

WARNING SIGNS

Recognizing the symptoms when fear begins influencing our decisions.

It usually begins innocently enough.

An opportunity presents itself. Something new. Something unfamiliar. Something that might require us to step outside what's comfortable.



Naturally, we begin asking questions. We consider the risks, weigh the possibilities, and identify a few perfectly reasonable concerns.

But something interesting can happen as the possibility of moving forward becomes more real.

Those reasonable concerns begin to grow into something else. Before long, we're no longer simply evaluating the opportunity. We're building a case for why we shouldn't pursue it.

And sometimes, we don't even recognize what we're doing.

I've come to recognize three warning signs that often appear along the way: Excuses. Exaggerations. Exit Strategies.

And there's a fascinating account in the Old Testament that illustrates how this progression can unfold.

TWELVE SPIES. TWO VERY DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS.

In Numbers 13, Moses sends twelve men to explore the land God has promised to Israel. Their assignment is straightforward. Look around. Observe the people, the cities, the land, and its resources. Then return and report what they discover.

For forty days, they explore the same territory. They see the same cities, encounter the same people, and witness the same abundance. They even bring back an enormous cluster of grapes as evidence of the land's fruitfulness.

When they return, everyone agrees about one thing. The land is exactly as fruitful as God promised. They even have the evidence to prove it.

But then something happens.

Actually, it all turns on one little word. Three letters.

“But...”

The land is fruitful, but the people are powerful. The land is abundant, but the cities are fortified. Everything God promised is there, but the obstacles seem overwhelming.

And with that one little word, the conversation begins shifting from what God has promised to everything that might prevent them from experiencing it.

The abundance hasn't disappeared. The obstacles haven't changed. But what they're paying attention to has.

And what happens next reveals a pattern I've seen repeated countless times.

EXCUSES: WHY WE CAN'T

The ten spies begin by acknowledging the abundance of the land. But almost immediately, they introduce their concerns. The people are powerful. The cities are fortified. The challenges appear significant.

Here's what's interesting. None of those observations is necessarily false. The obstacles are real. The risks are real. And the concerns are understandable.

But somewhere along the way, their observations become reasons not to move forward.

I've noticed how easily this happens in our own lives. An opportunity emerges, but rather than exploring what might be possible, we begin identifying everything that could go wrong. We have legitimate concerns, but those concerns gradually become explanations for why we shouldn't take the risk.

Sometimes those explanations are wise. But sometimes they're excuses protecting something we're reluctant to surrender.

EXAGGERATIONS: WHY IT'S WORSE THAN WE THINK

As the account continues, something changes. The spies begin describing the land as a place that devours its inhabitants. Suddenly, everyone they encountered seems enormous. They even describe themselves as grasshoppers compared to the giants in the land.

Their observations have become exaggerations. What began as legitimate concerns about powerful people and fortified cities has grown into a frightening picture of seemingly impossible odds.

The land hasn't changed. The people haven't changed. But their perception of the situation has.

Fear has begun influencing how they interpret reality.

And here's something else worth noticing. Their exaggerations don't simply make the obstacles appear larger. They make the spies see themselves as smaller.

I've watched this happen when people become increasingly uncomfortable with a possibility. The challenges grow larger in their minds. Their confidence begins to shrink. The potential consequences become more dramatic, and the reasons for not moving forward become more convincing.

Before long, what began as a legitimate concern has become an overwhelming obstacle.

EXIT STRATEGIES: HOW WE GET OUT

By the time we reach Numbers 14, the situation has deteriorated considerably. The people are no longer discussing how to enter the land. They're discussing how to escape the entire situation.

They propose appointing another leader and returning to Egypt.

Think about that. They would rather return to the familiarity of slavery than face the uncertainty of what God had promised.

What began as concerns about the future eventually became a plan to retreat into the past.

And I've noticed that this progression isn't limited to the Israelites. Sometimes we begin with reasonable objections. Those objections become increasingly exaggerated. And eventually, we start looking for a way out of something we once believed was worth pursuing.

We may even convince ourselves that walking away is the wisest decision.

WHAT ARE WE REALLY PROTECTING?

This is where I think the story becomes particularly revealing.

The ten spies weren't simply evaluating military challenges. Their response exposed something deeper. They were afraid of what moving forward might cost them.

Their comfort was threatened. Their confidence was shaken. And the outcome was beyond their control.

Sound familiar?

The very desires that can quietly influence our decisions today were at work in the wilderness. And the warning signs were there.

Excuses. Exaggerations. Exit strategies.

But here's what I find especially interesting. Joshua and Caleb didn't deny the obstacles. They didn't pretend the risks weren't real. They simply saw the situation through a different lens.

They believed God's promise was more trustworthy than their fears.

A QUESTION WORTH ASKING

I've learned that not every concern is an excuse, not every warning is an exaggeration, and not every decision to walk away is an exit strategy. Sometimes those responses reflect genuine wisdom.

But I've also learned that when we're reluctant to take a risk, it's worth becoming curious about what's influencing our thinking.

Are we seeing the situation clearly, or are our fears beginning to distort what we see?

Are we carefully evaluating the risks, or are we building a case for protecting something we're unwilling to surrender?

And perhaps most importantly, *are we responding to what Jesus is inviting us into, or to what we're afraid of losing?*

Sometimes the greatest obstacle standing between us and what God is inviting us into isn't the risk ahead.

It's the fear we've allowed to shape how we see it.