

Ministry of Grace Church

Numbers Chapter 20 – Speaker Notes

After the Children of Israel escaped from Egypt, they travelled on foot to Mt. Sinai where *Yahweh* delivered to Moses the Ten Commandments. He was up on the mountain for 40 days and, because they had not seen nor heard from him in almost seven weeks, the Israelites persuaded Aaron to make an idol for them to worship. Upon coming down from the mountain, Moses was angry at their idolatry and destroyed the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments. So, he went back up the mountain for another 40 days and returned with a second copy of the commandments.

At the end of the first year, the Israelites set up the Tabernacle and a month later Moses numbered the Israelites and they began their wandering, arriving at Kadesh-barnea at the beginning of the third month of that second year. Here they refused to enter the land because 10 of the 12 spies sent in to scope out the land brought back a bad report, discouraging the Israelites from going into the land. Because they refused to enter the land, *Yahweh* informed them that everyone who was counted in the numbering (those 20 years of age and older) would die in the wilderness. They wandered around for another 39 years until they returned to Kadesh-barnea. They arrived there on the first month of the 40th year since leaving Egypt.

Numbers 20:1

And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.

We are told here that after 40 years of wandering, the Israelites came to Kadesh, “into the Wilderness of Zin” If we compare this with **Numbers 12:16** it appears that there is a contradiction for there it says the encampment (at Kadesh-barnea) was in the Wilderness of Paran:

And afterward the people moved from Hazeroth and camped in the Wilderness of Paran. (**Numbers 12:16**)

Our text says that the people stayed at “Kadesh.” There are some who believe that this Kadesh is a different place than Kadesh-barnea because it is described as being in the Wilderness of Zin. So, how do we reconcile this seeming contradiction? The Wilderness of Paran is the heartland of the Sinai Peninsula, whereas the Wilderness of Zin is the area south of Hebron (Kiriath Arba) also referred to as “the mountains of the Amorites” which occupies the extreme southern end of the Promised Land. Kadesh-barnea is situated in the area where these two wildernesses meet. Therefore, Kadesh is said to be in both the Wilderness of Paran and the Wilderness of Zin.

In Numbers chapter 33 we have a recounting of the various encampments throughout the wilderness wanderings. In that list it appears that Kadesh-barnea is skipped-over since the encampment after Hazeroth is listed as Rithmah. However, this could be a reference to the Wady Ratemath, near the town of Barnea, where the Tabernacle may have been set-up.

They departed from Rephidim and camped in the Wilderness of Sinai. They moved from the Wilderness of Sinai and camped at Kibroth Hattaavah. They departed from Kibroth Hattaavah and camped at Hazeroth. They departed from Hazeroth and camped at Rithmah. They departed from Rithmah and camped at Rimmon Perez. (**Numbers 33:15-19**)

Assuming that Rithmah is the same as Kadesh-barnea, then after the Israelites left Kadesh-barnea they wandered throughout the wilderness of Paran. And then, according to Numbers chapter 33, they returned to Kadesh:

They departed from Abronah and camped at Ezion Geber. They moved from Ezion Geber and camped in the Wilderness of Zin, which *is* Kadesh. They moved from Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, on the boundary of the land of Edom. (Numbers 33:35-37)

Numbers 20:2-5

Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.”

We are told here, “there was no water” for the Israelites at Kadesh. This has been cited as evidence by some that this is not the same Kadesh as Kadesh-barnea since there was no mention of a lack of water before. However, nearly 40 years have transpired since the spying-out of the Promised Land at Kadesh-barnea, so what had previously been a water source could have dried-up.

If we go back several hundred years we find that a place called Kadesh (in the same vicinity) was referred to as EnMishpat which means “fountain of judgment” which, therefore, must have had water.

In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the border of the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh) and defeated all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who were dwelling in Hazazon-tamar. (Genesis 14:5-7)

Let’s put ourselves in Moses’s sandals for a few minutes. During the first year and two months of wandering (from Egypt to Kadesh-barnea) he repeatedly had to deal with the complaining of the people. Finally, *Yahweh* declared that all the people 20 years of age and up would die in the wilderness. Now, almost thirty-nine years later, this is a new generation and there are no recorded instances of these Israelites complaining throughout the past thirty-nine years. Moses certainly would have been relieved to have all the complainers behind him, but now with this next generation complaining about the lack of water, it would have been like opening up old wounds.

As part of their complaint to Moses, the people said, “If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD!” This is probably a reference to the deaths of their fathers over the past thirty-nine years. During these wanderings approximately 600,000 men had died (an average of about 45 per day). However, this expression could be a reference to all the judgments against the people in the form of plagues, fire from heaven, the earth splitting open, and the constant, day-by-day deaths of their fathers.

Like their fathers who have died in the wilderness, these Israelites blamed Moses for their difficulties saying, “Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here.” Once again, we see that the Israelites have lost sight of who has brought them out of Egypt and who has been leading them through the wilderness. These complaints sound amazingly similar to those of their fathers, directing their complaints at Moses, not *Yahweh*.

Numbers 20:6-8

Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.”

In previous descriptions of similar actions, it was only Moses who fell on his face before *Yahweh*. This time we see that both Moses and Aaron humbled themselves before The Almighty. As had been Moses’s custom in the past, they humbled themselves before *Yahweh* by falling on their faces before Him. In the text nothing is said about them talking to *Yahweh*, simply humbling themselves before Him. That’s not so strange when you consider that it’s not so much our words which God responds to as it is the attitude of our hearts.

Yahweh instructed Moses to, “Take the staff and assemble the congregation ...” When combined with the beginning of the following verse, “Moses took the staff from before the LORD,” some have speculated that these are a reference to the staff of Aaron. However, there is no evidence of this. It is more reasonable that it should be a reference to Moses’s staff with which so many other miracles of *Yahweh* had been associated. At Rephidim only the elders of the people were gathered together to see the miracle of water from the rock. Here we see that the entire congregation was gathered to witness *Yahweh*’s miraculous provision.

Yahweh’s instructions to Moses and Aaron were to, “Speak to the rock before their eyes” The specific instructions were for Moses and Aaron to stand before the people and speak to the rock.

Numbers 20:9-11

And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.

Moses’s comments to the Israelites, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” shows his attitude toward the people. This is obviously the language of frustration and retribution emanating from a sinner’s soul rather than the language of mercy and grace emanating from the Spirit of God. Moses was angered by the complaining of the people and he put forth himself as the one who was to get water from the rock. He should have directed the hearts of the people toward *Yahweh* who is the real source of water.

Then, we are told that, “Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock” This is not what Moses was instructed to do. *Yahweh* told him to **speak** to the rock in the sight of all Israel.

So, instead of speaking to the rock, Moses “struck the rock twice” We can imagine what Moses must have felt after having struck the rock the first time with no results. Perhaps there was a moment of panic when water did not immediately flow forth as it had at Rephidim. However, a second striking of the rock with the rod was performed in an attempt to bring forth the water. And, as is so often the case, when God provides, He does not do so as a miserly Lord, He brings forth abundantly to show forth His power and His love.

Numbers 20:12-13

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land

that I have given them.” These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy.

We see here that Moses’s disobedience was the result of disbelief (you did not believe in Me). *Yahweh* tells them that because they did not “uphold me as holy in the eyes of the children of Israel”, therefore He pronounced judgment against them. Moses words and actions were motivated by his own emotions. As a result, he and Aaron took credit for the miraculous provision, “Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” rather than giving the glory to God. Therefore, instead of showcasing *Yahweh* and displaying His power and love, Moses was drawing attention to himself. Even the Psalmist records that God’s punishment was a result of Moses’ anger and rash speech:

They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips. (Psalms 106:32-33)

Yahweh’s judgment of Moses and Aaron was, “... you shall not bring this assembly into the land.” This is one of the most curious judgments in all of Scripture. Here we have the greatest prophet who ever lived (other than Christ), who has been faithful above all the house of Israel. He has been so devoted to *Yahweh* and has established such an intimate relationship with Him that he could effectively “persuade” God to draw back His judgment on several occasions. Yet, for the first time since his return to Egypt to lead the people out, we see Moses’s sin nature controlling his actions. And, as a result of this one miss-step, *Yahweh* punished him by barring him from the Promised Land.

The rock is referred to here as, “Meribah,” meaning “quarreling or contention.” This is the second time that water has been brought forth from a rock and the second time that the place was referred to by this name. The other was at Rephidim:

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (Exodus 17:6-7)

Numbers 20:14-17

Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardship that we have met: how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers. And when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. We will go along the King's Highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.”

We learn from **Genesis 36:1** that Edom is one and the same as Esau, the twin brother of Jacob (Israel). And, according to **Genesis 32:3, 23** we know that Esau (Edom) lived in the area of Mount Seir:

And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, (Genesis 32:3)

Moses told the king of Edom, “You know all the hardship that has befallen us.” The plight of the Israelites was apparently known to all the peoples around. And, since the Israelites could not go up into the land of the Moabites (Hebron and the surrounding country), their next best route would have been to travel east to the great rift valley known as “the Arabah” which extends from the Dead Sea all the way down to the Red Sea at Ezion-Geber (modern day Eilat). In order to help persuade the King of

Edom that they meant no harm, Moses said, “We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells.” Israel promised to respect the possessions and livelihood of the Edomites.

Numbers 20:18-21

But Edom said to him, “You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you.” And the people of Israel said to him, “We will go up by the highway, and if we drink of your water, I and my livestock, then I will pay for it. Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more.” But he said, “You shall not pass through.” And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory, so Israel turned away from him.

In response to Israel’s polite request for safe passage through the land, the King of Edom sent back a message denying the request and threatening them with attack if they should try. Then, Moses repeats his request, indicating that they would take the main road. This would serve two purposes. The first is that the Edomites would know exactly the path that would be taken and secondly, the Israelites would not be tromping through cultivated land. Therefore, they would be protecting the crops.

As further evidence of the non-threatening nature of the request, the Israelites offered to pay for any water used. Since water was the most cherished commodity in this arid land, Israel was offering remuneration for any use of this resource. But, Edom’s response, like the first, was a denial of privilege.

Although it was already obvious that the Edomites did not trust the Israelites, they sent their army to the edge of their territory in order to demonstrate to the Israelites that they were not welcome to pass through their land. So, not wanting to provoke their relatives, the Israelites turned south-east to travel around the land of Edom by way of the East side of the Dead Sea.

Numbers 20:22-26

And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, “Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor. And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there.”

Where is this, “Mount Hor?” It is most commonly associated with Jebel Harun (Mount Aaron) in modern day Jordan, very near the ancient city of Petra. It was there that Aaron was, “gathered to his people,” as opposed to “separated from his people.” This is an expression showing that Aaron died and went to be with “his” people, that is, in Paradise.

Yahweh told Aaron that, “you rebelled against My word at the water of Meribah.” He said that Aaron and Moses, “rebelled” against *Yahweh’s* command. This comes from the Hebrew word *marah*, meaning “to be bitter, to rebel, or to disobey.” This served as a reminder to both Aaron and Moses that there are consequences to their disobedient actions.

There, on the top of Mt. Hor, Moses was to “strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son.” This was the “changing of the guard” with regard to the High Priesthood. Aaron was about to die, thus his eldest son Eleazar was consecrated as the new High Priest.

Numbers 20:27-29

Moses did as the LORD commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And

Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.

All the Israelites were able to watch Moses, Aaron, and Eleazar (and perhaps the elders of the people) go up the mountain. It is unlikely that they were able to observe the events that occurred up there since they may have been a couple of miles away. From chapter 33 of Numbers, we know when this occurred:

And they set out from Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, on the edge of the land of Edom. And Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor at the command of the LORD and died there, in the fortieth year after the people of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month. And Aaron was 123 years old when he died on Mount Hor. (Numbers 33:37-39)

So What?

Who gets the credit?

How easy it is for us to focus on our daily hardships and hassles, for these are the things which occupy us constantly. In doing so, however, our focus slips from God's daily provision. We stop seeking God's glory and start seeking our own. The Israelites who complained at Kadesh were quick to find fault and complain about the lack of water and the difficulty of their 40 years of wanderings. They still had childhood memories of the relative ease of their life in Egypt compared to wandering through the wilderness. They had heard of God's promise of a land that flows with milk and honey, yet all they had to eat was manna. They weren't able to see the miracle of the daily divine provision of *Yahweh*. Not only did he feed them every day with the manna, but their clothing had not worn out in spite of their trudging through the wilderness for forty years:

I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn off your feet. You have not eaten bread, and you have not drunk wine or strong drink, that you may know that I am the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 29:5-6)

The Israelites couldn't see what they had because they were looking for what they didn't have. And we do the same thing today! Let's stop for a minute and think of what we have from God. We have life, we even have eternal life if we have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We have health (we may not have perfect health, but most of us are not bed ridden.) We have family and friends around us. We have the clothes on our back (and some of us have a lot more stashed away in a closet, or two, or three). We have a roof over our head (it may not be a castle roof, but it's a roof). We have food on our table, while there are a lot of people in the world who don't know where their next meal is coming from. And, we have water to drink. How basic is that? And yet, as we know all too well, there are those who don't have a nearby source of water. We have a Heavenly Father who loves us and is watching over us. What more could we ask for?

And yet, we complain about what we don't have.

How could we?!

Just as we are guilty of losing our spiritual focus when we switch to our earthly focus, the Israelites had their focus on the daily problems of life rather than on the giver of life, the one who watches over and protects. And it was not just the common people who let their focus slip from the Divine to the mundane. Moses was just as guilty. When faced with the complaints of the people, he didn't complain to *Yahweh*, he humbled himself before the Almighty. And from his humbled position he heard clearly the instructions given to him by his Lord. He even acted on the instructions given to him by God. But he performed them from his fallen nature rather than his sanctified spirit. He was exercising the duties of his position by his own strength, focused on himself. He felt personally hurt by the people because

of their complaining. He took upon himself the responsibility of getting water from the rock. He spoke and acted out of anger rather than grace. He criticized the people and smacked the rock with his staff! Twice!

But, wasn't he doing his job? Yes, he was! Wasn't he getting water for the people just as God had directed him? Yes, he was! But, he was doing it in his own power, in his own way, and for his own glory. He must not have believed that water would come from the rock if he just spoke to it. For, God said to him, "**Because you did not believe Me.**" Moses knew he could strike the rock and produce the water. After all, he had done it before at Rephidim, but to just speak and have it happen, no way! Only God could do that, right? If he just spoke to the rock he would be placing himself equal with God and that wouldn't be right, now would it. He would have to strike the rock instead. That's what he thought, so that's what he did.

Do you see how twisted our thinking becomes when we place ourselves on the throne of our own life? It's easy to rationalize nearly every sin we commit. But sin is still sin and it's all the result of disbelief. It's all the result of placing our own needs and desires above what God asks us to do. In other words, sin is the result of following our own will rather than God's will. When we act this way we lift ourselves up and the net effect is to remove God from the throne of our lives. We're not honoring Him the way He deserves. We're not letting Him rule in our lives. We're not treating Him as the Holy God that He is, and neither did Moses. That's why God told him, "**Because you did not believe Me, to uphold me as holy**"

The prophet Habakkuk knew that a person cannot live with pride in his or her heart and live by faith at the same time, for he said:

"Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

Although this verse is specifically referring to the anti-Christ, it is nonetheless a statement that applies to all of us. We need to suppress our pride and live by faith, which we can't do when we are walking in pride. In his letter to the Romans, Paul quotes this very passage from Habakkuk as he tells us:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." (Romans 1:16-17)

And, in speaking to the believers in Corinth about the heavenly body that we shall receive one day, Paul reminds them (and us) that this earthly body is but a temporary dwelling place for our souls. In this earthly body we are burdened and we groan, but we walk by faith, not by sight:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened—not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 Corinthians 5:1-9)

And, in this earthly body we too should make it our aim to be well pleasing to Him. We do so when we "walk by faith, not by sight." We must be sober and vigilant and be ever mindful of our adversary who

would have us do our own thing. We must submit to our Heavenly Father, listen to His Spirit, keep our eyes on Him, and do exactly as he instructs us to do. And, we have to do it by faith.

I'm sure that we have all heard preachers say, "God had to teach me this lesson before I could teach it to you" or something similar. As I was preparing this message, He did just that. I had just finished the study notes and was working on the "So What." I was struggling with what to say and how to say it. The thoughts and the words just weren't coming like they usually do. I took a break. I drank some coffee. I took a short walk outside. I reviewed the study notes. But I just couldn't come up with what I wanted to say in the "So What."

Did you hear that? **I** couldn't come up with what **I** wanted to say. I wasn't focused on God's message. I wasn't trying to find what God wanted me to say. I wasn't interested in glorifying God. I just wanted to write my message and I wanted it to be powerful. All of a sudden it hit me like a sledge hammer! This isn't my message! I'm not the one who should get the credit. It doesn't matter whether it's a great and powerful message or not. What is important is that it is God's message. I'm just the messenger and He's the one who deserves all the credit. In that moment of contrition I bowed my head, I confessed my sinful pride, and I asked God to give me His message; the words that He wanted me to say. I want to speak the words that bring praise and glory to Him, not to me. I want to write and speak by faith.

If this message has touched your heart, if God has pierced through your protective shield and convicted you, please don't thank me, thank Him! Let's all turn our eyes and our hearts toward Him. Let's all confess our selfish pride and give Him the praise for all that we do. Let's ask Him to open our ears and our eyes to hear and see the message He has for us. Let's give Him the praise for all that He will do through us to bring glory and honor to Himself. And let's all look forward to that grand and glorious day when we will bow before His throne, casting our crowns at His feet, giving Him the glory:

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." (Revelation 4:9-11)

You are worthy, O Lord!

Let's pray.