

Sunday School Lesson for October 5, 2025
Numbers 20:2-13

Welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallahassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this first Sunday of October, we've been tracing the steps of the Israelites as they made their way to the Promised Land after the Lord's miraculous deliverance from Egypt. Moses had been their resolute and fearless leader from the time he dared confront the pharaoh with those bold words, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go,'" until this very moment forty years later as he prepares the people to take the final step of fulfilling their destiny in seizing the land God had promised to them through Abraham. Today, in our study from the first twelve verses of Book of Numbers, chapter twenty, we encounter an unexpected and startling turn of events. Something happens that disqualifies Moses from entering the Promised Land.

Now, if you've never heard the story before, you might be asking yourself, "How in the world could Moses not be allowed to enter the Promised Land? After all, wasn't he the one who started all this when he responded to God's call in the desert where the Lord met him in that burning bush that didn't burn? And hadn't he been the one who faced down the pharaoh--probably the single most powerful man in the world at the time--and God used Moses to lead the people out of their slavery in Egypt--parting the Red Sea, returning the waters to drown the Egyptian army, meeting with God on Mount Sinai and in the Tabernacle, and being God's personal envoy for His chosen people? What could Moses **ever** do that would disqualify him from the grand privilege of seeing his life's work completed--crossing over the Jordan River and stepping onto the land God had given to him and all the Israelites in a promise spoken more than six hundred years ago? And if Moses can be disqualified after all this, what does that say about me?" Let's find out.

After the Lord pronounced judgment on the children of Israel when they crossed the line by rejecting God's instructions to take the Promised Land--even to the point of their calling for an insurrection to remove Moses and put someone else in charge who would take them back to Egypt--, they tried to make things right with God by attempting to capture the land of Canaan on their own, thinking they could win back God's approval. But it was a disaster. God decreed that all the members of the generation then living--except Caleb and Joshua--would die in the desert, and it would be another forty years before they got a second chance.

In Numbers, chapter fifteen, we find a restatement of the regulations concerning sacrifices. In chapter sixteen, we learn about the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who sought to lead another uprising against Moses and how God dealt with them. Chapter seventeen contains the story of how the Lord dealt with the challenge to Moses' authority in a test to see whose walking staff grew shoots or buds. Only Aaron's staff passed the test, and it became part of the contents of the Ark of the Covenant. In chapter eighteen, we learn more about the responsibilities of the priests regarding the offerings and which part of the offerings they could put to their own use. Then, in chapter nineteen, we find instructions for the sacrificing of the red heifer as well as instructions concerning ceremonial cleanliness.

With chapter twenty, the forty years of wandering are over, an entire generation of Israelites has died in the wilderness, and we're back at Kadesh-Barnea in the desert of Paran--specifically the wilderness of Zin in the northeastern part of that desert wasteland. We know the timeline, first, because Moses could not have asked permission to pass straight through Edom in order to enter Canaan as he did in verse fourteen of this chapter until the period of wandering commanded by God was over; and, second, according to Numbers, chapter 33, verse 38, Aaron died at Mount Hor in the fortieth year after leaving Egypt. The events that we read about in chapters fifteen through nineteen could have happened at any point during the forty years. Oddly

enough--beyond the report in Deuteronomy, chapter two, verse fourteen that “the time from our leaving Kadesh-barnea until we crossed the brook Zered was thirty-eight years”--we don’t have any detailed account of what happened or where they went during the years of wandering beyond the stopping places mentioned in chapter 33, but the last stay in Kadesh could have lasted most of the forty years. We just don’t know for sure. **You can see Kadesh Barnea on the map here.**

In the first verse of chapter twenty, we read of the death of Miriam, Moses’ and Aaron’s sister: “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.” This first month was the first month of the fortieth year of their wanderings, and they’re back in Kadesh--the very place where the people had received the report of the ten spies that we learned about last week and where God had passed judgment on them for their refusal to trust Him to take the Promised Land. Miriam died during the time that the people were staying in Kadesh, and it was there that she was buried, some Jewish historians say at the age of 127.

So, it’s a new day for the children of Israel! The first month of the fortieth year. The wilderness wanderings are over. The former generation and all the disobedience and rebellion have passed away. The current generation need only look back to the last four decades as they watched their parents die in the desert because of their refusal to enter the Promised Land, even to the point of demanding a replacement for Moses who would take them back to Egypt.

At last, God’s chosen people can march triumphantly into the land the Lord promised to them through Abraham. Can you imagine the excitement and expectation that must have filled the hearts of each and every person as they waited for the pillar of smoke and fire to rise from its place above the Tabernacle and start heading north to the Promised Land?

Unfortunately, it wasn't like that at all, for as the people have reassembled in Kadesh, we don't hear sound of rejoicing, but moans of complaining--verse two: "Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 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.'" No water. Again.

But there had been water the last time they had stayed at Kadesh. Because they arrived in the first month, the same month that John writes about in the sixth chapter of his gospel where he says that there was "much grass" where Jesus was teaching, you would have thought that there would have been plenty of water. Either the water sources had dried up, or they were staying in a different location around Kadesh than they had last time. And their claim, like the ten spies telling Moses that all the people of Canaan were giants, could have been an exaggeration--not a total absence of water, but not enough for all the people to be comfortable. On the other hand, this could have been God giving them an opportunity to demonstrate a faith that was different and distinct from that of their parents.

In spite of the fact that an entire generation had died in the desert for the same attitude this next generation was displaying, "they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron" once again.

"And the people quarreled with Moses and said, 'Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord!'" Who these brothers were, we can't say for sure. They were either Korah, Dathan, and Abiram who had challenged Moses' and Aaron's authority and God had destroyed, or it was their fellow Israelites who had died in the wilderness over the last forty years--or it could have been both.

And they quarreled with Moses and Aaron. This wasn't a respectful delegation selected from among the tribal leaders to present a compelling appeal before God's representatives. They verbally fought with them, showing neither respect to their persons or dignity to their offices in spite of the fact that Moses had brought them to the brink of achieving their destiny as a people, perhaps even at a time when they should have been consoling him for the death of his sister.

In any case, they brought their complaint to Moses and Aaron. The place where they encamped might have reminded them of the consequences of the sin of rebellion, and their parents' graves should have reinforced the lesson. But the long years of wandering and millions of deaths had all been useless. And why did they ask Moses why he had "made us come up out of Egypt?" Most of them weren't alive when God miraculously delivered His chosen people from the most powerful ruler in the world. Most of them didn't experience anything in Egypt because they hadn't even been born yet. But here they are, repeating the same old exaggerations their parents had used on Moses forty years ago. Alexander MacLaren notes that "It is a signal instance of the solemn law by which the fathers' sins are inherited by the children who prove themselves heirs to their ancestors by repeating their deeds."

Yet the last forty years should have prepared them for the challenges that lay ahead. They knew that they had come to Kadesh in preparation for the final assault on the lands given to them by the Lord--the fulfillment of a dream that would cause them to forget all the hardships that came before this moment. Their desert training over the last forty years should have made them more resourceful and less desperate when the water failed; but the hopes of conquest and the duty of trust could not hold their own against the people's present, material inconvenience. They even seem to make bitter mockery of the promises when they complain that Kadesh is "no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates" which were the fruits brought back by the twelve spies; as if they had said, "So this stretch of waterless sand is the fertile land you

made such a big deal about, is it? This is all that we get by coming back to this miserable place?”

Fortunately, this was not the first time Moses had to deal with a complaint. He knew just what to do--verse six: “Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces.” In spite of the fact that the chief complainers may have encircled Moses’ and Aaron’s tents, leaving them no option but to concede to their demands, the two of them quickly made their way to the place where God had promised to meet with Moses and speak with him. As soon as they got to the door of the Tabernacle, they fell on their faces before the Lord in the most humble attitude they could muster, for, after forty years, they knew how the Lord would feel about this most recent complaint against His care.

Their falling on their faces before the Lord was not an display of intercession on behalf of the people, but the instinctive action of someone who, in silent shock and horror, expectantly await the immediate unleashing of a cataclysmic catastrophe that seemed to them to be inevitable, if not deserved. It would have showed the people that Moses and Aaron were overwhelmed with shame and sorrow in light of the repeated, awful sin of the people and of the terrible punishment that would surely follow.

Lying prostrate there in the Tabernacle, “the glory of the Lord appeared to them.” This was not the first time the Lord had revealed Himself in such an extraordinary way. We saw last week in our study of chapter fourteen that the Lord showed up when the people turned against Moses after hearing the discouraging report of the ten spies.

When Korah challenged Moses’ authority back in chapter sixteen, the glory of the Lord had appeared to all the congregation. The day after the Lord opened the earth and Korah and the others were swallowed up by the ground, the people complained that Korah and his fellow mutineers had been killed, and the glory of the Lord appeared yet again, this time to publicly put His

approval on Moses as His choice for their leader. And there were several other times when God appeared in their midst, giving them just a glimpse of His majesty and power.

Verse seven: “And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ‘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.’” I think Moses half-expected the Lord to do what He had initially said He was going to do back in Exodus, chapter 32, after the incident with the golden calf, or what He said in our study last week. But He didn’t. The Lord calmly told Moses to take his staff, gather the people together, and speak to the rock so they would have water to drink.

The rod he was to take had a long history. It was the rod Moses had used to lead his sheep in the wilderness near Mount Horeb where the Lord first appeared to him in Exodus, chapter three. When Moses questioned what he was to do if the people didn’t believe that the Lord had sent him to free the Israelites, the Lord told Moses to throw his rod down on the ground. He did, and it became a snake--a snake that would later swallow the staffs-turned-to-snakes of the pharaoh’s magicians. When Moses stretched out his staff, the plagues came upon the Egyptians. When he lifted up his hand and stretched out his staff over the Red Sea, it parted before the Israelites, and they crossed over on dry land. At Rephidim, the Lord had told Moses to use his staff to strike the rock to provide water for the people.

At their first meeting, the Lord had asked Moses what it was that he held in his hand, and Moses replied, “A staff.” That’s all it was in Moses’ hand, but, given to God to use as He intended, it was a powerful instrument for His glory.

“Take the staff, and assemble the congregation--you and Aaron, your brother.” With the staff in hand, they were to assemble--not just the leaders of

the twelve tribes--but as many people as possible to witness the Lord's abundant provision in this moment of their need in answer to their discontentment.

And here's where the story takes a tragic turn. "Take the staff,"--check--"assemble the congregation"--check--, "you and Aaron your brother"--check--, "and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water"--? The last time--at Rephidim--God had told Moses to strike the rock. Why would he just tell the rock to open and release the water below? Great question!

Remember that we said earlier that an entirely new generation of Israelites had been assembled. All of their parents--except for a precious few--have died in the wilderness over the last forty years, and now they stand on the cusp of a new era. It's up to them to do what their parents refused to do--march boldly and confidently into the Promised Land and dispossess it of its current inhabitants. The destiny of the nation lay on their shoulders, but the first thing we hear about them is that they're making the very same complaints and threatening the very same mutiny of their parents. They had failed their first test.

So, in order to lead this rebellious people, their leader had to be a person of uncompromising integrity and unwavering obedience to God. He had to set the proper example for them if he were to be the one to lead this strong-willed and defiant people to the grand and glorious goal the Lord had set before them. So Moses is told, "Tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water."

At Rephidim, Moses was told to strike the rock. This demonstration of physical force would certainly have impressed the people with the inherent, dynamic power of Moses' staff as well as the man who wielded it. It would be an easy thing to link the kinetic force of the rod with the unleashing of the water.

But here at Kadesh, he's only to speak to the rock. Speaking is not nearly as dramatic as raising a staff high above your head and bringing it crashing

down upon a rock that then splits and water gushes forth. Speaking to the rock as opposed to striking it could have, in the mind of Moses, required a greater display of faith with a much more subtle application of power. Ultimately, the same, long-suffering, kind, and compassionate hand that unleashed the water would do so in both cases. So, would Moses follow God's instructions?

Verse nine: "And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him." Does that mean his staff had been stored in the Tabernacle? Perhaps. Or it could just mean that he took the staff with him to the rock that he was to speak to.

Verse ten: "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?' 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." If this is the first time you've heard this story, did you see this coming? What's happened to Moses?

Well, let's look at where he went wrong. First was in what he said to the people: "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" There's no denying that the people had a rebellious spirit and had very clearly demonstrated that spirit in the latest encounter with Moses. But to actually call them out as rebels obviously crossed the line.

Moses seems to have thought that these people didn't deserve any water--let them hunt for water on their own since some of them they think they can do a better job of leading the people. So, second, his derisive, snarky question to them was, "Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" Did Moses really think that it was he who brought water out of the rock at Rephidim and that he would do it yet again here at Kadesh? Not only was he telling them they were unworthy to receive a miraculous blessing of water, he was--which is far worse--suggesting to them that it was he who had the power over the rock to produce water--a power equal to that of God Himself. He forgot that he was

as much an instrument in the hand of God as his staff was, and that it was God, not he, who would bring forth water from the rock. His angry scolding reveals his own, wounded, personal importance and annoyance at rebellions against his own authority rather than grief at their distrust of God.

“And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff--twice.” Why did he have to strike the rock twice? We don’t read an explanation, but there are at least two theories. On the one hand, the first strike might not have done anything. You could imagine Moses, straightening his body and standing tall, stretching out one hand while, with the other, raising the staff high above the rock to unleash its full force on the rock below; as the arm begins to move, the point of the staff plummets with lightning speed towards the ground as the crowd looks on in awe of this dramatic demonstration of raw power, only to hear a soft “thunk” when the staff impacts the solid, unyielding stone. And the crowd gasps. Moses is startled--shocked that it didn’t work. Regaining his composure, he lifts the rod again and lets it fall. This time, God spared him from any further embarrassment as Moses may have realized his horrific failure to do what God had told him to do, and water poured forth from the rock as expected.

On the other hand, Moses may have been venting his frustration with the people and their whole attitude for the last eighty years or so. He had originally left Egypt after killing the Egyptian who was mistreating a Hebrew slave and being identified by one of his own people as the murderer. Forty years later--Acts, chapter seven, verse thirty--Moses meets the Lord at the burning bush, and the Exodus follows. Now another forty years has passed, the people are complaining about not having water again, and they’ve still not made it to the Promised Land when they should have been there forty years ago. It seems that the faithful servant of God, completely worn out by the persistent contrariness and obstinacy of the people, had had all he could take. In fact, the psalmist, telling the story of the exodus experience, tells us in Psalm 106, verse 32: “They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went

ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips.”

Preachers and commentators have taken no small effort to try to describe Moses’ feelings at the moment. Alexander MacLaren writes, “[T]he failure of Moses’ patience was only too natural. The whole incident has to be studied as the first of a new era, in which both leader and led were on their trial. During the thirty-seven years of waiting, Moses had had but little exercise of that part of his functions, and little experience of the people’s temper. He must have looked forward--anxiously--to the result of the desert hardening; ...--and so his disappointment must have been proportionately keen, when the first difficulty that rose revealed the old spirit in undiminished force. For forty years he had been patient, and ready to swallow mortifications and ignore rebellion against himself, and to offer himself for his people; but now, when men whom he had seen in their swaddling-clothes showed the same stiff-necked distrust as had killed their fathers, the breaking-point of his patience was reached. That burst of anger is a grave symptom of lessened love for the sinful murmurers; and lessened love always means lessened power to guide and help. The people are not changed, but Moses is. He has no longer the invincible patience, the utter self-oblivion, the readiness for self-sacrifice, which had borne him up of old, and so he fails.”

He adds, “We may learn from his failure that the prime requisite for doing God’s work is love, which cannot be moved to anger nor stirred to self-assertion, but meets and conquers murmuring and rebellion by patient holding forth of God’s gift, and is, in some faint degree, an echo of His endless long-suffering. He who would serve [others] must--sleeping or waking--carry them in his heart, and pity their sin. They who would represent God to [others], and win [them] for God, must be ‘imitators of God . . .and walk in love.’ If the bearer of the water of life offers it with ‘Hear, ye rebels,’ it will flow untasted.”

So, what happened? Verse twelve: “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.’” In a moment, they made a mistake that obliterated their opportunity to see God’s promise to Abraham fulfilled--that grand and glorious mission that they had invested their lives in: “Because you did not believe in Me.”

It wasn’t absolute unbelief--it wasn’t that Moses and Aaron had somehow given up on the omnipotence or the grace of God, because Moses did almost everything the Lord had commanded him to do, in every way expecting the Lord to provide water out of the rock. His and Aaron’s unbelief was their lack of believing confidence, a momentary wavering of what should have been an immovable assurance, in a critical moment of opportunity that should have pointed the people to God / but pointed to themselves instead.

Moses struck the rock as if the provision of water depended on human effort and not obedience, trusting in the power of God alone, or as if the promise of God would not have been fulfilled without Moses striking the rock. God was telling them that they failed to believe entirely and obey Him unconditionally in such a way to provide yet another proof of God’s love and provision. Moses was too caught up in his own disgust with the people, and, it seems that he was also displeased with the Lord’s intention to bless the people in spite of their obstinacy, much like Jonah as he complained because God chose not to destroy the Ninevites.

Moses had placed himself between God and the people, not to show but to hide God; and, instead of exalting God’s holiness before them by allowing God to reveal Himself as the giver of the water of life, he intercepted the thanks and diverted them to himself, instead.

MacLaren concludes, “The subsequent history does not show any withdrawal of God’s favour from him, and certainly it would be no very sore sorrow to be freed from the heavy load, carried so long. There is disapprobation, no doubt, in the sentence; but it treats the conduct of Moses

rather as a symptom of lessened fitness for his heavy responsibility than as sin; and there is as much kindness as condemnation in saying to the wearied veteran, who has stood at his post so long and has taken up arms once more, ‘You have done enough. You are not what you were. Other hands must hold the leader’s staff. Enter into [your] rest.’”

Perhaps Paul had this event in mind when he wrote in his first letter to the followers of Christ in Corinth in chapter nine, verse 27: “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.”

Our text for today closes with these words in verse thirteen, “These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy.” The word, meribah, means “strife,” and it’s the same name that was given to the waters in Rephidim in the first year after they had left Egypt. Their strife was not with Moses as much as it was with the Lord who had appointed Moses to be his servant and their guide to the Promised Land.

In spite of their striving with God and with Moses, or, really, because of their striving, “God showed Himself holy,” either because He provided water for them out of the rock as proof of His sovereign power over creation, or in the sight of the people who witnessed the miracle and for whose sake the miracle came about. This revelation of God’s holiness came in spite of the fact that Moses and Aaron had failed to glorify Him in the sight of the people. Moses and Aaron lost the opportunity to enter the Promised Land with the rest of the Israelites, and yet God used that opportunity to once again display His grace as well as his judgment.

***As we reflect on Moses failure, perhaps we could ask, “What is success as God measures success?” Is it measured in terms of overcoming adversity? Moses should have been killed when he was born, but his mother put him in a basket and floated it down the Nile River betting on the rather remote

possibility that someone would retrieve it and her son would be spared. Not only was his life spared, but he was brought up in the court of the pharaoh himself.

Forty years later, he killed an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew slave. He fled and lived for another forty years in the land of Midian until God told him to go back to Egypt to free the children of Israel, and he became God's instrument for their deliverance. And there were many, many other adversities that he faced and overcame. But did that make him a success in God's eyes?

Could it be that success in God's eyes is found in seeking God?--Looking to God for direction and purpose in life. Look at Moses. Rather than retaliating against the unjust criticism of the people who contended with him because of their lack of water, Moses sought God's help and God's guidance in the matter. In verse six, we saw that Moses and Aaron left the people and fell on their faces at the door of the Tabernacle. They went directly to the place where God had made His presence known. Moses' attitude of reverence was surely commendable, but does that make him successful as God counts success?

As Moses sought God, God spoke to him. God gave him practical, specific, and promising instructions about what he was to do in response to the peoples' request for water. Moses sought God, he found God, he heard God, and God gave him the solution to his problem. But did that make Moses a success?

In God's Word, we find stories of many people who sought the Lord, who experienced the presence of God, and who even heard the voice of God speaking. Saul, the first king of Israel, for example, sought God, prayed to God, and heard the very words of the Lord as they were spoken through Samuel, yet no one would consider him to be someone who succeeded as God counts success.

In the New Testament, of all the people who sought the Lord, the Pharisees prayed according to the customs, tithed according to the law, heard the words of God as they were explained in the synagogue each Sabbath day, but hardly could they be considered successes. When the Pharisee stood up in the synagogue and prayed that prayer of thanksgiving, “Lord I’m glad that I’m not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or like that tax collector over there,” Jesus didn’t point him out as a model of spiritual success, but as a specimen of spiritual failure.

Had Moses successfully overcome adversity? Yes. Had he successfully sought God’s will? Yes. Did He do what God told him to do? No, and that’s where the failure comes in. Ultimately, the final measure of success is faithful obedience to the Lord as we trust Him to know and to do what’s best, just as the Lord explained in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter seven, verse 21: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” And Verse 24: “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.” That’s how God measures success.

Tragically, Moses failed, and another would take his place to lead God’s chosen people into the Promised Land, leaving for us another example, “written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come”-- First Corinthians, chapter ten, verse eleven.

Thank you for being part of our brief look at the journey of faith the Israelites followed as they made their way to the homeland God promised to them through Abraham. Next week, we turn to chapter 22 where we find the Moabites turning to a prophet of sorts by the name of Balaam to intervene on their behalf against the Israelites as they prepare to take possession of the Promised Land, focusing on verses 22 through 35 of chapter 22.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! God bless you!

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