

## In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

### “Strike the Rock”

Numbers 20.1-13; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 10.1-4  
11.27.16

*(Numbers 20) Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now Miriam died there and was buried there. <sup>2</sup> There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup> The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! <sup>4</sup> "Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? <sup>5</sup> "Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink." <sup>6</sup> Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them; <sup>7</sup> and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>8</sup> "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink." <sup>9</sup> So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; <sup>10</sup> and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" <sup>11</sup> Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. <sup>12</sup> But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them." <sup>13</sup> Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them.*

*(1st Corinthians 10) For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; <sup>2</sup> and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; <sup>3</sup> and all ate the same spiritual food; <sup>4</sup> and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.*

We're working through the Book of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible, the history of the Wilderness Wanderings. It's the story of the Israelites freed from slavery in Egypt and traveling to the Promised Land.

The core of the book is a series of seven revolts against Moses...but really against God Himself...in today's revolt (the 6<sup>th</sup> Rebellion) Moses is one of the rebels. He was previously called

“the humblest man on the face of the earth” but here, he has reached his limit... and he acts in anger and pride and defiance.

This may be the fortieth year of their wanderings and at this point the leaders of the first generation will either DIE or disqualify themselves ... Miriam dies in the first verses, Aaron dies in the last verses and in the middle, Moses and Aaron sort of lose it.

They disobey a command from God...which seems sort of minor (it's NEVER minor) but this offence is actually extremely serious... It becomes the reason that Moses and Aaron WILL NOT go into the Land and it's also another cautionary tale that will be referenced in other places in the Bible. (e.g. Ps 106.32)

This is an obscure section for a number of reasons but it really IS worth exploring because it highlights a disorder that affects every person who really knows God... On the surface it may look like rage or recklessness or an outburst of frustration (and I think we can all relate to that!) but under the surface we find another facet or nuance of THE CENTRAL flaw at the center of this book – it's an exposé of unbelief and today...it's unbelief disguised as anger. It's a picture on an UNBELIEVING believer.

Let's get three views:

- 1) a Telephoto of the Failings
- 2) a Wide-Angle of the Antidote and
- 3) an EKG on YOU (and ME!)

Remember that these seven rebellions are very intentionally recorded in a literary device called a “chiasm”. The first and the last revolts mirror each other (both about general complaining and both involve fire). The second and second-to-last ALSO mirror each other and the third and third to last ALSO correspond...and all the signs point to the forth, THE Central revolt which is the refusal to enter the Promised Land... that's the revolt that keeps them wandering around the desert for 40 years.

And it's THAT rebellion where we really see the root of ALL THE REBELLIONS i.e. unbelief. They won't trust in God and won't receive grace and promise from God as a gift... they want to control. They want to make it about them and their ability NOT ABOUT GOD AND HIS GOOD INTENTIONS and love.

In each revolt, there's some facet or perspective on this problem/failing of unbelief. And this 6<sup>th</sup> revolt begins with the people wanting water (just like earlier they cried out for food) and yet the way they put it (if we kind of ZOOM in) – they interpret their circumstances as evidence that God is not good.

“The people thus contended with Moses... saying, ‘If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is NOT a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.”

Once again, if you zoom IN, you’ll see it. It’s not just, “Hey...can a guy get a drink around here?”, instead it’s a questioning of God, of God’s leaders, of God’s arrangement/promises of their history and destiny as a people.

This is a Thanksgiving story...it’s a people who willfully forget that God saved them from slavery and that God did wonders IN THEIR HISTORY, in their own remembrance... but they almost deliberately forget. And they also forget their own FAILINGS.

“There’s no or figs or vines or pomegranates” – “Uh YEAH, because YOU wouldn’t go into the Land that God promised to give you... We scouted out that Land and brought back figs or grapes and pomegranates... fruit so big/heavy we had to carry it on a pole.”

They really don’t know God and they don’t know themselves. The unwillingness/inability to see their own flaws is spiritually and psychologically sick.

And then the people’s failings are met with failings in the leaders. Moses just sort of “short-circuits” (he sounds so much like a parent here!) “Listen now you rebels shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” (You know how parents ask their kids, “What do think money grows on trees?”)

He’s really saying, “You people expect WAY too much from your leaders!” AND YET, God did say, “Trust Me, Moses...as I once brought water from a rock I will do so again...trust Me to show My power to this people once again – go speak to the rock.”

But Moses is frustrated. This is the sixth rebellion and enough is enough... so, angry, frustrated and rashly, he strikes the rock. He plays into the peoples’ hand and makes it look like it’s his vitality and energy that cracks open the rock and produces water out of nothing... and God is good...He does give water (some underground spring opens up...gushes out).

But then God zooms in even more and diagnoses Moses/Aaron with something more than just anger or rage-disorder... (v. 12) “Because YOU HAVE NOT BELIEVED ME TO TREAT ME AS HOLY...”

That’s the telephoto view, the close up analysis: this is not simply exasperation or bad temper... the anger tells a deeper story (Are you aware that ANGER always tells a deeper story? Like

Allender/Longman say in their book *Cry of the Soul*, the dark emotions reveal what's going on down below...in our souls.)

Under the anger, Moses and Aaron are not believing – they are unbelieving believers.

AND when we pull out now and back way up and see this scene in context of the whole Bible and the wider story – we take a wide-angle view YOU'LL BEGIN TO SEE the antidote.

Remember back at the very start of their journey, 40 years ago there was a very similar scene. The people (all those unbelieving believers) wanted water and basically accused God and accused Moses of bringing them out of Egypt in order to kill them... and there's that really ODD and terrible, beautiful scene in Exodus 17...God says, "Moses, call all the elders together, the Supreme Court of the Israelites, and I will stand before YOU."

And Moses had to be thinking, "Uh...um...Lord... I think You meant WE WILL STAND BEFORE YOU... because, LORD, the way it works is that the accused always stands before the judge...so YOU can't stand before US... WE have to stand before YOU!"

But, of course, God said exactly what He meant, "I will stand before YOU... and you, Moses, will take that rod of justice and strike the rock where I am standing... I am showing you that I will take the blame for YOUR SIN...I will be judged in your place... I will take JUSTICE and you will receive mercy."

And reluctantly, Moses did strike the rock and water came gushing out...out of God's grace...out of His taking OUR blame came vitality ...came water and refreshment and cleansing and LIFE.

And this is why the Apostle Paul...looking back on this great cautionary tale... The Book of Numbers and the Wilderness Wanderings and Paul writes, "Even there, Christ was the source of life...Christ was symbolically giving Himself to be judged for His people... AND THE ROCK WAS Christ!"

This was why Moses' outburst was so serious... because this act of unbelief communicated something false about the work of God in Jesus Christ – it failed to see that HE WOULD BE JUDGED ONCE FOR ALL the people of God... He would appear in HUMAN HISTORY once for all.

He would come...not only symbolically as in the wilderness when Moses struck the rock in Exodus but would actually stand in our midst, Jesus Christ, God with us...God incarnated and at a point in time and He would be hoisted up on a Roman Cross and struck down for us... the Rock was Christ...judged for us.

That event in the days of Pontius Pilate was retroactively applied to the people in the wilderness and was THE reason they could know God and be forgiven...once for all... And when Moses

ignored that, it said something false about God...it ignored the specialness, the HOLINESS OF GOD.

But the good news for Moses, for Aaron for the rebels in the wilderness...and the Good News for us is that Jesus Christ died for all believers... and His work is thĒ source of life and refreshment even for believers who are failing to believe...

Moses can't take us into the Promised Land but we have a greater Moses who not only gave the Law but kept the Law for us...and He succeeds where Moses failed... the Rock IS Christ... He was the source of their life and He is the source of ours.

Now for the EKG – the electrocardiogram – the heart diagnosis for you and for me: WE too, like Moses are often unbelieving believers.

I'm NOT talking about true unbelievers – and there are some here today...who are just plain unbelievers, you may admire Jesus Christ but you've never "closed with Christ" (as the old writers used to say): you've never sat down at the closing table (and signed on the dotted line) and given Him your guilt and received His forgiveness... never received His promise to rule your life and renovate YOU...

See, YOUR next move is to come out with your hands up and close with Christ...receive Him... give Him your guilt and trust Him to save and reign in your life.

But I'm CERTAIN there are many more here who have "closed with Christ"; you are more than admirers – you're believers... AND yet, if you are honest and if you'll allow your heart to be searched would admit: "I am often an unbelieving believer."

It may be anger or extreme frustration...constant low-level annoyance (any shade of anger – there are many)...it may be anger that exposes your unbelief.

You may act and think as if it all depends on YOU or as if things have to go your way... You may be interpreting circumstances and thinking, "Hmmm- this family crisis, this unemployment, this awful situation at work...this death in my family...this period of loneliness – this is a sign that God has abandoned me...that God is NOT going to keep His promise that God cannot be trusted...and that's why I'm angry and annoyed/frustrated... I GUESS IF I DON'T MAKE IT HAPPEN – it aint gonna happen."

This happens all the time... in the life of every true believer in Jesus Christ – we are ALL often... unbelieving believers.

It's quite common... the Prophets will write about relying on the "arm of the flesh" (Jer 17.5; Isa 30.1, 31.3, Ps 146.3). James (NT) will write, "the anger of man does not achieve the

righteousness of God” (1.20) i.e. making it happen... not trusting and resting in God’s promises and the finished work of Jesus Christ... but forcing it...working it... Striking the rock ...twice...or three or four times will not bring about God’s peace and fruit.

It could be other dark emotions that bring it to the surface – like shame or fear or contempt – as you realize you are always trying to prove yourself to this person or those people or even to yourself... Maybe you're trying to show that you're good or worthy and deserving and lovable (driven by fear or shame)...WHY?

Let the Good News of Jesus Christ read and address the “EKG” and ask yourself: is it NOT enough that the Son of God loved you and gave Himself for you... is it NOT sufficient that the Rock is Christ and the Rock was judged for all who trust Him...so that the critique that HE DESERVED FROM THE FATHER might be applied to us, “THIS IS MY BELOVED CHILD IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED”?

Is that not enough?... Are you looking to “Christ +” – “I need Jesus Christ and I trust that I am forgiven and that the Father is utterly delighted in me... but I also have to put up the big sales numbers at my office... or I have to have kids that are perfectly behaved... or I have to live a serious and austere lifestyle...I have to be the life of the party... Christ PLUS...”

Ask yourself, in this coming week as you find feedback from the EKG – as the dark emotions come to the surface – (and as long as we have I-95 I can count on dark emotions coming to the surface!) – but just ask yourself – “What about the Good News of Jesus Christ am I not believing?”

Where do I see some deficiency in what Jesus Christ has done for me? Where am I saying “In Christ alone ...AND approval from people... AND comfort... AND a car that never breaks down...and a super-happy marriage... Christ PLUS my sacrifices”? Where am I trying to “work it” instead of just trusting, resting and relying on the finished work?

Come out with your hands up: repent and rest.

Listen to the old hymn:

“View Him, weeping, in the Garden  
On the ground your Maker lies,  
On the bloody tree behold Him  
Sinner, will this not suffice?” (Joseph Hart, 1759)