

"Markers of Spiritual Maturity"

Numbers 20

As we come to Num. 20 the reader is not initially aware that we have moved into Israel's final year in the wilderness.

20:1 *In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried.*

The first month of what? When we read Num. 33:37-39, the middle of a summary of Israel's geographical and circumstantial markers, we discover when:

³⁶ *They left Ezion Geber and camped at Kadesh, in the Desert of Zin.*

³⁷ *They left Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, on the border of Edom.* ³⁸ *At the Lord's command Aaron the priest went up Mount Hor, where he died on the first day of the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.* ³⁹ *Aaron was a hundred and twenty-three years old when he died on Mount Hor.*

Here we are at Kadesh in the 1st month of the 40th year when Miriam dies. 4 months later at Mt. Hor in Moab, Aaron dies. Between this we are told why: because Moses and Aaron disobeyed God. So we have geographical markers of Kadesh, Edom, king's highway and Mt. Hor. We have time markers of Miriam's death, Moses & Aaron's disobedience and Aaron's death. We also have another event recorded concerning Israel's desire to travel through Edom where they are met with resistance and forced to go around. An event that seems informational only at first glance.

However, I believe the chapter gives us markers of spiritual maturity – both a lack of it as well as evidence of spiritual growth in the lives of Moses, Aaron and the Israelites. How do we know if we're growing spiritually? What life experiences are showing we are seeing growth and where we've seen failures? Spiritual growth or conformity to Jesus is God's purpose for us. But it can feel like three steps forward and two steps back at times. How can this passage help us to look at our own life and see if we're growing spiritually? Perhaps we're unsure or don't feel like we are. My prayer this morning is that you will be encouraged that you have grown and are growing but also be challenged in areas you might need to grow more like Jesus. Let's pray for that.

Moses the author, it would seem, has skipped about 37+ years of information of Israel's wanderings. In Num. 33 he does give a list of all the places they camped at on their journey. Moses, by the Spirit, recorded for us those events that God wanted us to see how they were doing spiritually. We have many low marks and a few high marks. For the most part, life has been one journey after another of routine wandering, camping and people dying, especially men who were 20+ and up when the journey started. A sad daily reminder of their failure to trust God when they could have entered the land 37/38 years ago.

But now, a new generation has grown up. How have they matured over the years? Not as much as we'd like to have seen. Moses' sister Miriam dies. It's a sad, brief statement, I believe, meant to cause the reader to ask why. She was used by God at the exodus in leading Israel out, singing songs of praise, but later on she and her brother Aaron confronted Moses and wanted to be co-leaders. God rebuked them both; Miriam is cursed temporarily with leprosy and we never hear from her again. Did she grow spiritually over her life? We don't know.

Another sad thing in this passage here is that the people have not changed much in over 37 years. Again we hear a familiar sound – grumbling – about the same things!

² Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. ³ They quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! ⁴ Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? ⁵ Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”

So here’s a good marker for us to know whether we have grown spiritually over the years:

We Trust God More in Trials and are Complaining Less **(20:1-13)**

Looking back over the last 5, 10, 15+ years, when trials have come into our lives, how did we react to them? Do we still complain and react poorly and doubt God’s ability to work in our life or have we, by trusting Him more over our life and seeing His hand work and meet our needs, respond in faith and trust and complain less?

Here we are, 37-38 years later and the people of God are still grumbling when a trial comes up. This isn’t even a new trial. We need water – again! The mature response should have been, ‘Moses, we, our children and cattle are in need of water. God has provided water in the past when we needed it. Please cry out to God on our behalf for our need because we know He will come through as He has before.’ But they didn’t. The wording here is almost identical to Korah’s rebellion: “the people gathered in opposition to Moses” (v.2), whereas in 16:3 we read “*they came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron*’.

Trials, the bible says many times, are used by God to make us trust Him. If we respond in faith. Because when we do trust God in our trials we show

We have grown in understanding God’s ways (vv.1-5)

We don’t like to hear this truth, that God purposely allows difficulties to come in our life to mature us. If you have never memorized Rom. 8:28-30 and applied it to your life you have probably not grown in understanding God’s ways.

²⁸ And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

The response God wants to hear from us when life gets hard is, ‘*Lord, I know this trial is meant for my good which is conformity to Jesus, to make me more like Him. Help me to trust You in this so that I can thank You for what you’re doing and anticipate one day that all trials will end and I will be glorified in Your presence.*’

Israel still complained and were perplexed about the same trials God allowed as they did 37/38 years ago. And are we much different? There are believers in Christ who still wrestle with the same theological questions. Do we have free will or not? Is salvation my choice or God’s choice for me? Did God really create the world in 6 literal days? Does the Bible teach infant baptism? If we’ve been

saved for 20, 30, 40+ years and still have not settled with these issues, can we say we have grown much? Israel had not changed much in that time and now their children are saying the same things as their parents.

But even if we have grown spiritually and consistently, we can never lower our guard because we can still mess up, as Moses does here. Moses and Aaron respond as they usually did, they hit the dirt in prayer, fearing God is about to judge again. But perhaps this was part of their lack of maturing in understanding God's ways. Because I don't know if you noticed this or not but God is not impatient or upset or ready to judge here. He is gracious and tells Moses and Aaron without any hint of anger, take your staff and speak to the rock, and water will pour out.

Moses errs in that he has forgotten that God is also a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love. Moses wrongly presumed God would be angry again and threaten to destroy the people again, but not this time. Instead, Moses' gets angry and responds in anger because he's frustrated. 'We're almost here, people. Why can't you just trust God?'

Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?

Then he raised his arm and struck the rock twice and water gushed out – mercifully, graciously, compassionately. Why did God let water come out anyway? Because they genuinely needed it and to teach Moses that he still had some growing to do. Moses, you're a hardliner thinking that I always respond the same way. Have you forgotten how many times I relented from bringing judgment? Have you not noticed that every day without fanfare the manna shows up? That no one's clothes or shoes have worn out. That there's still 2 million+ Israelites even though so many have died over the years? I'm still working, I promised they'll get in and I will do it. But Moses, because you didn't treat me as holy and took the glory for yourself and made it about you, you won't get in.

Another marker that shows we're trusting God more than complaining is

God's glory is becoming more a priority than our own (vv.6-13)

Life is not about you or me; it's not about our opinions or desires or preferences. It's all about God. He must increase, we must decrease. That doesn't mean we become less involved, it means we make life more about what God wants and less about what we want. That may mean getting more involved. Because if we've lived for a while we have probably noticed life has not gone the way we planned or hoped? And thank God because His plan has been for our ultimate good which is to make us more like Jesus. And the speed bumps in the road are meant to help us stop and take notice of this.

So neither Moses nor Aaron will enter the land. Why not Aaron? His silence convicts him of either being in agreement with Moses' attitude or his unwillingness to stop Moses from doing something rash and ungodly.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them."

¹³ *These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them*

From here Israel moves toward the Promised land and the most direct route is along the King's highway which goes through Edom and up north towards the east side of the Dead Sea. *"So Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom"*

There's a little bit of déjà vu here because Kadesh was the place where Israel gathered when the spies returned from the land of Canaan and spread a bad report. Here we are again. What will happen this time? More obstinate unbelief? No. As easy path into Canaan? No. A new trial, yes? How do all of God's people – including Moses respond?

They Accept God's Will More and Question it Less **(20:14-29)**

The Edomites were related to Israel through Esau. So essentially, we have two families coming together, with history. Moses asks respectfully if they can pass through peaceably, even willing to pay the for any water they might use. The Edomites refuse threatening war if they set one foot in their territory. How do Moses and Israel respond to this set-back? They don't complain and trust God's will .

Even when a clear path before them is blocked (vv.14-21)

From a logical perspective, this should have been a no brainer. The Edomites are our brothers, they'll let us go through, thank God for our shared history – let's go! But what seems obvious to us at times is not necessarily God's will.

Is. 55:8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord.

⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

How does Israel respond when a clear path is before them and God doesn't allow it? They follow a different path without grumbling. They accept God doesn't want them to go that way for reasons He did not make clear, although Edom will become a thorn in their side for many years and perhaps because Israel is not battle ready yet. Many reasons, some of which they can understand, some of which God may not reveal.

And what about when God closes what seem to us an obvious open door? We say, thank you Lord for closing that door to spare us grief that we're unaware of right now. Help us to follow the path you have in store for us. Help us to wait patiently for you, while we continue to serve You. And You will show us that in Your time.

The chapter ends with Israel arriving at their intended destination, mind you along a longer and different path. But they are east of the Jordan now, close to the land of Canaan at Mt. Hor. And here Aaron will pass away and Moses takes the priestly garments from him and puts them on Eliezer his son. The people all witness this transition and say goodbye to Aaron, mourning him for 30 days. Here we another marker of spiritual maturity where people are accepting of God's will

By their willingness to obey God even in the hard things (vv.22-29)

For Moses, this had to have been very hard. Aaron had been beside him for 40 years. He stood beside him and spoke for him against the most powerful man in the world at the time, the Pharaoh of Egypt. Only by the grace of God did they not die at his hands. Moses may have been blaming himself for Aaron's death since it was his idea to strike the rock. But the important verse here is:

²⁷ Moses did as the Lord commanded: They went up Mount Hor in the sight of the whole community. ²⁸ Moses removed Aaron's garments and put them on his son Eleazar. And Aaron died there on top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain,

Moses did what God said even though it was hard. Obeying God is not always easy. Sometimes in obeying God we have had to go against our parent's wishes to obey what Scripture says. Sometimes we have had to break off a relationship because of what Scripture says. Sometimes we have had to take a job with lesser pay because the environment of the more lucrative job contained unethical temptations or compromised your faith. Sometimes we have had to go against our peers at school, at home or in our community in order to obey the Scriptures. I can envision tears in Moses' eyes as he takes the high priest's garments off of Aaron and placed them on Eliezer, who also would have been sad because he knew dad was going to die.

As great as he was, even Moses stumbled in his walk with God. Sometimes moving forward, sometimes falling backwards. So we shouldn't be too discouraged when we fail at times as well. But like Moses, let's learn from our disobedience and move forward in Christlikeness.

Here we saw the community struggle with the same spiritual dilemmas as their parents did. How about us? Do we still react poorly when trials come our way? Gripped by fear or anger and complaining? Are we still wrestling with the same theological issues that we did years ago? Why? I can only assume it's due to a lack of growth in studying God's word. If your only diet of the Word of God is listening to one sermon a week and reading a devotional a few minutes a day, that's not going to help you grow in your own understanding of the Word of God. Make sure you are reading and growing in your understanding of God's Word yourself and being involved in a bible study where the Bible is actually studied and applied.

Spiritual growth is a lifetime pursuit of being formed into the character of Jesus. We will still stumble at times, but will we get up, accept God's forgiveness readily available in Jesus Christ, and continue on to the next step in our growth? We aren't just saved by faith, we are commanded to live by faith,

Heb. 11:6 "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

* * * * *

If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net