

Numbers Chapter 20 – The Return to Kadesh

Read Numbers 20:1 Return to Kadesh

The wilderness of Zin was last mentioned in Numbers 13, in connection with the spies' journey into the Promised Land. So it is just north of Kadesh, on the southern border of Canaan. This verse begins a new section of Numbers, and marks the change from aimless wandering in the wilderness, to marching toward the Promised Land. This time, they will not go straight north, but will strike east first, and cross the plains of Moab. This march will have many parallels to the earlier marches, from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, and from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh.

Read Numbers 20:2-8 The Complaining at Meribah

Complaints about lack of water had characterized the journey to the Red Sea, and on that occasion, God had instructed Moses to strike the rock to bring forth water. This time, he was commanded merely to speak to the rock. 1 Cor. 10:3-4. As a foreshadowing of Jesus, the rock needed to be struck only once. After that, it was necessary only to speak to the rock and it would bring forth its life-giving waters.

Read Numbers 20:9-13 The Disobedience of Moses and Aaron

Why is it that God punishes the action of Moses and Aaron? Many feel it was Moses' anger. But that emotion was merely what caused him to fall short. Some say it was the attempt to take credit for the miracle, and that may be so, but God had repeatedly put his prophet and priest forward as His agents, and gone out of His way to bring them the people's respect. In fact, in verse 7, God had said that Moses and Aaron should speak to the rock "before their eyes" and that they would bring the water out of the rock for the community. Credit does not appear to be God's main concern.

In verse 12, God says it was their failure to believe in Him, failure to uphold Him as holy before the people of Israel. The answer may be the one we find the hardest to accept: it was no more than the deviation from God's instructions that brought judgment. Moses and Aaron were responsible for showing the people how to fully obey God. How could they do that when they failed to do so themselves? That was how they failed to uphold Him as holy before the people of Israel. And that's why they were disqualified from leadership as the people prepared to enter the Promised Land.

Verse 13 sums up the passage by remarking that Meribah was where the people had grumbled and God had *shown Himself to be holy*. He had done so by demanding complete obedience from even his appointed prophet and priest, as is fitting a holy God. What a lesson for the young Israelites and their descendants! What a lesson for us!

Read Numbers 20:14-21 Israel on the March

Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom) were twin brothers. The Israelites and Edomites were their descendants. Moses reminds Edom that they were brothers, and asks for passage through the land, promising to stay on the King's Highway, which was the main route from Damascus to Arabia. Edom's refusal was a sin. Israel "turned away" from Edom, apparently traveling south, to go around Edom before traveling again north.

Edom was to the east, and the King's Highway would, from there, lead north to the east of the Dead Sea. This seems like an "out of the way" route. Interestingly, there is no mention in this account of the pillar of cloud leading the way.

Read Numbers 20:22-24 The Death of Aaron

Numbers 33:38 tells us that Aaron died in the 40th year after leaving Egypt – 38 years after the first failed attempt to enter the land. Aaron had lived a rugged life in the wilderness. But he never entered into the rest of the Promised Land. For us, the Promised Land represents arriving at that point in our spiritual growth in which we have learned to obey God and to rely wholly on Him. It is the "spirit-filled life." There are many people who are saved, but never enjoy the fruits of salvation in this life. They, like Aaron, have not entered in because of their rebellion. Galatians 5:16-24

Read Numbers 20:25-29 The Induction of Eleazar

Aaron was "gathered to his people." For the young Israelites, the second generation out of Egypt, Aaron was the only priest they had known. But God had been preparing them for this, for example, by putting Eleazar in charge of the Levites (Num 3:32), and by giving Eleazar responsibility for the rite of the red heifer (Num 19:3-4). Now God directs the transfer of the high priesthood from Aaron to Eleazar. By making this change at this point, God ensured that the status of high priest would be maintained during the march to and conquest of Canaan.

We, however have a High Priest not "after the order of Aaron" but "after the order of Melchizedek." He is forever!