

## “Grasshoppers”

It was to be a great and decisive moment in the history of Israel: They are about ready to enter the promised land - Canaan! Before they enter the land, Moses, their leader, sends out 12 spies to check things out. For 40 days they are gone, spying out the land. After the 40 days, they come back with a report. They say to Moses, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit" (Numbers 13:27). They had brought back a huge cluster of grapes, and some figs and pomegranates. "It's a rich, fertile land" they exclaim. But . . . . "The people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there" (Numbers 13:28). It's a lush country, they say, but the people there are strong, the cities are well defended, and the descendants of Anak are there – they are physical giants!

But 2 of the 12 spies – Caleb and Joshua - disagree with this majority report. Caleb speaks up: "But Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, 'Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it'" (Numbers 13:30). However, the other 10 spies argue against this: "Then the men who had gone up with him said, 'We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we'" (verse 31). Besides, they remind them, the people there are giants! "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them" (Numbers 13:33). The Common English Bible has it: "We saw ourselves as grasshoppers."

When I was younger and played baseball, softball, ice hockey, whenever we would face a team, before the game I'd look at the opposing players, and check out how big they were. If I felt they had a bigger team, I admit that I would feel a bit intimidated.

Try to imagine how the Israelites felt! They started to panic. Then they turned against their leaders, Moses and Aaron. "Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. And all the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?' So they said to one another, 'Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt'" (Numbers 14:1-4). They want to pick a new leader and go back to Egypt – to slavery!

Again, Caleb and Joshua try to dispel their fears, but the people threaten to stone them! Moses eventually has to beg God to forgive the people, and God does. But because they have rebelled against the Lord, that entire generation is kept from entering the Promised Land, and they have to spend the rest of their lives wandering in the wilderness. Only their children will inherit Canaan – except for Joshua and Caleb.

We're nothing but *grasshoppers* toward these huge people! This Old Testament story is so true to human nature, isn't it? *It shows two different attitudes in life.* One is positive – Joshua and Caleb say, "C'mon, men, let's just do it! We can take the land!" The other is negative – *the grasshopper syndrome* – "We'll never conquer that country! We're too weak. We're too little. The enemy's too big and too much for us."

This is the age old difference between the optimist and the pessimist, between the positive thinking person and the negative thinking person. Which do you tend to be? The positive thinking person, after spending 4 days of a week's vacation, says, "Man, am I lucky! I've got 3 days yet to go on my vacation. Sure beats working!" The negative thinker would say, "Oh, crap. Over half of my vacation is gone already." The positive thinker, after finishing a meal at a restaurant, might say, "Wow! That was great! The meat was delicious, the vegetables were so tasty, and the baked potato was done just right. And that dessert was scrumptious." But the negative thinker chimes in, "Yeah, but the rolls were too well done, and the coffee tasted like muddy water."

We all know persons who always tend to look on the dark side, always highlighting the worst. Their motto is: "With every silver lining there's a cloud!" This kind of negative attitude is *contagious* - the 10 spies and their negativism spread to all the Israelites - and everybody panicked!

How good it is that others are much more positive! A person known to be an incurable optimist fell out a window on the tenth story of a high rise building. As he passed the second floor window, someone inside heard him say, "Safe so far!"

A man had 2 young boys. Even though they were fairly young, already they had developed very different personalities and outlooks. The one always seemed to look on the bright side - cheerful, and always made the best of things. The other was just the opposite. He would whine and fret and complain, and always pick up on the worst. The father grew more and more concerned. He figured that each of them needed some balance in their attitudes. The positive thinking son needed to see that life was not always rosy. And the negative minded boy had to realize life was not always gloom and doom.

So, the dad put the negative thinking kid in a room just full of delightful items: big-screen TV, X-Box with a whole slew of games, all sorts of sports equipment - all kinds of things a young boy would dream of. And he put the other child in a room piled high with manure. After few hours, he checked in on them. He came to the negative kid's room, and when he opened the door his child just cried and fussed and whined, "There are so many toys to pick from I couldn't decide what to play with. How could you do this to me. I've been sitting here ever since you left thinking how miserable you've made me, forcing me to try to make up my mind."

Somewhat exasperated, he moved on to the other son's room, where the positive-minded boy was in 2-3 feet of manure. Before he even opened the door, he could hear the boy singing and whistling. When he opened the door, there he was, happily shoveling manure into a growing pile. The startled father said, "Son, what are you doing?" "Dad," the boy said, "with all this manure, I figured there had to be a pony somewhere!"

Which kid are you most like! Now, I'm not suggesting that we lose touch with reality, and look at everything through rose-colored glasses. But Christians, of all people, ought to exhibit a positive attitude towards life!

This whole matter also applies to congregations, and to the Church as a whole! It seems like every church has its share of negative thinkers. These are the people who will always look on the dark side of things. "Oh, that would never work here". There can be a hundred things right about a church, and these negative-minded people will nit-pick about something that isn't up to snuff (at least in their mind). This "grasshopper syndrome" has killed more visions and dreams within the church than we can imagine!

*"We saw ourselves as grasshoppers."* The enemy's too strong. We're like pip-squeaks towards them. We'll never be able to take the Promised Land! The next time we fall into that negative mode – can we *stop* – and see the positive! Negative-minded people tend to be unhappy people, and they spread that dismal attitude on to others. Negative-minded *Christians* certainly don't honor God, nor create an atmosphere where people are drawn to Jesus!

"We saw ourselves as grasshoppers" (Numbers 13:33). But something even deeper and more significant is going on in this Old Testament story. It's more than just a contrast between the optimist and the pessimist. This story points out the *battle between faith and unbelief*. The response of the people of Israel in saying they couldn't take the Promised Land was nothing short of unbelief, and a lack of trust in God - *because God had already told Israel that He would give them the land!* "The Lord said to Moses, 'Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, *which I am giving* to the Israelites" (Numbers 13:1). Remember, long before this event, part of the promise God gave to Abraham was that He would give them their own land! And hadn't God been faithful to them all these years - through the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob? And hadn't God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and sustained them in the desert so far by giving the manna? No wonder God gets disgusted with them! Numbers 14:11 tells us: "And the Lord said to Moses, 'How long will this people despise me? And how long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?'"

*We feel that tension between faith and unbelief too, don't we?* The obstacles seem so large, the enemies in life we face can seem so great, that we feel like puny grasshoppers! "I'll never be able to get through this grief and live with joy again...". "I don't think I'll ever be able to learn this new job...I'll never be able to pass this exam...". "I can't imagine going through this surgery, and the rehab that follows." The land of Canaan, and their giants, and their fortified cities, can represent all kinds of things we have to face in life!

Beyond the personal giants that we face, on a larger scale, some of the global issues we face can make us feel even more like puny little grasshoppers. Russia, China, North Korea, Iran – the threat they pose to world peace. The hateful political divide in our country – how depressing is that! Inflation, and the rising cost of just about everything. Moral decline in our country.

I don't want to trivialize these massive human problems, but this story in the Book of Numbers is a great reminder that when we trust God and His promises, we're no longer grasshoppers! Of course, we have to step out and *do something!* The Israelites couldn't just loaf and expect the Lord to *carry them* into the promised land. They had a battle to fight. But the Lord had already promised them the victory!

The noted philosopher-theologian Soren Kierkegaard once wrote: "When I read the New Testament I get the impression that in God's opinion every person is a giant...how ironical that every person is designed to be an Atlas, capable of bearing the weight of the world - and then see what (people) we are; and alas, how sorry a thing it is that we ourselves are to blame for what we are." *God made us to be giants, not grasshoppers!*

The Bible says God is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think! Just when we think there's no hope for the moral decline we are seeing, God sparks a revival in Wilmore, KY, and people literally from all over the world come to soak up the Spirit's presence on the campus of Asbury University. Just when we think we'll never get through the ordeal ahead of us, we find a strength beyond our own that comes from the Lord. Just when we think there's no answer to the dilemmas that threaten our nation and the world, God raises up a person or group and the course of history is changed.

You may remember the name of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. He is the Soviet man who took center stage some years ago in his battle for human rights. At one time, he was a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp. Like other prisoners, Solzhenitsyn worked in the fields, following a pattern of backbreaking labor and slow starvation. One day the hopelessness became too much to bear. He felt no purpose in fighting on and lost his will to live. Laying his shovel down, he walked slowly to a crude worksite bench. He knew at any moment a guard would order him up and when he failed to respond, hack him to death, probably with his own shovel. He'd seen it happen many times.

As he sat waiting, he felt a presence. Slowly he lifted up eyes, and next to him sat an old man with a wrinkled, utterly expressionless face. Hunched over, the man used a stick to draw something in the sand at Solzhenitsyn's feet. The man deliberately traced out the sign of the cross. As Solzhenitsyn stared at that rough outline, his entire perspective shifted. He knew he was merely one man against the all-powerful Soviet empire. Yet in that moment he also knew that the hope of all humankind was in God, and especially in the cross. Solzhenitsyn slowly got up, picked up his shovel, and went back to work - not knowing that his writings on truth and freedom would one day enflame the whole world.

"We saw ourselves as grasshoppers..." (Numbers 13:33). But God has given us so many promises! God wants every one of us to experience the fullness of life that Jesus came to give! To live a victorious life in Christ! Be a Caleb! Be a Joshua!

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.*  
*Community United Methodist Church*  
*April 16, 2023*

