do something he does not want us to do, we are sure to fail. We may think we are getting along very well doing what he does not want us to do, but sooner or later we will learn that we would have been much better off had we obeyed God. Let us try to remember that!

QUESTIONS

- Whom did Moses send into the land of Canaan as spies, and what did they learn while there?
- What did these spies report to Moses, and did they all agree?
- How long did the Israelites remain in the wilderness before God allowed them to go into the Promised Land?