



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 16, 2009
Released on Wednesday, August 12, 2009

"Disregarding God's Directive"

Lesson Text: Numbers 20:1–13.

Background Scripture: Numbers 20:1–13.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 95.

Numbers 20:1–13

1 Then came the children of Israel, even the whole congregation, into the desert of Zin in the first month: and the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there.

2 And there was no water for the congregation: and they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron.

3 And the people chode with Moses, and spake, saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord!

4 And why have ye brought up the congregation of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our cattle should die there?

5 And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates; neither is there any water to drink.

6 And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the Lord appeared unto them.

7 And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying,

8 Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink.

9 And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

10 And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock?

11 And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.

12 And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them.

13 This is the water of Meribah; because the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and he was sanctified in them.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to recall Miriam's death, the murmuring of the people for lack of water, and Moses' mistake in striking the rock when he was commanded to speak to it.

Principle: to recognize the importance of believers following God's instructions explicitly.

Application: to follow divine directives even if they are not thoroughly understood.

INTRODUCTION:

Do you ever get frustrated? Unless you are among that tiny minority of people who never seem to get frazzled, you most likely have times of frustration and disappointment.

Sometimes our frustrations revolve around things over which we have no control: traffic jams, bad weather, illness. And many frustrations can be quite difficult to avoid, as they may involve our families or jobs. Of course, we may get frustrated with ourselves—even with our lack of spiritual progress.

If you are a church leader or a Sunday school teacher, you may get discouraged over things occurring in your congregation or class. Frustrations frequently revolve around people—people who may be chronic complainers or simply uncommitted to serving God. Either way, we often take the problems they cause very personally.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: about 1405 B.C.

Place: Kadesh

Numbers 13 tells the story of a group of Israelite men who were sent into the land of Canaan as spies to evaluate the region. They returned with glowing reports of the land's bounty. But most of the men gave fearful reports of the military strength of the residents. This caused the nation to cry out for a return to Egypt, and even to make plans for replacing Moses as their leader. This story was the topic of last week's lesson.

The result of this lack of faith was for God to forbid the adults of the nation to enter the promised land. They would die in the wilderness, for anyone age 20 or over would be included in this death toll (Numbers 14:29). The only exceptions were to be the 2 spies who encouraged the nation not to fear and to go and possess the land (14:30). The other Israelites were told that they had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years until the adult population of the time had passed away (14:33).

The people of Israel did not take this news well. Therefore, they decided to try to force their way into Canaan in spite of the Lord's decision. This expedition was a disaster, and the Israelite force was soundly defeated by the Amalekites and Canaanites of the region (Numbers 14:45).

In today's lesson, the nation has returned to the site of this earlier rebellion, namely Kadesh (Numbers 13:26; 20:1). While the exact location of Kadesh is a matter of conjecture today, it was a site about 50 miles south of Beersheba. Beersheba marked the southern border of Canaan. The land is increasingly arid and barren south from there. This is described as the "wilderness [and desert] of Zin" (13:21; 20:1). It is the northern part of the larger "wilderness of Paran," which includes most of the central area of the Sinai Peninsula (see 13:3, 26).

In these references, the word *wilderness* has the primary idea of "uninhabitable" because the conditions were so harsh. The water miracle in today's story means that Kadesh became an oasis in this wilderness. Today's lesson occurs at the end of the 40-year period of wilderness wandering (about 1406 BC). This is just prior to the campaigns and maneuvers that take Israel into the promised land of Canaan.

THE DEATH OF MIRIAM (Numbers 20:1)

1. In what year did the events of our lesson likely occur (Numbers 20:1)?

The Wilderness of Zin is in the general region of Kadesh-barnea, where the people had listened to the spies' report, rebelled, and resolved to return to Egypt (Num. 14:1-4).

"The reference to Kadesh does not mean that Israel arrived there for the first time, since they had already sent the spies out from there (12:16; 13:26). It means simply that they returned to Kadesh on this occasion" (Walvoord and Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Cook).

The reference to "the first month" in Numbers 20:1 is a bit confusing, as it might seem to indicate that these events occurred at the beginning of the Israelites' journey. Of course, it undoubtedly refers to the first month of the fortieth year of their wanderings (cf. 20:22-29; 33:38).

Few of the generation that was prohibited from entry into the promised land remain for the episode we are about to see unfold. The death of *Miriam*, one of the last of that older generation, is recorded here. She was the sister of Moses and Aaron (Numbers 26:59; 1 Chronicles 6:3; compare Exodus 2:4). Those three formed something of a family triumvirate of leadership during the wilderness period (see Micah 6:4).

2. Besides Miriam's death, what else do we know about her?

Although she is not named there, the first mention of Miriam in Scripture is in connection with Moses' birth. It was Miriam who stood by to see what would become of baby Moses, who was hid-den in the bulrushes. It was also Miriam who suggested to Pharaoh's daughter that a Hebrew woman might be secured to nurse the child for her (Exod. 2:1-10).

Along with Aaron, Moses' brother, Miriam played an important role in leading the people of Israel. She is one of the few women in the Bible referred to as a prophetess (Exod. 15:20; cf. Judg. 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14).

Both Aaron and Miriam criticized Moses' choice of a wife and challenged his authority (Num. 12:1-15). Because of this, God rebuked Moses' siblings, telling them that their brother had been selected for a special role and should not be disparaged. As punishment, Miriam was smitten with leprosy for a time, presumably because she was the instigator of the criticism (v. 10).

"After challenging the authority of Moses, Miriam, along with her brother Aaron, nearly disappears from the scene.

Although Miriam's age is not specified, she would have been somewhat older than Moses, who died later that year at the age of 120 (Deut. 34:7), and Aaron, who died at the age of 123 (Num. 33:39).

In spite of the above-noted incident that put her in a poor light, Miriam was greatly respected by succeeding generations of Israel. In the New Testament the name that is equivalent to "Miriam" is "Mary." The popularity of the name "Mary" is seen in the New Testament by the fact that there are seven different women with that name. Because of Jesus' mother, "Mary" has been a popular name among Christians, just as "Miriam" has been among Jews.

THE DISSATISFACTION OF THE MULTITUDE (Numbers 20:2-5)

3. What was the complaint of the children of Israel at this time, and why was this a particular problem for the people (v. 2)?

In spite of the fact that God had provided miraculously for Israel on numerous occasions during their journey, they continued to complain. This time they said "there was no water for the congregation." That there was no water should probably not be understood in an absolute sense; otherwise, they all would have died in a matter of days (which may, of course, have been what they feared). There may have been a trickle of water but not enough to satisfy their needs for cooking and bathing, with perhaps only enough drinking water to barely sustain them. A

similar incident occurred at the beginning of their forty-year journey (Exod. 17:1-7).

Any water supply at Kadesh of some 40 years previous has dried up by now. We do not know the exact population of *the congregation* of Israel at this point, but a later count puts the number of men at 601,730 (Numbers 26:51). Adding in women and children makes the number much larger. This number of people requires an enormous supply of fresh water every day. The frustration of *no water* leads the people to turn against their leaders.

4. While quarreling with Moses, what did the people wish had happened to them (vs. 3-5)?

As the long-time leaders, Moses and Aaron continued to bear the brunt of the nation's criticism. "The people chode with Moses" (Num. 20:3). *Chode* is the past tense of *chide*, and here means "to argue or dispute." The mass of *people* yapping at *Moses* probably is led by the remaining few from the rebellion at Kadesh some 40 years earlier, for they refer to the deaths of their *brethren*. Consider that God has provided for these people faithfully through 4 decades of nomadic life. Moses later will point out that even their clothes did not wear out during this 40-year period (Deuteronomy 8:4). Yet they still complain!

All of their needs for the past forty years, all that the people could do was focus on their current deprivation. Being short of water meant that they had to conserve and that their livestock suffered as well.

The Wilderness of Zin is desert country, quite unlike the fertile region where the Israelites had dwelt in Egypt. The people not surprisingly regarded it as an evil, or terrible, place (Num. 20:5).

GOD'S WILL SOUGHT (Numbers 20:6-8)

5. After listening to the people's complaint, what was the first thing Moses and Aaron did (v. 6)?

After listening to the complaints of the people, Moses and Aaron went immediately to the tabernacle to receive guidance from the Lord. Too often when we are confronted with problems or complaints, we try to argue with the complainers or solve the problem on our own. To their credit, the two leaders of Israel sought the Lord during this crisis. Moses and Aaron prostrated themselves before the Lord, whose glory then appeared before them.

6. What specific instructions were given to Moses regarding providing water for the people (vs. 7,8)?

God spoke, giving Moses very specific instructions regarding the solution for the lack of water.

Instructed to take the rod that had been used to perform miracles, Moses was told to speak to the rock in the presence of the assembled people. In a nearly identical incident that had occurred some forty years earlier, Moses had been told to strike the rock and thereby bring water out of it (Exod. 17:6).

Though it might be argued that Moses simply misunderstood God's command the second time around, the subsequent details of the account indicate that he acted out of irritation rather than ignorance.

GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS VIOLATED (Numbers 20:9-11)

7. In what ways did Moses not fully obey the Lord (vs. 9-11)?

Moses starts well, taking the *rod* as *the Lord* commands. Rather than proceed with his simple task, however, *Moses* takes the opportunity to give a little speech. This speech contains two troubling elements.

Moses first chastises the people of Israel as *rebels*, although God has not told him to do so. God's response in Numbers 20:8 shows no impatience or exasperation with the people. In a later recounting of this incident, the psalmist will write that Moses spoke "unadvisedly with his lips" (Psalm 106:33).

Second, Moses' question *Must we fetch you water?* seems to take personal credit (along with Aaron) for the miracle about to happen. Does Moses fail to recall that he is no more than God's instrument?

Third, *Moses* disobeys the Lord by striking *the rock* (v. 11) when he had been told to speak to it (v. 8).

It is obvious that Moses was angry and wanted the people to know how up-set he was. "The remarkable thing is that God gave the water, even though Moses' attitudes were all wrong! ... God in His grace met the needs of His people because He is a God of compassion and infinite goodness, but He did not overlook Moses' sins" (Wiersbe).

As Christians, there are times when we may become frustrated with fellow believers. We may be tempted to vent our anger in various ways. But doing so is counterproductive to promoting unity among God's people. We should take seriously the advice of James 1:19-20: "My beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

THE DISCIPLINING OF MOSES (Numbers 20:12,13)

8. What punishment was suffered by Moses and Aaron at this time (v. 12)?

The wilderness experience of Israel includes examples of God's forgiveness (compare Numbers 14:18). In this case, however, the disobedience of *Moses and Aaron* is to be punished. This is to be so even though Moses has been God's key man to this point in creating the nation of Israel.

God brings two charges. The first charge is that the brothers have shown a lack of faith. This results in disobedience. They do not trust God enough to carry out His instructions in humility, but give in to anger. Second, the pair does not *sanctify* God, that is, to demonstrate His holiness, was to have serious consequences for Moses and Aaron. "In disobeying instructions and showing no respect for the symbol of God's presence, Moses failed to *sanctify* God; that means he did not acknowledge publicly [God's] purity and unapproachability" (Wenham).

No doubt Moses and Aaron longed to lead the people into the Promised Land and enjoy its blessings. This, however, was not to be. Of course, this had nothing to do with their eternal destiny; it was a temporal punishment for their lack of judgment on this occasion. Although they were leaders, Moses and Aaron were not exempt from suffering the consequences of their wrong actions. Both political and religious leaders must realize that they are not above the law, whether man's law or God's law.

9. How have you discovered that disobedience to God always leads to loss in some way? How have you grown through such experiences?

Moses' disobedience resulted in not being allowed to lead the people into the promised land. When a believer disobeys, something is always lost. Sometimes the loss is large, sometimes it's small. Sometimes the loss is immediate, sometimes the consequences are delayed. But there is always loss. God will forgive when a person repents. But even with forgiveness, some consequences of the disobedience remain. The sordid episode of David and Bathsheba is an example.

10. What name was given to the place where these events occurred (v. 13)?

Because of the events that occurred at this location, the place was named "Meribah" (Num. 20:13), literally, "strife" or "contention." Interestingly, in the similar incident that occurred forty years earlier, a similar designation was given to that location: "And he called the name of the place Massah, and Meribah, because of the chiding of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exod. 17:7).

Since God is a "jealous God" (Exod. 20:5), He allows no rivals. Not even His appointed deliverer and lawgiver, Moses, or the first high priest of Israel, Aaron, was permitted to diminish the glory of the Lord by failing to sanctify Him among the people. History has frequent examples of well-intentioned religious leaders who have allowed power and popularity to go to their heads and experienced great falls. As Paul said, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

After leaving Kadesh, Israel journeyed to Mount Hor. The precise location of this mountain is in dispute, but it was there that Aaron's high priestly power was transferred to his son Eleazar. After that, Aaron died on the mountain (Num. 20:22-29).

PRACTICAL POINTS:

- 1.** Circumstances meant to strengthen our faith can bring out rebellion if our hearts are not right (Num. 20:1-2).
- 2.** Complaining and casting blame are a sure sign that we are not walking by faith (vs. 3-5).
- 3.** The Lord has the solution for our dilemmas, but He requires implicit faith in His Word to realize it (vs. 6-8).
- 4.** Acting out of anger, even when doing right, can spell trouble (vs. 9,10).
- 5.** Positive results are no guarantee that a course of action was in keeping with the will of God (vs. 11-13).

CONCLUSION:

Honor, Glory, and Holiness

The complexities of our lives can lead to frustrations both big and small. We seem just to get on top of our finances when a big, unexpected expense comes our way. We are let down by people we depend on. A careless driver bumps our car. People reach breaking points as frustrations begin to pile up. By the time Israel returned to Kadesh, they had been through a lot. But at that place they were confronted with a situation that pushed their frustration tolerance past its limits.

The frustration of the people infected Moses. Forty years in the desert apparently took its toll on that elderly leader. He began well, standing up to Pharaoh's every threat and roadblock to free the people of Israel from Egypt. He followed God's directions, even though the commands must have seemed curious at times. No one expects to escape across a sea without boats or military protection. But Moses trusted God and performed the seemingly futile act of raising his rod over the sea, seeing it part to reveal a dry path of escape. In celebrating this victory, Moses sang that the Lord is "glorious in holiness" (Exodus 15:11).

The New Testament contains a reprise of the Song of Moses from Exodus 15 in Revelation 15:3, 4. In this brief passage, we gain the perspective that worship is a matter of fearing God, of glorifying God, and of respecting God's holiness. To worship God requires that we show Him honor in every possible way.

This is more than a Sunday morning task. As Moses learned the hard way, we can honor or dishonor God even in a seemingly straightforward job. Violating God's holiness is much more than disrespecting items or spaces in our church buildings. We violate God's holiness every time we rebel against Him and act in defiance to His

will. This is because disobedience betrays our lack of fear for God and causes our praise of His glory to ring hollow. We respect God's holiness when we love Him and fear Him enough to obey Him.

PRAYER:

Holy God, may we honor You in all we say and in all we do. May we never despise Your provisions for us. May we sanctify You in our congregation. When complaints rise to our lips, may we have the wisdom to swallow them and sing Your praises instead. We pray these things through the name of our Savior Jesus. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

Respect God's holiness by obeying Him.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Deuteronomy 6 is one passage that says a lot about spiritual instruction of children. After receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai (Exod. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21), the Israelites were told to teach them diligently to their children on a regular basis.

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Union Gospel Press, P.O. Box 6059, Cleveland, Ohio 44101. (Web site:
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The Pulpit Commentary, Spence-Jones, H. D. M. (Hrsg.), Bellingham, WA : Logos
Research Systems, Inc.

The KJV Parallel Bible Commentary, by Nelson Books

Holman Bible Dictionary, Holman Bible Publishers