

Twelve Tribes and Twelve Spies

Scripture Reference: [Numbers 1-3, 13-14](#)



Suggested Emphasis: God is with us so have courage and do not be afraid to do what is right.

Memory Verse: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.” Joshua 1:9 (NIV)



Background Study



Story Introduction



Telling the Story



Review Questions



Songs



Learning Activities



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Story Overview:

The Lord commanded that Moses take a census (counting the number of people) of the twelve tribes of Israel. Moses appointed one man from each tribe to spy out the land of Canaan. When the spies returned, ten of them convinced the Israelites that the peoples of the land of Canaan were too big and strong to overcome. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb knew that they could overtake the Canaanites with God’s help. Because of the people’s unbelief, the Lord said that none of the Israelites over twenty years old would live in the promised land. Only Joshua and Caleb were the exceptions. Because of their lack of faith, the people would now wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Background Study:

When reading the first three chapters of the book of Numbers it becomes apparent why the book is referred to as “Numbers”. There is a lot of counting and sorting going on.

We learned earlier, when the Israelites left Egypt, that this was a very large group of people traveling through the desert.

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Sukkoth. There were about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. Many other people went up with them, and also large droves of livestock, both flocks and herds. [Exodus 12:37-38](#) (NIV)

Chapter 1- (The Census):

Two years after leaving Egypt the Lord commanded Moses to count “all the people of Israel”. Following this count a list was to be made according to families and tribes. Young men of fighting age were also noted for later service in the army.

The name “Israel” was given by God many years earlier to Jacob ([Genesis 35:6-29](#)). All of the people on this journey could trace their ancestry back to Israel (Jacob) so it makes sense that they would be referred to as Israelites.

Adding more detail to their ancestry, each person could trace their lineage back to one of Israel’s/Jacob’s twelve sons. So, again, it is easy to see why the people were referred to themselves as the “Twelve Tribes of Israel”.

Organising the Israelites was done through the use of the same “12 Tribe” system. However, even though there were 12 original sons of Israel/Jacob, there were a few adjustments made when God instructed Moses to divide them into 12 groups.

- Years earlier, when Israel/Jacob was still alive he had claimed his 2 grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own sons ([Genesis 48:5](#)). These were his grandsons through Israel/Jacob’s son, Joseph. By the time the exodus from Egypt had occurred there was no “tribe of Joseph”. Instead there were the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Blessing Joseph’s 2 sons in this way was a tribute to how God had used him to save the entire family.
- The tribe of Levi (the tribe Moses and Aaron belonged to) would not be given land like the other tribes. Instead the descendants of this tribe would serve as priests and workers in the tabernacle.
- Children might enjoy the equation which represents how Jacob’s 12 sons ended up becoming the 12 Tribes of Israel. No wonder it is called the book of Numbers.
 $12-1+2-1=12$ or
Twelve sons of Jacob/Israel minus Joseph plus Ephraim and Manasseh minus Levi equals 12 tribes of Israel.

List of Israel’s Original 12 Sons

[Genesis 29:31-30:24 and 35:16-20](#)

Reuben

Simeon

Levi

Judah

Dan

Naphtali

Gad

Asher

The 12 Tribes of Israel in the Wilderness

[Numbers 1:20-46](#)

Reuben

Simeon

Gad

Judah

Isaachar

Zebulun

Ephraim (Joseph’s son)

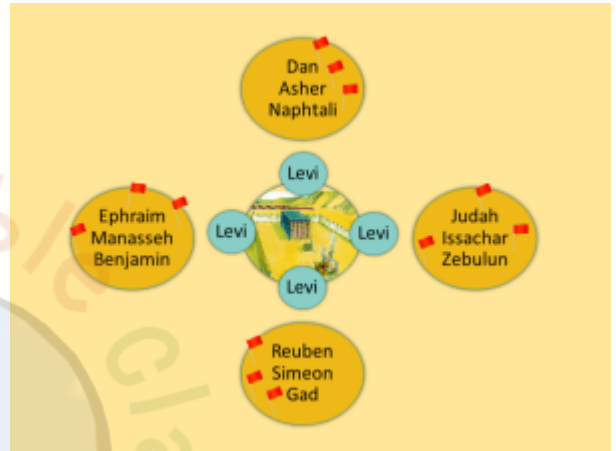
Manasseh (Joseph’s son)

Issachar	Benjamin
Zebulun	Dan
Joseph	Asher
Benjamin	Naphtali

Eventually, when the land is finally conquered, each of "[The Twelve Tribes of Israel](#)" will receive a portion of the land (except the tribe of Levi).

Chapter 2- (Arrangement of the Camp According to Tribes):

It would be obvious from now on which tribe each person was associated with because each had an assigned place whenever the camp moved to different locations. Each tribe even had a banner or flag to mark its identity and space.



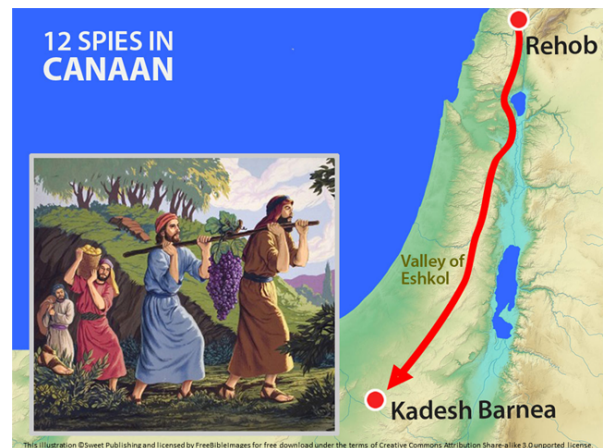
The tabernacle and the Levites would always be in the centre of the camp with the rest of the tribes were positioned around it.

Chapter 3- (Appointing and Resourcing the Priests):

Aaron and his two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, would serve as priests. Since the Levites were now fully devoted to serving in the tabernacle, God ordered each of the other tribes to give money toward the support of the tabernacle and it's workers (the Levites).

Chapter 13: (Sending Spies to Canaan):

In the two years since leaving Egypt God has led the Israelites south across the Sinai Peninsula and then north again to the Desert of Paran (later referred to as Kadesh Barnea) just south of modern day Palestine and Israel. They are now poised to enter the land God has promised to them.



At God's instruction Moses chose one man from each tribe to spy out the land. For forty days they travelled through the land from south to north observing people and buildings and even collecting specimens of the bountiful produce. When the twelve spies reported back to Moses and the people, ten of them painted a picture of

peoples and land that were too formidable to conquer. Only two of them, Caleb and Joshua, had confidence that God would lead them into battle and overcome.

Chapter 14 (Rebellion and Consequence):

On the continued negative word of the ten spies the people lost confidence in God's ability to lead, protect and save them and so returned to their old ways of rebelling and grumbling. They went so far as to begin forming plans to return to Egypt and even talked about stoning Moses and Aaron. Joshua and Caleb were the only spies who challenged the people's rebellion and attempted to inspire them to trust in God. They said...

"The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." Numbers 14:7-9 (NIV)

In what is similar to the conversation God and Moses had on Mount Sinai while [the people were building a calf idol](#), God considers destroying the people and beginning again with Moses and his descendants.

Instead, he passes sentence ([Numbers 14:26-35](#)). Even though they were at the very brink of entering the promised land they would now wander in the desert for forty years (one year for each day the spies were in the land). God would keep his promise to his people and lead them to a land of their own but adults over the age of twenty and who grumbled against him would die during the forty years and would never enter the promised land.

Joshua and Caleb had remained faithful and would enter the land when the time finally came.

One sad attempt by some to try to fight their way into the promised land at this time led to a resounding defeat.

At God's appointed time (forty years after this event) Joshua and Caleb will both be actively involved in conquering the land. Joshua leads the people in [Crossing the Jordan](#) and [the Fall of Jericho](#). As an old man Caleb is still ready to fight in [Conquering the Land and Fighting Giants](#).

"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9 NIV



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Way to Introduce the Story:

Take a census. Count how many people in your class today. Now count people in other bible classes. You might want to count people "secretly" like the spies did. You could just quietly count the adults in the adult class making

sure that you are all so quiet that they do not notice you. Come back to the classroom and write your results on the board. "When you count people you are taking a census. We took a census of our class [and others]. God told Moses to take a census of all the people who were travelling together."

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The Story:

Not long before today's events God's people had been slaves in Egypt for over 400 years. Now they were on a journey to a land of their very own, a land God had promised them many years ago.

The people did not need a map. God showed them exactly where to go. In the day he made a large cloud appear in the sky and they followed the cloud. At night he made a large pillar of fire appear in the same way. At night they would follow the fire.

Today's Bible lesson is found in the book of Numbers. If you enjoy mathematics or counting then you would probably really enjoy the book of Numbers. God told the leader of the people, Moses, to count all of the people. Moses' brother, Aaron, helped him count because there were thousands and thousands of people.

The number of God's people was so big that God asked Moses (their leader) to divide them into groups called "tribes".

When it came time to camp each tribe would gather together in their own place. Each tribe even had their own flag.

If you were to look at a map of the camp you would see God's very important tent, the tabernacle, in the center. Nearby the tabernacle would be the Levites. They were the ones in charge of taking care of the tabernacle and leading worship.

On the north, south, east and west edges of the camp you would find the tents of the twelve tribes.

Once the Israelites were organised into 12 tribes God told Moses that it was now time to get ready to enter the land that he had promised them. The new land might be dangerous so some Israelites should go quietly into the land to see what was there before they made a plan.

Moses chose one man from each tribe to be a spy to "spy out the land".

The twelve spies quietly went around the promised land finding out as much information as they could without being seen. They saw big fighting men in the land and some began to feel nervous. Would they have to fight these men before they could live in the new land?

There were also big cities in the land and they had strong walls built around them. The spies began to realise that this was going to be very difficult. Would God be strong enough to help them win against these people?

But the 12 spies also saw that the land God had promised was amazing. They saw grapes and pomegranates and figs. The spies cut off one branch of a grape vine and put it on a pole to carry back to show Moses and the people. The grapes were so big and heavy it took 2 men to carry the pole.

After spending 40 days spying out the land these men knew it was time to return to the camp and give their report to Moses and all of the people.

Even though the spies had seen many good things in the land some of them just wanted to talk about the BAD things. Ten of the spies told Moses and the people that it would be too hard to enter the promised land. There were giant fighting men there and many of the cities had strong walls. The ten spies gave such a bad report that

they said, "The fighting men there are so big that we just look like little grasshoppers compared to them!" The people were so discouraged.

All of the people were beginning to think they should not go into the promised land. But two of the spies (Joshua and Caleb) had a different report to give Moses and the people. They told the other ten spies to stop saying that it was too hard and scary. Caleb said, "We should go and take the land for ourselves. We can do it!"

But the people listened to the ten spies more. There was much arguing and people began to get very angry. Some even said that God's promises were not good. They said, "God promised we could have our own land but he can't help us beat giants! We never should have followed God. We should have stayed in Egypt."

Moses and Aaron and Joshua and Caleb were shocked. Go back to Egypt? They had been slaves in Egypt. Why wouldn't the people believe God's promise? God was stronger than any giants or strong walls. Moses and Aaron and Joshua and Caleb begged the people, "Please, don't be afraid! God will protect us. Just trust in God."

But the people did not listen. In fact they just kept getting more and more angry. They were so angry that they were just about to throw stones at the men to kill them.

Moses talked to God. The people were angry but God was also angry. He had done so much for the people. He had saved them from slavery in Egypt. He had parted the Red Sea so they could cross through it safely. He had given them the ten commandments, food in the desert and even a beautiful place to worship. He had chosen a beautiful land for them to live in. All they had to do was enter into the land. He would keep his promise and protect them from all enemies. Why didn't they believe him?

God was so angry that he felt like destroying all of the people. Even though the people did not deserve God's forgiveness Moses begged Him to show his love and mercy to them.

So God acted in mercy and decided not to destroy all of his people.

But turning away from God was extremely serious. There would be a sad punishment so everyone would learn a lesson for the future.

1. All of the people would suffer a punishment. If they had trusted God then they could have entered the land right away. Now they would have to live in the desert for forty more years before they entered the land. This was one year for each of the forty days the spies had spent spying out the land.
2. All of the people that complained and wanted to go back to Egypt would suffer a punishment. They would not live past the next forty years and would not have the joy of entering the promised land when the time finally came.
3. And finally, there was a punishment for the ten spies that convinced all of the people to turn away from God. These ten men were overcome with a terrible sickness and died.

In all of this God remembered Joshua and Caleb's faithfulness. They were the only two of the twelve spies who did not die. And even though they had to wait forty years along with the rest of the people they would someday have the joy of entering the promised land.

It may seem incredible but there were some of the people who still didn't listen to God! They didn't want to wait forty years so they tried to enter the land anyway.

But it did not matter how strong they were or hard they fought. They could never win without God on their side. Instead, they returned to camp defeated.

So it was back into the desert again. God continued to lead them but they would have to wait forty years before he would lead them to the promised land again.

Now what about you. If you had been one of the people would you have listened to the ten spies or would you have listened to the two spies?

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Ways to Tell the Story:

This story can be told using a variety of methods. Always remain true to the facts found in the Bible but help children connect to its meaning by using drama, visual aids, voice inflection, student interaction and/or emotion. [Click here for visual aids and story-telling methods.](#)

[Click here to download the slideshow](#) or [click here to download the pictures to print.](#)

Be selective. Each teacher is unique so only use the illustrations that best relate to the way YOU are telling the story in THIS lesson. Too many illustrations can be confusing so eliminate any that cover other stories or details you do not wish to emphasise in this lesson.

Review Questions:

1. What did it mean when God told Moses to take a census? To count the people
2. How many tribes were the Israelites divided into? Twelve
3. How many spies took a look at the new land? Twelve
4. What did ten of the spies report? The enemy is too strong and big for us.
5. Who were the two spies that believed God would help Israel win the new land of Canaan? Joshua and Caleb
6. Because the people did not trust in the Lord, how many years would they have to wander in the desert? 40

Song Suggestions:

- [My God is So Big Song](#)
- [I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Song](#)
- Refer to the [Song Page](#) on this website for more options.

Learning Activities and Crafts:

[\(How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation\)](#)

Activities:

- Send out your spies! Let the children try to count the number of adults in the adult class or children in another class without those people knowing it (you might want to mention this before class to the teachers of those classes)
- Play "I Spy" (For a variation you might spy things on the timeline if you have done one. Example: "I spy with my little eye . . . something hard with writing on it. Answer- the Ten Commandments).
- Use the maps in the back section of a bible to show Egypt, Canaan, and the Jordan River. Many of them show how the Israelites wandered after the incident with the spies.
- Act out difficult situations where God gives us strength.
- Help children understand the concept of the nation of Israel being divided into twelve tribes by bringing a pizza to class and dividing it into twelve slices (Thanks, Cristy Neves, New Zealand for this great idea).
- Have some fun with numbers! For older children discuss in more detail about Jacob's sons and how this led to the 12 Tribes of Israel. Explore the equation $12-1+2-1=12$ as above. Read [Exodus 12:37-38](#). Based on

that estimate how many people there were all together. Another thing you could do is add up the tribe totals found in the [first chapter of Numbers](#). Finish off the conversation by talking about the Israelites that tried to take the land without God on their side ([Numbers 14:40-45](#)). Most important to remember is that any number minus God equals zero.

- Here is a [Song/Poem about the 12 Spies](#) submitted by Jenny Ancell, Australia. I'm sorry I don't know the tune for the song.
- Here are some [pictures about the 12 Spies story](#) to help explain some background information concerning the 12 spies and the places they would have seen. Submitted by Marvin Ancell, Australia.
- Review the Ten Commandments and the other memory verses this term.

Crafts:

- Craft: Use plastic cups and purple paint to paint a cluster of 12 grapes and then write the names of each tribe inside the grapes. [Adapt this plastic cup printing method \(2 minute 27 second video\) at http://youtu.be/-zD11L7awK8](http://youtu.be/-zD11L7awK8)

Check the [Teaching Ideas](#) page on this website for ideas that are adaptable to any lesson.



[Click here for "Twelve Tribes and Twelve Spies" printables to print \(A4 paper\)](#)

[Click here for "Twelve Tribes and Twelve Spies" printables to print \(Letter size-USA\)](#)
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Other Online Resources:

- [The 12 spies colouring page & puzzle worksheets \(Calvary Curriculum\)](#)
- [Rahab and the Spies colouring page & puzzle worksheets \(Calvary Curriculum\)](#)
- [How to make grapes out of old egg cartons \(Crafty-Crafted\)](#)
- ['Journey to the Promised Land' game \(Christian Crafters\)](#)

<https://www.pinterest.com/marynnz/moses-wilderness-wanderings/>
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