

The Book of Numbers, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 13: Water from the Rock; the Bronze Serpent

Numbers 20:1–21:35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson asks the class to hold together two truths that our age likes to split apart: the kindness of God and the holiness of God. At the rock, God is faithful to give water even when Moses fails, yet He still holds His servant accountable, because the higher the trust, the more God's holiness must be honored before the people (20:12). Teach Moses' failure soberly and pastorally, never with a sneer. He is one of the great men of God, and his fall should make every leader tremble and every member tender toward those who lead. The doctrinal stake is the character of God: He is gracious, and He is holy, and we never honor one by ignoring the other.

The doctrinal centerpiece of the lesson is the bronze serpent, and it deserves the heaviest weight (Q9). Do not let it remain a curiosity. Jesus Himself reached back to this strange scene to explain His own cross: as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life (John 3:14–15). The dying Israelite was not healed by effort, ritual, or merit, but by a look of faith at God's appointed remedy. Press that home. Salvation comes to guilty, dying people who turn from themselves and trust the One God lifted up. Be careful and accurate with Paul's use of the wilderness rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4: Paul says the Rock that followed them was Christ and that these things were written for our instruction, so we may learn from Israel a timeless, trusting, obedient faith without reading later realities back into their experience.

Aim, finally, at the formation of the student. The wilderness generation heard, saw, and still fell through unbelief (Hebrews 3). Our people sit in comfortable rooms and can do the same, grumbling against God's road, trusting their own strength, refusing to look up. Lead the class to confess where they are striking the rock instead of trusting God, where they are nursing complaints instead of fixing their eyes on the Savior. The goal is not merely to admire the bronze serpent as a clever picture but to look up at Christ crucified and risen with the same simple, obedient faith, and to keep looking until that look becomes the habit of a lifetime.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read Numbers 20:1–13. God told Moses to speak to the rock, but Moses struck it twice and spoke harshly to the people. According to verse 12, what was the heart of his failure, and why does God connect it to failing to treat Him as holy before the people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Numbers 20 opens at Kadesh in the first month, and the death of Miriam (20:1) quietly marks the passing of the old generation. The same complaint that condemned their parents now rises again: no water, and the bitter charge that Moses brought them out to die (20:2–5). It is a fresh round of the chronic unbelief that has defined this generation.

God's instruction is clear and gentle. Take the rod, gather the assembly, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield water (20:7–8). God will provide for the whole congregation, undeserving as they are. The miracle is set up to display His faithfulness and to honor His name before the people.

Moses, worn thin, gathers the people and calls them rebels, then asks, must we bring water for you out of this rock, and strikes the rock twice (20:9–11). The water still flows, because God keeps His word, but Moses has disobeyed the specific command and, in his anger, has obscured God before the people. The verdict in 20:12 is severe and just: because you did not trust Me, to treat Me as holy in the eyes of the people, you shall not bring this assembly into the land.

We must teach this soberly. Moses is not a villain; he is a faithful man who failed at a critical moment under real pressure, and grief over Miriam likely pressed on him. God's discipline of His servant is not cruelty but the honoring of His own holiness, and the lesson lands hardest on those who lead. The waters are named Meribah, contention, a name that will follow Israel as a warning.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's holiness must be honored, and that responsibility weighs most heavily on those entrusted with leadership (20:12)
- God remains faithful to provide even when His servant fails, but faithfulness on His part does not cancel accountability on ours
- Anger and weariness do not excuse disobedience; they are exactly when we are most tempted to dishonor God
- Psalm 106:32–33 shows the people provoked Moses, but the responsibility for his rash words still rested with Moses
- Leaders set the tone for how God is seen; misrepresenting Him before the people is a grave matter

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly did God command, and how did Moses' action differ from it?
- Why would God hold Moses to such a high standard after so many years of faithful service?
- How does this passage guard us against thinking that long service earns us the right to disobey when we are tired?

Question 2

Student Question:

Moses had served faithfully for forty years, yet one act of disobedience in a weary moment carried lasting consequences. Where are you most likely to dishonor God precisely when you are tired, frustrated, or feel you have earned the right to react however you please?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The verdict on Moses is one of the most sobering moments in Scripture for anyone who has served God for a long time. A single act, born of frustration, cost him the thing he had labored toward for forty years. It tells us that the moments we are most likely to dishonor God are not always our weakest seasons but our most exhausted ones.

Notice the setting. Miriam has just died. The people are attacking him again. The same old complaint is in his ears. Moses is not a young, untested leader; he is a weary one. And it is precisely there, in the wear and tear of faithful service, that he stumbles. That should make us gentle with tired servants and watchful over our own hearts.

This question turns the mirror toward us. We all have a place where exhaustion or frustration loosens our grip on obedience: the short word at home, the cynical thought about the church, the corner cut when no one is watching. The flesh whispers that we have earned the right to react however we please.

The gospel answer is not to try harder in our own strength but to bring our weariness to Christ, who gives rest, and to guard the tired places before they become the failing places. Honoring God as holy is a daily, deliberate habit, especially when we feel we have nothing left to give.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Weariness and long service can become occasions for sin rather than excuses for it
- Personal accountability remains even under real pressure and genuine grief
- The places where we feel entitled to react are the places most in need of watchfulness
- Christ offers rest to the weary, which is the true remedy for the tired heart (Matthew 11:28–30)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does exhaustion most often loosen your obedience?
- How can you guard the tired places in your life before they become failing places?
- What would it look like to bring your weariness to Christ rather than venting it on others?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read Numbers 20:14–21. Israel asked Edom for safe passage as a brother nation and was refused, and Israel turned aside rather than force the issue. What does this restraint show us

about trusting God's timing and methods rather than seizing what we want by our own strength?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Israel sends a courteous, even diplomatic, message to Edom, appealing to kinship as descendants of Esau and promising not to take their water or trample their fields (20:14–17). Edom answers with a threat and comes out with a strong force (20:18–20). Israel, who could have pressed the matter, simply turns away (20:21).

This restraint is striking. God had not authorized war with Edom, the brother nation, and Israel respects that boundary rather than seizing the shorter road by force. It is a quiet act of trust: God will get them home His way and in His time, even when the obvious door is slammed shut.

There is wisdom here about how the people of God handle closed doors and unfair refusals. The flesh wants to force the issue and demand its rights. Faith is willing to take the longer road, trusting that God's path, even when it costs us, is better than our own shortcut.

The detour around Edom will be long and hard, and it sets up the very journey where the people grow impatient (21:4). Yet the choice to honor God's restraint is the right one, and it models a patience that the New Testament repeatedly commends to a people who must sometimes suffer wrong rather than retaliate.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting God's timing and methods over seizing our way by force
- Honoring God-given boundaries even toward those who treat us unfairly
- Closed doors are not always defeats; sometimes they are God's redirection
- The willingness to take the longer, costlier road as an act of faith

Discussion Prompts

- Why might Israel have been tempted to force its way through Edom, and why did it refrain?
- How do you usually respond when a door is shut on you unfairly?
- What does it look like to trust God's route when His path seems longer than your own?

Question 4

Student Question:

Think of a relationship where someone shut a door on you unfairly. How do you tend to respond when you are wronged, and what would it look like to entrust that situation to God instead of demanding your own way?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Edom's refusal is a personal kind of wound: a brother nation turning away a brother in need. Many of us know that ache, when someone who should have helped instead shut the door, or worse, met our courtesy with a threat.

Israel's response is instructive precisely because it is restrained. They do not nurse the grievance into a feud or take vengeance into their own hands. They turn aside and keep walking toward what God has promised.

Our instinct when wronged is to demand our rights, replay the offense, and look for a way to even the score. The New Testament calls God's people to a different posture: to leave room for God's justice, to bless rather than curse, and sometimes to suffer wrong rather than retaliate.

Entrusting a wrong to God does not mean pretending it did not happen. It means releasing our grip on revenge and continuing to walk the road God has set, confident that He sees, He cares, and He will set all things right in His time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Responding to unfair treatment with restraint rather than retaliation
- Entrusting our wrongs to God's justice rather than seizing revenge (Romans 12:19)
- Refusing to let a grievance harden into bitterness
- Continuing to walk toward God's promise even when others fail us

Discussion Prompts

- How do you typically react when someone shuts a door on you unfairly?
- What is the difference between ignoring a wrong and entrusting it to God?
- Whom might God be calling you to release from your demand for repayment?

Question 5

Student Question:

Read Numbers 20:22–29. Aaron's priestly garments are placed on Eleazar, and Aaron dies on the mountain. What does the orderly passing of the priesthood from father to son teach us about God's faithfulness to His own appointed order even as individual leaders pass away?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

At Mount Hor, God announces that Aaron will die, because he too was involved at Meribah (20:23–24). The scene is solemn and tender: Moses leads Aaron and Eleazar up the mountain, strips Aaron of his priestly garments, and puts them on his son (20:26–28).

Aaron dies on the mountain, and the whole house of Israel mourns him thirty days (20:29). The first high priest, who had borne the names of the tribes on his breastplate before God, passes from the scene. Yet the priesthood does not fail; it continues in Eleazar.

The orderly transfer of the garments is the point. God's appointed order does not depend on any one man's longevity. Leaders die, but God's purposes and His ordained service continue without interruption, because the office belongs to God, not to the man.

For Christians, this points us forward to a better and unchanging priesthood. The Aaronic priests were many, because death prevented them from continuing, but our great High Priest holds His priesthood permanently because He lives forever (Hebrews 7:23-25). The mountain where Aaron's garments passed to his son whispers that we need a priest who never has to hand His robe to anyone.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's appointed order endures even as individual leaders pass away
- The office and service belong to God, not to any one person
- Aaron too was held accountable for Meribah, underscoring God's impartial holiness
- The mortal Aaronic priesthood points forward to Christ's permanent priesthood (Hebrews 7:23-25)

Discussion Prompts

- What does the careful passing of the garments teach about how God preserves His work?
- How does Aaron's death set the stage for the better priesthood of Christ?
- Why is it healthy to remember that God's purposes do not depend on any single leader?

Question 6

Student Question:

Who are the faithful older saints who have poured into your life, and how are you preparing to carry forward what they entrusted to you when they are gone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Behind every faithful saint we know stands a chain of others who poured into them, and behind Eleazar stood Aaron. The transfer of the garments is a picture of one generation handing the work of God to the next, and it invites us to think about who has handed faith to us.

Most of us can name the older Christians whose prayers, teaching, and example shaped us, often quietly, over many years. They carried the work when we were young, and one day they will be gone, as Aaron was.

The question is whether we are ready to carry forward what they entrusted to us. Faith is always one generation from being lost if it is not deliberately passed on. The garments do not pass themselves; someone must climb the mountain.

This calls us to two things at once: deep gratitude for those who have gone before, and intentional preparation to receive and continue the work. We honor the older saints best not by mourning them only but by taking up the service they laid down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gratitude for the faithful older saints who have shaped us
- The deliberate work of passing faith from one generation to the next
- Faith is always one generation from being lost without intentional handing on
- Honoring those who go before us by continuing their service

Discussion Prompts

- Who are the older saints who poured into your life, and what did they give you?
- What are you doing now to carry forward what they entrusted to you?
- Whom are you preparing to receive the work when you can no longer carry it?

Question 7

Student Question:

Read Numbers 21:4–9, where the people speak against God and Moses, God sends fiery serpents, and the people confess their sin and ask Moses to pray. What does it reveal about God that He answers their cry, yet provides rescue on His terms rather than simply removing the consequence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

On the long detour around Edom, the people grow impatient and speak against God and against Moses, despising the manna as worthless food (21:4–5). It is the same ungrateful unbelief, now aimed openly at God Himself. In response God sends fiery serpents, and many die (21:6).

The discipline brings them to their senses. They come to Moses confessing, we have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you, and they ask him to pray that God will take away the serpents (21:7). Their confession is real, and so is their request for relief.

But notice how God answers. He does not simply remove the snakes. He provides rescue on His own terms: make a bronze serpent, set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten will live if he looks at it (21:8–9). The consequence remains, but a way of life is opened to all who will trust God's remedy.

This is how God so often deals with us. He answers the cry of the penitent, yet He frequently leaves the consequence in place while providing a means of grace that requires faith. The serpents are still in the camp; the bronze serpent is the appointed way to live among them. God's mercy and God's terms come together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God answers the cry of the truly penitent
- God often provides rescue on His own terms rather than simply removing consequences
- Genuine confession names the sin honestly before God
- Grumbling against God's provision is a serious form of unbelief

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about God that He responds to their confession at all?
- Why might God leave the serpents in the camp while providing the bronze serpent?
- How does God's way of rescue here invite faith rather than mere relief?

Question 8

Student Question:

When God disciplines you and then offers a way back, are you quick to confess and look to His remedy, or do you bargain, excuse yourself, and look for a way out that costs you nothing?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When God disciplines us and then opens a way back, our response exposes our hearts. Israel, once bitten, confessed plainly and looked to God's remedy. Many of us are far slower, preferring to bargain or excuse ourselves rather than simply admit we were wrong and turn.

The look at the bronze serpent cost the Israelite nothing but his pride and his unbelief. He had only to take God at His word and turn his eyes to the appointed remedy. Yet pride can make even a free rescue feel like too much to accept.

We often want a way back that leaves our self-image intact, that lets us save face, that does not require us to admit how badly we have sinned. God's way of return always runs through honest confession and humble trust in His provision.

The invitation is to be quick people, quick to confess, quick to turn, quick to look to Christ. The longer we delay, bargaining and excusing, the longer the poison works. Faith does not negotiate; it looks up and lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contrast between honest confession and self-justifying excuses
- Pride resists even a free and gracious rescue
- God's way of return runs through humble trust in His provision
- Delay lets sin's poison continue its work

Discussion Prompts

- When God offers you a way back, are you quick to confess or slow to admit fault?
- What does it cost your pride to simply look to God's remedy?
- How does bargaining with God keep you from the rescue He freely offers?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read Numbers 21:8–9 alongside John 3:14–15. Jesus said the Son of Man must be lifted up just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so that whoever believes may have eternal life. How does the bronze serpent picture Christ crucified, and what does the simple, obedient look of faith teach us about how a guilty, dying person receives life in Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson. God told Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a pole, and everyone bitten who looked at it lived (21:8–9). It is a strange and wonderful picture: the image of the very thing that was killing them, lifted up, becomes the means of their life. Healing came not by effort or ritual but by a look of faith at God's appointed remedy.

Jesus Himself unlocked the meaning. To Nicodemus He said, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life (John 3:14–15). The lifting up is the cross. The dying Israelite is every sinner under the sting of death. The look is faith. Christ, made to be sin for us though He knew no sin, is lifted up so that all who turn to Him may live.

Press the simplicity and the seriousness together. The Israelite did not climb to the serpent, manufacture his own cure, or earn the right to be healed. He looked, because he believed God's word, and he lived. So the guilty, dying sinner is saved not by his own strength or merit but by trusting the One God lifted up. Yet that look was no empty glance; it was the obedient response of faith to God's command, and so saving faith in Christ is a trusting, obedient turning to Him, not a mere opinion held at a distance.

Handle Paul's wilderness commentary accurately. Paul says these things happened as examples and were written for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:11), and that the spiritual Rock that followed them was Christ (10:4). We learn from Israel a timeless faith that trusts and obeys God's appointed way of salvation, and we see that the One who provided for them then is the same Christ who is lifted up for us now. The bronze serpent is one of the clearest Old Testament windows into the cross, and Jesus put it there Himself.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The bronze serpent is a type of Christ lifted up on the cross, drawn out by Jesus Himself (John 3:14–15)

- Salvation comes to guilty, dying people through a look of faith at God's appointed remedy, not by effort or merit
- The look was an obedient response to God's word, so saving faith is trusting, obedient faith, not bare opinion
- Christ was lifted up bearing the curse so that all who turn to Him in faith may have eternal life
- Paul reads the wilderness rightly as written for our instruction, with Christ as the spiritual Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4, 11)
- The image of judgment becomes the means of mercy, foreshadowing the cross where sin is condemned and sinners are saved

Discussion Prompts

- How does the bronze serpent picture what Christ accomplished on the cross?
- What does the simple look of faith teach us about how a guilty sinner receives life in Christ?
- Why is it important that the look was an act of obedient trust and not merely a passing glance?

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way the picture of looking up at the lifted-up Savior is forming you right now, drawing you to stop trusting your own strength and to fix your eyes, in trusting and obedient faith, on Jesus crucified and risen.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone turns the whole lesson into a personal looking up. The wilderness generation perished because they would not trust God; the bitten Israelites lived because they looked at the lifted-up serpent. Jesus says the same look of faith, now directed at Him crucified and risen, gives eternal life.

Spiritual formation happens as we learn to stop trusting our own strength, which is exactly where Moses, and the grumbling people, and we ourselves so often fail. The discipline of the believer is to fix our eyes again and again on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, until that look becomes the settled posture of the heart.

Ask the class to name something specific. Not a vague resolve, but a concrete place where they are being drawn to look up rather than to strive: a fear they keep trying to manage alone, a sin they keep trying to fix by willpower, a burden they keep refusing to lay at the cross.

The goal is a life lived under the lifted-up Savior, returning to that look in trusting, obedient faith day after day. The bronze serpent was for a moment of crisis; Christ crucified is for a lifetime of

looking. The student who learns to look up is being formed into the image of the One he beholds.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christian formation as learning to look to Christ rather than trust our own strength
- Fixing our eyes on Jesus crucified and risen as a daily, repeated discipline (Hebrews 12:2)
- Naming a concrete area where God is drawing us to look up rather than strive
- Beholding Christ as the means by which we are transformed into His image

Discussion Prompts

- What specific area of your life is God calling you to bring to the lifted-up Savior?
- Where are you still trusting your own strength instead of looking to Christ?
- How can you make looking to Jesus a daily habit rather than only a crisis response?