

Drinking From the Well of God's Word

Numbers 20

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Introduction: A Gap of Thirty-Nine Years

Today is Father's Day. As I shared when it was Mother's Day, I tend to continue on wherever we are in the Bible, trusting the Lord with whatever message he has for us in the passage at hand. On Mother's Day we were in Numbers 8, and right there in the text was a word about the sacredness of a woman's womb. Today, on this Father's Day, the Lord has given me a difficult passage — and a deeply personal one.

Five months ago, I lost my father, Duane Eastman. This Father's Day carries a weight that is hard to put into words. Our passage this morning is Numbers 20, and if you look at the end of the chapter, Aaron dies and is buried by his son Eleazar. It has been an emotional week for me, thinking about Eleazar watching his father die and then putting on the garments of that father. That is where we are headed. But before we arrive at verse 23, there is a story of extreme importance that we need to work through carefully. In it, there are two critical theological truths that I do not want us to miss.

But first, we need to orient ourselves in the story.

There is a gap between chapter 19 and chapter 20 — and it is not a small one. The book of Numbers begins with the people of Israel still at Mount Sinai. It is there that they entered into a covenantal relationship with the holy God and received the law that defines how that holy God will dwell among them. The first nine chapters of Numbers are all about the people being organized, consecrated, and prepared for the journey to the Promised Land. In chapter 10 they depart Sinai and go directly to the southern border of the land the Lord had promised them. There they send out spies, who return with a report that the land is good — but that there are giants in it. The people respond by saying they would rather die in the wilderness than face those giants. And the Lord essentially says: so be it. For the forty days the spies were in the land, you will spend forty years in the wilderness.

This does not go over well. Last week our passage described an organized attempt to remove Moses and Aaron from their positions of leadership — Moses as judge and civil leader, Aaron as High Priest. The rebellion did not end well for the rebels. Those who claimed to be holy discovered they were not when they stood before a holy God, and the leaders of the revolt were swallowed up by the earth. A general uprising followed, and was quickly put down by a plague.

All of this may have taken place within the first sixty days after leaving Sinai — eleven days to reach the southern border (Deuteronomy 1:2), forty days of spying, and roughly nine days of rebellion. So from the opening of Numbers to the end of chapter 19, we are looking at perhaps five months of narrative time.

When we turn the page to Numbers 20, we jump thirty-nine years into the future.

We know this because of the death of Aaron at the end of the chapter. Numbers 33:38–39 gives us the date of that death precisely:

“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.”

Between Numbers 19 and Numbers 20, thirty-nine years have passed in silence. We need to adjust the way we are reading the story. The Israelites are no longer at the beginning of their wilderness journey — they are at the end of it. The forty years is coming to a close. What we are entering now is the beginning of the end.

The Death of Miriam and the Quarrel at Kadesh

The beginning of the end opens with a death.

“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.” (Numbers 20:1)

Miriam was the sister of Aaron and Moses. We are told in Exodus that she was a prophetess and a leader among the people — it was Miriam who led the congregation in song and praise after they crossed the Red Sea. Her death must have been a tremendous blow, not only to her brothers, but to the whole community. I suspect her passing contributed to what happens next. It is possible — and I am speculating here — that her death left the people feeling discouraged and afraid, wondering whether God was still with them. That discouragement and fear came out in the form of quarreling.

“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.’” (Numbers 20:2–5)

Moses and Aaron do what they have always done in a crisis — they go to the Lord. They leave the presence of the assembly, go to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and fall on their faces. The glory of the LORD appears to them, and the Lord speaks.

“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.” (Numbers 20:8)

The instructions are clear. Take the staff. Gather the people. Tell the rock to give water.

Now watch what Moses and Aaron actually do.

“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.” (Numbers 20:9–11)

Do you see the divergence? The Lord said, “tell the rock to yield its water.” Moses does not speak to the rock. He speaks to the people — and then he strikes the rock. Twice. The water still comes out. But what the Lord said to do and what Moses and Aaron did are not the same thing.

The Lord’s response makes the stakes unmistakable.

“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.” (Numbers 20:12)

Because you did not believe in me — therefore you shall not enter the land.

The First Critical Truth: The Distinction Between Sin and Unbelief

Please make careful note of the reason Moses and Aaron are barred from leading the people into the land. The reason is not, first and foremost, that they disobeyed. Yes, their unbelief led to disobedience — but it is their unbelief that the Lord identifies as the cause. This distinction between sin and unbelief points to an extremely critical theological truth, and I do not want us to move past it too quickly.

Here is the truth: the Lord God Almighty has provided a means by which your sins can be covered and you can be cleansed. Your sins do not, therefore, have to stand between you and fellowship with God — if you confess them and receive the forgiveness he has provided in the person, the work, the sacrifice, and the death of Jesus Christ. How much clearer could 1 John 1:9 be?

| *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

The Lord has provided, in Jesus Christ, a means of forgiveness by which the penalty of our sins does not fall on us. And because of that forgiveness, your sins do not exclude you from the kingdom of heaven.

But — and here is the distinction that matters — the Lord has not provided a means for us to approach him without faith. It does not matter how good a person is, how hard they work, how much they give away, or how greatly they love and care for others. Without faith it is impossible to approach God. Without faith it is impossible to please God, or to receive from him the forgiveness of sin, eternal life, and fellowship with himself. The Lord has made provision for sin. He has made no provision for unbelief.

Do you see now why Moses and Aaron are not to lead the people into the land? The Lord did not condemn Moses because he struck the rock — but because he did not believe. Which raises the obvious question: what exactly did Moses not believe?

The Second Critical Truth: The Shift to the Written Word

To answer that question, we have to go back to the instruction the Lord gave.

| *“Tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.” (Numbers 20:8)*

From Genesis through Numbers 19 — across the entire sweep of redemptive history up to this point — the Lord God worked through what we might call signs and objects of power. He spoke to people through dreams and visions. He performed mighty acts of judgment in Egypt.

He gave to Moses a staff as an object of divine power in Exodus 4. It was with that staff that Moses struck the Nile and turned it to blood. It was when Moses raised that staff that the sea divided. It was with the staff lifted high that the armies of Israel prevailed over their enemies. And in Exodus 17, the first time the people complained about water, the Lord told Moses to strike the rock — and he did, and water came out. Moses had lived his entire ministry in a world where God’s power came through visions, through encounters, through objects of power like the staff.

But thirty-nine years pass between Numbers 19 and Numbers 20, and in that gap, something happens that changes all of history.

During those thirty-nine years in the wilderness, Moses — inspired by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit — begins to write scripture. I do not think that Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers existed in their fully finalized form during this period, but I do believe these books were taking shape among the people of Israel across those decades in the wilderness. The written Word of God is the new thing God is doing.

And with this new thing, a change must take place in how God’s people relate to him. No longer is God’s will to be known primarily through visions, or through objects of power like the staff. Now God’s will and God’s power reside in the written Word. You will know the will of God not through signs and symbols, but through his Word. You will call upon his aid not through objects of power, but through his Word.

This is precisely why the Lord tells Moses to take the staff but not to use it — to speak to the rock instead. The Lord’s instruction to Moses was itself a visible demonstration of the shift from the old way to the new way. The staff is in his hand, but the staff is not the means. The Word is the means. And Moses, forty years accustomed to striking things with that staff, could not make the transition. He struck the stone because he had no faith in the spoken word of God. He did not believe that simply speaking God’s word to a rock would cause it to give forth water. And it is precisely this — a lack of faith in the Word of God — that disqualifies Moses and Aaron from leading the people into the Promised Land. They are generationally stuck in the past, unable to see what God is doing in the present.

This shift is confirmed just six months later, when Joshua is commissioned to lead the people. Listen to what the Lord says to him — and notice what is absent.

“Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” (Joshua 1:7–8)

There is no mention of visions or dreams. There is no staff, no object of power. Joshua is to know the will of God through the written Word. He is to meditate on it. It is to be on his lips. He is to live by it and trust it. He is to believe in the Word of God in a way that Moses did not.

This truth has not changed. We are a people of the Book. In this regard, Joshua is far more like us than Moses was. We know God's will through his Word. We are to speak it and pray it, meditate on it and study it. We are to trust the Word of God as a guide for our lives. Because Moses and Aaron could not make this transition, they remained bound to the past — and to the past they would stay. They were not permitted to move into the new land.

The Death of Aaron and the Garments of the Priesthood

In the middle of Numbers 20, the Israelites begin to move toward their new staging ground for entering the land. The original plan had been to enter from the south, but now they will enter from the east — crossing the Jordan from the plains of Moab opposite Gilgal. To move east, however, they face a nearly impassable mountain range. The only shortcut is a five-mile path that passes near the ruling city of Edom, which today we call Petra. Petra's location is not accidental — it commands both the north-south passage and this mountain corridor, which is exactly why the city was built there. In Numbers 20:14–21, the Israelites ask for safe passage through this territory. They want the five-mile shortcut rather than the hundred-and-fifty-mile detour around the southern tip of the mountain range. Edom refuses, and backs up that refusal with an army.

And so, just before the Israelites begin that long march around the mountains — a march to a destination they can probably see five miles away — Aaron dies.

“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.’” (Numbers 20:23–26)

Mount Hor literally overlooks Petra. Standing there, you can see the city that would not let them pass.

“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.”
(Numbers 20:27–29)

The garments spoken of here are the garments of the High Priest — four unique and highly significant items. The first was a blue robe. Blue dye in the ancient world was extraordinarily expensive and rare, making this robe of great worth. Around its hem hung bells, so that those outside could hear whether the priest was still alive as he moved within the Holy of Holies. The second was a multicolored ephod — essentially a ceremonial apron. The priests sacrificed animals; they were, in a real sense, butchers, and the ephod was secured to the body by shoulder straps, each strap bearing a stone engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel. The High Priest literally carried the weight and burden of the people upon his shoulders. The third was the breastplate, measuring roughly a span by two spans and then folded over to create a pocket. On its outer surface were twelve stones, each bearing the name of a tribe of Israel. Inside the pocket were the Urim and Thummim — the judgment stones by which the Lord’s will was discerned. And the fourth was a piece of hammered gold worn on the forehead, fastened with a blue cord, engraved with the words: *Holy to the LORD*.

These garments, stripped from Aaron’s body on the top of that mountain and placed upon his son Eleazar, signify that the office of High Priest has passed to a new generation. And Eleazar proved himself worthy of it. He and Joshua would together lead the nation of Israel into the new land. The very last verse of the book of Joshua records the death of Eleazar — his ministry bookending the conquest from beginning to end.

It should be noted — though a full treatment of this would require another sermon entirely — that all of these garments point forward to Jesus Christ. He is the one who reveals God. He is the one who carries the weight and burden of our sin. He is the one who loves us and holds us near his heart. He is the one of surpassing worth and value. And he is the one who is holy to the Lord. These garments are a worthy topic for another day.

The Garments Our Fathers Pass to Us

Today is Father’s Day.

Reading this passage this week, I cannot help but think of myself standing at my father’s grave just over five months ago. There is something almost uncanny about it — on the day I stood at

his graveside, I wore a suit that had been my father's. I literally clothed myself in his garments. And then the Lord brought me to this text for today. I believe he did that on purpose.

What I think the Lord is calling me to do is to name the garments my father gave to me — not physical ones, but spiritual ones. The attributes, the beliefs, the habits of life that defined him and have now been passed to me. Forgive me for being personal, but I feel led to share some of them with you. The garments my father gave to me were these: the centrality of God's grace, which he preached all his life; a love for the church, expressed most clearly in how he loved the people within it; faithfulness to God's Word; and faithfulness and love to his family. These are what he wore, and what he left me.

When I think about what garments I will pass on to my own children, I find they are not so different from his.

What about you? What garments did your father pass on to you — those things of value and virtue and habit that defined his life and now mark yours? I want to invite all of you today — men and women, young and old — to take some time to identify two or three things that defined your father and have been passed on to you. If your father is still living, I encourage you to share those things with him today. Tell him what you see in him. If he has already died, I encourage you to give thanks to the Lord for what was given.

And to you fathers — especially those with children still living in your home — what garments are you going to pass on? What habits, what values, what virtues are you giving your children by the way you live your life? I ask you to identify two or three things of such importance to you that you make a conscious decision to clothe yourself in them daily. Is the grace of God something you hold dear? Then live as a person of grace — with yourself and with others. Is faithfulness to God's Word a value you want to pass on? Then clothe yourself with it so that your family can see it worn. You cannot pass on what you are not wearing.

Thanks be to God for his Word, for his forgiveness, for the gift of faith, and for our fathers.