

Second Baptist Church of Doylestown
Bible Study Notes
12-15-21
Numbers 20

The Death Of Miriam – Verse 1

¹ In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.

20:1 It had been 37 years since Israel's first scouting mission into the Promised Land (Numbers 13–14) and 40 years since the Exodus from Egypt. The Bible is virtually silent about those 37 years of aimless wandering. The generation of those who had lived in Egypt had almost died off, and the new generation would soon be ready to enter the land. Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb were among the few who remained from those who had left Egypt. Once again they camped at Kadesh, the site of the first scouting mission that had ended in disaster. Moses hoped the people were ready for a fresh start.

Israel Contends With Moses And Aaron Because Of Thirst – Verses 2-6

² Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. ³ They quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the LORD! ⁴ Why did you bring the LORD’s community into this wilderness, that we and our livestock should die here? ⁵ Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!” ⁶ Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them.

20:3-5 After 37 years in the wilderness, the Israelites forgot that their wanderings were a result of their parents' and their own sin. They could not accept the fact that they brought their problems upon themselves, so they blamed Moses for their condition. Often our troubles result from our own disobedience or lack of faith. We cannot blame God for our sins. Until we face this reality, we will have little peace and no spiritual growth.

God's Command To Moses: Provide Water For Israel – Verses 7-8

⁷ The LORD said to Moses, ⁸ “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.”

20:7-8 Take the rod ... Speak to the rock before their eyes: Specifically, God told Moses to take the rod, but not to use it. Water would be provided if Moses would speak to the rock before their eyes. And it will yield its water: Back at Mount Sinai, God told Moses to strike the rock and water came forth (Exodus 17:6). But now he was merely to speak to the rock, yet with the rod in his hand. This rod was a symbol of his authority from God.

Moses' Contention With The People - And With The LORD – Verses 9-11

⁹ So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence, just as he commanded him. ¹⁰ He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, “Listen, you rebels,

must we bring you water out of this rock?”¹¹ Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

20:9 So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him: Moses began by doing exactly what the LORD had told him to do: Take the rod, and gather the people of Israel. Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock? God did not command him to speak to the nation, and to speak so severely to the nation, yet Moses did.

20:10 Moses, after doing what God had told him to do, then did something God had not told him to do: He lectured the nation. Worse, he lectured the nation with an attitude of heart he had not shown before - one of anger and contempt for the people of God, with a bitter heart. Before, Moses fell on his face before God when the people rebelled (Numbers 16:4). At Meribah, when the people contended with Moses because there was no water, Moses cried out to the LORD, not against the people (Exodus 15:22-25). When the people did need to be boldly confronted, Moses did it; but without the edge of anger, contempt, and bitterness we see here (as in Exodus 17:1-7). There are a hundred explanations for Moses' frustration here (Psalm 106:32-33 describes how the people provoked Moses here), but not a single excuse.

20:11 Worse yet, Moses not only took the rebellion of the people against the LORD too personally, he also over-magnified his own partnership with God: Must we bring water for you out of this rock? Moses spoke as if he and God would do the job, as if they divided the work fifty-fifty; as if God couldn't bring water unless he was around to speak to the rock. His lapse into contempt for the people led him into a lapse of subtle pride.

Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod: Moses disobeyed God directly, striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Water came out abundantly: Yet, despite Moses' lapse into sinful attitude and action, God still provided abundantly for the people. This teaches us that God's love for His people is so great, he will use very imperfect instruments, and that the fact God uses someone is no evidence - to themselves or to the people - that they themselves are really right with God or ministering according to God's heart.

God would deal with Moses, but the people needed water - and so it was provided. Moses might have come away thinking he did right, and the people probably thought so as well - because what Moses did seemed to work. But what works is not the best measure of what is right before God.

God's Rebuke And Correction Of Moses – Verses 12-13

¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.”

¹³ These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD and where he was proved holy among them.

20:12 The Lord had told Moses to speak to the rock; however, Moses struck it, not once, but twice. God did the miracle; yet Moses was taking credit for it when he said, “Must we bring you water out of this rock?” (20:10). For this he was forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Was God's punishment of Moses too harsh? After all, the people had nagged him, slandered him, and rebelled against both him and God. Now they were at it again (20:5). But Moses was the leader and model for the entire nation. Because of this great responsibility to the people, he could not be let off lightly. By striking the rock, Moses disobeyed God's direct command and dishonored God in the presence of his people.

Messengers To The King Of Edom – Verses 14-17

¹⁴ Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, saying: “This is what your brother Israel says: You know about all the hardships that have come on us. ¹⁵ Our ancestors went down into Egypt, and we lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our ancestors, ¹⁶ but when we cried out to the LORD, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. “Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. ¹⁷ Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the King’s Highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory.”

20:14 Two brothers became the ancestors of two nations. The Edomites descended from Esau; the Israelites came from Jacob. Thus, the Edomites were “brothers” to the Israelites. Israel sent a brotherly message to Edom requesting passage through their land on the main road, a well-traveled trade route. Israel promised to stay on the road, thus harmlessly bypassing Edom’s fields, vineyards, and wells. The Edomites refused, however, because they did not trust Israel’s word. They were afraid that this great horde of people would either attack them or devour their crops (Deuteronomy 2:4-5). Because brothers should not fight, God told the Israelites to turn back and travel by a different route to the Promised Land.

20:17 The king’s highway was an old caravan route. Long before this time it was used as a major public road.

The Edomites Refuse Passage To The Israelites – Verses 18-21

¹⁸ But Edom answered: “You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword.” ¹⁹ The Israelites replied: “We will go along the main road, and if we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We only want to pass through on foot—nothing else.” ²⁰ Again they answered: “You may not pass through.” Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful army. ²¹ Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them.

20:21 Moses tried to negotiate and reason with the Edomite king. When nothing worked, he was left with two choices—force a conflict or avoid it. Moses knew there would be enough barriers in the days and months ahead. There was no point in adding another one unnecessarily. Sometimes conflict is unavoidable. Sometimes, however, it isn’t worth the consequences. Open warfare may seem heroic, courageous, and even righteous, but it is not always the best choice. At times, we should follow Moses’ example and find another way to solve our problems, even if it is harder for us to do.

The Death of Aaron – Verses 22-29

²² The whole Israelite community set out from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. ²³ At Mount Hor, near the border of Edom, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ²⁴ “Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. ²⁵ Get Aaron and his son Eleazar and take them up Mount Hor. ²⁶ Remove Aaron’s garments and put them on his son Eleazar, for Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will die there.” ²⁷ Moses did as the LORD commanded: They went up Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. ²⁸ Moses removed Aaron’s garments and put them on his son Eleazar. And Aaron died there on top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain, ²⁹ and when the whole community learned that Aaron had died, all the Israelites mourned for him thirty days.

20:22 Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor: Here a definite marker, indicating the end of the 38 years Israel had been "sentenced" to in the wilderness. Numbers 33:38 tells us Aaron died there in the fortieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt.

There is very little record of what happened during these years; they are compressed into only five and one-half chapters, while the single year at Mount Sinai is given almost 50 chapters. This was to demonstrate these years accomplished nothing, except the death of the generation of unbelief. These were just years of surviving in the desert, wasted years, waiting for the "old man" to die. During those 38 years, there was much movement - but no progress. Our walk with God can be the same way.

20:28 Aaron died there on the top of the mountain: The passing of Aaron is a huge landmark in the history of Israel; he was the first high priest of the nation - and yet, not exempt from the decree that his generation would perish in the wilderness. Moses, who represented the law, could not lead them into the Promised Land. Miriam, who represents the prophets, could not lead them into the Promised Land. Aaron, who represents the priests, could not lead them into the Promised Land. Only Joshua, that is, JESUS, could lead them into the land of God's promise.

20:28 Aaron died as a great, but complex figure, even more so than Miriam. He was used of God mightily, as Moses' partner (Exodus 4:27-31), to initiate the priesthood (Leviticus 8), and to plead with Moses for the people (Numbers 16-17). At the same time, he was instrumental in the grotesque debacle of the golden calf (Exodus 32) and in challenging Moses' authority with his sister Miriam (Numbers 12). Aaron's life shows us, among other things, that the office is more important than the man himself. Aaron the man was not always worthy of respect, but Aaron the high priest always was worthy of honor.

20:28 Aaron died just before entering the Promised Land, probably as punishment for his sin of rebellion (Exodus 32; Numbers 12:1-9). This was the first time that a new high priest was appointed. The priestly clothing was removed from Aaron and placed on his son Eleazar, following the commands recorded in the book of Leviticus.