



DIAGNOSING FEAR: Three Symptoms of Distrusting God

Fear is rarely as obvious as we imagine.

Most people do not wake up and consciously declare that they no longer trust God. Fear is far more deceptive than that. It disguises itself in language that sounds practical, responsible, strategic, or even spiritually mature. It often hides behind phrases like “I’m just being realistic,” “I need to be wise,” or “This probably isn’t the right time.”

But beneath those surface-level justifications, fear often reveals a deeper struggle. At its core, fear is frequently not the absence of belief in God’s existence, but the erosion of trust in God’s character, God’s promise, or God’s provision.

This is what makes Numbers 13 and 14 so profound.

When Moses sent twelve spies into Canaan, they were not being sent to decide whether the Promised Land was worth taking. God had already settled that. The land was promised. The mission was not about determining possibility. It was about discerning what faithfulness would require.

This distinction matters.

Too often, fear tricks us into treating God’s promises like debates instead of invitations.

The spies entered the land and found exactly what God said they would find. It was fruitful, abundant, and overflowing. They returned carrying evidence of extraordinary provision. The grapes were so large they had to be carried on a pole between two men. The promise was tangible.

But so were the obstacles.

There were fortified cities. Powerful enemies. Giants in the land.

And this is where fear began to reinterpret reality.

Ten of the twelve spies allowed visible obstacles to become more authoritative than God’s invisible promise. Their fear did not begin when they saw giants. Their fear began when what they saw became more influential than what God had said.

This is still how fear works.

Fear often starts when circumstances become louder than conviction.

Symptom One: Excuses

Fear's first response is often not rebellion, but rationalization.

The ten spies did not immediately reject God's promise. They first acknowledged its goodness. They admitted the land was everything God had said: "It does flow with milk and honey..."

Then came the pivot.

"But..."

There is an old joke that "but" comes from the Greek word meaning *"forget everything I just said."*

Humorous, yes. Accurate, too.

Because "but" is often where fear reveals itself.

*God is calling me, **but...***

*This seems right, **but...***

*I know I should, **but...***

That tiny word often signals the moment trust begins surrendering to self-protection.

This pattern echoes throughout Scripture.

Again and again, when God called someone, an excuse quickly appeared.

Moses questioned his identity and ability. Gideon pointed to his weakness and insignificance. Jeremiah argued that he was too young. Jonah's excuse became outright flight.

The pattern is striking. Divine calling is often followed by human inadequacy.

Why?

Because calling exposes the distance between God's sufficiency and our perceived insufficiency. Fear rushes to fill that gap with excuses.

Excuses often begin with partial agreement followed by practical retreat.

Yes, God may be calling me.

Yes, this opportunity may be real.

Yes, this may be the right thing.

But...

I'm not ready.

I'm too old.

I'm too young.

I don't have enough resources.

The culture is too hostile.

The challenge is too big.

Excuses are powerful because they often contain fragments of truth. The cities really were fortified. The enemies really were strong.

But fear takes legitimate obstacles and turns them into illegitimate conclusions.

Excuses shift our focus from God's sufficiency to our inadequacy. They become a way of preserving comfort while sounding responsible.

This is critical: excuses are often fear's attempt to make unbelief sound wise.

The deeper issue is not the obstacle itself. The deeper issue is what the obstacle reveals about where trust is actually resting.

Throughout Scripture, God's response is rarely to deny human weakness. Instead, He consistently redirects attention back to His presence.

"Certainly I will be with you."

Fear says, *"I can't."*

God says, *"I know. But I can."*

Symptom Two: Exaggerations

If excuses are fear's first language, exaggeration is fear's amplification system.

Fear rarely stays content with acknowledging challenges. It magnifies them.

The spies said, *"We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."*

Notice what happened.

Their fear did not merely enlarge the enemy. It diminished themselves.

This is one of fear's most destructive effects. Fear simultaneously makes obstacles bigger and identity smaller.

The people who had witnessed plagues in Egypt, crossed the Red Sea, eaten manna from heaven, and followed a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night now saw themselves primarily as grasshoppers.

Fear had rewritten their self-perception.

This is what exaggeration does.

It turns difficulty into impossibility. It turns caution into catastrophe. It turns uncertainty into assumed defeat.

Fear is not content with facts. It adds fiction.

Yes, there were giants.

No, Israel's story was not over.

Exaggeration occurs when fear takes a real challenge and builds an imaginary future where God's faithfulness no longer applies.

This is why fear is so spiritually corrosive. It does not just affect circumstances. It affects interpretation.

Exaggeration is often evidence that fear has begun preaching a false gospel, one where obstacles are ultimate and God is secondary.

Symptom Three: Exit Strategies

Unchecked fear eventually moves beyond internal hesitation and begins constructing escape routes.

In Numbers 14, Israel did not simply express concern. They began planning retreat: *"Let's choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

This is staggering.

Egypt was not freedom. Egypt was slavery.

Yet fear has a remarkable ability to romanticize former bondage when present obedience feels costly.

This remains one of fear's oldest tactics.

When trust feels dangerous, fear makes captivity look comfortable.

Exit strategies are what happen when people stop asking, *"How do we move forward with God?"* and start asking, *"How do we get back to what feels safer?"*

This can happen spiritually, relationally, organizationally, and personally.

A calling becomes too difficult, so we retreat. A conviction becomes too costly, so we compromise. A mission becomes too uncertain, so we return to what is familiar.

Exit strategies are rarely framed as surrender. They are often framed as prudence.

But in reality, they reveal a heart preparing for retreat rather than resilience.

Fear loves backup plans that keep obedience optional.

Joshua and Caleb: The Counterpoint to Fear

Joshua and Caleb saw the same land, the same giants, the same walls, and the same risks. Nothing about their external circumstances was easier. They were not looking at smaller enemies, weaker armies, or lower walls. They saw exactly what the other ten spies saw.

But they interpreted reality through a fundamentally different lens.

“The Lord is with us.”

This is the dividing line. Fear interprets God through obstacles. Faith interprets obstacles through God.

That distinction changes everything.

The ten spies looked at God’s promise through the size of their opposition. Joshua and Caleb looked at their opposition through the certainty of God’s promise.

One perspective produced panic. The other produced courage.

Joshua and Caleb did not deny reality. They were not pretending the giants did not exist. They were not practicing blind optimism or reckless positivity. They simply refused to define reality apart from God’s presence.

This is what true courage is.

Courage is not pretending something is less dangerous than it is. Courage is recognizing that God is greater than the danger.

This is why courage is so often misunderstood.

Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the refusal to let fear become the loudest voice.

Joshua and Caleb understood something the others forgot: if God had already said “go,” then opposition did not nullify the mission. Obstacles did not cancel the promise. Difficulty did not mean defeat.

Where fear saw giants, faith saw an opportunity for God’s faithfulness to be revealed. Where fear saw walls, faith saw something God could overcome. Where fear saw reasons to retreat, faith saw reasons to trust.

Their clarity was theological before it was tactical. They believed God’s character mattered more than Canaan’s challenges.

And this remains true now.

The greatest battles in our lives are often not about what stands in front of us, but about which lens interprets what stands in front of us.

Fear says, *“Look how big this is.”*

Faith says, *“Look how faithful God has been.”*

Fear magnifies barriers. Faith magnifies God.

This is why Joshua and Caleb stand as Scripture’s counterpoint to fear. They remind us that fear may be loud, but it is not always truthful. And they remind us that courage is often born not when obstacles disappear, but when trust becomes greater than intimidation.

The Three Symptoms Still Reveal Us

These are not merely ancient patterns. They remain modern symptoms. They show up whenever fear begins governing decisions more than trust.

When people consistently make excuses, fear may be protecting comfort.

When people exaggerate challenges, fear may be distorting identity.

When people create exit strategies, fear may already be preparing surrender.

This is why the real battle is rarely just external. The giants in the land are often secondary.

The greater battle is internal: Which voice will shape perception most?

Fear asks, *“What if this goes wrong?”*

Faith asks, *“What if God remains faithful?”*

Final Thought

The tragedy of Numbers 13 and 14 was not that giants existed.

The tragedy was that fear became more persuasive than promise.

And that remains the danger today.

Fear still speaks. Fear still rationalizes. Fear still distorts. Fear still offers escape.

But fear does not have to lead.

Because the opposite of fear is not recklessness.

It is trust.

And trust remembers that no giant, no wall, no excuse, no exaggeration, and no exit strategy will ever be more powerful than the God who already said, **“Go.”**