

Dr. Cortez Cooper
Eagle Heights Presbyterian Church
Winchester, Virginia
August 08, 2010

The Tyranny of the Circumstantial

Numbers 13:25 - 14:10

What a wonderful story, but one fraught with many, many difficulties and the manifestation is not a wholesome manifestation of faith and confidence in God that we find here. We go to the book of Numbers - God has led His people out of bondage in Egypt. He has delivered them from their slavery. He has brought them, now, up to this place of entry into the Promised Land. God has, I believe, in a concession to their weakness and lack of faith, God has said to Moses, "Send out some spies. Choose one man from each of the twelve tribes and let them go out and on this reconnaissance mission. Let them see the land. Let them come back then and make a report to you, Moses, and to all the people about the land that I have promised to them and to you that they might go in." It's a forty-day mission, it turns out, and at the end of forty days, as we'll see, the spies come back to report, and just a tip-off here, that some of the interesting things is Israel has never been a democracy or a republic. Israel's a monarchy and Israel has a king. His name is Yaweh, Jehovah, the LORD. His name is Elohim, the Mighty God. That's His name and He is the King. But see how easy it is for these people and perhaps for us to forget that. The Word of God, reading from Numbers Chapter thirteen at verse twenty-five and some verses that follow:

Numbers 13:25 - 14:10

²⁵At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan."

³⁰But 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." ³¹Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are." ³²So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

¹Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night. ²And all the people of Israel grumbled 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! ³Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt."

⁵Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes ⁷and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, "The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸If the LORD delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them." ¹⁰ Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the LORD appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

The Word of God.

So that now, in the eyes of the people, the great monarchy, in which God alone is King, becomes a democracy. So that the majority vote will prevail. And did you hear that, did you listen carefully? Listen to the fact that there is a majority report and a minority report. It sounded like a PCA General Assembly to me. You always have all these reports, and some are majority reports and somebody gets up and says, "I want to make a minority report." Well, you had a majority report because ten of the twelve spies said, "There's no way we can do this. There's no way we can do this." And two of them, namely Joshua and Caleb, said, "Whoever thought we could do this? That's not the point. God's going to do it. If God's pleased with us he's going to do it through us. Let's go get this real-estate, because God promised it to us." However, the majority prevailed and the ten votes are accepted as the rationale and the decision for the people of Israel. And so the people begin to complain against Moses and Aaron, their leaders, but did you notice more than that they complained against God. They asked the question, "Why is the LORD... Why is the LORD bringing us into this place that we might die by the sword? Why has the LORD led us to a place where our children are going to be on spear-points? As prey (P-R-E-Y), as prey, as victims of these gigantic men who live in the Canaanite lands? Why have you, Moses, why have you, Aaron, led us here? Why have you, God, led us to this place that we would die by the sword."

I think there are a number of issues raised here that don't pertain only to the Israelites of Moses' time. I think there are points that pertain very sharply to you and me. I think there are things to learn from this that are huge in our lives right now. Because we do live in a generation, a time and a place in history where troubles have come and more troubles are coming. And against this backdrop and this reality of much evil in this world and much evil in our own land and the difficulties and the vexations which are there, coupled with personal difficulties and disillusionments and disappointments, I think would constitute for us a challenge like this. Because you see the essence of the majority report in Israel and the

The Tyranny of the Circumstantial August 8, 2010

turning away from the LORD and rebelling against Him was “The Tyranny of the Circumstantial.” That’s really what it was. You might even go on to say that the tyranny of urgent things in our daily lives that blot out the Son of God’s blessing. “The Tyranny of the Circumstantial,” the absolute rulership of the circumstantial in our lives.

As I go through this message, we come to see that there lodged in the heart of the Israelites a rebellious lack of faith. But I’m going to ask you, please, to question your own faith, to question yourself about these things, and to ask yourself to go along. Those Israelites, the twelve of the spies and all the nation, faced certain difficult circumstances. Well, we have circumstances, don’t we? We face some things that are quite difficult. What is our perspective? What is the manner in which we handle, or don’t, our circumstances. Well, very frequently I greet people, “How are you doing today?” And they say, “Fine, under the circumstances.” To which I respond, “What are you doing, as a Christian, under the circumstances?” Isn’t that a good question? What are you, a Christian, doing under the circumstances. And honesty would compel us, wouldn’t it, that often that’s exactly where we are. We are **under** the circumstances. Not above them, not even beside them, we are under them. They are compellingly the core of our lives just now.

One time some years ago, this is just before cellphones came into common usage. I’m sitting in the offices of a man that, I’m sure of, is involved in deals of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars. And the telephone rang, and he was sitting there with a guy who has a transaction worth a lot of money, and the telephone rang and he answered it. His administrative assistant had called him about something and he answered it. And he interrupted this particular conversation with the man with whom he was having the transaction. And under that tyranny of the urgent thing, and he admitted later to me that that really wasn’t that important, that man who had a crucial deal with him walked out without the transaction because that man, that businessman was diverted from something important by something very unimportant but - listen - urgent. And I see this happening all the time on our cellphones, when we’re involved in conversations that are deeply serious and urgent, the phone rings and we answer it. There’s more of that stuff going on where you shop and where you live and where you work than you can believe! Texting all time, texting all the time, is that important or not? And is it conceivable that many texts and many messages interdict more important things?

Are we being diverted by the tyranny of the circumstantial? I think so. I really think so. Are we being diverted by the urgent away from things that are crucially important? I believe so. I believe so. So the lesson is here in Scripture for us. The Israelites lived under the tyranny of their circumstances. How did that happen? Well, I’m going to do a simple thing. I’m going to lift out five characteristics of the ten spies, the majority reporters, and all of Israel that followed them, that went with their report, and contrast those five things, those characteristics of the report of those ten, with the report of two, Joshua and Caleb, and we’ll see a perfect alignment so that you have the same issues being addressed from a different pole altogether.

First, the majority report, the ten spies who came, by the way, there was some basic agreement, wasn’t there? The ten agreed with the two and all twelve said, “It is a land flowing with milk and honey. It is a marvelous land. It is everything God

said it is - a land flowing with milk and honey." But there was a distinction because the ten said, "We better not try this. We'll be squashed by the Anakim, these giants who live there. We'll be crushed by these fortified cities. We have no way of doing this." The two begged to differ seriously. What about the ten? What about the people that went with them? Well, of course, you know they had a "grasshopper syndrome." That was their main problem. They had a "grasshopper syndrome." If you're a psychologist you see it right away because they say, "We saw ourselves as grasshoppers and we are sure that those people saw us the same way. They saw us as grasshoppers. Step on them and squash them. This is the grasshopper syndrome.

First point: They had doubting hearts and double minds. What does that mean? They had a very low view of God. The God who had brought them out miraculously from their slavery, the God who had opened the Red Sea, the God who had fed them in the desert and who had provided water from rocks, "That God," they said, "is not able to handle these circumstances." Although those are circumstances God had set up and God had managed those, but obviously they believed that God could not handle **these** circumstances, **these** giants in the land, **these** fortified cities, **these** lands that devoured its inhabitants. They had doubting hearts. They doubted God's promises; they doubted His ability to fulfill his promises for them, their circumstances, their problems, their needs, their challenges, their issues, their enemies then loomed largely and formidably before them. And they were controlled, absolutely and totally controlled, by the circumstantial and by the urgent. Because you see, always, the doubting heart falls over into a double mind. James addresses this, I'm sure you know, in chapter one of his book in the New Testament, verses five through eight, ask in faith with no doubting. "For the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. He is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways." He is a double-minded man, unstable in all ways. "Maybe it's this, maybe it's that, maybe it's both of them. I don't know." Unstable. Instability is a great enemy of the Christian. That means when your gaze is not riveted on God as the only keeper of promises, the only truly faithful one. These people in their grasshopper syndrome obviously forgot that. And they had serious doubts about God's ability to handle their circumstances.

Second: Speaking of the grasshopper syndrome, they had a distorted image of themselves and a distorted view of their circumstances - a distorted image of themselves and of their circumstances. They say, "We seem to ourselves as grasshoppers and we're sure we look the same way to the Canaanites."

It reminds me, some of you are too young to remember her, but there was a comedienne named Phyllis Diller, who was a hoot every time I ever saw her on television or heard her on *[the]* radio. She was an absolute hoot, and she was always deprecating herself. She was not overly attractive; I think that would be fair to say. She always had this frowsy hair and these funny glance and one night on television she was being interviewed and she was telling the person interviewing her *[that]* she had a great experience that day. He said, "What was that?" She said, "Well, I spent seven hours in the beauty parlor - *[pause]* - and that was just for an estimate!" Boy, we can relate to that, can't we, when we've felt so small, so inconsequential, so ugly and so out of step with everything. I believe we all have those times. I really believe we do, "Seven hours, and that was just for an estimate."

These Israelites were exactly there. “There’s no way we can do this. There is simply no way!” Because their circumstances loomed so largely, then they said, of course, “Our little ones will become their prey.” And you’ve heard me on this before. Really? Really? The children are going to be killed? Our children will end up on the lance-points, remember? They’re going to die. Well, flash forward thirty-eight years when they go in. Who goes in? The children! Who does not go in? The majority of Israel. Two of them go in from the adult generation. Guess who? Joshua and Caleb. How interesting. Just flash forward to see! They were exactly wrong in every point. They were the prey, not the children. And the LORD said to Moses subsequently and to Aaron, “I will deal with these people, and all of this adult generation, who will die before I lead the nation in.” Distorted image of themselves – they did not really see themselves as kept by the LORD who had led them out and blessed them. How about you, as a Christian? Your circumstances sometimes loom largely, too, don’t they? Well, in those moments, those times in your life, do you see yourself as a child of the King? Do you really know that he is larger than your circumstances? Do you really believe that he will undertake for you this hard thing at the hard time? Really? Do you really believe that? Or do we Christians go down into despondency just as quickly, perhaps more so, as pagans, because we have this distorted image of ourselves? We don’t see ourselves as children kept and protected by the King. Somehow we think we’re in a democracy now, or, at best, a republic and not a monarchy.

I’m really looking forward to Heaven and one of the reasons is that I’m looking forward to the Monarchy in operation. There’s nothing in Scripture about ballot boxes in Heaven. There’s nothing there about what we will do for Him, but all about what He has done and will do, and is doing for us. Distorted image of themselves, distorted image of their situation, of their circumstances of their challenges.

Third thing: Those people had a dim memory, and they were downhearted. They had a dim memory and they were downhearted. So they began crying and cringing and complaining and carping and conspiring. Remember the backfield in high-school that I played in: Mumble, Stumble, Grumble, and Fumble? There they are. Carping, complaining, griping all the time. Why? Well, among other things they had forgotten their own song. Only, only a few months before. They are now only a year and a half, two years into the pilgrimage. So only a few months before. Listen to this. After God opened the Red Sea, carried them across on dry land and then destroyed Pharaoh’s army with its chariots following. Just after that Moses presented a song, but it says in Exodus fifteen in the opening verses, “Then Moses *and* the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD...” The people sang with Moses – wasn’t just Moses. What did they sing? “I will sing to the LORD.” This is Exodus fifteen, the opening verses:

Exodus 15: 1-11

¹*Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,*

"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;

the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

²*The LORD is my strength and my song,*

The Tyranny of the Circumstantial August 8, 2010

*and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.*

³*The LORD is a man of war;
the LORD is his name.*

⁴*"Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.*

⁵*The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.*

⁶*Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.*

⁷*In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;
you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.*

⁸*At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.*

⁹*The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'*

¹⁰*You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.*

¹¹*"Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?"*

What a song! Do you hear them singing that here? A few months ago they were singing that song of the victory of God. Do you hear them singing now? No! They had forgotten their song. Have you forgotten yours? The God who saved you so magnificently, the God who has sealed you to Himself forever, is that God not able to deal with your problem at work? Is that God not able to deal with the opposition you have even some times in your family, to your faith? Is that God not able to deal

with your circumstances? Let's be honest, sometimes on this point, right there with these Israelites, we forget our song. We forget our song. There's not a song in the heart anymore. There's not a song in the soul. So they forgot their own song. We see that they were downhearted, and many would say that that's understandable, the problems were huge. But they'd been there before. Do you remember in the opening of the book of Exodus. And you'll find this written in chapter six, especially through verses two through nine. Moses is giving, as he is now beginning to confront Pharaoh about letting the people go. The people are restive, they're upset because they fear the power of Pharaoh, they fear the power of his army, and after all they're making bricks without straw and they're doing all those things. And it's a pretty unpleasant existence. And Moses speaks with them and guess what? The people do not hear him. They do not hear Moses speaking for the LORD. Why? Well let me quote from that passage. They did not hear Moses speaking from the LORD because, they could not listen because, they were dispirited, and downhearted by their slavery. Well, the LORD was very patient, and the LORD was very forgiving because, you see, they had not yet been out under His hand through the Red Sea. They had not yet seen the mighty miracles of water from rocks and food from the sky, not yet. The LORD was gracious. But what about now? What about the learning of lessons? What about the thinking of the power of God in every aspect in our lives? Where is that? Where is our song? The downhearted inevitably settle on the immediate and the circumstantial. That's the way it works. That's point three.

Point four: I said there would be five... Point four: These people had a desire for security, but it was in this world. How do I know that? Well, it's very clear, isn't it? "Why did Moses and Aaron bring us here? Why did the LORD lead us here? We're in a terrible fix because of that. It'd be a whole lot better if we'd died in Egypt. Maybe if we'd stayed in Egypt we wouldn't have died. It would have been better, even, to have died in the desert than come die if we try to cross this border into Canaan." The desire for security - that seems pretty normal in fallen men and women, doesn't it? But to lodge that desire in the world? To lodge that desire in wealth and riches or influence, or prestige, or power, or friends, or anything else? To lodge that desire in anyone else but Jesus Christ puts us exactly where these Israelites were. Not only had they forgotten their song, they had really forgotten where they were before God, in terms of His being faithful, His keeping His promises, and His always doing what He covenanted with them to do. And what was that? To secure them. What had God said consistently? "You are mine. And I have given myself to you. That means I will take care of you." God has said, "A part of my mission for you is your security." They didn't believe that. In these circumstances they certainly forgot that. What about you? What about us?

You know, I've found in my life, pre-conversion, Satan wasn't very active, didn't have to be, because I was in his bag. But when Jesus jerked me out of there, he really got active. In a big way, he really got active. And he's got legions to help him out with that. He became really active! Why is that? Because you're no longer there, and this is terribly frustrating to Satan: that we belong not to him, not to the world, but to Christ. And the attacks are savage, but our security is in Christ, and Christ only. And you know, there is - let's put it humanly for a moment - that there is a risk factor. But what are the risks? To be embarrassed before the world, is that really a big risk? Maybe I'm too iconoclastic, but I don't look at that as too big of a risk. I fear that it's a really normal thing to happen when you stand out for Jesus. I

mean, a lot of folks don't like that and don't like you because of that. That's just something you have to deal with, but it's there.

But let me ask you a question on another level having to do with circumstances and whether or not we're controlled by them. Let me ask you this question: what have you attempted to do in the last month in the service of Jesus Christ that you couldn't have just as comfortably done in your own strength? You know what I'm asking? What is there in your life that you're attempting for Christ these days that you couldn't do just in your own strength? Where is any risk you've taken for Christ in relationships where you fear to be embarrassed, where boldness might bring the kind of criticism that bites? What have you attempted for Christ recently that you couldn't just as well have done in your own strength? If you're serving Jesus in your own strength only, you may not be serving Jesus at all. Do you see that? It's a question we ought to ask ourselves because our lives are, indeed, full of circumstances.

Last thing is: First, you remember they had doubting hearts and double minds, distorted image of themselves, and the enemy in the situation, they had, thirdly, had a dim memory and were downhearted. Fourthly, their desire for security was placed in the world and not in God.

Fifthly, and I think significantly, they despised human weakness and admired human strength. It's very much like our exaltation of athletes today. We despise our own weakness and admire human strength. They didn't get the lesson that we preached on last week about the Macedonians. They didn't get it at all. And so they despised themselves in the eyes of these giants, all of whom, I suppose, would these days be playing in the NBA. They despised themselves and exalted their enemies because they were physically strong. What about the contrast with Joshua and Caleb? I think you see them by now. Number one: They never doubted God. They had such a high view of God that they said in the assembly, "Listen, God made a promise about this land. It's already ours. The real-estate belongs to us. God's transacted the deal. Let's go get it. God will provide it." And Caleb said, this is verse eight in chapter fourteen in Numbers, "If the LORD delights in us, He'll bring us into this land. He'll give it to us." If He delights in us. In other words, if we do as he has commanded us to do, no doubt of God, they had a very high view of God. Secondly, if they saw themselves as grasshoppers, they saw themselves as victorious grasshoppers. And they saw the Canaanite giants as helpless and hopeless. "Let's go now. We can do it," said Caleb. "The LORD has removed their protection from them. Don't fear them. The LORD is undressing them before our very eyes. He is more than they. He is greater than they. He is mightier than they." So the circumstances start shrinking.

You know, that's how it is with us when we start to pray for the Lord's blessing and presence in our hearts and circumstances. This is my experience of it. As I begin faithfully to pray, I look at my heart and circumstances, and they look like dwarves. Before they looked like giants. And as Joshua and Caleb looked out there, they didn't see giants. They saw dwarves. They saw shrunken men, nothing before God. And that's the way it is for the Christian, who comes through these difficult circumstances as victorious... grasshopper.

Thirdly, they remember God's promises. And they were wholly, that is completely, headed in God's direction, knowing that He would bless them as they did that. They were wholehearted, not downhearted. If you have time today, go home and read Joshua chapter 14. Having looked at Numbers 14, look at Joshua 14, and read there the story of Caleb. This is now years later, forty-five years later, and he's eighty-five years old. And the land is being apportioned by Joshua, the new leader, following Moses. As you know, Caleb's going to get Hebron, the hill country, which was his portion, which he had wanted. And he gives this testimony, he says, "At eighty-five I'm just as strong as I was at forty, and I'm just as ready to go to war, because God has empowered me." He said, "I'm ready to go to the hill country because I know that God has given it to me. Therefore, it is mine and I'm going to get it." And the issue in that text, you are going to find, is this. That became true for Caleb because he was completely, completely, wholeheartedly given over to his Lord. So far from becoming downhearted, he was wholeheartedly committed to the living God, believing that God would achieve for him all that had been promised.

What about this desire for security? Well, the people were saying, "Let's impeach Moses. Let's shunt Aaron aside. Let's elect a new leader and go back to Egypt." The dangers and risk of finding security in this world - Caleb never considered it a risk to follow God. He never considered that a risk. He remembered God's promises, as did Joshua, and they were wholly committed to Him. Therefore, their security was in God. Is yours? Is mine? Are we wholehearted about that? Do we really know this?

And finally, they knew what the apostle Paul came to know, that God weakens those He's going to use - always, always. In 2 Corinthians chapter twelve, as you know, Paul talked about, he called it, one translator called it his "elation" and confidence in the Lord in what was happening. He was elated, but he became elated in himself and with his own strength. And God gave him, remember, a "thorn in the flesh" and Paul asked the Lord three times, "Please take this away." And God wouldn't. And God didn't. And so Paul did the logical thing, He asked, "Why?" And God answered him directly, "Because I need to teach you to depend upon my grace. My grace is sufficient for you." In other words, "You must depend upon Me, not yourself, not others, not anybody else, or any other force, but you must depend on Me. You must learn this."

And then we have this. I just have to read you those last few verses in the second Corinthian letter, chapter twelve, these verses begin at the ninth.

2 Corinthians 12:9, 10

⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Do you really believe that or is that just a cute saying for you? Do you really believe that? I believe that American Christians face a huge challenge in that arena, because we have been so much controlled by our circumstances that we are sometimes sold-out to the idea that having been made strong with God I can deal

The Tyranny of the Circumstantial August 8, 2010

with my circumstances. No. You can no more deal with your circumstances apart from Him than you could have saved yourself apart from Him. So, as Joshua and Caleb knew, and the apostle Paul knew, and we must know that when we are weakest, when we are most dependent upon the Lord, then we're truly strong. Let's pray.

O Lord God, You are our hope, You are our strength, You're our comfort, You're our Savior, You're our sustainer. We praise You and thank You for the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom we have life forever. Praying in His name, Amen.