

Numbers 20 “From Kadesh to Hor: Death, Grumbling, Disobedience, Resistance, and Death”  
January 19, 2014

Our passage tonight is all about death, grumbling, disobedience, resistance,  
and oh, did I mention death?

Our text is bracketed by two deaths:  
the death of Miriam in verse 1,  
and the death of Aaron in verse 28.

The death of Miriam and Aaron represent the death of Israel in the wilderness.  
After all, Miriam and Aaron had grumbled against Moses in the third rebellion (ch 12),  
even as Korah and Dathan and Abiram had grumbled in the fifth rebellion (ch 16).  
And God had declared that this whole generation would perish in the wilderness.

Aaron may be the high priest.  
Miriam may be a prophetess.  
But the wages of sin is death.

And at the center of our story tonight is the rebellion of Moses.  
And the rebellion of Moses in verses 10-13  
is couched in the language of the great rebellion.  
“You did not believe in me” (v12) –  
this is what God said to Israel in 14:11.

At the heart of Israel’s great rebellion was Israel’s lack of faith.  
And at the heart of Moses’ disobedience is lack of faith.

So let’s pay attention to this as we go through Numbers 20 –  
so that we can learn from our fathers not to have a stubborn, unbelieving heart.

### **1. The Death of Miriam (v1)**

*And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.*

Verse 1 has perplexed many.  
It’s the first month – but what year?  
The wilderness of Zin is fairly large –  
and Kadesh seems to have been where Israel stayed for most of the 40 years.

Which year is it?  
We don’t know.  
Many think that this is the first month of the 40<sup>th</sup> year.

But all we need to know is that the “first month” is the month of Passover.

Miriam was the sister of Moses.

She was the one who protected Moses when he was a baby –  
so she is definitely older than Moses.

He was 80 years old when the Exodus began –  
so when Miriam led the women in song in Exodus 15,  
she must have been 85 or 90.

So whether this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> year or the 40<sup>th</sup> year –  
she is old.

In chapter 12, God struck Miriam with leprosy as a rebuke for her rebellion against Moses.

As we’ve seen throughout the book of Numbers,  
at some point or other – *everyone* becomes unclean;  
at some point or other – *everyone* grumbles –  
*everyone* sins –  
*everyone* dies.

The question that came out of the rebellion of Korah (the fifth rebellion) in chapter 16 was,  
“Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, shall die.  
Are we all to perish?” (17:13)

And in chapter 19 we just heard about God’s provision of the water for purification  
in order to cleanse the unclean.

Yes, the wages of sin is death –  
but God is merciful, and he provides cleansing for the unclean.

And therefore, it is important to say that Miriam dies a natural death.

There are only two natural deaths in the book of Numbers.

Tens of thousands of people die in this book.  
Fire comes out of the sanctuary.  
The earth swallows people up alive.  
Plague and serpents and war take others.

But Miriam dies a natural death!

The Hebrew of verse 2 creates something of a disjunction between verse 1 and verse 2.

The author does not want you to make a strong connection between Miriam’s death  
and Israel’s grumbling for water.

## **2. The Grumbling at the Rock (v2-9)**

<sup>2</sup> Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. <sup>3</sup> And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! <sup>4</sup> Why have you brought the assembly of

*the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? <sup>5</sup> And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.”*

Does this sound familiar?

Back in chapter 11, in the second rebellion, Israel grumbled about food.

Now they complain about water.

Back in chapter 13, the spies brought back figs, grapes, and pomegranates from the land.

But Israel refused to believe God’s promise.

They refused to follow Moses into the Land.

Now they complain that Moses has not brought them to a place  
for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates!

This is what unbelief and ingratitude does.

Unbelief leads you away from the land of blessing into a barren desert.

If Israel had believed God and followed Moses,

then they would (by now) have taken possession of the Promised Land.

They would have all sorts of good things!

And ingratitude leads you to blame others for your situation.

A thankful heart would have blessed Moses for his continual care for Israel –  
but Israel does not have a thankful heart!

Unbelief and ingratitude do the same thing today.

If you believe Jesus, sure, you may have to leave everything to follow him.

But as Jesus says in Mark 10:29-30

*Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house  
or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands,  
for my sake and for the gospel,*

<sup>30</sup>*who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time,  
houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands,  
with persecutions,  
and in the age to come eternal life.*

If you leave everything to follow Jesus,

you wind up with the whole church as your family!

Now, there is a curious thing here in Numbers.

As far back as Exodus 17, Israel has grumbled about a lack of water.

But they haven’t grumbled about water since then!

Why is that?

Listen to what God says to Moses in verse 8:

<sup>6</sup> Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them,<sup>7</sup> and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,<sup>8</sup> “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.”<sup>9</sup> And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him.

“Take the staff” – which staff?

verse 9 makes that clear: “the staff from before the LORD.”

This is the staff of Aaron – the staff that budded.

It is *that staff* which Moses shall use.

And “tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”

What rock?

Plainly Moses will know what rock.

It is the “rock before their eyes.”

There are lots of rocks in the wilderness –

but this is clearly *the rock* before their eyes.

Many modern scholars have argued that there must have been a big rock

near the center of the camp.

But I think the ancients were on to something.

Paul says that “all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them,  
and the Rock was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:4)

I don’t know if this was a literal rock that literally followed them.

It would be no more miraculous than a pillar of cloud and fire!

But Paul says that *Christ* followed Israel in the wilderness –

and that Christ *was* the spiritual rock that followed them.

So as we watch this scene unfold, we need to see Christ’s presence with his people –  
both in blessing, and in judgment.

### **3. The Disobedience of Moses (v10-13)**

<sup>10</sup> Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them,  
“Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?”

This is a *striking* statement.

In contrast to the humility that Moses has shown in the past,

Moses now ascribes to himself a power that belongs only to God!

“*shall we* bring water for you out of this rock?”  
Moses had always ascribed all power and glory to God!  
He always spoke of how *God* would judge – or bless.  
As he said in 16:11, “it is against the LORD  
that you and all your company have gathered together.  
What is Aaron that you grumble against him?”

In all of the rebellions the focus turns to “me” and “us” –  
in all of the rebellions, people say things like:  
“we are not able to go up against this people – they are stronger than we” (13:31).  
But here, Moses himself loses sight of God –  
and he thinks simply of himself and his situation.

This is at the very heart of unbelief.  
In this moment, Moses forgets the LORD.  
It’s easy to do.  
This is what sin is all about!  
We think that we don’t need God.  
We think that we can do it all by ourselves.  
“I can handle it.”

And so now Moses claims for Aaron and himself a divine power and glory,  
and he wields the blessed staff of Aaron – contrary to the divine word:

<sup>11</sup> *And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.*

We saw a couple weeks ago that the staff was a sacrament.  
And sacraments always work.

No, I don’t mean that in the *ex opere operato* sense.  
It’s not that everyone who is baptized is regenerated!  
But sacraments always work –  
they always work (in the end) either for blessing or for cursing!  
This is why Paul issues the warning in 1 Corinthians 11.  
This is why Hebrews warns that those who have been enlightened –  
if they reject Christ – will be destroyed.

Some people have responded to this by saying,  
“then we shouldn’t baptize people until we’re *really* sure that they are saved!”  
There were some – like Tertullian – around 200 AD,  
who argued that baptism should be postponed until well into adulthood,  
to make sure that all youthful rebellion was out of the system!

Others refrained from partaking of the Lord's Supper until they were near death!

But this misses the point of the sacraments!

The sacraments are designed to strengthen and nourish faith.

It's like saying, "if I never eat anything, then I will never become obese!"

Moses strikes the rock with the staff of Aaron.

Think back to what we saw about the ancient stories about the rod of Aaron.

Aaron's rod was a sacrament of Aaron's high priestly authority.

It was supposed to be kept in the sanctuary

“as a sign for the rebels,

that you may make an end of their grumblings against me, lest they die.” (17:10)

Once before, in Exodus 17, God told Moses to strike the rock with the same staff –  
and God brought forth water from the rock.

But here, it is not the staff, but the voice that is supposed to open the rock.

God tells him to speak – but instead he strikes the rock.

And so, with the sign of the high priest's authority –

with the staff that God caused to bud (without any help from Moses!),

Moses now strikes the rock.

And if that rock was Christ,

then Moses strikes Christ with the very rod that foreshadows the cross..

*<sup>12</sup> And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” <sup>13</sup> These are the waters of Meribah,<sup>[a]</sup> where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy.*

And God says to Moses and Aaron

that their sin is that they “did not believe in me,

to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel.”

The first petition of the Lord's Prayer is

“hallowed be thy name.”

If you do not uphold the holiness of God then you are not believing in him.

When someone says that they are a Christian –

but they do not uphold God's holiness in word and deed –

then they do not believe in God.

Now think about it.

Does Moses believe in God?

Obviously, yes!

And yet God says no.  
When push came to shove,  
you did not *really* believe in me.

Parents:

do you want to know the best way that you can help train your children?  
Believe God.  
That may sound easy.  
But it's the hardest thing in the world to do!  
Even Moses himself failed catastrophically.

And God says, "therefore you shall not bring this assembly in the land that I have given them."  
Sin has consequences.  
The wages of sin is death.

Maybe you've wondered:

why did God punish Moses so severely?  
Moses fails *once* – and God says that he will never enter the land!  
There's a simple reason for this.  
Moses is the man of the law.  
As James says,  
"whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point  
has become accountable for all of it." (James 2:10)  
God wants Israel to see that *no one* is righteous by the works of the law –  
not even Moses!  
The law cannot bring you into the land!

But then again, the law was never designed to bring you into the land!  
The land is yours because God *promised* to Abraham.

Of course, many have wondered why God does nothing to judge Israel.

Moses is judged for failing to treat God as holy –  
but Israel seems to get off the hook (and get water) without punishment!

I would suggest that verses 14-21 explains the punishment.

When you rebel against the LORD,  
life just gets harder!

#### **4. The Resistance of Brother Edom (v14-21)**

<sup>14</sup> *Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: "Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardship that we have met: <sup>15</sup> how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers. <sup>16</sup> And when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are*

*in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. <sup>17</sup> Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the King's Highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.” <sup>18</sup> But Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you.” <sup>19</sup> And the people of Israel said to him, “We will go up by the highway, and if we drink of your water, I and my livestock, then I will pay for it. Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more.” <sup>20</sup> But he said, “You shall not pass through.” And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force. <sup>21</sup> Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory, so Israel turned away from him.*

The form of the message to Edom follows the standard covenantal pattern:

identification of parties – Israel to Edom

historical setting – “you know our hardships in Egypt, but Yahweh heard our voice, and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt.”

Formal request – “please let us pass through your land”

Stipulations – we will stay on the road and pay for anything we eat or drink

Israel offers to endure a sort of fast –

abstaining from anything that belongs to Edom –

for 2-3 days as they cross the 20 miles of Edom’s territory.

Moses appeals to the Edomites based on their common “brotherhood” – since Esau and Jacob were twin brothers.

Of course, their “brotherhood” is now 500 years distant.

It would be like saying that because Henry VIII divorced Catherine of Aragon, therefore Spain should still be bitter enemies with England!

But no matter how distant the relation,

Edom is still descended from Abraham –

and so Israel should always think of Edom as a brother.

And perhaps Moses’ reference to food and water

is designed to remind Edom of how Esau was famished,

and could not control his desires,

and so he sold his birthright to Jacob.

Moses is saying, “we are sons of Israel.

We can control our appetites.”

We’ll sing Psalm 137 after the sermon –

a song that asks God to remember how Edom treated Jerusalem on the day of Babylon’s invasion.

But that is still within the realm of brotherly relations.

If your brother betrays you and encourages those who are trying to destroy you, then he has broken the bond of brotherhood.

If he repents and seeks to make it right, you should forgive him!



But Edom does not view Israel in a brotherly light.  
And so Edom refuses to let Israel pass through.  
Indeed, Edom comes with a show of force  
to bar the way and prevent Israel from crossing their land.

### **5. The Death of Aaron (v22-29)**

<sup>22</sup> *And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor.* <sup>23</sup> *And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom,* <sup>24</sup> *“Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.* <sup>25</sup> *Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor.* <sup>26</sup> *And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there.”* <sup>27</sup> *Moses did as the LORD commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation.* <sup>28</sup> *And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain.* <sup>29</sup> *And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.*

So now they prepare to go around Edom  
(a long 90 miles to the south  
and then again around the southern and eastern borders of Edom).  
In other words, instead of 20 miles across Edom,  
they will now need to go 200 miles *around* Edom!

But as they turn south, the LORD said to Moses and Aaron that it was time for Aaron to die.  
Numbers 35 will speak of how the high priest must die  
in order for the manslayer to return to his home after an accidental death.  
Israel has been guilty of worse than manslaughter.  
Their rebellions have doomed an entire generation.  
But with the death of Aaron, the high priest,  
the next generation may enter the promised land.

Numbers 20 is the hinge – the turning point – of the book.  
With the deaths of Miriam and Aaron,  
the wilderness generation is passing.

The wages of sin is death,  
but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Close with Psalm 137