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Lesson 15
Moses Disobeys God
Numbers 20:1-13

Do you desire to be a leader in some capacity in Christendom? Perhaps you aspire to becoming an elder or a deacon in the local church. You may want to be a part of the missions committee or the school board. You may sense that your leadership desires are in the area of Sunday school teaching, women's ministries, leading a home Bible class, or being a teacher in a Christian school. Whatever leadership position God may give you, large or small, Numbers 20 has something to say to you.

Those who are placed in positions of leadership are more accountable to God for how well they lead Christians. The Bible teaches that with much light comes much responsibility, and with responsibility comes the greater discipline from God. Numbers 20 tells us what happens falls into unbelief and disobeys God. This chapter, in my opinion, is one of the saddest and most sobering passages in all of Scripture, and it should strike fear into all who are in any position of leadership in Christendom.

FORMING A NEW GENERATION - Numbers 20:1

“Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh.” This event took place in the fortieth year of Israel's wanderings. Thirty-eight years before this event, Israel, after being delivered from Egypt and being tested in the desert to prepare them for war and to trust God, came at that time to Kadesh-barnea, which was on the border of Canaan, the Promised Land. That generation of Jews refused to believe God, disobeying God's promises, and they failed because of unbelief to enter the Promised Land. God then told Moses to send the Israelites back out into the desert where they would roam aimlessly for thirty-eight years, waiting for that adult generation of unbelieving Jews to die off. Because of their rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, that older generation carried, as it were, its sentence of death back into the desert until those long, tiring and aimless years were completed. But Numbers 20 tells us that once more a new generation (those twenty and under at the time of the rebellion and those born since the rebellion) was again at Kadesh, which is probably a reference to Kadesh-barnea. From the very spot where the older generation had miserably failed God thirty-eight years before, God now makes a fresh start with a new generation. God is faithful to His purpose. If God's directive will for Israel was interrupted, it was by man's unbelief and rebellion, not by failure on God's part. When God resumed His work, it was exactly where it had been broken off.

This was a new, fresh, and virgin generation and the expectancy for them to believe Jehovah was very high, but what we are going to find is more unbelief just like their fathers.

“Now Miriam died there and was buried.” The last of the older generation was dying out. Apparently all had died but Miriam, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and Caleb. These were all holdovers from the older generation, and only Joshua and Caleb were promised entrance into the land. Miriam, who hid Moses in the bulrushes (Ex. 2:4), who was a prophetess in Israel, and who praised and danced before God after the crossing of the Red Sea, died like all the rest of the unbelieving Jews in the desert. Why did she not get to enter the land? She at one time had entered into a plot against Moses (Num. 12:1) and had failed to believe God when it was time to enter the land. Miriam, a true believer, died and went to heaven, but she never saw the Promised Land. She was disciplined for her unbelief.

FAILURE OF THE NEW GENERATION - Numbers 20:2-5

“And there was no water for the congregation; and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron.” This was a new, untested generation who had to learn afresh the ways of Jehovah-God. While in the desert for thirty-eight years, probably much, if not all, water was supplied by supernatural means. As this new generation of at least two million Jews gathered in the one area of Kadesh, there would be a water shortage. This new generation would be tested just as the older generation was tested at

Rephidim (Ex. 17). This young, new generation knew of the wonders of the Lord by hearing only, not by sight, but now they too would be tested, as were their fathers. There was no water, and instead of trusting the Lord and casting all their cares on Him so as to experience the peace that passes all understanding, they revolted in unbelief. They faced a crisis situation and failed to believe God.

“The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, ‘If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD!’” When these Jews faced this crisis of no water, it seemed as though the prospect of entering the land was hopeless, and they were destined to suffer the same fate as their fathers. They complained that divine justice should have taken their lives in the wilderness like it did the older generation of Jews. These Jews lost all perspective, for instead of giving thanks for deliverance from Egypt and divine protection for forty years, they wanted to die. Unbelief that gives way to fear always causes one to take his eyes off the Lord and put them on circumstances. The result is always to put eyes on self and great self-pity obsesses one’s thinking and one says, “I wish I was dead!”

“Why then have you brought the LORD’S assembly into this wilderness for us and our beast to die here?” Their thinking was all jumbled up because they were looking at life from a human viewpoint. In one breath they said, “We want to die as our fathers in the wilderness,” and in the next breath they said, “You, Moses, brought us out into the wilderness to die, and we don’t want to die.”

“And why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.” So out of fellowship were these Jews that they called the promised land which was flowing with milk and honey, a “wretched place” or an “evil place.” This new generation wanted to go back to Egypt because they had forgotten what God had done for their fathers and for them. They despaired of any success and wanted to give up and go back to Egypt. They preferred slavery to liberty and the house of bondage to the land of promise. When believers get out of fellowship the old, unsaved life always looks better than it actually is.

Where did this new generation get this complaining spirit so that they would call the Promised Land a wretched place? Was it just that they had an evil heart? No, they did have a depraved heart, but many of their attitudes were learned from their parents who died in the wilderness because of their complaining, griping, and unbelief. That older generation griped, complained, moaned, and groaned for forty years, and this new generation followed the example of their parents. Negative, critical, and bitter spirits are not genetically inherited but are environmentally received, and the sinful heart basks in a negative way of life. Behavior is so much a matter of acquired habits. These children learned to complain in their homes. They learned defeatism from their parents. Parents’ values and attitudes are transferred to children who have a depraved mind and heart. If positive attitudes of parents are communicated to children, then this will restrain sin and cause a positive response. If negative attitudes are communicated, then this will feed the sin nature already inherent in children, and they may well be more negative and critical than their parents. For instance, if parents are materialistic in spirit, then this may well show up in a double portion in children because the sinful heart is ready to pick up on anything that feeds the flesh. All Christian parents must realize that children are going to respond more to what parents are and do than what they say. A positive life for Christ by parents is worth ten thousand words in affecting our children for Christ.

FAILURE OF MOSES - Numbers 20:6-11

“Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them . . .” Moses and Aaron said nothing but fell on their faces before God in prayer. Surely they were making groaning that cannot be uttered, patiently waiting for God to give them orders. They knew they could never calm this angry crowd so they turned the mob over to the Lord.

“...And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.’”

Moses was told specifically that he was to speak to the rock. Thirty-eight years before this time at Rephidim (Ex. 17) under similar circumstances God told Moses to strike the rock, but here he is only to speak to the rock.

“So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, ‘Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?’” Moses was told to speak to the rock but instead he spoke to the people. Moses was disgusted with the Jews. He became angry. He had just gotten rid of one generation of rebels and now he inherited another. Moses probably sighed and said, “Here we go again!” This was too much for Moses. Moses and Aaron were weary, worn pilgrims and they were tired of fighting the rebels. Moses was battle fatigued and idealistically was hoping for a time of relief from hand-to-hand combat with rebels in this new generation. Moses also had another problem. He began to feel his own importance to God’s work, forgetting he was but a servant and instrument of God. He said, “Shall we bring forth water for you?” Moses could do no miracles. God did the miracles, but Moses began to think himself more important to the plan of God than he actually was, for God could take the people into the land without him.

“Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.” Moses, discouraged, fatigued and embittered, became sinfully angry and struck the rock twice and did not speak to it as God had commanded. Surely Moses had reason to get angry, but he was the leader in Israel and was held responsible to keep his cool. Dissatisfied people, unhappy people, always hammer away at leadership. It is a constant phenomenon that rarely lets up, and it can become most trying to the nerves of a leader. Moses was disobedient to the direct command of God, for God said to speak and he struck the rock.

This shows us how important it is to follow God’s commands in every detail. When God said, “Speak,” He meant speak, and to willfully violate God’s command is a serious matter. God’s Word is sure, accurate, true, and authoritative, and is to be obeyed. Moses simply did not feel like doing what God told him to do, and he gave way to his own passions. Moses was determined to do it his own way and he paid a heavy price for his disobedience. This may have been the only time in Moses leadership over Israel that he gave way to his feelings, but it cost him dearly. This whole incident seems very trite and insignificant by modern-day standards, but it is a serious matter to disobey God.

Moses was a leader, a mature believer, yet he failed to follow instructions. Being the most mature believer in all of Israel, God expected more from him. A less mature believer in Israel may have gotten away with this kind of disobedience (at least there would have been a lesser discipline) but not Moses. God held him more responsible. Moses, being a leader, received a double portion of discipline for his actions. **“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment”** (James 3:1).

Notice carefully that water came out from the rock in spite of Moses’ disobedience. Why? Because God did not want to embarrass Moses in front of the people so as to cause them to lose respect for him. God graciously gave the water and He would discipline Moses, but He disciplined Moses in private. The principle here is that leadership is primarily to be disciplined in private and not in public. Moses still had to lead the people and have authority over them even though it would only be for a short while longer.

FRIGHTFUL DECISION OF GOD AGAINST MOSES AND AARON—Numbers 20:12-13

“But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.’” Moses and Aaron had a deeper problem than just disobeying God’s explicit command to speak to the rock. Their real problem was that they failed to believe God. Their confidence, trust, and faith were shaken by unbelief so that they, in their own way, became like the children of Israel. They failed in their unbelief to treat God as holy or separate; that is, they failed to glorify God in their

actions before the nation of Israel. Moses and Aaron both fell into the same sin as the sons of Israel, only in a different direction. The people despaired of success by rebelling in unbelief against leadership, feeling that they could never get into the Promised Land with Moses and Aaron as their leaders. On the other hand, Moses and Aaron also despaired of success and rebelled in unbelief against the people. Moses and Aaron came to the place where they were convinced that God would never let these rebellious Jews into the land. In both cases, it was unbelief. Israel failed as the people of God. Aaron failed as the high priest, and Moses failed as the mediator for the people. Moses, for the first time, staggered at the promise of God, and for his unbelief he was forbidden to go into Canaan, the land of promise. Both Moses and Aaron were left to die in the wilderness, Aaron at Mount Hor and Moses at Mount Nebo. Moses was put on the shelf because, as a leader, he sinned against God. This was a clear case of Moses, a true believer, whose ministry was shortened and his physical life taken because of the sin of unbelief. Moses lost his life but not his soul. God has promised salvation to all true believers and He is true to His covenant.

“All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:27-29).

Yet God must discipline His own children in loving kindness.

This incident in Moses’ life shows us that even though he was the most meek and humble man on the face of the earth, yet under stress, he gave way to his passions. The lesson for us is ***“Wherefore let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.”***

Another lesson for us to learn is that God does not judge sin as man would. It seems to us that the punishment did not fit the crime, but God holds high standards for His people in leadership. The closer a person is to Christ, the more spiritually mature a person is in Christ, the more God is grieved by his sins.

Lastly, this incident shows that God does discipline even the highest servants because He hates sin. Yet, He always disciplines the believer out of love and not wrath, for He is a loving Heavenly Father.

“...And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM: FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:5-11).

“Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the LORD, and He proved Himself holy among them.” “Meribah” means “contention,” “strife,” or “gripping.” In spite of the Jews rotten attitude, God dealt with them in grace. He gave them water when they deserved nothing because God is a gracious, compassionate, merciful, and loving God. ***“If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself”*** (2 Tim. 2:13). God is true to His covenant even when we are not true to ours, for He is an immutable, unchanging God.

CONCLUSION

We see how God must deal with sin, even in the life of a true believer, because He is a holy, righteous, and just God who hates sin. If God was so severe with Moses, what will be His judgment against those who reject His Son, Jesus Christ? God will judge rejecters of Jesus Christ for all eternity. Why? Because they have no Savior to forgive their sins and give them a righteous standing before God.

How can you escape eternal wrath against sin? Believe in Christ. Accept Him as your Savior. Bow to Him as your Lord. Christ died for sinners that they might have their sins forgiven, be given a perfect standing before God, and be granted eternal life.

What must you do if you are going to be saved? You must stop trying to work your way to heaven and trust only in Christ for your deliverance from sin. Once it was asked the Apostle Paul by the Philippian jailor, ***“What must I do to be saved?”*** Paul did not say he was to join the church, be baptized, do good works, be confirmed or turn over a new leaf. Paul said, ***“Believe on the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved”*** (Acts 16:31).