

04.03.11 / Numbers 20:1-13

Passage Insight

At this point in the story, God's people had been wandering in the desert for about 40 years. Miriam, a sister of Moses and Aaron, has just died, letting us know that the leadership is aging considerably during this time. This was the second time that the assembly had passed through this particular part of the wilderness. While they had been at this location previously, there appears not to have been a shortage of water during their first visit, but the reason for the current water shortage is not mentioned. What is most important is the response of the people to the leadership, and ultimately to God – additionally, the leadership's (Moses and Aaron's) response both to the people and to God has much to teach us about ourselves even today.

In verses 2 and 3, we see that the people have assembled AGAINST Moses and Aaron and that they were QUARRELLING with their leadership. It's fitting that last week's passage was James 4:1-5, where we studied both the cause and effects of quarrelling. In summary, the cause is simple: a pursuit of our own selfish desires for selfish gain – and the effects are simple as well: enmity with and the opposition of God. Let's see how it plays out and the implications for us in this.

The people's mistrust of God is shown in their accusation of Moses and Aaron. Though they accuse their human leaders, they reveal their lack of faith in God to provide for their needs. They even reveal their entitlement and presupposition that they can determine their own needs in the specific things they long for: grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates. This grumbling continues despite 40 years of provision, including bread and meat directly from the hand of God, and in spite of liberation from Egyptian slavery and persecution. The ease with which they forget the Lord's provision is startling, but we should be checked on this as well. We would be wise to ask ourselves and one another, "Where are you failing to remember the faithful provision of the Lord?"

Moses' and Aaron's response to the people's grumbling has a lesson for us. Rather than respond with a dismissal of their accusations or with an immediate rebuttal, Moses and Aaron retreat to the tent of God in order to seek His guidance and direction. When we ourselves are accused, or when we find ourselves offended by the actions of those within the body of Christ, what is our response? Is our response automatically directed at the accuser/offender, or is it automatically and humbly directed toward God? Interestingly enough, God's response toward the people's request is more provision. While we may be tempted to argue that He should have punished them then and there for their grumbling, we see clearly that the Lord's ways are not our ways.

The Lord makes clear His instruction to Moses and Aaron. They are to assemble the people, speak to the rock, and watch as the Lord provides for the needs of His people despite their grumbling. Unfortunately, they take matters into their own hands. Though directed to gather the people and address the rock, they gather the people and address the assembly with condemnation, calling them rebels out of frustration. They then strike the rock multiple times, though they had been instructed only to speak to it. Their leadership had been threatened, they were frustrated, and though called by God to provide in the face of an attack by their own, they instead attack in return. In doing this, they not only disobey God, which is enough, but they also fail to reflect God as He intended. This misrepresentation of God revealed in Moses and Aaron a lack of faith in the Lord – perhaps not a lack of faith that He could provide as He promised, but rather a lack of faith that His response of provision was an adequate response in the face of such blatant grumbling and insurrection. OUR passions for the things of the Lord must not overshadow the character and

accurate representation of God Himself. Remember what causes fights and quarrels among us in James 4. Moses and Aaron's response to the attack on them was ultimately driven by pride, and they went outside of God's instruction, calling the people rebels and striking the rock. This drew attention to themselves and ultimately misrepresented God before His people by not upholding Him as "... holy in the eyes of the people of Israel..." (verse 12).

On what could possibly be a side note, it is even said by some that Moses' act of striking the rock was symbolically a questioning of the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, as Christ, the Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4), was only struck once for our sins, and that was sufficient – whether or not this symbolism is intended in the text, it points us to a relevant question – how do we add something to the gospel with our actions and show ourselves to disbelieve the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work?

In response to their disobedience, the Lord disciplines Moses and Aaron by not allowing them to "... bring this assembly into the land that [He] has given them" (verse 12). When we respond to the Lord in disobedience, we are often disciplined as a way to bring us back to Him. Proverbs 3:11-12 says this:

My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline
or be weary of his reproof,
for the LORD reproves him whom he loves,
as a father the son in whom he delights.

In disciplining Moses and Aaron, the Lord demonstrates His continued love for and pursuit of Moses and Aaron, thus representing Himself accurately and showing Himself to be patient, slow to anger, and merciful.

Obedience to the Lord is the best place we can be, and the Lord's discipline reminds us of this as we examine the fruit of such. 1 Peter 1:22 says that obedience to the truth leads to the purification of our souls. It goes on to say that what results from such purity is a love for one another within the body of Christ. Remember where we started in looking at this passage? There was grumbling and disunity due to selfish desire (lack of love for one another), yet we are promised that the outcome, following the Lord's discipline and our obedience, will be love for one another in the body, which is ultimately a beautiful reflection of the character of our God, who is love.

Finally, 1 Peter goes on to say that this obedience to the truth, this purification of our souls, this loving of one another in the body of Christ, is possible because we have been born again "... through the living and abiding word of God...", which is "... the good news that was preached to you." This good news is the gospel. This good news is Christ.

Application Questions / Prayer

The Lord Allows Struggle

- 1) Where do we wrongfully accuse others of struggles that the Lord is allowing us to go through?
- 2) How do we then fail to see the Lord's provision in this?
- 3) What do James 1 and Romans 5 tell us about the Lord's intent for Christians during times of struggle?

Passion Hijacked

- 1) How do your passions, even those that seem good, lead you to misrepresent God to others?

- 2) What are you calling others to that is not part of the gospel when you do this?
- 3) What corrective action do you need to take as a result?

The Lord's Discipline

- 1) How has the Lord disciplined you in times when you have sought to fulfill your own selfish desires?
- 2) How do you respond to the Lord's discipline?
- 3) If it's true that the Lord disciplines those He love, how does this inform our response to His discipline?

Obedience Leads to Purity, Which Leads to Love

- 1) How have you seen obedience to the Lord's commands lead to purity of your soul?
- 2) How have you seen obedience to the Lord's commands lead you to love your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Sources

- Prayer
- The Bible Knowledge Commentary
- The Bible Reader's Companion
- Commentary on the Old Testament
- A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments
- Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume