

## GRASSHOPPERS IN CONTEXT

### A Devotional Meditation on Sh'lach L'cha (Send for Yourself)

Numbers 13:1-15:41; Joshua 2:1-24; Proverbs 30:24-28; Isaiah 40:1-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9

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Grasshoppers are such versatile insects. The big, green grasshoppers I remember as a child could walk, hop, or fly. They were big enough to hold between thumb and forefinger while studying their alien facial features, especially the mandibles that could pinch if they encountered a finger. Their size and agility made them perfect for generating reactions from unsuspecting friends – usually by dropping them down the back of a shirt or onto the hair. Grasshoppers also served as ideal bait for the larger varieties of fish. That's what I remember of grasshopper encounters during the long, hot Alabama summers of my youth.



Photo by SJ Liew, Malaysia, July 26, 2007, [via Flickr](#).

Grasshoppers may startle the unwary or spoil a picnic, but there's nothing to fear from them – unless they appear in vast numbers. That's when the harmless grasshopper transforms into the deadly locust. It's the same insect, but we aren't afraid of a few grasshoppers because they don't devastate crops over vast regions as do swarms of locusts in the Middle East and Africa. That bit of our shared human story has remained unchanged ever since grasshoppers reduced Egypt to hunger in the days of Moses.

When we're not fighting swarming locusts, or trying to put grasshoppers on fishhooks, we might learn a few things from them, as Solomon says:

Four things on earth are small, yet they are exceedingly wise:

Ants are creatures with little strength, yet they store up their food in summer;

Coneys are creatures with little power, yet they make their homes in the cliffs;

Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks;

A lizard you can catch with the hand, yet it is found in kings' palaces.

Proverbs 30:24-28 TLV

We might access the wisdom of locusts by imagining the world from their perspective. They operate by instinct, obeying no direction except that which the Creator built into them. They take no thought of creatures like us. We are outside their frame of reference because we are too big and not edible. The deep thoughts we think, the mighty works we do, and the great things we build have little impact on locusts and grasshoppers because they are focused on living life as they are designed to live. If our worlds intersect, perhaps by a human picking up a grasshopper to study its features, the interaction is momentary, little understood by the insect, and instantly forgotten. Any harm done to one grasshopper does not frighten the others because they are incapable of fear, or even of thought about concepts like harm.

All of that is simply human projection onto what passes for the mind of a grasshopper. We learn from them by observing how they act in nature, deriving lessons about how we should act in relation to our Creator, our environment, and each other. These lessons allow us to ascribe characteristics to grasshoppers, and to other creatures, which then can be applied in the abstract to human situations. We have an example of this in the story of the Israelite chieftains who scouted the land of Canaan. Their famous “bad report” of the land was based on an insect analogy:

But the men who had gone up . . . said, “We cannot attack these people, because they are stronger than we.” They spread among *Bnei-Yisrael* [ children of Israel] a bad report about the land they had explored, saying, “The land through which we passed to explore devours its residents. All the people we saw there are men of great size! We also saw there the *Nephilim*. (The sons of Anak are from the *Nephilim*.) We seemed like grasshoppers in our eyes as well as theirs!”

Numbers 13:31-33 TLV

Ironically, that description of themselves as grasshoppers was decidedly ungrasshopperlike. Even if grasshoppers and locusts were gifted with the ability to think and reason, their nature would have caused them to take no notice of the giant Canaanites except in how they might try to prevent them from doing what their Creator had made them to do. That’s the difference between Caleb and Joshua and their ten fearful colleagues. Like true grasshoppers, those men knew that what God had given them to do, He would enable them to accomplish. Their colleagues could only see the size and apparent capabilities of their giant opponents, and therefore reacted with fear and anger at the God Who had led them on what they saw as a fool’s errand. Their fear and anger quickly spread, leading to rebellion not only against Moses, but against the God Who had redeemed them and saved them out of many impossible perils.

The Ten Spies, and all Israel, experienced the same aspects of God’s providence that Joshua and Caleb experienced, but they responded differently to the great trial of taking possession of the promise. The difference had to do with relationships and expectations. Joshua served Moses, and saw him communicate with God in the Tent of Meeting. That must have inspired him to remain in the Tent, where he could be near the Presence of the Almighty. Through that experience, he might have learned something Isaiah explained many centuries later:

He sits above the circle of the earth—  
its inhabitants are like grasshoppers—  
He stretches out the skies like a curtain,  
spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.  
He reduces princes to nothing.  
He makes the judges of the earth a confusion.

Isaiah 40:22-23 TLV

If we all appear as grasshoppers to God, then what does it matter how we appear to other people? Instead of worrying whether we have the power to overcome our adversaries, we should be concerned about whether we are acting like grasshoppers God wants to keep as good insects in His garden, or like locusts He must eradicate because of their threat to what He has planted.

It's not hard to imagine Joshua having conversations about this with Caleb and the other spies. Caleb shared Joshua's perspective, as we see from his emphatic statement that Israel was well able to go up and capture the land, and his enthusiasm forty years later at choosing the hardest terrain to conquer as his portion. The other men, however, didn't get it. Did they expect that God would do everything for them, and that all they had to do was show up and take possession? That's not the way God works – not for them, and not for us, as Peter explains:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:3-7 ESV

The promises of God are “Yes and Amen,” but He expects us to do our part to obtain those promises. We do that the same way Joshua and Caleb did: by cultivating a healthy fear of our Creator, learning His ways, and doing what He says. That's the difference between desirable grasshoppers, and pesky locusts.