

Adult Bible Class

The Book of Numbers

Lesson #13, Chapter 20

Numbers Chapter 20 - The Rock in the Wilderness

In this chapter, Israel is back at Kadesh where the Lord dealt with them almost forty years ago. At this very place, Moses sent out the twelve spies to check out the land of Canaan, and ten of them came back with an evil report. Read what was said so many years ago when the spies came back with their report:

Numbers 13:27 (NLT) This was their report to Moses: "We entered the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is the kind of fruit it produces. **28** But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak! ...**31** ..."We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!" **32** So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: "The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. **33** We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!"

Not only did the spies give a bad report, but the people believed it:

Numbers 14:1 (NLT) Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. **2** Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!" they complained. **3** "Why is the Lord taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder! Wouldn't it be better for us to return to Egypt?" **4** Then they plotted among themselves, "Let's choose a new leader and go back to Egypt!"

Because of their complaining and unbelief, God said they would wander in the wilderness until the older generation died off. The younger generation would then go into the Promised Land:

Numbers 14:30 You will not enter and occupy the land I swore to give you. The only exceptions will be Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

31 "You said your children would be carried off as plunder. Well, I will bring them safely into the land, and they will enjoy what you have despised. **32** But as for you, you will drop dead in this wilderness..."

34 "Because your men explored the land for forty days, you must wander in the wilderness for forty years—a year for each day, suffering the consequences of your sins..."

36 The ten men Moses had sent to explore the land—the ones who incited rebellion against the Lord with their bad report— **37** were struck dead with a plague before the Lord. **38** Of the twelve who had explored the land, only Joshua and Caleb remained alive.

Nearly forty years of wilderness wandering followed. Very little is mentioned about this time in Scripture. It is a time of waiting for the older, disobedient generation to die. Now as we come to Numbers chapter 20, we read about this up-and-coming younger generation who are now almost forty years older.

Numbers 20:1 (NLT) In the first month of the year, the whole community of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Zin and camped at Kadesh. While they were there, Miriam died and was buried.

We have to notice that Israel is back at Kadesh - the very place where they began their wandering and waiting. Israel has accomplished very little. Yes, they were moving. Yes, God did provide their basic needs by giving them daily manna, water, and clothes that never wore out. He provided shade in the inhospitable wilderness (a cloud for a covering). But during this wilderness wandering Israel was just marking time. No real progress is made.

But here we read that Miriam died and was buried. The three great children of Amram were Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. All three of these siblings were greatly used by God. Miriam, the oldest, was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20-21). Aaron was the high priest of Israel (Exodus 28:41). Moses was the great law-giver of Israel (Deut. 4:44-45). But as we continue our study, we will see that all three will die within one year and be buried just short of the Promised Land.

Numbers 20:2 There was no water for the people to drink at that place, so they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The people blamed Moses and said, "If only we had died in the Lord's presence with our brothers! **4** Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord's people into this wilderness to die, along with all our livestock? **5** Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us here to this terrible place? This land has no grain, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, and no water to drink!"

Uh oh! The older generation has died off - maybe only a handful left. But what is this that we hear from the younger generation? Compare what they said above to what their parents said below soon after they had crossed the Red Sea:

Exodus 17:3 ...tormented by thirst, they continued to argue with Moses. "Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Are you trying to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?"

We see here that the children in Numbers 20 sound much like their parents did nearly forty years ago. In fact, the children seem to have brought the complaining up a notch or two!

Let's continue reading in Numbers 20:

Numbers 20:6 Moses and Aaron turned away from the people and went to the entrance of the Tabernacle, where they fell face down on the ground. Then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared to them, **7** and the Lord said to Moses, **8** "You and Aaron must take the staff and assemble the entire community. As the people watch, speak to the rock over there, and it will pour out its water. You will provide enough water from the rock to satisfy the whole community and their livestock."

How gracious God is to these complaining people! God is going to overlook their attitude and He is going to provide life-giving water, just as He did for their parents so long ago. God told Moses and Aaron to speak to the rock "*as the people watch.*" Moses and Aaron were to be God's examples of how to get water from this rock.

But these instructions are different than what God told Moses to do almost forty years ago. Read what happened back then:

Exodus 17:5 The Lord said to Moses, "Walk out in front of the people. Take your staff, the one you used when you struck the water of the Nile, and call some of the elders of Israel to join you. **6** I will

stand before you on the rock at Mount Sinai. Strike the rock, and water will come gushing out. Then the people will be able to drink." So Moses struck the rock as he was told, and water gushed out as the elders looked on.

In that earlier situation, Moses did as God commanded Him - He hit the rock with his staff. Moses behaved meekly (as was his reputation). But, nearly four decades later, we are going to read that Moses had had enough! Moses disobeys God.

Numbers 20:9 "You and Aaron must take the staff and assemble the entire community. As the people watch, speak to the rock over there, and it will pour out its water. You will provide enough water from the rock to satisfy the whole community and their livestock."

So Moses did as he was told. He took the staff from the place where it was kept before the Lord. **10** Then he and Aaron summoned the people to come and gather at the rock. "Listen, you rebels!" he shouted. "Must we bring you water from this rock?" **11** Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the staff, and water gushed out. So the entire community and their livestock drank their fill.

12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!" **13** This place was known as the waters of Meribah (which means "arguing") because there the people of Israel argued with the Lord, and there he demonstrated his holiness among them.

This time Moses, who had previously behaved in a meek manner (for the most part), allows his temper to control his actions. Perhaps it was too much for him to see the younger generation acting just like their parents. Perhaps it was the fact that he was nearly 120 years old, and he had just had enough.

Yes, the younger generation was acting like their rebellious parents. The New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that we should look at those rebellious parents as a lesson of what not to do:

Hebrews 3:7 That is why the Holy Spirit says,

"Today when you hear his voice,

8 don't harden your hearts
as Israel did when they rebelled,
when they tested me in the wilderness.

9 There your ancestors tested and tried my patience,
even though they saw my miracles for forty years.

10 So I was angry with them, and I said,
'Their hearts always turn away from me.
They refuse to do what I tell them.'

11 So in my anger I took an oath:
'They will never enter my place of rest.'"

12 Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. **13** You must warn each other every day, while it is still "today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. **14** For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ. **15** Remember what it says:

"Today when you hear his voice,

don't harden your hearts
as Israel did when they rebelled."

16 And who was it who rebelled against God, even though they heard his voice? Wasn't it the people Moses led out of Egypt? **17** And who made God angry for forty years? Wasn't it the people who sinned, whose corpses lay in the wilderness? **18** And to whom was God speaking when he took an oath that they would never enter his rest? Wasn't it the people who disobeyed him? **19** So we see that because of their unbelief they were not able to enter his rest.

As we read today's chapter (Numbers 20), we have to notice that God was merciful with the younger generation just like He was merciful with the older generation when they were thirsty. Forty years ago, God told Moses to hit the rock and water would gush out for the people. Now, the directions were different. Moses was not supposed to hit the rock; he was supposed to speak to it.

The rock in the wilderness was a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus provides living water to all who will ask Him.

John 4:10 (NKJV) Jesus answered and said to her [the woman at the well], "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water..."

14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.

Jesus wasn't talking about water, but about a spiritual fountain that one can receive called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said:

John 7:38 (NKJV) He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." **39** But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Jesus Is the Rock

The New Testament tells us that the rock in the wilderness was a type or picture of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). The rock in the wilderness was apparently there for them whenever they needed it (and people need water every day). Although that rock was there, they continued to behave in unbelief. That was the great sin of the Israelites in the wilderness - they complained instead of believing! They had great reason to believe. God had done multiple miracles to show His great power. He had made many great promises to them. But in spite of all that, they complained and disbelieved.

Jesus, our Rock, suffered greatly at Calvary for our sin. But that suffering was meant to be a one-time thing ("*For Christ also suffered once for sins.*" 1 Peter 3:18). After Jesus suffered and died on the cross to pay mankind's debt of sin, He rose from the dead! He is the first one to completely conquer death. Because He conquered death, we have a hope of a resurrection after we die. Because He lives, we, too, can live.

Now, we can speak to this Rock, Jesus Christ, just as Moses was supposed to speak to the rock in the wilderness to bring forth water. The violence that Jesus suffered is over. We can speak to Him in prayer, in worship, as a friend speaks to a friend. Remember what Jesus said:

John 4:10 (NKJV) Jesus answered and said to her [the woman at the well], "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water..."

Can it be as simple as that? To receive God's Spirit, do we just need to ask Him for it? Yes! If we have repented and if we look in faith to Jesus Christ, all we need to do is ask God to fill us! He will! Water will come from that Rock, Jesus Christ.

Some Christians go without simply because they do not ask. It takes faith to ask.

Matthew 21:22 And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.

Luke 11:9 "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **10** For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. **11** If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? **12** Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? **13** If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Jesus is the Rock in a weary land. He is the Solid Rock on which we stand. He suffered, but now the suffering is over, and we can speak to that Rock for spiritual refreshment. He is risen forevermore, and He is looking for faith on the earth.

Luke 18:8 ...when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?

God was looking for faith from Moses when He told him to "*speak to the rock*" to get water. Instead, Moses was cranky. The younger generation were acting just like their parents! Moses called them "rebels" and acted like it was he and Aaron who gave them water. He said, "Must we bring you water from this rock?" Then Moses hit the rock twice.

Moses did a bad thing. That rock in the wilderness was a picture of Jesus Christ. Moses had already hit the rock before. Jesus Christ was crucified once for all time and for all men. It was wrong for Moses to hit the rock again out of anger, out of disgust. It was now time for him to speak to the rock for the people. This younger generation needed to see that picture, and we in the New Testament age needed to read about it.

Because of Moses' disobedience and lack of faith in the Word of God, God told him:

Numbers 20:12 But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!" **13** This place was known as the waters of Meribah (which means "arguing") because there the people of Israel argued with the Lord, and there he demonstrated his holiness among them.

God will always be sanctified among His people. This will happen one way or another. God's holiness was demonstrated on that first occasion when Moses hit the rock and water came out for the people. God's holiness was demonstrated the

second time, even though Moses did not speak to the rock like he was told to do. Water still came out because God came through, but Moses got in trouble with God because he personally did not demonstrate God's holiness there at that moment by speaking to the rock.

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He was sanctified before the entire world. This was perhaps the most holy moment in human history. But that moment was over when it was over. Jesus said, "*It is finished.*" Today we serve a risen Savior. He is risen from the dead, and he has salvation for all who will call on Him.

Now, God is glorified, He is sanctified, His holiness is demonstrated when people speak to that rock and they receive life-giving water. We are to remember His death until He comes, but we must go beyond that. *We must receive from Him*, by faith, believing.

Numbers Chapter 20 Continued - The Attempt to Pass Through Edom

Numbers 20:14 (NLT) While Moses was at Kadesh, he sent ambassadors to the king of Edom with this message:

"This is what your relatives, the people of Israel, say: You know all the hardships we have been through. **15** Our ancestors went down to Egypt, and we lived there a long time, and we and our ancestors were brutally mistreated by the Egyptians. **16** But when we cried out to the Lord, he heard us and sent an angel who brought us out of Egypt. Now we are camped at Kadesh, a town on the border of your land. **17** Please let us travel through your land. We will be careful not to go through your fields and vineyards. We won't even drink water from your wells. We will stay on the king's road and never leave it until we have passed through your territory."

The people of Edom were the descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother whom he deceived out of his birthright and blessing. Edom means "red" and was another name by which Esau himself was called.

Genesis tells us that Esau had his own place. Jacob was promised the land of Canaan, but Esau was given the land of Seir, also called Edom.

Genesis 36:6 Esau took his wives, his children, and his entire household, along with his livestock and cattle—all the wealth he had acquired in the land of Canaan—and moved away from his brother, Jacob. **7** There was not enough land to support them both because of all the livestock and possessions they had acquired. **8** So Esau (also known as Edom) settled in the hill country of Seir.

It had been about 350 years since Jacob and Esau made peace. Now their descendants were meeting, but the meeting is not so peaceful. Israel wanted to travel through the land of Edom. God told them:

Deuteronomy 2:4 . . . "You will pass through the country belonging to your relatives the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, who live in Seir. The Edomites will feel threatened, so be careful. **5** Do not bother them, for I have given them all the hill country around Mount Seir as their property, and I will not give you even one square foot of their land. **6** If you need food to eat or water to drink, pay them for it.

Let's continue in our chapter in Numbers:

Numbers 20:18 But the king of Edom said, "Stay out of my land, or I will meet you with an army!"

19 The Israelites answered, "We will stay on the main road. If our livestock drink your water, we will pay for it. Just let us pass through your country. That's all we ask."

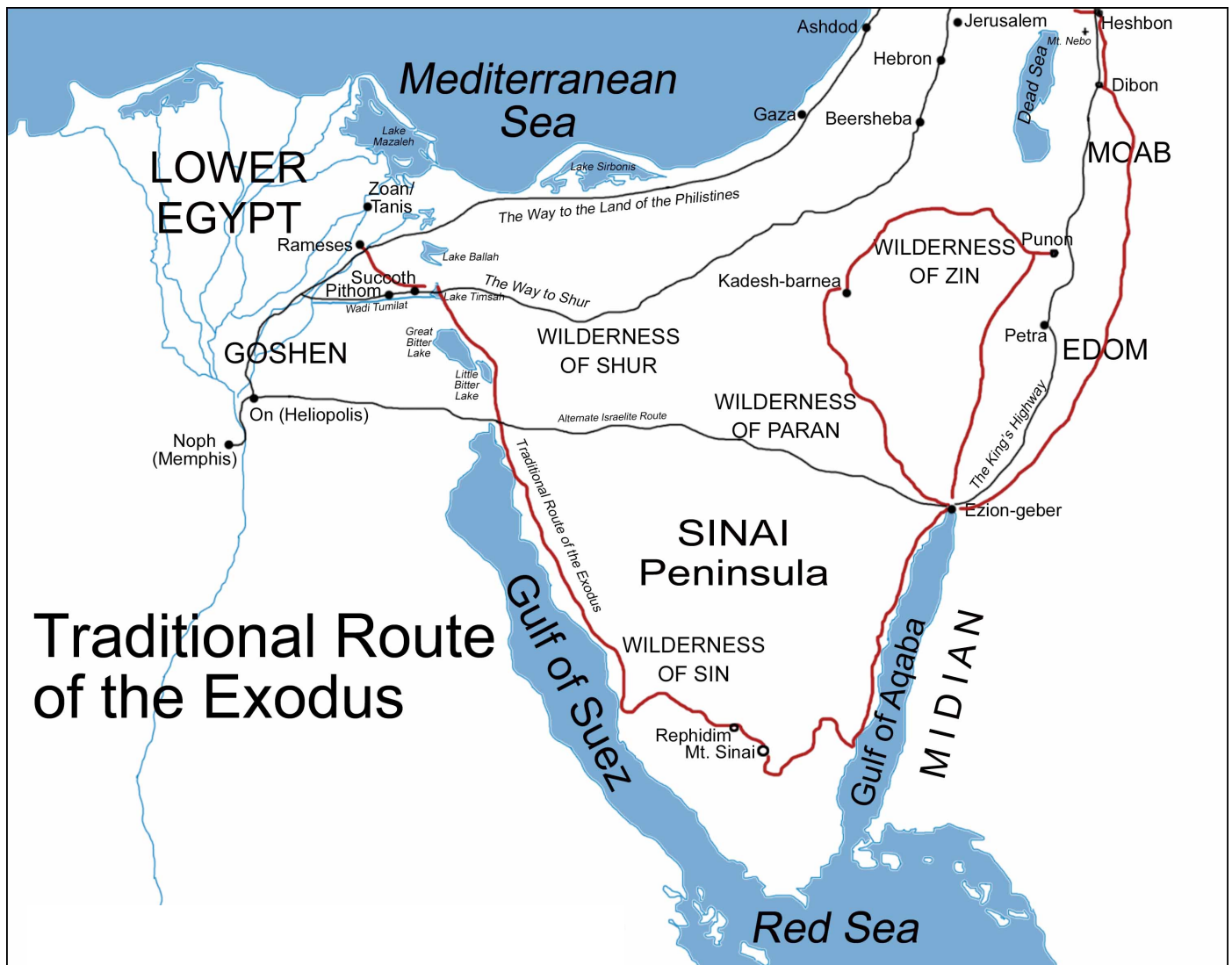
20 But the king of Edom replied, "Stay out! You may not pass through our land." With that he mobilized his army and marched out against them with an imposing force. **21** Because Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through their country, Israel was forced to turn around.

As it turned out, Edom completely refused to let them pass through their land. The way through Edom would have been the most direct path, but it was not to be.

A History of Edom

Throughout its history, the nation of Edom was often antagonistic towards the people of Israel. Edom ceased to exist as a people within a few centuries after the Romans conquered Judea and Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Edom was near the land of Israel, to the south of Jerusalem, between the Dead Sea to the north and the Gulf of Aqaba to the south. It's most famous city was Petra, which featured many buildings that are carved into rock.

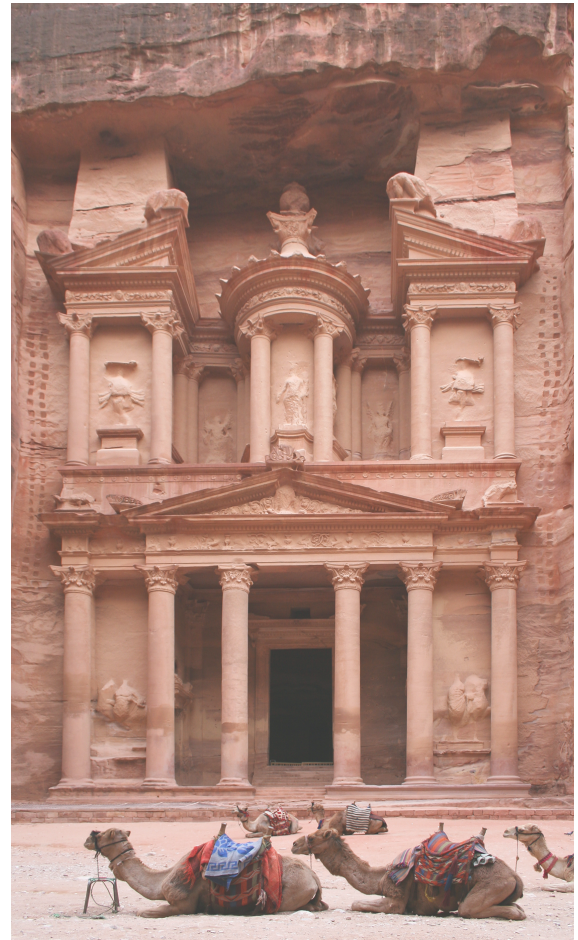


Although Edom and Israel were related through Esau and Jacob, there was constant warfare between the two countries. David was the first Israelite King to conquer Edom. Edom revolted in the days of King Joram, installing its own king. Years later, Amaziah reconquered Edom, and it was not until the days of Ahaz that the country regained its independence. In the 6th century BC, Edom was conquered by the Babylonians (as was Judah).

In the years that followed, the Edomites went westward into southern Judah, south of Hebron. The area became known as Idumea, and in 135 BC it was conquered by John Hyrcanus who converted them to Judaism. King Herod the Great was an Idumean of Edomite origin. Edom was condemned by the prophets, especially Obadiah, who devoted his book to foretelling the eventual destruction of the country.

- Obadiah 2 (NLT)** The Lord says to Edom,
"I will cut you down to size among the nations;
you will be greatly despised.
3 You have been deceived by your own pride
because you live in a rock fortress
and make your home high in the mountains.
'Who can ever reach us way up here?'
you ask boastfully.
4 But even if you soar as high as eagles
and build your nest among the stars,
I will bring you crashing down,"
says the Lord . . .
10 "Because of the violence you did
to your close relatives in Israel,
you will be filled with shame
and destroyed forever.
11 When they were invaded,
you stood aloof, refusing to help them.
Foreign invaders carried off their wealth
and cast lots to divide up Jerusalem,
but you acted like one of Israel's enemies.

12 "You should not have gloated
when they exiled your relatives to distant lands.
You should not have rejoiced
when the people of Judah suffered such misfortune.
You should not have spoken arrogantly
in that terrible time of trouble.
13 You should not have plundered the land of Israel
when they were suffering such calamity.



The Treasury in Petra (modern Jordan)

The forty years of wandering were going to be completed by a long side trip around Edom.

The Death of Aaron

Numbers 20:22 (NLT) The whole community of Israel left Kadesh and arrived at Mount Hor. **23** There, on the border of the land of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, **24** "The time has come for Aaron to join his ancestors in death. He will not enter the land I am giving the people of Israel,

because the two of you rebelled against my instructions concerning the water at Meribah. 25 Now take Aaron and his son Eleazar up Mount Hor. **26** There you will remove Aaron's priestly garments and put them on Eleazar, his son. Aaron will die there and join his ancestors."

27 So Moses did as the Lord commanded. The three of them went up Mount Hor together as the whole community watched. **28** At the summit, Moses removed the priestly garments from Aaron and put them on Eleazar, Aaron's son. Then Aaron died there on top of the mountain, and Moses and Eleazar went back down. **29** When the people realized that Aaron had died, all Israel mourned for him thirty days.

Just six months earlier, Miriam had died (beginning of this chapter). Now, Aaron - the middle child of Amram - was going to die (Numbers 33:39 says he was 123 years old). He could probably see the edge of the Promised Land from on top of Mt. Hor.

As great as Aaron was (he was the first High Priest of Israel), he was going to die here because of his sin at Meribah. The whole community watched as Moses removed the priestly garments from Aaron and put them on Eleazar, Aaron's oldest living son. Aaron would die, but the priesthood would live on.

Though he died here because of sin, yet *"all Israel mourned for him."* They loved him and respected him as the first High Priest of Israel.



Aaron's tomb on Mt. Hor - modern Jordan.