

Faith Can Do It¹

Thrust statement: We can accomplish what God requires when we believe what God says.

Scripture Readings: “And they returned from spying out the land after forty days. ²⁶Now they departed and came back to Moses and Aaron and all the congregation of the children 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. ²⁷Then they told him, and said: “We went to the land where you sent us. It truly flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸“Nevertheless the people who dwell in the land are strong; the cities are fortified and very large; moreover we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹The Amalekites dwell in the land of the South; the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the mountains; and the Canaanites dwell by the sea and along the banks of the Jordan.” ³⁰Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹But 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.” ³²And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature. ³³There we saw the giants (the descendants of Anak came from the giants); and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight” *Numbers 13:25-33*.

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” *Philippians 4:13*.

One of America’s beloved poets, Edgar A. Guest, once had a weekly radio broadcast entitled *It Can Be Done*. The program would feature stories about people, who when life’s obstacles seem to be stacked against them, overcame one obstacle after another to rise to fame, wealth, health, or happiness.

A collection of these stories was put into a book. At the beginning of the book is a poem by Mr. Guest entitled *It Couldn’t Be Done*. This poem has a message for us all.

Somebody said that it couldn’t be done
But he with a chuckle replied
That “maybe it couldn’t,” but he would be one
Who wouldn’t say so till he’d tried.
So he buckled right in with a trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn’t be done, and he did it.

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Somebody scoffed: “Oh, you’ll never do that’
At least no one ever has done it.”
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat,
And the first thing we knew he’d begun it.
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn’t be done, and he did it.

There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,
There are thousands to prophesy failure;
There are thousands to point out to you one by one
The dangers that wait to assail you
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing
That “cannot be done,” and you’ll do it.

Which one of us has not given up on something too soon? Who among us has not felt a desire to excuse himself by saying his task was greater than his ability? Yet, is it not true that there are times when human knowledge and ability are insufficient to meet the needs of the hour? For no matter how great our ability, how noble our wishes, or how ambitious our will, there are some things which are not within the realm of human possibility. Aren’t there?

To know what we can and cannot do and to act according to that knowledge is a constant challenge. However, we would be careful to make this distinction between the poem by Mr. Guest and the biblical message from our text – namely, that Mr. Guest spoke about what man can do for and by himself, whereas the biblical passage portrays what man can do by the power of God, or as Paul states it for the Christian, “through Christ” (Philippians 4:13.).

If it is true that we can do almost anything we wish to do, why is it that we so often feel that we are not big enough to do what lies before us? Let’s look at our texts. Perhaps answers can be found there.

The complete story of Israel’s unbelief at Kadesh-Barnea is told in two passages – Numbers 13:1 – 14:45 and Deuteronomy 1:19-46. We must remember that while God had established a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give the land of Canaan to their descendants, not one of these Israelites who was coming from Egypt had been in Canaan before. None of them knew the conditions of the land. In order therefore that they might determine the best strategy for taking it, Moses sent twelve men, all princes from their respective tribes, to spy out the land.

For forty days they were gone. What happened to them during that time we can only guess. We assume that they traveled over a sufficient portion of the land to accurately report the location of different tribal nations. Whether or not they traveled mostly at night, or mostly in the daytime, or whether they entered into any of the cities is unknown. There does seem to be some implication in

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the text, however, that the men saw only enough to draw an exaggerated opinion of the land and people.

Moreover, that which they did see seems to have been improperly interpreted. Notice, for example, the large cluster of grapes which was borne on a pole and carried on the shoulders of two of the men. If grapes grew this large, how large must be the men who tend them? Surely they must be giants! It may also be that the only people of the land which they saw were those who peered down on them from over the top of the walls of the fortified cities. How could these men be so high?

When therefore the spies returned to camp they informed their people of what they had seen. Truly, the land flowed with milk and honey. Indeed, it was a good land. "Yet," they said, "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" (Numbers 13:28). Moreover, they said, "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 men of great stature. And there we saw the nephilim . . . and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them" (Numbers 13:32-32).

Of course, you know the results when these things were reported to the people of Israel. Throughout the camp the cry went up, "We cannot take the land!" "And all the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in this wilderness! Why does the Lord bring 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?'" (Numbers 14:2-3).

In looking at this incident, we are surprised at this attitude of the Israelites. Had not the Lord given bread, that is, Manna, to sustain Israel in the wilderness? Had he not delivered them from warring tribes? Had he not given them a royal law from Mt. Sinai, and demonstrated again and again that he was the protector of Israel?

We are surprised when only two of the twelve spies, and in fact only two persons in all Israel, have enough faith to speak their convictions that "the Lord will bring us into this land and give it to us" (Numbers 14:8). In vain they sought to persuade the people, saying, "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" (Numbers 14:9). But it was all to no avail.

But why? Why did Israel feel themselves unable to enter into the land of Canaan? This brings us back to our former question. Why do we sometimes feel that we are not big enough to enter upon tasks that lie before us? There are at least four perspectives in the answer to this question. Each perspective is but a view of the same reality, only the angle is different.

We suggest, first, that the answer lies not so much in our view of what is before us, but in our view of ourselves and of God. Israel's difficulty was not in what she saw, but with the eyes through which she saw it. As former slaves, the Israelites were unskilled in warfare; they were not accustomed to making decisions. As slaves, they had done what they were told to do. Now, however, Israel was free from bondage, yet still shackled with slave mentality. Although baptized

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unto Moses in the sea, and made a chosen people of God, Israel still held herself in low esteem. The Israelites thought of themselves as grasshoppers in comparison to the Canaanites.

Is this not also sometimes true of us? While we may be freed from sin through baptism in Jesus Christ and made a holy people unto God, do we not also frequently respond to life's goals in accordance with habits and patterns of existence of the old man rather than with the characteristic faith of the new man in Christ Jesus? We too may be guilty of saying "I can't" because we may have a low view of ourselves.

Perhaps what we feel we cannot do is really what we know we should do, but also feel that we cannot be the masters of it. Maybe its saying "No" to a bad habit, or perhaps saying "Yes" to some conviction. We realize that what we need is endurance and courage, but we do not feel that we have it within us. If so, then we yet have to learn to say with the Apostle Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

A second reason why we often feel unable to do what is set before us is inherent within the nature of fear. More precisely, fear of the unknown. This, too, was a part of Israel's problem. Israel knew that from which she came, but not that to which she was going. Israel had been happy to leave the slavery of Egypt. For there, great burdens, hardships, and sorrows had been heaped upon her. Now, some eighteen months removed from those circumstances, Israel looked toward the land of promise – and wondered.

When you are on a journey your mind has a way of wondering about things. You may wonder when you'll get to where you're going, of if someone will be there to meet you. I once heard about a man who was going home after a dissipated life. He had written ahead to let his family know that he was coming. His only concern was whether he would be welcomed. He requested that if he was, his family should attach a white ribbon to an apple tree on the family near the railroad tracks. As the train passed by on the way into town, he would look for the sign of his welcome home. He feared that he would not be welcomed back home.

The Israelites were also afraid. They were afraid of their task of conquering the land. They were unskilled in warfare. They would have to fight against fortified cities. They would have to fight against giants. Yes, they were afraid. They were afraid of all the unknowns of being in a land of uncertain geographical terrain, of peoples of unknown ways, of cities of unknown dimensions. And, in a time of such unknowns, exaggerated tales have a way of growing larger and larger until they are outside all boundaries of reasonableness, and yet they are believed.

And how about us, are we not sometimes also afraid of many unknowns in this Christian life? We are often afraid to launch out into some new effort, or to some new place, for fear of failure. (Sometimes churches are afraid to assume new responsibilities for fear of being unable to fulfill them. And, to the individual Christian, surely death is nothing to fear, yet we must admit that most of us seem to approach it with a sense of dread and reluctance, if not fear.)

A third perspective, or factor, in failure to fulfill the commandments of the Lord lies in our anxieties about the difficulties that are before us. When our sights are on the difficulties before us we are prone to think, "I'll never make it." Then we may give up before we really try.

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I recall one December Saturday morning while in college. Because my home was such a long way from school, I had not gone home for the Christmas holidays, but had gotten a job for a few weeks. I had stepped out of the dormitory to catch an early five o'clock bus. As I walked out the door I saw the bus was already at the bus stop more than 300 yards away. I just knew it would leave any second. I thought I could not get there in time to catch the bus, or even get close enough to flag it down. So I didn't even try. I just stood there, watching, and fully expecting to see the bus depart any second. I must have stood there a full five minutes, and still the bus did not move. Finally, I came to my senses, and bolted away toward the bus. But I did not make it. Before I got halfway there, the bus left, and I was unable to flag it down. I had not caught the bus, not because I could not have, but because I thought I could not.

This was Israel's attitude. Israel did not believe she could conquer the land. Therefore she complained and murmured, just as we sometimes do. Because Israel centered her attention on her own difficulties and held a low view of her own capabilities, that generation of people were not permitted to enter into the promised land.

A fourth and final perspective, indicating why we fail, is perhaps but a larger view of the other three, namely the lack of faith. We have said that Israel had a low view of herself. We have said that Israel's failure was partly because she was skeptical of her ability to overcome the obstacles that lay in her pathway. And we have said that a part of Israel's trouble was in the fear of the unknown. In reality, all of these could be viewed as a lack of faith. Israel's error was that she did not look upward to God. She had looked inward to self, outward to difficulties, and forward to uncertainties, but not upward to God. God had said, "I will give you the land" (Genesis 12:7, 24:7; 35:12; 48:4, Exodus 32:13), but Israel did not believe God's promise. Israel believed not the sentiment later recorded by Luke, that "with God nothing shall be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

When Christians have set before them responsibilities that demand accomplishment, or commands from the Lord which demand obedience, Christians must have convictions which say, "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me." We may look within to ourselves, we may look about ourselves, and we may look beyond the present to the future, but most of all, we must look upward in faith toward God. For "if God be for us who can be against us (Romans 8:31)."