

Without going into personal detail, the lesson of this chapter has been evident in my life three times in the past. Because of my sin, the Lord has disciplined me. It wasn't fun. But I am thankful for His goodness and mercy.

For God's people, disobedience always brings discipline.

To understand the events of Numbers 20 one must understand what has brought God's people to this place.

They have been in the wilderness for as many as 38 years. We don't know exactly how long.

What might have felt like a lifetime ago, the Lord rescued them from Egypt.

I would like to review their recent history in the words of repentance in Psalm 106.

This is how Israel is supposed to remember what we read of in Numbers. **Psalm 106:4-33**

"Because they were rebellious against His Spirit, He spoke rashly with his lips."

Before we consider Moses and his "speaking rashly," we will look at the rebellion of Israel against God's Spirit.

Again, their grumbling and lack of faith is understood as "rebellion."

I. Sometimes the discouragement is overwhelming. Numbers 20:1-5

The book of Numbers might be the saddest book in the Bible.

Of course it has competition in this: Judges, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Hosea...

The sadness of this chapter is its principal feature. There is little encouragement here.

This chapter begins with the death of Miriam, Moses' sister.

The chapter ends with the death of Aaron, Moses' brother... and with weeping.

The main event of this chapter is the disobedience and discipline of Moses.

In verse 13 we learn that they named that place "Meribah." (the place of strife, contention, struggling)

This is because of the strife between the people and Moses, and between Moses and the Lord.

It is because of all the hardship they have been through that the people complain against Moses again.

Now they have a new hardship, no water. They do not respond well.

Their complaint is understandable, but unreasonable.

You see, when you are grumbling you cannot see clearly nor think logically. Sin does this to our brains.

Their complaint has four parts, each of which is unreasonable... but each for different reasons.

1. They wish they would have died in Egypt.

I've had more than a few people tell me, while in misery, suffering, sad, or struggling,

"I think I'd rather be dead."

Not true. You might think that, but the only reason you think that is shortsightedness.

You think that because you do not see all that is happening, the plans of God, your blessings.

2. They ask why Moses has brought "the Lord's assembly" into the wilderness to die.

This is simply not true. They feel this way because of what has happened.

But Moses brought them into the wilderness for three reasons:

First, he brought them here because the Lord was rescuing them from slavery on Egypt.

Second, he brought them here to meet and worship the Lord. God said this before they left.

Third, he brought them here so that he could lead them to a promised land.

The dying that has happened in the wilderness has been entirely a result of their own sin.

3. They ask Moses why he has brought them "to this wretched place?"

Well, it wasn't Moses' plan that they be in the desert for 40 years.

It wasn't even God's plan. They were just supposed to be travelling through.

They have been in "this wretched place" because they refused to trust the Lord and enter the land.

Their presence in the wilderness of Zin, at Meribah, is their own fault.

4. They complain that this place has no vines, pomegranates, nor water.

Of course it doesn't. It's a desert.

Neither God nor Moses said that this place would have vines, pomegranates, or water.

They were supposed to be in the promised land by now...

But they refused to trust the Lord and take the land.

They have only themselves to blame for their miserable situation.

But people will do just about anything so as to not take responsibility for the results of stupid actions.

So, here they are, miserable and blaming Moses.

II. Go to the Lord; He has a plan.

Numbers 20:6-8

Now Moses and Aaron do what the situation requires, and they fall down before the Lord. They pray.

They are crying out to the Lord. Why?

Because the people don't seem to learn. God solved this kind of problem before.

Because the people are again demonstrating that they are not trusting God.

Because, in their lack of faith, the people are again blaming Moses for their misery.

Moses here does exactly the right thing. He is upset, frustrated, discouraged. He cries out to the Lord.

And the glory of the Lord appears in the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle.

And then the Lord spoke to Moses and told him what to do.

And the Lord told Moses what He is going to do. God will again provide water.

Consider here the patience of the Lord, and His mercy.

These people deserve judgment. God gives them water. God is so good.

Psalm 81:1-10

God is so good. Moses, not so good.

III. Moses fails to trust in the Lord.

Numbers 20:9-13

The Lord has given Moses clear instructions. He does not obey them.

He is to gather the people and speak to the rock and God will provide.

Instead, Moses gathers the people, speaks to the people, and strikes the rock.

1 Corinthians 10:4 we read that "the rock was Christ."

It is fascinating that this rock becomes a picture of Christ providing for His people in the wilderness.

Often in the Bible, the rock becomes a metaphor for the Lord. (Deuteronomy 32:4, Psalm 78:35)

Christ, the rock, is stricken in our human disobedience, and from Him flows life-giving water.

This is a little taste of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the book of Numbers.

And even Moses is a sinner who must be saved by God's grace through faith.

Moses is not perfect.

A leader is not perfect, or even better than anyone else, by virtue of being a leader.

In fact, leadership can make one prideful, as if one's success as a leader is not entirely dependent upon the Lord.

Spiritual leaders, prophets, kings, apostles, pastors, elders, sin and need to be dealt with by God.

Why did Moses disobey the Lord? We are not told, but it is not difficult to imagine.

He is frustrated by these incorrigible people, always grumbling to him about the same things.

He is angry and strikes the rock.

In Exodus, when God provided water, Moses was commanded to strike the rock. (Exodus 17:1-7)

He maybe wants to take more credit for the miracle than he ought to. (verse 10, "shall we bring forth...")

Verse 12 tells us that Moses "was not believing" in God when he did this.

Also, in verse 12 we learn that Moses was not treating God as holy in the sight of the people.

Moreover, this is rebellion against God by Moses. He's doing things his own way, not God's way.

In Numbers 27:14, before Moses dies, the Lord says to Moses about this moment, "you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their eyes."

There are times when we may think that we are doing God's will our way.

This is always wrong. We are required to do God's will God's way.

When we disobey the Lord, even in things that we might see as small, we fail to honor God as holy.

Disobedience to God shows that we think God is common, optional, not our Lord and King.

Disobedience to God shows to others that we don't think God is worth obeying.

Which, by the way, is what most people already think.

Why would we want to confirm the disobedience to God that we see all around us already?

This Moses does, and so the Lord sentences him to die before the promised land like the rest of his generation.

IV. Israel fails to trust in the Lord.

Numbers 20:14-21

Now Moses asks Edom, descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, for passage through their lands.

Moses appeals to their relationship and their compassion. "We were treated so badly... God is leading us"

The king of Edom refuses, the people beg him, saying they will not even use any water.

So, then, they go another way, a much longer and more dangerous way.

But, notice, not once here do these people, nor Moses, ask God what they should do.

Psalm 95:6-11 puts this moment in proper perspective. These people were not trusting in God.

Before we finish, I want to consider an important question that people might have when reading Numbers.

Obviously, we are learning that grumbling is wrong, sinful, and a display of a lack of faith.

But are we to always feel happy about everything?

After all what does **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** really mean?

What about Philippians 2:14, "Do everything without complaining or arguing?"

Does that mean that we are not to feel upset about the direction of things?

Does this mean that we should never say anything critical of anyone?

Does this mean that we are never to say anything negative or raise concerns?

What should we do when we see something wrong, are unhappy, enduring hardship, tempted to grumble?

1. Be honest with yourself and God. Say what you really think to yourself and to God.

2. Listen to God. He is teaching you a lesson. Count on it. Usually trusting Him is part of it.

3. If you still think that there is something you need to do or say, begin praying.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray always." Don't take action without praying.

4. Always beware of the prideful temptation to think you know best. **Ephesians 4:1-3**

We live in a culture that encourages people to be angry and take a stand. Often that is just prideful.

5. Don't open your mouth to anyone until you have prayed for a while. Don't be hasty. **Proverbs 17:28**

6. If you still think you need to take action that might be critical of someone, get wise counsel.

Proverbs 11:14, 15:22

7. After all this, if you must act, consider how to do it in a way that shows love, truth, and faith.

But the people of Israel did not do this.

They grumbled at Moses. They failed to go to the Lord.

They failed to trust the Lord. They went their own way.

And because of this they were miserable. The chapter ends in unmitigated sadness.

V. All Israel wept for thirty days.

Numbers 20:22-29

In addition to the misery brought on by their failure to look to the Lord, now Aaron dies.

We learn in verse 24 why Aaron died in the wilderness.

It was because of the disobedience of Israel that Aaron was a part of.

Even Aaron, the leader under Moses, dies in the wilderness.

We see again in the Bible that sin leads to sadness.

You might think that people don't see your sin and so it will not cost you.

You might have a strategy that your sin will be blamed on someone else.

You might think that a little sin is OK as long as you can get your way.

You might think you can sin for a little while and then get right with God.

But sin will result in sadness, for you and for others. It may take time, but you can count on it.

Whether the sin is gossip or grumbling,

Lust, lying, or laziness,

Theft or thoughtlessness,

Greed or gluttony,

Idolatry, idleness, or insubordination,

Maybe it is just lack of love for a Christian brother or sister.

Eventually that sin will bear its terrible fruit and you will weep in the wilderness.

The Lord loves you and Jesus came to die for you so that sin would not rule in your life.

Trust in Him, listen to His words, obey Him, and discover wonderful freedom from sin and its sadness.