

GOD THE SAVIOR

A Gospel-Centered Exploration in **NUMBERS** and **JOSHUA**



PHILIP NATION & ROBERT SMITH



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT AND WRITERS . . .	4
HOW TO USE THIS STUDY	5
SESSION 1:	6
<i>When Faith Fails</i>	
SESSION 2:	18
<i>The Bronze Serpent</i>	
SESSION 3:	30
<i>The God Who Goes Before</i>	
SESSION 4:	42
<i>The God of Unusual Victories</i>	
SESSION 5:	54
<i>Tainted by Sin</i>	
SESSION 6:	66
<i>In Light of God's Salvation</i>	
SMALL-GROUP TIPS AND VALUES	78

ABOUT THE GOSPEL PROJECT

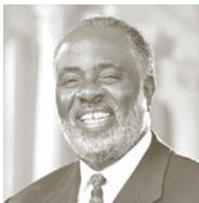
Some people see the Bible as a collection of stories with morals for life application. But it's so much more. Sure, the Bible has some stories in it, but it's also full of poetry, history, codes of law and civilization, songs, prophecy, letters—even a love letter. When you tie it all together, something remarkable happens. A story is revealed. One story. The story of redemption through Jesus. This is *The Gospel Project*.

When we begin to see the Bible as the story of redemption through Jesus Christ, God's plan to rescue the world from sin and death, our perspective changes. We no longer look primarily for what the Bible says about us but instead see what it tells us about God and what He has done. After all, it's the gospel that saves us, and when we encounter Jesus in the pages of Scripture, the gospel works on us, transforming us into His image. *We become God's gospel project.*

ABOUT THE WRITERS



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Alicia Claxon adapted this material for use with small groups.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Welcome to *The Gospel Project*, a gospel-centered small-group study that dives deep into the things of God, lifts up Jesus, focuses on the grand story of Scripture, and drives participants to be on mission. This small-group Bible study provides opportunities to study the Bible and to encounter the living Christ. *The Gospel Project* provides you with tools and resources to purposefully study God's Word and to grow in the faith and knowledge of God's Son. And what's more, you can do so in the company of others, encouraging and building up one another. Here are some things to remember that will help you maximize the usefulness of this resource:

GATHER A GROUP. We grow in the faith best in community with other believers, as we love, encourage, correct, and challenge one another. The life of a disciple of Christ was never meant to be lived alone, in isolation.

PRAY. Pray regularly for your group members.

PREPARE. This resource includes the Bible study content, three devotionals, and discussion questions for each session. Work through the session and devotionals in preparation for each group session. Take notes and record your own questions. Also consider the follow-up questions so you are ready to participate in and add to the discussion, bringing up your own notes and questions where appropriate.

RESOURCE YOURSELF. Make good use of the additional resources available on the Web at gospelproject.com/additionalresources and search for this specific title. Download a podcast. Read a blog post. Be intentional about learning from others in the faith. For tips on how to better lead groups or additional ideas for leading this Bible study, visit: ministrygrid.com/web/thegospelproject.

GROUP TIME. Gather together with your group to discuss the session and devotional content. Work through the follow-up questions and your own questions. Discuss the material and the implications for the lives of believers and the mission to which we have been called.

OVERFLOW. Remember... *The Gospel Project* is not just a Bible study. *We* are the project. The gospel is working on us. Don't let your preparation time be simply about the content. Let the truths of God's Word soak in as you study. Let God work on your heart first, and then pray that He will change the hearts of the other people in your group.



SESSION 1

WHEN FAITH FAILS

“Faithless is he that says farewell when the road darkens.”¹

J. R. R. TOLKIEN (1892-1973)

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Life is hard. Beyond the objective realities that we face in the world, such as disease, natural disasters, and death, there are other complications that happen along the way. Every day is filled with moments for decision-making. Some are simple, and some will change the course of your life forever.

Moments of decision come frequently in our lives, and the same was true of the people in the Bible. As we journey through the storyline of Scripture, we join the children of Israel as they come to the brink of the promised land for the first time. The God who promised to bring salvation to the world through the seed of Abraham has rescued Abraham's descendants from their slavery in Egypt. After a year in the wilderness, the Israelites have arrived at the doorstep to the land God promised. But before they enter, they are confronted with a decision that requires faith.

When have you faced a decision that required faith? What helped or hindered your faith during that time?

In this session, we see how God is faithful, even when human faithlessness leads to tragedy. The Israelites failed the test of faith as they were called to enter the promised land. In their example, we see what happens when we start looking at our own strength instead of God's. When our faith fails, we forget the power God has demonstrated in the past and we lose sight of His future promise. When our faith fails, we need a faithful representative who will plead to God in our place. As you work through this session, ask the Spirit to examine your heart and grow your sense of gratitude for the greatness of God's faithfulness.

Throughout the week, engage these daily study sections on your own. Each of these examines different examples of humanity's faithlessness and God's faithfulness. There are three daily readings to prepare you before your group meets for this session. Interact with the Scriptures, and be ready to interact with your small group.

1

God's Strength, Not Ours

The Lord once said to Abraham that He would make a great people (the nation of Israel), send them into a great land (Canaan), and provide great blessings through them (see Gen. 12:1-3). Centuries later, the Lord was now ready to move this people into the land, but obstacles arose, tempting Israel to look at their own strength instead of God's.

¹The LORD spoke to Moses: ²“Send men to scout out the land of Canaan I am giving to the Israelites. Send one man who is a leader among them from each of their ancestral tribes.”

.....

²⁶The men went back to Moses, Aaron, and the entire Israelite community in the Wilderness of Paran at Kadesh. They brought back a report for them and the whole community, and they showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷They reported to Moses: “We went into the land where you sent us. Indeed it is flowing with milk and honey, and here is some of its fruit. ²⁸However, the people living in the land are strong, and the cities are large and fortified. We also saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites are living in the land of the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live by the sea and along the Jordan.” ³⁰Then Caleb quieted the people in the presence of Moses and said, “We must go up and take possession of the land because we can certainly conquer it!” ³¹But the men who had gone up with him responded, “We can't go up against the people because they are stronger than we are!” ³²So they gave a negative report to the Israelites about the land they had scouted: “The land we passed through to explore is one that devours its inhabitants, and all the people we saw in it are men of great size. ³³We even saw the Nephilim there—the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim! To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and we must have seemed the same to them.”

NUMBERS 13:1-2,26-33

Ordinary men weren't sent into the land to spy it out. Instead, God wanted leaders from each tribe to do the reconnaissance work. They would see what God was going to deliver and report back to the people. Then, acting on faith, the people could go forward to claim what God had promised.

The early part of the spies' report could be summarized like this: “It's better than you can possibly imagine!” The natural resources of the land were like nothing they'd seen before.

Having lived all of their lives in Egyptian slavery with a brief stint in the wilderness, such abundance was surely overwhelming. But as is often the case in the Old Testament, the Israelites faltered in their faith. Right on the heels of describing the land as everything they could hope for, the spies also described why it was impossible to possess.

Why was the land everything they could hope for? What were the obstacles to taking the land?

Words like *large*, *strong*, and *fortified* were at the top of the spies' minds. When their faith faltered, they saw an unconquerable force before them. They took their eyes off the promise and put it on their enemies.

The spies had seen what they would have if the promise were fulfilled, but fear of the enemy caused them to lose faith. They had let go of their identity as the people of God. They were the people of promise, saved by the one true God, and commissioned to take the land God had for them. Instead, they looked at some really large soldiers and made a poor assessment of themselves, as if God were absent—"To ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers" (v. 33).

"Like grasshoppers" is how they described themselves, but it wasn't how the Lord would describe them. To God, the people were His children delivered from slavery and ready to take hold of the land of promise. This shows us that the failure of faith is both losing faith in God's power and losing a sense of yourself as a child in God's story of redemption.

Only through faith in God and His work do we gain a true understanding of the world and ourselves. Because of Christ's redemptive work on our behalf, our identity has changed. We're no longer an enemy, an outsider, a rebel, or lost in darkness. Instead, we're considered a member of God's family, an ambassador for Christ, and a child of light.

In the face of danger only Caleb and Joshua stood ready to forge ahead, but they were outnumbered by spies who believed the fortified cities were too great even for God to overcome.

When do you find it easiest for your feelings and fears to overwhelm your faith?

2

God's Power and Promise

What's likely to happen when your faith begins to falter? In the Book of Numbers, we see a people that didn't reflect on what God had done in the past, neither did they look forward to God's future promise. They were overcome by fear of death and despair.

¹ Then the whole community broke into loud cries, and the people wept that night. ² All the Israelites complained about Moses and Aaron, and the whole community told them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt, or if only we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the LORD bringing us into this land to die by the sword? Our wives and little children will become plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴ So they said to one another, "Let's appoint a leader and go back to Egypt." ⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell down with their faces to the ground in front of the whole assembly of the Israelite community. ⁶ Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who scouted out the land, tore their clothes ⁷ and said to the entire Israelite community: "The land we passed through and explored is an extremely good land. ⁸ If the LORD is pleased with us, He will bring us into this land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and give it to us. ⁹ Only don't rebel against the LORD, and don't be afraid of the people of the land, for we will devour them. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us. Don't be afraid of them!" ¹⁰ While the whole community threatened to stone them, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the Israelites at the tent of meeting. ¹¹ The LORD said to Moses, "How long will these people despise Me? How long will they not trust in Me despite all the signs I have performed among them? ¹² I will strike them with a plague and destroy them. Then I will make you into a greater and mightier nation than they are."

NUMBERS 14:1-12

When the leaders lost their faith, the people of Israel faced a crisis. Once the majority of spies said there was no hope, the Israelites went from wondering to mourning to outright rebellion. In the heat of the moment, the people's rebellion escalated. They took the ridiculous position that they would be better off dead! The people contemplated the merits of having died as slaves in Egypt or having died in the desert on the way to the promised land.

Moses and Aaron fell down in a posture of repentant prayer. Joshua and Caleb, the two faith-filled spies, tore their clothes as a sign of mourning. They entered into such postures because the rebellion of the people was a sin against God and grievous to the soul. These men wanted

to lead their people toward faith in the God who fulfills His promises. Their slavery had been broken. Deliverance of the nation through the wilderness had been assured. The promised land they had awaited was within sight. This was all due to the gracious hand of God.

What do you turn to for strength in moments when your faith is faltering?

God's work in the past isn't only for the history books. It's the assurance of what He can do in your present circumstances. As the church, we must also look at our present circumstances from the viewpoint of God's work in the past and His promise for the future.

As believers, we have been freed from sin. The temptation we face is an impossible power to overcome—when we fight on our own. The Israelites faced enemies who were bigger, stronger, and had every perceivable advantage. The church stands against the world, the flesh, and the Devil, who all seem to carry an advantage over us, but this too is just perceived.

When have you faced a difficult circumstance from which God delivered you? Did reflecting on God's work in your life in the past give you strength to face that trial? Why or why not?

To ensure that the people clearly understood the gravity of both their history and their present circumstances, the Lord personally visited them. As Joshua and Caleb bowed down and cried out for the people to remember God's presence among them, God did the work Himself. Every work of God in our lives is an opportunity to trust Him more deeply.

As Christians, we have something the Israelites did not. We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God personally resides in us, as believers in Jesus, to give a witness of His ongoing work. The Holy Spirit's presence with us is a down payment of what He has promised will be fulfilled in the future.

Why does the Spirit dwelling in us give us an advantage over the Israelites whenever our faith begins to falter?

3

Our Perfect Advocate

How did the Lord respond to the people's faithlessness in the Book of Numbers? He was ready to destroy them, until Moses began to intercede for his people. He lifted up the name of God and reminded God of His character:

¹³ But Moses replied to the LORD, "The Egyptians will hear about it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from them. ¹⁴ They will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, LORD, are among these people, how You, LORD, are seen face to face, how Your cloud stands over them, and how You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. ¹⁵ If You kill this people with a single blow, the nations that have heard of Your fame will declare, ¹⁶ 'Since the LORD wasn't able to bring this people into the land He swore to give them, He has slaughtered them in the wilderness.' ¹⁷ "So now, may my LORD's power be magnified just as You have spoken: ¹⁸ The LORD is slow to anger and rich in faithful love, forgiving wrongdoing and rebellion. But He will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' wrongdoing on the children to the third and fourth generation. ¹⁹ Please pardon the wrongdoing of this people, in keeping with the greatness of Your faithful love, just as You have forgiven them from Egypt until now." ²⁰ The LORD responded, "I have pardoned them as you requested."

NUMBERS 14:13-20

Moses stood before God as the representative for his people. He pleaded with God to show mercy so that the name of the Lord would be more widely known. Certainly, any work that God does proves His power, but Moses prayed that God would use this circumstance of the Hebrews' rebellion to display His power in His ability to forgive sin—once again.

Moses asked God to forgive "in keeping with the greatness of Your faithful love, just as You have forgiven them from Egypt until now" (v. 19). The forgiveness of our Heavenly Father is based on His love, not on our merit, penitent spirit, or ability to straighten out our lives. When God immediately pardoned the sin of the Israelites, He mentioned nothing of their ability to keep covenant faithfulness. The good news given to us by God is that His forgiveness is based on His power, not on our abilities.

What characteristics of God did Moses mention when pleading for mercy?

God could have displayed His power in judgment. Why do you think Moses asked for mercy?

When Moses stood before God and begged for mercy upon the people, he gave us a picture of what was to come. The people needed an advocate. They had one in Moses. The problem, however, was that Moses died, and he is still dead! This was a temporary advocacy by a temporary leader in a temporary time. We need a permanent solution.

God's pardon finds its ultimate fulfillment not in the temporary circumstance of the Israelites standing on the edge of the promised land. Rather, we have found it in the journey Jesus made to the cross, the grave, and rising from the dead. Only God in the flesh can be our perfect advocate.

Jesus lived as we do so as to sympathize with our weaknesses. Israel would spend 40 years in the wilderness, wandering around in faithlessness. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan, but unlike Israel, He passed the test. As the perfect representative, He gave the sacrifice we should give so as to grant salvation by His grace and through our faith. He rose from the dead, a state we can't overcome, so as to defeat sin, death, hell, and the Enemy. And now Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us every moment of our existence.

Furthermore, because we've been fully represented before God by Jesus, we now are able to represent God before the people of the world who don't know Him. Today, our calling isn't to conquer the nations but to take the gospel to them. No matter if the obstacles make us feel like "grasshoppers," we trust that God's power is greater than our own and that He will give us all we need to accomplish His mission.

As the people's representative, Moses showed interest in what "the nations" would think if God destroyed the Israelites. How can the church show interest in seeing that the glory of God's forgiveness is known among the nations?



GROUP STUDY

Warm Up

In life, do you tend to see obstacles or possibilities first? Explain.

When have you faced something that seemed impossible?

How did you approach the situation? What were the results?

When we consider what we face in life, we must view our circumstances in light of this reality: God has empowered believers to face both difficulties and temptations. God's Spirit works in us so that we can accomplish God's assignment for us.

During this time you will have an opportunity to discuss what God revealed to you throughout the week. Listed on the next page are some of the questions from your daily reading assignments. They will guide your small group discussion.

“For faith is only real when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the act of obedience.”²

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER (1906-1945)

Discussion

1. When have you faced a decision that required faith? What helped or hindered your faith during that time?
2. When do you find it easiest for your feelings and fears to overwhelm your faith?
3. What do you turn to for strength in moments when your faith is faltering? Why?
4. When have you faced a difficult circumstance from which God delivered you?
5. Did reflecting on God's work in your life in the past give you strength to face that trial? Why or why not?
6. Why does the Spirit dwelling in us give us an advantage over the Israelites whenever our faith begins to falter?
7. What characteristics of God did Moses mention when pleading for mercy?
8. How can the church show interest in seeing that the glory of God's forgiveness is known among the nations?

Conclusion

The world is filled with insurmountable obstacles. We face enemies stronger than we can imagine; our hearts fill up with doubts and fears that we try to fend off. But in the end, we need our Great High Priest, King Jesus, to rescue us from our sin, our fear, and our doubt. Just as God met the Hebrews in the desert with a desire to restore, He will meet you in the desert places of life. It's God's desire to redeem, not destroy. He enjoys delivering you into the work He has prepared for His people. It's the beauty of the gospel that leads us to repent and follow Him with a growing faith.

Spend some time praying this for you and for your group:

"God, we have seen Your sovereignty and faithfulness unfold throughout history. We know that nothing is impossible for You. Forgive us when we fail to trust Your plans. Strengthen our faith so that it will stand no matter what we face."

1. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), 336.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 64
3. John Wesley, quoted in *Be Available*, by Warren Wiersbe (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 76.

