

Message #21**Numbers 20:1-29**

Israel had been wandering around the wilderness for 40 years and probably were wondering will we ever get things right and will we ever actually get to the Promised Land.

Verse 1 informs us that they finally came to the wilderness of Zin and were at Kadesh. They were on the verge of something good. At this point we leap across time some 38 years and are once again back at Kadesh on the verge of taking the Promised Land.

Now this Kadesh is the same location from which the spies had been sent (i.e. Numbers 13:26). So 38 years of time has elapsed and once again the people are back on the verge of taking the Promised Land. It appears from **verse 1** which says they are back here on the “first month” and from Numbers 33:38 which says “fifth month,” that the nation will be camped here for four months.

Now you would think that by now the people would have learned that they can trust God and that they need to quit grumbling and complaining and obey the Word of God. You would think that, but this is not how it worked.

ISRAEL FACES SOME DIFFICULT SITUATIONS AND LOSES TWO IMPORTANT AND LOVED LEADERS AND SHOULD LEARN THAT GOD AND HIS WORD SHOULD ALWAYS BE TRUSTED AND STRICTLY OBEYED.

There are four main episodes that occur here in this location:

EPISODE #1 – Miriam dies. 20:1

In this chapter, Israel will lose two of its major national leaders via death. These were people very special to Moses.

The first of the leaders to die was Miriam. While they were at Kadesh, Miriam died and was buried.

Miriam was both Aaron and Moses’ sister. Miriam had watched over Moses as a baby when he was in the basket in the marshes of the Nile river (Ex. 2:4-9). She was probably 10 to 12 years old at the time. Moses never forgot that and neither did God. Moses loved her and when she got leprosy, because she spoke against Moses, Moses cried out to God for Him to heal her. She had lived a good, long, productive life.

When the Israelites left Egypt, she became a leading woman. According to Exodus 15:20-21, she was a prophetess, who at times received revelatory messages from God, and she also had a music ministry that was primarily aimed at Israeli women.

She had her moments of weakness, like we all do, and when she died it was a real loss. She died in Kadesh four months before her brother Aaron, and eleven months before Moses. She was loved by Moses and the people and she was buried.

Eusebius, the church historian, claimed that the place where she was buried was still able to be seen in his day. Many believe this death hit Moses very, very hard.

EPISODE #2 – God provides water. 20:2-13

Many believe that the death of Miriam had a very negative effect on Moses, so this episode occurs to get Moses to refocus and it may be why Moses responded the way he did. He was very emotional over the loss of Miriam.

According to **verse 2**, there was a real lack of water so this congregation assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. This is just what you need when you have just buried your sister. What Moses had on his hands was an angry congregation that came up against him and Aaron.

According to **verses 3-5**, the congregation was complaining. The Hebrew word “contend” (yareb) means to strive and litigate by using harsh, bitter words. They are blaming Moses and Aaron for their predicament. They bring out three complaints:

Complaint #1 - They wish they had died with their brothers.

Probably a reference to the previous judgment plagues that killed about 15,000 people.

Complaint #2 - They believe Moses and Aaron have brought them out there to die.

The people are alleging that Moses and Aaron have brought them out there to die of thirst. Again they start making up their own insane narrative. They conclude that Moses and Aaron have specifically brought them and their animals out in to this area to die.

Complaint #3 - They believed life in Egypt was better than where they were.

They were not in a land flowing with milk and honey, and didn't even have any water.

Of course the real reason why they were not in the Promised Land was not because of Moses and Aaron's leading, it was because of their own rebellion. That was not the fault of Moses and Aaron. They are still blaming others for their problem and in spite of all they had seen God do, they still do not trust in the Lord.

According to **verse 6**, when Moses and Aaron heard all the complaints, they went to the doorway of the Tabernacle, away from the people, and fell on their faces before God. The people were once again back at sinning and Moses and Aaron were once again back to praying. If it had not been for these two godly leaders, God would have destroyed that nation. As Moses and Aaron were praying, the text says, “then the glory of the LORD appeared to them.” God's very special and very visible presence appeared.

According to **verse 7**, the LORD spoke to Moses and in **verse 8** He gave him six mandates:

- 1) Get your staff. **20:8a**—There is a debate as to whether this is Moses’ staff or Aaron’s budded staff that was usually kept in the Ark of the Covenant box. We think it was Moses’ staff. This was the same staff Moses used to perform miracles in Egypt.
- 2) Get your brother Aaron. **20:8b**
- 3) Assemble the congregation. **20:8c**
- 4) Speak to the rock before their eyes. **20:8d**
- 5) Water will pour out of the rock. **20:8e**
- 6) Let the people and their beasts drink. **20:8f**

Now Moses was a man given to obeying God. There are six responses to what God told Moses and a couple of them aren’t good:

(Response #1) - Moses took the staff before the Lord. **20:9**

(Response #2) - Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock. **20:10a**

(Response #3) - Moses spoke to the people and identified them as rebels. **20:10b**

The word “rebel” (mara) means one who is defiant against God. Moses is actually making himself the judge here and the provider. **God did not tell Moses to use this language against the people, He told him to speak to the rock.**

(Response #4) - Moses questions whether or not he and Aaron should bring forth water. **20:10c**

Here is a problem. It was not Moses and Aaron who could do this. It was God.

Rather than using this as a basis for glorifying God, Moses put the emphasis on them.

(Response #5) - Moses took his staff and struck the rock twice and water poured out. **20:11a**

God did not tell Moses to strike the rock and Moses did it twice.

(Response #6) - The people and their beasts drank. **20:11b**

In **verse 12**, God said to Moses, because you did not believe My Word and follow it literally and did not treat God as holy in the sight of the people, God said you will not bring Israel into the Promised Land.

Now what did it mean that Moses did not believe God? It certainly did not mean that Moses did not believe in God or His power. What this means is that Moses did not believe God in the sense that he did not exactly obey the Word in this instance in precisely the way God prescribed. He had a lapse of faith and took it upon himself to say and do things God did not tell him to say and do. Instead of obeying the Holy God in front of the people, Moses blew his stack and it cost him.

Psalm 106:32-33 says that these people so angered Moses at the “waters of Meribah” that it ended up costing Moses.

According to Luke 12:48, everyone who has been given much, much is demanded. The place was named “Meribah” which means place of strife, contention or quarreling.

Now we want to make a very important observation from this. **Moses represents the O.T. law. If you miss one little commandment or have one little lapse or moment of disobedience, you are condemned and heading to death. This text should cause every human to flee to Jesus Christ by faith.**

EPISODE #3 – Edom refuses to allow Israel to pass through land. **20:14-21**

Israel was now on the verge of entering the Promised Land. The nation was moving toward the eastern entrance into the land of Canaan and to get there, they needed to travel through some territory that belonged to their ancient Arab brother, Edom. The Israelites came from Jacob, and the Edomite's and Arabs came from Esau. So they were brothers.

This land, that Israel needed to pass through, was the most direct route from Kadesh to the Promised Land. It was land that extended along the southern boundary of Canaan from the Dead Sea to the eastern arm of the Red Sea. This land had been given by God to Esau, and at the time of this event, the land was occupied by Arab Bedouins.

According to **verse 14**, Moses sent a delegation to diplomatically approach the king of Edom to ask permission to pass through the Land. The request is for 2-3 million people plus livestock. Moses knew the tension between the Arabs and Israel. Notice **v. 14**, he knows they are brothers.

In **verses 15-16**, Moses gives a brief history of Israel's suffering and deliverance by God. These Arabs would have known of this story and how God delivered Israel from the Egyptians. You would think that would be an extra incentive for them to allow Israel to travel through the land, but that was not the case. Two times in **v. 15** Moses uses the phrase "our fathers."

Moses said in **verse 17** that they would not even drink any water, they would not go through any vineyard and would simply travel on the king's highway that was an ancient route that linked Egypt and Arabia with Ammon and Damascus.

According to **verse 18**, Edom said you cannot cross our land and if you do we will attack you with a sword.

According to **verse 19**, Moses offered to pay them for any expense even if any livestock takes a drink of water. But according to **verse 20**, Edom refused.

So Israel turned away and went to Mt. Hor (**verses 21-22**). God could have destroyed the Edomite/Arabs and one day He will (i.e. Obadiah).

EPISODE #4 – Aaron dies. **20:23-29**

According to Numbers 33:37, the Israelites moved to Mt. Hor which was located at the edge of the land of Edom.

While they were there, God spoke to both Moses and Aaron and said it is time for Aaron to die. Aaron was 123-years-old (Num. 33:38-39). He is going to die here and he will not enter the Promised Land (**v. 24**). **Notice how God describes death: he "will be gathered to his people" (23:26)**. Death for a believer is a home-going.

In **verse 25**, God told Moses to take Aaron and his son Eleazar, and bring them up the mountain and take off his priestly clothing and give it to Eleazar, and he would die there. The work of God must go on.

According to **verse 27**, Moses did that. There is a very special solemnity to this event. The entire congregation has gathered to watch Moses and Aaron go up the mountain and they know Aaron will die. It is a sacred moment, a sad moment but it is also a God-glorifying moment.

Aaron knew as he walked up this mountain, that this was his final walk. He knew this was his death march. According to **verse 28**, Aaron, Moses' brother, died on top of the mountain.

Aaron had done much for God. He had been responsible to oversee that priestly ministry and the Tabernacle. He was a big name and yet he died.

Moses and Eleazar came down the mountain together and the congregation saw Aaron had died and Israel wept for 30 days.

These fickle people are the same people who grumbled against him, wanted on occasion to stone him and tried to replace him. But now that he is gone, they realize what they have lost.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe said, "Victorious Christian service, like the victorious Christian life, is a series of new beginnings. No matter what mistakes we've made, it's always too soon to quit" (*Be Counted*, p. 109).