

"Moses Strike the Rock"

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[0:00] Well, again, I want to say good morning. It's good to have you here. And I want to just remind you, as Tom said earlier, if you are feeling hot and need to get up, move to a different zone so you can feel a fan or go downstairs and continue to engage in our service on the live stream in the air conditioning, please feel free to do that.

In great stories, there are always inflection points. And if you are particularly a teen here and you want to read these books, you may want to plug your ears because I'm about to give you spoilers, okay?

Obi-Wan falls to the lightsaber of Darth Vader in the Death Star at the end of the original New Hope. Dumbledore, okay, have you plugged your ears?

All right, so Dumbledore meets his fate at the top of the Astronomy Tower in Hogwarts. And in the minds of Moria, again, if you haven't read The Lord of the Rings, plug your ears, Gandalf falls into the abyss at the bridge of Khazad-dûm.

And in each of these situations, the main characters, Luke, Skywalker, Harry Potter, Frodo Baggins, and the company ask the question, how do we go on? Where do we need to look for help, for leadership, for guidance?

[1:25] During the...in these inflection points, in these turning points, they feel fear, confusion, and uncertainty about how to go forward. In the journey of our life, we may also come to inflection points along the way.

It might be starting a new job or having a promotion, a new company. It might be heading off to junior high or high school coming up this fall. Maybe that you're getting married or having a baby or having another baby.

All of these are inflection points in our lives. Perhaps you've suffered great loss. Maybe a loved one or even a pet or a job or a hope.

They cause the same feelings in us. Confusion, fear, uncertainty. How do we move forward? What would God want us to know about Himself in these moments?

This is what brings us to our passage today. We'll be looking at Numbers chapter 20. This summer, we are preaching through the book of Numbers in the Old Testament.

[2:35] If you're looking at the Pew Bible, that's page 119 in the Pew Bibles or around there. We're looking. And as we go through, you will see we're going to focus particularly on the narrative story in verses 2 through 13 this morning.

So we're not going to teach through the whole chapter. We're just going to focus on that story. But if you haven't been here or just to remind us of where we are in the whole Bible, right?

Numbers is the book about God leading His people on a journey through the wilderness. God had in the book of Exodus delivered His people from Egypt, brought them to Mount Sinai, revealed Himself with great signs and wonders.

And they camped there as they received the law and began to learn what it meant to be God's people. The book of Numbers begins as the people set out from the Mount of Sinai, heading towards the promised land that God would promise to take them into.

But despite all of God's great signs of faithfulness to them, the people struggled and failed to trust and believe God in this journey through the wilderness.

[3:48] They complained about food and about water. They rebelled against God's leaders. In Numbers 13, they came to the brink of the promised land, and they went in and spied it out.

And they came back and they said, There's no way God can help us. We're afraid. We don't want to do this. And so God in His judgment said, If that's how you feel, fine.

My judgment is that this generation will not enter in to the promised land. But your faithfulness, faithlessness, will not deter my faithfulness.

So the next generation I will take in. So you are now going to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. And in that time, He reaffirmed His appointment of the leadership of Moses and Aaron in the priesthood.

And He asked them again and again to trust Him. To believe in His saving purposes. That God will deliver us from our enemies. To trust in His provision.

[4:47] That God will give us the things that we need. Manna and water. That God, He calls us to live with hope in His promises. That what God has said He will do.

He will bring it to completion. When we come to Numbers 20 then, it's a turning point. Because suddenly, we are 40 years ahead.

Right? The generation that was condemned for not believing God and going into the promised land. Had pretty much died out.

And the new generation had raised up. And you see this in a number of different ways. You see this new place coming up. You see that there's an inflection point in the leadership. Right? Chapter 20 begins in verse 1 with the death of Miriam.

Remember, Miriam was the prophetess. The sister of Aaron and Moses. Who helped lead the people and praise the Lord. Right? And we see at the end of the chapter that Aaron too.

[5:48] His death is recorded in this. And the passing on of the high priesthood to a new generation. To his son, Eleazar. And it's even an inflection point in the travel plans.

Because they're still thinking they're going to go to the promised land. And in verses 14 through 21, they try to go through Edom. And Edom says, no thanks. We don't want your people walking through our land.

And so God redirects them to go south and around the long way. So that God can show his faithfulness to them. So there's your outline for the whole chapter. If you missed it, you can go back and watch it on the video.

So, but the central narrative in this is verses 2 through 13. So we're going to look at that today. We're going to read it. And we're going to explore it. So if you want to read with me, Numbers chapter 20, verses 2 through 13. Numbers 20, verse 2.

[6:55] 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. 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.

[8:02] So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle. 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.

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.

[9:10] Let's pray and ask for God's help as we look at his word today. Lord, thank you for this word. Thank you for this morning that we can gather together. And we pray for your help as we look at this. Lord, help us to understand your word.

Lord, help us to not only understand it, but Lord, make our hearts ready to receive it and to submit to it. Search our hearts. Lord, show us if there be any wicked way in us, and lead us in the ways of everlasting.

Lord, be my help. Help me to speak as I ought to this morning, that your truth may be clear. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. So we're going to recount the story so that we can pull out some of the details and see it for all that we can see in it.

And then we're going to ask three questions at the end. So if you're making an outline, that's what we're going to do. So the story comes in four movements, right?

[10:12] In verses 2 through 5, the new people, the new generation, complain. Now remember, they are thinking, potentially, the old guard, they got judged, but we're now expecting blessing.

And so here they go, and the first thing that happens to them is, there is no water. And this is not merely them overlooking something that was untrue. It's not that they misperceived the situation. The narrator himself says, there was no water. The question was, how would they respond to that? Well, they complained. Just like the earlier generation did, they complained.

They were faithless. They were accusatory of Moses and Aaron. Why did you lead us out here to die? It's interesting. They even say, we wish we were like our brothers, the brothers who were the rebels who were swallowed up by the earth.

We wish that we would die instantaneously like them rather than dying by starvation in the wilderness. It's a pretty ugly picture of the people of God.

[11:22] The second movement in this story is God's response. In verses 6 through 8, Moses and Aaron receive this. They take it to the Lord, and the Lord gives them instructions.

And it's so interesting, is it not? Though in some of the other places, God would have said, these people are worthless and faithless, and I'm going to judge them and wipe them off of the face of the earth.

And then Moses and Aaron step in and say, no, God, you have to keep your people to, because you want, you have to keep your promises. And then God relents, and it goes on from here. Here, you don't see any word at all of condemnation.

Right? Look with me again at verse 7. What does he say? Where'd it go? The Lord spoke and said, he just said, take the staff and assemble the congregation.

His goal is to provide for the people. Right? He gives Moses and Aaron particularly three instructions. He said, go get the staff.

[12:26] And what is the staff? It's particularly here, the staff of Aaron that they had, if you go back and you have to listen to the sermon from a couple weeks ago on Aaron's staff, signifying that the priesthood was meant to be a life-giving blessing to the people of God.

It was a signal of God's authority to these leaders, but it was a signal of God's desire to bless his people through their leadership. So go get the staff from the tent of meeting.

Get it from its special place in the Holy of Holies. Second thing, assemble the people. And it's really interesting. If you look carefully, there are two different words through this passage.

One is assembly and one is congregation. And God uses the word congregation, typically, in a neutral or positive sense to talk about the unified people of God.

But he uses the word assembly often with the connotation of, these are the people who are rebelling against me. So when in verse 7, God says, go assemble the congregation, he's saying, pull the people together before me.

[13:37] Right? And then the third thing is, he says, speak to the rock so that it will yield the water. And God's promise is, when you do these things, the water will give rock, sorry, the rock will give water to all the people.

Not only to all the people, but all the livestock. It's not just a trickle. It's a gush. It's a torrent. It's a waterfall to feed all these hundreds of thousands of people and their livestock.

So God promises. He instructs his leaders to do things with the promise that God is going to provide for the people through them. The third movement, in verses 9 through 11, Moses and Aaron's surprising leadership.

This is very interesting. The ESV does not help us by putting a paragraph break between verses 9 and 10 and a new title. Okay?

So I want you to try to erase that from your brain if you're looking at your Bible. And just because in verse 9, right, it says Moses heard God and he went and he took the staff out of the tent of meeting as the Lord commanded him.

[14:53] Now, as the Lord commanded him feels a little early, doesn't it? God gave him three instructions and Moses did one of them.

Right? So there's partial obedience. But then what do you see in the rest of it? Is it further obedience? Well, he gathers the people, but again, verse 10 says, he gathered the assembly, which is an indication perhaps in the narrative of something slightly off, and his tone.

I tried to get it when I was reading it earlier. He says, you rebels. Right? which is the word used in chapter 16 for Korah and his followers when they rose up against the leadership and God brought great judgment on them.

He treated them as worthy of judgment. And he didn't say, God has promised to provide for you. He said, should you?

Should I bring water out of the rock for you? The implication, I think, is that he, Moses was thinking, these people are not deserving. These people don't deserve God's grace.

[16:12] They don't deserve God's provision. And then the third thing he does is he strikes the rock. He lifts up his hand.

He strikes the rock. He strikes it twice. He lifts up his hand. And the water gushes forth. And God is faithful and God provides the water for the people.

We're going to come back and explore this a little bit because it's the first question. Right? So, the fourth movement in the story is because it feels like, hey, this is great.

God has totally provided and this is wonderful and let's go on into the promised land. Verse 12, God's judgment and vindication.

Right? Verses 12 and 13, water does come from the rock, but Moses and Aaron are condemned. Why? For two reasons.

[17:08] The text is clear. The first one is, you did not believe in me. That is, you did not trust me. You did not trust my words. Secondly, you did not, what's the phrase that he uses particularly?

Uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel. You did not represent me as I truly am in my heart for these people accurately.

You showed that through your disobedience and you showed that through your attitude. And God gave the people water, but there's a word of rebuke and condemnation and consequence for Moses and Aaron.

They would not see the promised land that this generation would. Okay. So that's the story.

I've tried to pull out some of the details. Let's talk about the implications of it. Three questions. The first one is, why was Moses and Aaron's sin so significant? And I put Moses and Aaron together because as you go through the story, it's actually a little bit confusing because it moves from singular to plural and back and forth between just talking about Moses and talking about Moses and Aaron.

[18:31] And when you look at verse 12, when you see the judgment on them, it's on both of them. And so I'm going to use plural broadly even though the text goes back and forth between Moses did this and it doesn't specify that Aaron did this.

The idea is that they were doing this together is what we see, right? But why was it such a big deal? It kind of seems harsh on a first read.

Like, seriously God? They just, they kind of misstepped on a few of the details and you like, nope, you can't see the promised land? That's a terrible, that seems really harsh, doesn't it?

Well, it does until you see this in the context of the book and understand a few details that are really important. The first thing is Moses and Aaron were given particular roles.

If you go back and read, if you remember what we've seen in Numbers 11 through 20, God keeps propping them up. Moses is the prophet. He is the anointed one that I have set aside to lead these people into the promised land.

[19:37] He is to represent me and He is to represent the people to me. So Moses has this unique role as a mediator and Aaron is held up in chapters 16 through 19, particularly in chapters 16 and 17.

Aaron is held up as the high priest, the one who goes into the Holy of Holies to make the sacrifices, to atone for the sins of the people. So these two people had a unique role in the people of God at

the time.

And God gave them staffs. And I'm going to say two of them because this is kind of important, right? Each of them had a staff that symbolized their authority.

And I went back and looked and I'll tell you, I just want to be clear. The writer isn't always clear on which staff is which staff, okay? But here we go, right?

The staff of Moses, the staff that he used as he raised up to part the Red Sea, right? The staff that he used to strike the rock in Exodus 17 to bring water the first time and when the first generation complained, right?

[20 : 52] This is the staff of Moses. But remember, the staff of Aaron, now the staff of Aaron was also used back in the judgments on Egypt. It was a time when Aaron would raise up his staff to be a part of what God would do.

So again, there's a bit of intermingling, but they are two distinct staffs. And at this point in Numbers 20, as I said, Aaron's staff has been put away in the innermost place where God's presence dwells among his people to be a testimony of his faithfulness and his desire to provide.

So God tells them, go get that staff so that you can hold it up, not to strike the rock, but to hold it up to remind the people that your leadership is meant to be a blessing.

And they do that. But then in verse 11, it says, Moses took his staff and struck the rock. not Aaron's staff.

Now, we could have a really good row about the Hebrew particles and whether this is really a distinction or not, but this was helpful for me that it specified it's Moses' staff that he takes to strike the rock because it shows how far he had gone in disregarding God's command.

[22 : 15] because the point of getting Aaron's staff was to hold up this sign of authority. But Moses said, no, I'm going to do this. I'm going to get my own staff and struck the rock.

Right? And so, and part of this is because it subverted God's plan for this. Because in this inflection point, Moses has been with the people leading them, but he's not going to be with this new generation forever.

At some point, he's going to die. And what is going to continue to lead and instruct the people of God? Interestingly, not another prophet like Moses, but the words of Moses written down in the law. And so, God is using this. The command to speak is trying to signify a transition that God wants to happen among his people, that it will not be the person of Moses, but the words of Moses that will be their instruction.

And so, when Moses subverts this by striking the rock and putting himself back in, again, the implications of it are much greater.

[23 : 25] And in all of this, they misrepresented the heart of God. God came to this undeserving people who were complaining just like the old generation complained, and was clear that his purpose was to bless them, not because they deserved it, but because he was a gracious God who would provide for his people.

And they subverted that. And they didn't represent God as he truly was, but instead thought, God, these people are people you should judge just like you judge those other people, and treated them as in that way.

And because of this, then, this is the reason why there was a great judgment upon them, why they would not enter into the promised land with this new generation, because they failed in this unique role that God had given them to represent him.

And that is a great loss, because this whole story in this inflection point is for God to show the new generation more about who he is, and they distorted that.

Now, before we move on, I want to just think briefly. Application for us. The church is called the New Testament people of God, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, that we are meant to represent Christ in the world.

[24 : 54] That's why we're called Christians, because we represent Christ. If we claim to be the people of God, do we take it seriously that all of our actions, all of our words, all of our stewardship of life are meant to represent the character of God?

More specifically, do we obey God in the specifics of what he has commanded us in the New Testament, not just do the ones that we agree with or like?

When we do obey, do we believe that God will show his glory through our obedience? Or do we obey with doubt and fear of consequences?

Do we believe that God will provide for us? Or do we grumble and complain?

Do we, like Moses and Aaron, take up a part of God and represent that to the people without representing the fullness of who he is?

[26:10] some reflections for us as God's people. The story goes on because the purpose of this story is not to focus on their sin, but it's so that we can see God.

Did you notice in verse 6, Aaron and Moses turned to the tent of meeting and went there and the glory of the Lord appeared, right? Now, this happens because that's where he dwells and when he shows up to speak, his glory... So, at some point, it's very... But it's also right in the central... center part of the story that the glory of the Lord appears.

So, the second question I want to ask is, what does this story tell us about God? And you've probably... You've heard this already. God wanted to show himself faithful again to this new generation, right?

Just like to the old generation who he gave manna in the wilderness and he gave water from the rock. He wants to say... show the same thing to this. He wants to show himself to be the Lord who announced himself on Mount Sinai to Moses when Moses said, tell me who you are, let me see your glory.

And the Lord passed by him and said, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

[27:34] this is what the Lord wants us to know about him. Yes, he is holy. Yes, he will judge sin. But at the end of the day, he will do that as a God who is merciful and gracious and whose redemptive plan is to rescue people from that right judgment by his own work.

He showed this to the people through providing them water even though their leaders sinned against him. Right?

God didn't blink. God didn't stop Aaron and Moses in the middle and say, whoa, whoa, whoa, you guys got it wrong, so sorry, no water. He said, the water came out and it was so abundant it gushed out.

And this water is a reminder that he would provide for them in all things along the way. And we'll see this as we go along. He will provide military victories that they shouldn't be winning.

He will provide food and allies when they don't deserve it. But all of this is a down payment of the promises that he will ultimately fulfill, meeting not just our physical needs but our spiritual needs.

[28:53] Look at me at verse 13. It's so striking here. It says, these are the waters of Meribah where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord. Right? This is the second Meribah.

The first one is mentioned in Exodus 17. Right? But in that context, what did God do? Through them, through the very people who quarreled against him, he showed himself holy.

He showed himself as a God like no other. He showed himself to be the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

That's exactly what he did in this story. He displayed his glory. And this, it's exactly what he wanted Moses and Aaron to do when they failed to do it. And God said, I don't care if you fail, I'm going to do it anyway so that this new generation in this inflection point will know that this is the kind of God that I am.

I am the God who graciously provides. I am the one who brings water out of rocks. I am the one who will provide for you new leaders in the new generation when Aaron and Moses and Miriam are gone.

[30:15] I will take you into the land that I have given to you. I am your God. Friends, when we're facing inflection points in our lives, we need to gaze upon this God.

We need to remember what He is like. We need to recognize how prone we are to grumble and complain, to see difficult circumstances and think that God has abandoned us in them when in fact He was always there and He is ready to show Himself faithful in the midst of it.

and in transition, how easily it is for us to forget what God has done and look ahead with fear and anxiety rather than with hopeful faith.

So that's the second question. What do we see about God in this? And then the third one is, what does this mean for us today? How are we to live in light of this passage?

Remember what we read earlier, what Carolyn read from 1 Corinthians 10. These stories are given to us for our good. Specifically, did you hear how it was mentioned?

[31:30] I'm just going to re-read the first beginning, the first few verses again. Paul writes this, 1 Corinthians 10, 1 through 4. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all buried, were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea and all were baptized into Moses, into the cloud and in the sea and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ. Do you see how the New Testament, I'm not just making it up that this story about some water in the desert, is pointing to our salvation.

The New Testament tells us that. It tells us that this rock is a picture. It is an image to help us understand what God has done in Jesus Christ.

That in Jesus, in His life and His death and His resurrection, He has achieved victory over sin and death so that He might be the one who comes to be the bringer of life.

We who are in our sins spiritually a wasteland and a desert without hope and without any ability to bring spiritual life to ourselves, God comes and brings it to us from the outside making us born again, having a new spiritual life that wells up like the water from a rock wells up in us when we place our faith in Jesus.

[33:03] Christ is the rock for us and this is what this passage tells us. And if we wonder if God is going to be faithful in the circumstances of our lives and the inflection points of our lives, the New Testament reminds us to look at the cross, look at the empty tomb, remember who Jesus is and know this is where we find life and this is where we find hope and this is where we know that God will be faithful to us.

And even in the most difficult circumstances, He is ready to show Himself faithful when we despair and when we feel like we're in the wilderness and when we're tempted to complain or give up.

Jesus invites us in this passage to come to Him and find a spiritual life in Him. And for those of us who have known Him, we are reminded again in Hebrews 12 of how to follow Him.

Hebrews 12, 1-3 says this, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. Friends, as God's people, we are to lay aside our sin.

[34:47] We are to lay aside the things that so easily distract us from seeing Christ alone as the place where we find real, true life, eternal life with God.

And the writer of the Hebrews exhorts us, fix our eyes on Him. People often ask me, how do I live the Christian life?

How do I do this? How do I grow in godliness? How do I... And I... And there are lots of techniques, there are lots of things for us to learn, but friends, at some level, it's this hard and this simple.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. That means reading God's Word. That means attending church. That means finding fellow brothers and sisters who you can have fellowship with to talk about Christ together, to remember His goodness and His faithfulness and His character as He's shown it to you in your life and as He's shown it revealed in His Word so that we can look to Jesus because He is both the founder, the beginning of our faith and the one who will bring us through this journey in the wilderness to the promised land.

He is the one who ultimately will take us home and one day we will be resurrected with Him and we will be taken to the new heavens and the new earth which will be the best promised land that we could ever imagine.

[36:12] And now He says, it will be hard. There will be a race to run. It is through a wilderness. But fix your eyes on Him and let Him be the author and perfecter of your faith.

So consider Him and don't grow weary as you face inflection points or even if you're not in the middle of inflection point, maybe you're in a point of the most stability you've ever had in your life. Fix your eyes on Him. Let's pray together. Lord, thank You for this Word. Thank You for the way that it points us to Christ, the rock from which we drink spiritual life.

Lord, be with us as we continue to worship You through the celebration of baptism. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.