

October 5, 2025

LACK OF TRUST: NUMBERS 20:2-13

Introductory Activity (ETB LG, 59)

Read: Direct adults to read the opening paragraph on page 46 of the PSG silently. [See Notes Box]

Ask: Do you find yourself in category one or two? Why do you think that is your tendency? On what kinds of tasks is it most important to follow instructions all the way to the end? (PSG, p. 46)

Suggest: Mention that sometimes even people who normally follow directions skip them because they think they know what they should do. Point out that sometimes this could lead to serious difficulties or unintended problems.

Transition: Today's study passage comes from Numbers 20. It's an account of a time when Moses, usually a person who followed God's directions, chose to act according to his own plan. As a result, Moses experienced a painful consequence.

Introductory Activity 2

Ask the group if they have heard the counseling term "gunnysacking."

Relay the content about gunnysacking: "Perhaps a husband offends his spouse by failing to pick up his socks, which she has legitimately asked him to do every other week for the past ten years or so. Or perhaps the wife forgot to pick up her husband's favorite suit from the dry cleaners, as she had promised. Once the argument ensues, though, instead of focusing on the specific issue under dispute, all kinds of unresolved grievances emerge. One spouse inundates the other with every single one of his or her failings that he or she has carefully been saving up over the last six months, from the time she ran over the neighbor's cat to his habit of failing to put the lid back on the milk. The result is that instead of a limited argument over a minor issue, the couple ends up with a full-scale war because now they are dealing with six months' worth of issues all at once." (Preaching 250)

Transition: Today, we are going to see a case of gunnysacking. "In the same way [as the example above], in this case, the Israelites' real problem was that they had nothing to drink, but once the Complaints Department was open for business, everything and anything was fair game. They repeated the complaint they had made when Moses had first brought them and their livestock into the wilderness that he had led them there to die (Exodus 17:3), but now with an added edge." (Preaching 250) Not only will the people practice gunnysacking, but it is possible that Moses was feeling much the same way. Let's look at this event that took place at the end of the forty-year wandering of the people.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Numbers* (Preaching)
- *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Numbers* (TOTC)
- *Numbers* (Harrison)
- *New American Commentary: Numbers* (NAC)

"People generally fall into two categories—those who read and follow the instructions and those who think they can figure it out as they go along. Those who fall into this latter category may do so because of heightened self-confidence, impatience, or a history of past successes. Sometimes, though, at the end of the project, those in the second category may be left with extra, unused parts or an end product that doesn't quite look like it was supposed to." (ETB PSG, 46)

1. THE PROBLEM (NUM. 20:2-5)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers **20:2-5**.

Explain: Verse 1 of chapter 20 tells us that the people had entered the Wilderness of Zin and settled at Kadesh. After forty years of wandering, they had arrived back at the southern tip of Canaan. “Their return to Kadesh points to the wasted time and lives of an entire generation lost because of their unbelief and refusal to obey God.” (ETBC, 52) It was now time to “try this again” and enter the land. Before they can do that, they again begin to complain before the Lord. Verse 2 tells us that there was not enough water for the “community.” It also implies they sent a delegation to Moses to complain about the situation. It appears they established a “complaints committee.” In verse 3, this committee “quarreled with Moses and Aaron.” The word “[quarreled]” denotes a contentious dispute, as the people verbally assaulted Moses and Aaron over their hardship. (ETB LG, 60)

Discuss: Before we go any further, let’s be reminded of other times the people had acted in such a way. (Pass out **Pack Item 9** (*Handout: Complaints in the Wilderness*; this can be found in the big zip lock bag with the posters.)

- Guide the group to examine the left column. Ask them to call out the basic complaints of the people while they wandered in the wilderness.
 - There was more complaining in the book of Exodus before the 40-year wandering began, but on this handout listing their complaints in the wilderness, we see three basic complaints. First, complaints about food and water (Num. 11, 20, 21). Second, complaints about God’s “inability” to take them into the land, leading to their refusal to follow Him there (Num. 13:26-33, 13:30-14:3, 14:10-12). Third, they complained about leadership (Num. 12, 14, 16). [See the attached color-coded handout]
- Guide the group to examine the far right column. Ask the group to call out the names of those the people complained to or about. (God, Moses, and Aaron) **Discuss:** Ask the group to discuss what the people were actually doing when they grumbled against God, Moses, and Aaron. (I can’t think of a better way to ask the question. Use my comments below to formulate a better question.)
 - When the people complained against God, they were participating in an active rebellion against their King. Whether they were complaining about His apparent inability to provide water and food or refusing to trust in His power to take them into the Promised Land, they were rebelling against Him. A lack of trust in the God who promised to care for them was in effect rebellion against Him. Similarly, when they complain to and about Moses and Aaron, they were rebelling against their God-given leaders. Moses and Aaron

Notes:

Scholars disagree about the exact location of “Kadesh” in chapter 20. It might have been the same “Kadesh” as Numbers 13. That place had ample water the on in chapter 20 seems to be lacking water. For our purposes what matters is that the location places them in the same general region preparing to move into the land.

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were the spokespersons for the Lord. Throughout the Exodus and the wandering, it was God who led them *through* the words of Moses.

Explain: In Numbers 20:2-5, the people are practicing a bit of gunnysacking (If you did not use the introduction that includes this phrase, you might need to explain it here.) Their complaint expands beyond the lack of water.

Reread verses 3-5

Explain: They declare they wish they had died like their “brothers.” This might be a reference to the rebellions in Numbers 16-17, where the Lord judged the people and many died. They go on to complain that they are living in the wilderness and not Egypt or the Promised Land. Here, they whitewash the evil they endured in Egypt as slaves. Not to mention, none of those who complained were adults in Egypt. They were pining for “the good old days” that they never actually experienced and really were not so good. In their complaint about living in the wilderness instead of the Promised Land, they forget, or refused to admit, that it was not God’s or Moses’ decision that denied them entrance into the land. Instead, it was their parents’ refusal to trust God that led them into the wilderness. Before we move on to some application, let’s look at one more phrase in the text.

Explore: Ask the group to look at verse 4 and call out what the Israelites call themselves. (“the Lord’s assembly”)

Explain: “The specific expression Lord’s assembly stresses the people’s relationship with God.” (ETB LG, 60) They might be alluding to this special relationship to imply that it was Moses’s fault, not God’s, that they were suffering. As we have seen, any complaint against Moses is one against God. The phrase “assembly” is interesting for another reason. In the Greek translation of the OT that was used by Jesus and early Christians, this word is translated “*ekklesia*.” That same word is used for the “church” in the NT.

Discuss: While the modern church does not equate exactly with the ancient nation of Israel wandering in the wilderness, we can apply some of the truths gleaned from their experience to the modern, local church. Think back to the ways the people complained in the wilderness (complaints related to God’s provision, complaints related to God’s ability to care for them in difficult assignments, and complaints related to God-given leadership) and discuss ways these same complaints can show up in the local church.

Summarize Transition: Sometimes, we in the church can practice “gunnysacking.” Things might seem bleak, or maybe the church is experiencing a challenging time (btw, challenges can be negative or sometimes they can be exciting because of the work God is doing). In these times, the situation might just blow up, and every incident related to resources like money or supplies, and every suspected slight to “my” ministry gets brought up. Sometimes, the people will complain about past

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“They were God’s chosen people, the congregation of the Lord (*qēhal YHWH*), and so it must have been Moses’ fault that they faced this crisis of survival in a place with no grain, fruit, or water.” (NAC, 325)

initiatives. “We tried that, and it did not work.” Or every perceived slight by the pastor gets brought up. Churches are made up of people, and we, like the Israelites, sometimes begin to complain. We should be careful to remember that “Believers can trust God even when current circumstances appear bleak.” (ETB LG, 61) In the next passage, we are going to see what we should do when things are challenging or when people begin to revolt.

2. THE PLAN (NUM. 20:6-8)

Read (or have someone read) Numbers 20:6-8.

Explain: In this passage, we see three things: The Proper Response by Moses and Aaron, The Precise Instructions by God, and The Promise of Mercy by God.

The Proper Response by Moses and Aaron: After hearing the complaints of the people and enduring their “quarrelling,” Moses and Aaron go to the Tabernacle to pray. This is the proper response, and it can teach each of us some things. First, when a leader is facing opposition or a challenging time, he should go to the Lord. Sometimes, our initial response is to “come up with a plan” or “handle the situation.” Godly leaders should first go to the Lord. Second, it reveals our emotional response to those who are complaining or “quarreling” with us. Some scholars say that “Moses and Aaron interceded before God most likely because they were frightened *for* the people” (ETBC, 55, emphasis added). Moses has seen what happens when the people rebel against the Lord, and it is not good. He was praying for them. When we face adversaries or complainers, we should plead their case before the Lord. We also see here what the people should have done in the first place. Verse 2 reveals the fact that “there was no water for the community.” This seems to be an undisputed fact. In response to the very real need of the people, they should have gone to the Lord instead of complaining to Moses.

Guide and Discuss: Guide the group to page 51 of their Personal Study Guide and ask the question on the page: “What kinds of difficulties get you facedown—either literally or figuratively—before the Lord?”

Pray: Take a moment to pray with your group about some of the challenges they might be facing at the moment.

The Precise Instructions by God: Next, we see the precise instructions by God. Moses and Aaron went to the Lord in humility (We can’t deal with this.) and servanthood (You are in charge, God, not us.) In response, the Lord showed up with a plan. “When one demonstrates the attitudes of humility and servanthood, God’s presence and blessing are realized most fully.” (NAC, 326) The plan was simple: “take the rod, assemble the congregation, and speak to the rock.” (NAC, 326) It seems that God

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recognized the very real plight of the people. So, He presents a plan to give them water.

The Promise of Mercy by God: Lastly, we see that God promises mercy. While the water situation was real and God wanted to address that problem, the people had created another problem for themselves. They complained about their God-given leaders and thereby complained about God. Moreover, they began to quarrel with God's appointed leadership. They "were following closely in their parents' footsteps." (ETBC, 53) As a result, they had placed themselves in a position deserving of God's judgment. "Such unbelief [among the people] certainly deserved God's wrath. Instead, God chose to deal with them in mercy and grace." (ETBC, 56)

Summarize and Transition: When individuals, churches, and leaders (inside the church or in the world) face challenging times, they should respond like Moses and Aaron and run to God. God is aware of our situation and has a plan to get us through it in a God honoring way. This passage reminds us that "We can turn to God with our needs and concerns." (ETB LG, 63)

3. THE RESULT (NUMBERS 20:9-13)

Read or have someone read Numbers 20:9-13

Explain: This passage reveals Moses' response to God's instruction and God's response to Moses' actions. Initially, Moses responds like he has in the past: he obediently takes the staff and gathers the people. "The scene was set for another demonstration of God's mercy, benevolence, and longsuffering, but the account would soon take a sudden, tragic shift." (NAC, 327) Upon reaching the rock, Moses acts in an ungodly manner. First, instead of speaking to the rock, he lectures the people. In doing so, he refuses to exhibit the grace and mercy that God was planning to extend. Moreover, he usurps God's place when he declares that it is he and Aaron who will bring forth the water. Then he strikes the rock twice. The language indicates that he did not tap the rock but struck it forcefully. We do not know why Moses speaks and acts the way he does when he reaches the rock. Maybe someone said something to him on the way to the rock. Maybe he and Aaron were talking amongst themselves about the people. Maybe he was simply frustrated after 40 years of their complaints. Possibly, Moses was participating in a bit of gunnysacking in his mind.

Application: As Christian leaders in the church, we may be tempted to act like Moses. Whether we are a pastor dealing with a grumbling congregation or a lay leader dealing with curmudgeons in a ministry area, the temptation can arise. If we consider the possible reason given above regarding Moses' actions, we can make an effort to protect ourselves from acting as he did. When people just "keep going on and on" with their complaints, we either need to find a way to shut it down or find a way to avoid it. If we are tempted as leaders to talk negatively about a person or situation "just among ourselves" or "just between you and me," we need to be careful not to exacerbate the situation by going over it again and again with trusted peers. Or maybe we need to be careful of gunnysacking. If a person stays in a church long enough, some of the same people will

Notes:

Scholars disagree on what staff this was. Some say it was Moses' staff others Aaron's staff that had budded. Either way the staff represents the authority of God.

"The Hebrew wording signifies a strong blow. Elsewhere the word can describe striking someone down in battle, as when David killed the Philistine giant Goliath (1 Sam. 17:50)." (ETB LG, 65)

"Here was an entire shift in attitude by Moses from one who pleaded before God on behalf of the people to one who was consumed by anger against the people." (ETBC, 58)

"Remember, God was mercifully preparing to furnish the people with the water they so desperately desired. Instead of speaking and acting with the same kind of grace and mercy with which God was acting, Moses reacted with anger and a physical manifestation of that anger." (ETBC, 58)

complain or act in the same frustrating way. We need to be careful not to “keep a record of wrongs.” (I Cor 13:5)

Explain: Moses’ response was telling, but so was God’s response. When Moses disobeyed the Lord and hit the rock, we might expect that no water would come out. However, water gushed forth. We can learn that God will not deny the people what they desperately need because of the disobedience of the leader. We also see that God will not overlook rebellion, even from His trusted servant Moses. We should stop and consider why Moses’ actions resulted in discipline. First, Moses set himself up as judge. “In calling them rebels, he spoke correctly. However, the problem is that Moses was putting himself in the place of a judge to make that declaration, though the Lord had not authorized him to do so. The Lord told him to extend his mercy and grace to the people in giving them water in a way that demonstrated unequivocally that the source was God; instead, Moses set himself up as their judge.” (Preaching, 253) Second, He failed to trust the Lord. As Christians, we understand sin to be unrighteous actions (sin of commission) or a failure to act in a righteous way (sin of omission). Wenham states, “Faith is the correct response to God’s word, whether it is a word of promise or a word of command.” (TOTC, 169) Moses was failing to respond to God’s promise to bring forth water using the spoken word. Therefore, he acted in rebellion against the Lord.

Application: Like Moses, we often want to be the judge and jury of others. Moses was angry at the assembly (*ekklesia*—the church) for not “acting right.” Therefore, he judged them harshly when God wanted to show mercy. We, too, can act as judges of others when they do not trust the Lord. Let us follow Moses’ initial example and pray for them, not his later example of judging and lecturing them. We should also maintain a commitment to fully trust the Lord. He will guide us in ways that might challenge us or test us. When He does, we should follow His guidance and His commands to do what He is calling us to do.

Summarize and Transition: In the end, Moses faced the same punishment as the first generation who rebelled against the Lord at Kadesh 40 years before. Like them, he would serve as an object lesson for those who refused to “trust me to demonstrate my holiness.” Like them, he would not enter the promised land. We can learn from Moses and “recognize that ignoring God’s instructions leads to consequences.” (ETB LG, 65)

CONCLUDE

End your group time together by reminding the group that Moses’ actions and God’s discipline do not signal an end to their friendship.

Read Deuteronomy 34:5-7 and 10-12.

The Lord honored Moses by letting him see the land (34:4) and being with him at his death. Moreover, the Lord Himself buried his servant, Moses. The book of Deuteronomy ends with a positive obituary for Moses. We should know that while our sins have consequences, the believer is never abandoned by the Lord.

Challenge:

- Ask the group to consider situations or challenges in their lives. Encourage them to go to the Lord in prayer as Moses and Aaron did.

Notes:

“Even the failure of his leaders would not thwart his will to bless his people. The rebellious, however, would fail to fully experience the abundance of his blessing.” (NAC, 329)

The full quote from the TOTC: “Whereas Christian theologians, following Paul’s supposed distinction, often contrast faith with obedience, this dichotomy is unknown in the Old Testament. Faith is the correct response to God’s word, whether it is a word of promise or a word of command.” (TOTC, 169)

“Moses has received a sentence not unlike that of the generation that rejected the land. Even the greatest of the prophets must endure the judgment of God when he rebels.” (NAC, 322)

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- Challenge them to ask the Lord to guard their emotions when dealing with challenging situations and people so that they will act in a trustworthy and righteous way.
- Challenge them to faithfully follow the Lord when He guides them in difficult times.

COMPLAINTS IN THE WILDERNESS

complaints about food and water
complaints related to the land
complaints related to leadership

PASSAGE	COMPLAINT	COMPLAINERS	TARGET OF COMPLAINTS
Numbers 11:1-34	Hardships and food	The Israelites	God
Numbers 12:1-12	Challenging Moses's prophetic authority and his marriage to a Cushite woman	Miriam and Aaron	Moses
Numbers 13:26-33	Doubts in their ability to defeat the promised land inhabitants and take over the land	All the Israelite scouts except for Caleb and Joshua	Moses, Aaron, God
Numbers 13:30-14:3	Rejections of the promised land	The Israelites	Moses, Aaron, God
Numbers 14:1-10	Demanding a new leader to guide them back to Egypt	The Israelites	Moses and Aaron
Numbers 14:10-12, 22, 37	Refusal to enter the promised land	The Israelites, except for Caleb's and his descendants	God
Numbers 16:1-50	Rejection of priestly authority—believing the entire community of Israelites were holy	Korah, Dathan and Abiram, and On, along with 250 prominent Israelite men	Moses and Aaron
Numbers 20:1-13	Lack of water	The Israelites	Moses
Numbers 21:4-5	The final complaint—that God had led them to die in the wilderness with no bread, water, and “wretched food”	The Israelites	God and Moses

ITEM 9

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