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Exploring the Promised Land

Scripture

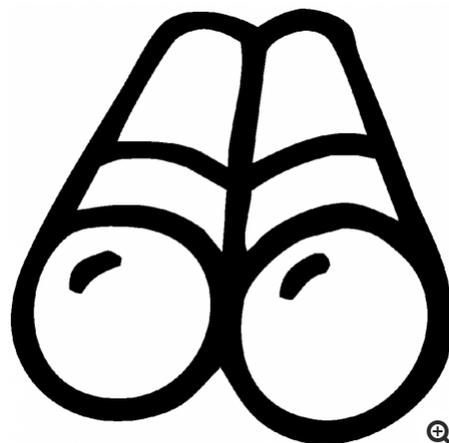
[Numbers 13-14](#)

Focus

The people of Israel forgot to trust God's promise to bring them safely to Canaan.

Faith Nurture Goals

- Wonder why the people forgot God's promises to them.
- Wonder at God's patience with the people who forgot to trust God's promises.
- Trust God's promises to us, as Joshua and Caleb did.
- Thank God for keeping each promise to us.



Leader Reflection

Preparing to Tell God's Story

After months of hardship and miracles in the wilderness, and after covenanting with God at Sinai, the moment has come for the Israelites to return to the land of their ancestors, the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God directs Moses to choose a man from each tribe to explore the land before they enter. While God has promised to "give" them the land, it seems wise to get some sense of its contours and potential problems they might encounter. The exploration seems to be intended more to raise expectations than to dash hopes.

At first the explorers' report seems exciting and wonderful; the promised land is truly a "land flowing with milk and honey" (13:27). But soon they warn of its large, fortified cities and its wild tribes of supersized people. You can almost feel the people's hearts sinking as they listen. Then Caleb, one of the explorers, speaks up: "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it." But his response gets lost in further doom and gloom about the huge men before whom "we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes" (v. 33).

Soon there is a full-scale rebellion. The Israelites grumble against their leaders and even against the Lord himself: "If only we had died in Egypt. . . . Why is the Lord bringing us to this land only to fall by the sword?" (14:3). They are ready to vote in another leader and march back to Egypt.

The Lord becomes very angry and tells Moses he is going to destroy the people, much as he threatened after they had worshipped the golden calf. God even offers to start over by making of Moses a new nation. Moses, again as at Sinai, pleads for the people. His arguments are similar. Basically they're a variation of "What will the neighbors say?" God's name, he points out, will be mud if he abandons his people now (v. 16).

What follows next is one of the most powerful, heartfelt prayers for mercy anywhere in the Bible. It pleads for forgiveness, not based on any possible change in the people of Israel and certainly not on any merit on their part. Moses' plea is based solely on the character of God himself: "slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people" (vv. 17-19).

Then God displays the very character Moses had described in his prayer. The Lord replied, "I have forgiven them, as you asked." The power of prayer! But God also punishes sin, and God's just judgment falls on this rebellious generation, who will never see the land but who are condemned to forty more years of wandering in the wilderness. Only their children will see the promised land.

While the Israelites want to accept the forgiveness, they refuse to bow under the judgment. They decide that in repentance they will march against the people of the land in their own strength. But Moses says, "Because you have turned away from the Lord , he will not be with you and you will fall by the sword" (v. 43). The Amalekites and Canaanites would send them running in defeat.

Steps

Step 1 Breathe

Use this time to focus your attention on God.

Do this with me: calm your head, heart, and hands as you slowly breathe in . . . and out. *(Demonstrate a few deep "in and out breaths" with eyes closed.)*

Step 2 Tell and Wonder

Files: [Story Symbols \(full unit\): Year 2 Unit 4](#)

Re★formed

The destiny of the Israelites, and of every believer, lies ultimately not in what we can do but in the character and promises of God. God is love, and God always keeps promises, even when we do not.

Let's enter God's story together. Here's the story symbol for the part of God's story that we'll be spending time in today. I wonder what clues it gives us about the story we're about to hear? *(Show the story symbol. Accept any answers without giving away whether or not the kids have guessed correctly.)*

Listen closely as we read the story together to see which story our symbol represents.

Read "Exploring the Promised Land" aloud, pausing throughout to allow children to answer the wondering questions. NOTE: It's always a good idea to read through the story beforehand so you'll be able to tell it well.

You can also read the story from a children's Bible or a simplified translation of Scripture like the New International Reader's Version (NIRV). Remember to pause throughout to allow time to wonder.

Story: Exploring the Promised Land Numbers 13-14

Open the Bible to Numbers 13. Show the children the name of the book and the chapter where today's story is found. Read Numbers 13:1-2 aloud. Then place the Bible on your lap and begin.

God's people have been traveling for a long time! They have been trudging through the hot sand in the scorching sun. They are tired of walking! That's why they are *beyond happy* when Moses tells them the news: We're almost there!

If you were there and heard the news, how would you have felt? (Pause for responses.) If you were all together when you heard the fantastic news, suggest ways you might have celebrated as a group. (Pause for responses.)

Moses announced to everyone, "God wants me to send one person from each tribe of Israel to explore our new land—the land God promised to give us!" There were twelve tribes—that's another name for the groups the Israelites were divided into—so that meant that twelve men would be sent into Canaan to check out the situation there.

Now these men couldn't just walk into Canaan and announce that they were about to take over the land. No! They had to act like spies. Before they left, Moses told them, "We need to know if there are many people there and whether they are strong or weak. It would also be nice to know whether the land has water and whether it is good for growing things. If you find fruit, bring some back for us to try."

I wonder why Moses would want to know if there were a lot of people there and if they were strong or weak. (Pause for responses.)

As the other people watched, the twelve spies waved goodbye and started walking toward the promised land. Before long they were entering the land God promised to give them. Their eyes grew large and their excitement grew. They had been wandering for so long they had almost forgotten such beautiful land existed! They cut down a branch of grapes and gathered some pomegranates and figs to bring back to Moses.

The spies were so excited—until, that is, they began noticing some other things. Everywhere they looked they saw big strong walls around big strong cities. They also saw people—big, strong-looking people.

They pointed and said to each other, "Look! Have you ever seen walls like that? No way could we break through those walls!"

"Yeah!" said another. "And take a look at the people! I'd call them giants for sure. They make us look like puny little grasshoppers."

So when the spies returned to Moses and the Israelites to report about the land, they told them that the land was a very good land and showed the people the fruit they had brought back. But, they also told them that the people who lived there were very strong and their cities were surrounded by big, secure walls.

Caleb, one of the spies, spoke up, encouraging the people, "We should go at once and live in this land for we will be able to take it." But the other spies disagreed with him, saying they would be destroyed if they tried to take the land God promised to them.

Hmm. I'm wondering about something. Can you name some things they seem to be forgetting? (*Pause for responses.*)

You're right! And I'm happy to say that Caleb and Joshua, one of the other spies, disagreed with the ones who were afraid. They were sure—*positive*—that their big and powerful God—their God who had already done so many wonderful miracles—could keep the promise to give them this land.

They reminded the others, "God will bring us into this beautiful land and give it to us. Do not fear the people in this land. While God is with us, there is no need to fear these people."

But the people didn't listen. They started grumbling and complaining. They said to Moses, "If only we had died in Egypt or out here in the desert. Why did God bring us all this way just to let us die in some strange place? We should choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!"

What do you think of their reaction? (*Pause for responses.*) **How do you think God felt as God listened to them?** (*Pause for responses.*)

God called to Moses and said, "How long will these people refuse to believe in me? Even after all of the miracles they have seen, they still don't trust me or believe my promises." Moses prayed to God and begged God to remember the promises to love and forgive the people. Moses pleaded with God to show God's power by bringing the people into the promised land. God heard Moses' prayer and God forgave the people, just as Moses asked.

But because the people had once again failed to trust God, their actions would have consequences. God said, "Because they didn't believe in me and trust my promises, none of these people, except Joshua and Caleb, will ever get to live in the promised land. Instead, all of you must live for *forty more years* in this desert. I will bring your children into the new land—but I won't bring you!"

The people turned around and slowly trudged over the hot sand. This was not good news!

But listen! God was *still* with them and *still* took care of them. And one day, they knew for sure, God would bring their children into the wonderful promised land—exactly as God had promised.

Close your Bible and set it aside. The children will probably feel disappointed by this story— and rightly so. Listen to their comments and reactions as you reflect and wonder about it together. Throughout your wondering time, use every opportunity to affirm how great and loving our God is. Even when we disobey, God still loves us!

Step **3** Pray

Close in prayer, inviting the kids to share any prayer requests they might have and including those in your prayer. You may wish to ask whether there are any kids who would like to help you pray aloud today and then give those volunteers one of the prayer requests to pray for when you pause during the prayer. Your prayer might go something like this:

Awesome God,

You were faithful with the Israelite people every time they forgot your promises. Thank you for being faithful to us too. We're so glad your promises weren't just for people long ago but are for us too! Lord, we know you promise to always hear our prayers, and we have some things we'd like to pray about today.

Please be with *(name a prayer request here and cue any volunteers to pray for the other requests.)*

Thanks for listening, God. Thanks for loving us, God. Thanks for always, always, always keeping your promises.

Amen.

See [5 Ways to Pray with Kids](#) for other ways to pray.

Step **4** Respond

Select and do one or more of the response activities from God's Big Story card #32 or check out [5 Ways to Retell a Bible Story with Kids](#) for some fun ways to retell this story. Include older kids in the retelling by having them read the story aloud while the younger children act it out.

**God's Big Story cards can be ordered from FaithAliveResources.org.*

Easy Extras

1. Arrival Activity: Word Puzzle

Materials: Word puzzle printable page, one per person • pencils

Files: [Printable : Word Puzzle](#)

Invite the kids to try to figure out the message on the word puzzle. (Depending on the ages in your group and the individual learning styles, you might have the kids solve the puzzle with a buddy or two, or perhaps even as a full group.) If they are stumped after a minute or so, give them the second letter of each word. When they finish, have them give God a round of applause for always keeping promises. Then you give them an ovation for completing the puzzle.

Tip

If you're leading this session virtually, it might be best to work on the puzzle together as a group to give the children a chance to interact with each other before listening to today's story.

2. Age-Specific Activities

Click below to access the full age-specific *Dwell* session for this story:

- 2nd-3rd Grade: [Exploring the Promised Land](#)