Twelve Tribes and Twelve Spies



Scripture Reference: Numbers 1-3, 13-14

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

Memory Verse: “Remember that I commanded you to be strong and brave. So don’t be afraid. The Lord your God will be with you everywhere you go.” Joshua 1:9, ICB

Story Overview:

As the people of God approached the land of Canaan that God had promised them, Moses took a census to record the number of people in the twelve tribes. A representative from each of these tribes entered into the land of Canaan to spy it out. When the spies returned, ten of them reported that the Canaanites were too big and strong to overcome. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, had confidence that God would help them conquer the land. The Israelites were then made to wander in the wilderness for forty years as a consequence of their lack of faith.

Background Study:

Organising the Israelites was done through the use of the “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 two 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.

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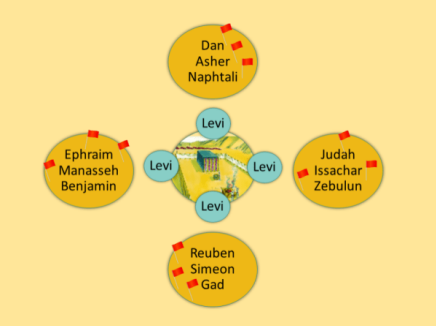
List of Israel's Original 12 Sons	The 12 Tribes of Israel in the Wilderness
Genesis 29:31-30:24 and 35:16-20	Numbers 1:20-46
Reuben	Reuben
Simeon	Simeon
Levi	Ephraim (Joseph's son)
Judah	Judah
Dan	Dan
Naphtali	Naphtali
Gad	Gad
Asher	Asher
Issachar	Issachar
Zebulun	Zebulun
Joseph	Manasseh (Joseph's son)
Benjamin	Benjamin

The Book of Numbers, Chapter 1: The Census

The opening chapters of this book involve a lot of counting and sorting, so it is apparent why it is called "Numbers."

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.

Numbers Chapter 2: Arrangement of the Camp According to Tribes



From this time forward, families would camp together according to tribe. This applied 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 positioned around it.

Numbers 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 the other tribes to give money toward the support of the Tabernacle and its workers (the Levites).

Numbers Chapter 13: Sending Spies to Canaan

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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 on the land. For forty days, they travelled through the land from south to north, observing people and buildings and collecting specimens of the bountiful produce. When the twelve spies reported back to Moses and the people, ten 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.

Numbers Chapter 14: Rebellion and Consequence

The ten spies' continued negative words caused the people to lose confidence in God's ability to lead, protect, and save them and return to their old ways of rebelling and grumbling. They even began forming plans to return to Egypt and 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 went to explore is very good. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land. He will give us that land where much food grows. Don't turn against the Lord! Don't be afraid of the people in that land! We will chew them up. They have no protection, but we have the Lord. So don't be afraid of them." Numbers 14:7-9, ICB

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

Instead, he passed a sentence (Numbers 14:26-35). Even though they were on the brink of entering the promised land, they would now wander in the desert for forty years (one year for each day the spies were there). God would keep His promise to His people and lead them to a land of their own, but adults over the age of twenty 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 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 would be actively involved in conquering the land. Joshua would lead 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.

> "Remember that I commanded you to be strong and brave. So don't be afraid. The Lord your God will be with you everywhere you go." Joshua 1:9, ICB

Way to Introduce the Story:

Take a census. Count how many people are in your group today. If other groups are meeting at the same time as yours, count people in those groups as well. You might want to do this "secretly" as the spies did, ensuring you are all so quiet that they do not notice you. Gather back together and write your results on the

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board. “When you count people you are taking a census. We took a census of our group [and others]. God told Moses to take a census of all the people who were travelling together.”

The Story:

Today’s Bible lesson is found in the Book of Numbers. If you enjoy mathematics or counting, you will probably 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 centre. Nearby, the tabernacle would be the Levites. They were in charge of taking care of the Tabernacle and leading worship.

The tents of the twelve tribes were located on the camp’s north, south, east, and west edges.

Once the Israelites were organised into 12 tribes, God told Moses it was time to get ready to enter the land He had promised to His people. 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 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, pomegranates, and figs. The spies cut off one branch of a grapevine and put it on a pole to carry back to show Moses and the people. The grapes were so big and heavy that it took two 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 just wanted to talk about the BAD things. Ten spies told Moses and the people that entering the promised land would be too hard. There were giant fighting men, and many 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 the people were beginning to think they should not enter the promised land. However, two spies (Joshua and Caleb) had a different report to give Moses and the people. They told the other ten spies to stop saying 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.

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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 in God's promise? God was stronger than any giants or strong walls. Moses, Aaron, 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. 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?

Turning away from God was extremely serious. Now, there would be a sad punishment so that everyone would learn a lesson for the future.

1. If they had trusted God, they could have entered the land immediately. Now, they would have to live in the desert for forty more years before they entered the land. This was one year for each forty days the spies had spent spying out the land.
2. The people who complained and wanted to return to Egypt would suffer 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 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 with the rest of the people, they would someday have the joy of entering the promised land.

It may seem incredible, but some of the people 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 how 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 various 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 or other group participation.

Be selective. Each teacher is unique, so only use the illustrations that best relate to how YOU tell 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.

Click here for visual aids and more storytelling methods.

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Review and Reflection Questions:

Review questions help children remember and know the facts of a story. Reflection questions encourage them to internalise the meaning and implications for their lives. Asking at least one of each type of question can help strengthen a child's spiritual development and help them connect to God. Click here to learn more about review and reflection questions.

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Review:

- What did it mean when God told Moses to take a census? (To count the number of people)
- How many tribes were the Israelites divided into? (Twelve)
- How many spies went to see the new land? (Twelve)
- What did ten of the spies report? (The enemy is too strong and big for us)
- Who were the two spies who believed God would help Israel win the new land of Canaan? (Joshua and Caleb)
- Because the people did not trust the Lord, how many years would they have to wander in the desert? (40)
- What do you learn about God from this story?

Reflection:

- What do you think the promised land looked like? What about the people who lived there that the spies were afraid of?
- What do you think the promised land smelled like? How do you think the grapes that the spies brought back tasted?
- How do you think the ten spies felt when they said the people in the promised land were too big to defeat?
- The 12 spies came back to give a report to the Israelites about the promised land. If you had been one of the Israelites, would you have listened to the ten spies or the two spies?
- What part of this story did you find most interesting?
- Why do you think the Israelites didn't trust God could help them defeat their enemies, even though He had done so many miracles for them (like the ten plagues in Egypt, parting the Red Sea, giving them manna and quail, etc.)?
- Is there something you're afraid of today? Do you trust that God will help you, or do you feel all alone?
- When we're afraid, what should we remember? What are some things we can do? (you can talk about God always being with us, prayer, talking to an adult, etc.)

Prayer:

It is important to guide children in learning how to pray. In prayer, children can connect with God and learn that He hears and answers them. God can become a life-long friend who is with them every moment of their lives. Try using a variety of prayer methods from time to time so that the children can learn to connect with God in different ways. Note that you can pray at any time throughout your lesson. A variety of prayer methods are found here.

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Song Suggestions:

- Twelve Spies Song
- My God is So Big Song
- I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy Song
- Goodbye World Song
- He's Still Working on Me Song
- Refer to the Song Page on this website for more song options.

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Activities and Crafts:

- How to choose the best learning activities for my teaching situation.
- Visit the activities and songs pages for additional activities and crafts.

Activities:

- Send out your spies! If other groups meet at the same time as yours, have the children count the number of people in each. As spies, they will want to be quiet and do the counting so that people do not even notice they are doing so. If you think this will be a disturbance, discuss this with the leaders of the other groups before the day.
- 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.
- Bring a pizza to the gathering to help children understand the concept of the nation of Israel being divided into twelve tribes. Divide 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 were there altogether? Another thing you could do is add up the tribe totals found in the first chapter of Numbers. Finish the conversation by discussing the Israelites who tried to take the land without God (Numbers 14:40-45). The most important thing 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, but I don't know the tune.
- 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.

Invite the children to respond to this story using the adaptable "God's Story" printable reflection page. Free printables for this story.

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Crafts:

- Dip the rim of a plastic cup in purple paint and then press the cup onto paper to leave a circle. Make a number of these circle impressions so that the circles look like a cluster of grapes.
- Read Numbers 13:1-16 and write the names of the tribes. Alternatively, print this worksheet so children can circle the tribes and draw pictures of the spies.

Print and use these free bookmarks, trading cards or timelines. Free printables for this story.

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Other Online Resources:

- Colouring page The 12 spies & puzzle worksheets (Calvary Curriculum)
- Colouring page Rahab and the Spies & puzzle worksheets (Calvary Curriculum)
- Craft: How to make grapes out of old egg cartons (Crafty-Crafted)
- Game: 'Journey to the Promised Land' (Christian Crafters)

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