

The Book of Numbers

Lesson 13: Water from the Rock; the Bronze Serpent -- Numbers 20:1–21:35

The wilderness years are nearly over, but they do not end gently. Numbers 20 opens with a death and a grave. Miriam, the sister who once stood guard over a baby in a basket of reeds and who later led the women in dancing on the far shore of the Red Sea, dies at Kadesh and is buried there. You can almost feel the camp grow quieter. A generation is passing away in this desert, and Miriam is among the first of the old leadership to go. The road home is also a road of saying goodbye.

Then comes the thirst. There is no water, and the people gather against Moses and Aaron with the same bitter complaint their parents used to throw at them: why did you bring us out here to die? God, patient as ever, tells Moses to take the rod and speak to the rock, and water will pour out for the whole assembly. But something snaps in Moses. He has carried these people for forty years, buried his sister, swallowed insult after insult, and now he stands before the rock, calls them rebels, and strikes it twice with his rod instead of speaking to it. The water gushes out anyway, because God is faithful even when His servant is not. And yet God says something that lands like a stone in the heart: because you did not trust Me, to treat Me as holy in the eyes of the people, you will not bring this assembly into the land.

The chapters that follow keep moving toward Canaan through grief and grace. Edom refuses to let Israel pass, and rather than fight a brother nation, Israel turns aside. Aaron climbs Mount Hor, his priestly garments are placed on his son Eleazar, and the first high priest dies on the mountain while the people weep thirty days. The journey grows long and the people grow impatient again, and this time God sends fiery serpents among them, and many die. When they cry out, God does not simply take the snakes away. He tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and lift it high on a pole, and everyone who is bitten will live if he looks at it. A look of faith, and life. Then come the first real victories, over Arad, over Sihon king of the Amorites, over Og of Bashan, as if to say the inheritance is finally within reach.

Maybe you know what it is to serve faithfully for years and then have one bad day undo something precious. Maybe you have stood at a graveside in a season when you needed strength and had none to spare. Maybe you are tired of grumbling, your own and everyone else's, and you wonder whether God still means to keep His promises. This lesson holds all of that in one hand and, in the other, holds up a bronze serpent on a pole, the strangest picture of salvation in the Old Testament, the one Jesus Himself reached back and grabbed to explain His own cross. Before we are done, we want to stand under that pole and look up, the way the whole gospel asks us to look up, in trusting, obedient faith, at the Son of Man lifted up so that we might live.

Group Discussion: When have you watched someone serve faithfully for a long time and then stumble in a single weary moment, and how did that shape the way you thought about both grace and accountability?

Personal Reflection: Where in your own life right now are you tempted, like Israel, to remember the comforts of the past and grumble against God instead of trusting Him with the road ahead?

Read Numbers 20:1–21:35

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?

5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: John 3:14–15, Jesus identifies the bronze serpent as a type of Himself lifted up on the cross for our salvation; 1 Corinthians 10:1–11, Paul reads the wilderness rock and Israel's failures as written for our instruction, with Christ as the spiritual Rock; Hebrews 3:7–19, the wilderness generation as a sober warning against unbelief and a hardened heart; Psalm 106:32–33, an inspired commentary on Meribah and how the people provoked Moses to speak rashly; Romans 15:4, whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction and hope

More studies available on ChurchOfChristBibleStudies.com