

## Lesson 21: Numbers 15-21 Moses Strikes the Rock (Wandering, part 2)

### Introduction

Numbers: Kingdom Rebellion		
Key Passage: 14:20-23		
1:1-10:10	10:11-25:18	26-36
Preparation to enter the land	Wandering in the desert	Preparation to enter the land
Census of the first generation	Death of the first generation	Census of the second generation

The stories of grumbling in the middle section of the book of Numbers continue on after the refusal to enter the promise land. Four incidents led up to the failure to enter and four more will follow. We can put together a little bit of a timeline, though not an exact one. Back in chapter 10, verse 11, the Israelites set out from Sinai during the second month of the second year. They had been at Sinai for about a year. The tabernacle is built. They just celebrated Passover in the first month. Now in the second month the cloud of God's glory lifts from the tabernacle, and they set out.

10:33 reports that the expected time of travel is 3 days; 3 days! The chapter starts with the nation setting out in obedience and ends with a bit of enthusiastic poetry from the leader Moses spurring the people on:

Rise up, O LORD!  
And let Your enemies be scattered,  
And let those who hate You flee before You (10:35).

That enthusiasm of Moses does not hold the people for long at all. Three days is a long weekend. That's how long it should take from Sinai to the promise land. That makes the grumbling of chapter 11 all the more poignant. The people could not hold on to their faith for three days. Romans 5:3-4 gives us this spiritual principle: "we exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope." The journey was not meant to be a great test. The people did not have the best food, but you don't have the best food on military maneuvers or on a camping trip? And they did have food. They didn't even have to carry the food. The manna came to them.

Every June our Adventure Education staff guy Nate takes Leadership Lab International students on a three-day trip to build the team. We have always eaten well, thanks to Nate's wife Mia who is an expert in packing light and tasty. Nate has taken LLI team members hiking, canoeing, this year they kayaked around an island. On the first canoe trip Johann from the Philippines talked us into eating grasshoppers that we roasted over an open fire. I ate mine and offered one to Johann. He said, "No, no, no...I have eaten grasshopper. But I don't like grasshopper." The students always enjoy the weekend with Nate. It's an adventure.

It is amazing how hope can change a situation. And most of that rested on Nate for us. We trusted our leader to take us from start to finish with adequate food and water and sleep in between. It was not great food. Sometimes the water tasted like purification tablets. The sleep is never very good. But our mindset is on adventure. And have a sure hope that everything is going to turn out alright. I do not think my character has grown a lot from joining the trips because Nate has everything under complete control. I just have to go along.

I wish I could have that same trust in God no matter what adventure life brings. When the tribulations come, if I trust God to bring me through, that gives me strength to persevere, and if I persevere, then my character is proven trustworthy, and if I experience God bringing me through and working in my character, then my hope grows. That is the underlying principle here. A confident hope that brings us through tribulation results in a more confident hope. But I think, "How often do I

bail out at the last moment? I think I am at a breaking point, so I give up, or I lash out and if I had just held on a few more hours or another day or two, I would have made it to the end of the trial.

This generation out of Israel does not trust Moses, their leader, and they do not trust God. They had learning moments like this before. And they have been carried through before. We read about those in Exodus 16 and 17 as the people journeyed to Mount Sinai. They did not learn from those moments. They did not exult in their tribulations. They did not persevere without complaint. They did not experience the proving of their own character. And they did not grow strong in hope; in their vision of a future promise land. This generation is a mirror for us to look into. Do I trust God through the tough spots in life? Do I bail out or do I persevere? Do I live this life with a strong conviction of the hope that lies before me, of eternal relationship with my heavenly father? Is this life a death march into the desert? Or an adventure wilderness trip ending up at home? How do I view it?

After three days the congregation of Israel complained, were punished, complained some more; that was all in chapter 11. They arrived at the southern border of the promise land. And they heard the report and saw the fruit brought back by the spies; grapes and pomegranates and figs. Yet, in their fear of the land's inhabitants, they did not trust Moses, and they did not trust God. They grumbled and complained and refused to go in. And then when the punishment of 40 years was laid on them, then they decided they would go in with or without God. This is a stubborn-hearted people. And we are not seeing any growth.

Faced with the wilderness they grumble against Moses and Aaron. Instead of receiving the discipline of God as a restorative rebuke and turning their hearts back to walk with him, they interpret the negative consequences as having nothing to do with their own behavior. They are not the problem. Moses' faulty vision was a mirage. There is no promise land for Israel. They never should have left Egypt. That was never God's plan. It could never have worked. Moses is the problem. That's the way they began to feel on the way to the promise land and that is the way they really feel after failing to get in.

The first four incidents of grumbling in chapters 10 through 14 only took a couple of months. The next four in chapters 15-21 are going to take a period of 40 years. The text seems to give us two examples at the beginning of those 40 years and then two at the end of the 40 years, though it is a little hard to figure out the timing, which is not clearly stated. But if these events mark the beginning and end, you have to wonder what it was like for Moses and the other faithful ones throughout the whole four decades. Maybe those times of transition brought to fore the worst of the Grumbling Generation. But you have to wonder what it was like throughout. We are going to consider the four incidents of grumbling that are recorded for this 40 year period with a special focus on the one where Moses strikes the rock.

### **Korah's Rebellion (16:1-40)**

We start in chapter 16 with Korah's rebellion. The Levite Korah leads the rebellion with three men from the tribe of Reuben. Reuben was the first born of Jacob but was disqualified from that blessing after he slept with his father's concubine Bilhah. The blessing eventually lands on Judah and Joseph's son Manasseh. Those two are kind of vying for the spot. Moses is from neither of those tribes. He doesn't have a claim of Manasseh. He doesn't have a claim of Judah. He doesn't have a claim of Reuben. He has no inherited claim to lead Israel at all. His claim comes from a specific call by God.

Korah's claim comes as a cousin to Moses and Aaron. Their fathers are brothers from the clan of Kohath, Levi's second son. The priesthood was not bestowed on all the Levites, only on Aaron and his descendants. The rest of the Levites were to serve the priests in the work of the tabernacle. The clan of Kohath had the high honor of transporting the holy furnishings inside the tabernacle, like the lampstand and the ark of the covenant. They did not, however, participate in making sacrifice or burning incense in the tabernacle. That was reserved only for Aaron and for his sons.

Korah has a message for the people, though, and a message for Moses and Aaron. His message is not entirely false. He mixes truth with error. Let's hear it from Numbers 16:3.

They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?"

The first part of Kohath's speech is true. At Mount Sinai God called Israel "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6)." They are all holy. God is in their midst. True. Rebellion does not recruit followers if the message is 100% false. Satan works by mixing truth and lie. The second part is the lie. "You exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD." Is that charge true? Moses and Aaron do claim special roles of leadership over Israel. The question is, "Who put them there?" The answer is God exalted them over the assembly of the LORD. God gave them that role.

Moses does not fight for himself. He relies on God who sets up a power encounter. We see this occasionally in the Bible, as with Elijah and the priests of Baal and fire comes down and burns up one and not the other. God does not normally validate his leaders with such a clear and severe manner. But these are critical times for the people of Israel. So, Moses tells Korah to bring 250 of his men with censers for burning incense to the tabernacle. The censers are interesting. Why did God command they bring censers? Well, Korah is claiming the right for himself and others to participate in the priestly rituals. Moses has said that right only belongs to Aaron and his descendants. And Moses has frightened people away by saying that if anybody else enters the tabernacle they will die. So, now Moses is giving Korah opportunity to prove his view of things. If he truly believes that he and others have right to perform the priestly ritual of Yahweh, come and do it.

Now, if you believe in God, and if you believe Moses and Aaron have been called by God, would you accept the challenge to come with your censer and burn incense at the tabernacle? No. You'd be a fool to accept, especially with the near memory of Aaron's sons modifying the ritual of burning incense and being burnt up themselves by the consuming anger of God. You wouldn't come. So, Korah must not accept Moses' interpretation of that event. He doesn't believe what he has been told by Moses. He doesn't believe that God has only appointed Moses. He is ready to challenge Moses' with his version, his interpretation of what has been happening. So, he comes with his 250 ready to test the LORD.

The Reubenite leaders are more suspicious. They refuse to come out of the camp to the tabernacle. So, in their response to Moses in Numbers 16:12-14, you hear both their complaint and their distrust of Moses.

<sup>12</sup> Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come up. <sup>13</sup> Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us? <sup>14</sup> Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"

They have turned the vision of a promise land upside down. In their discontent, they claim that Egypt was the land of milk and honey, re-interpreting their enslavement and the harsh labor. They also blame Moses for failing to attain the vision of the promise land, without taking any responsibility for their own part, their tribe's refusal to go into the land. And they accuse Moses of treachery, claiming that he plans to harm them, to put out their eyes, if they come up to the tabernacle. They believe it is all a big trap, so they stay down in the camp. And since the people are arranged by tribe, their choice to stay in the camp means they are surrounded by their own families and related clans.

This is another one of those stories in narrative biblical literature that the dialogue and the details all matter. It all connects. I will leave you to study the text more closely yourself. I am just giving you the overview of the story. Moses and Aaron do not rally the Levites to take up the sword against the

rebels the Reubenites feared. They live it to God. God chooses to mete out punishment himself. The 250 who burned incense are burned. They are consumed by the fire of God. While those who refused to come up to the tabernacle, think they are safely surrounded by their own people, they are swallowed up by the earth.

And the rest of the people are duly terrified, and they run away from the place of judgement. And God then instructs Aaron to take the fallen censers and hammer them into a plating for the tabernacle altar. 16:40 tells us this is to be a reminder to Israel, “that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the LORD.” Moses and Aaron did not exalt themselves. God exalted them. It is God’s plan for only Aaron and his descendants to serve as priests. That is not up for discussion.

### **Grumbling of the People (16:41-17:13)**

The next incident of grumbling is an extension of this rebellion. Numbers 16:41 tells us,

“But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, ‘You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD’S people.’”

We are sitting here reading the Bible, and we get to read an inspired interpretation of all these events. The people of Israel have to interpret the events with eyes of faith. They have to choose who to trust based on their past experiences, present circumstances, and future hopes. But the story of this generation shows a real inability to correctly interpret God’s actions in the past and a short-sightedness that cannot see God’s promises for the future. It is a very, very human reality. The difficulty of putting past, present, and future into the context of God’s story is true for every human generation. When human nature is the compass that is guiding our interpretation of events, we just don’t understand what God has done, what he is doing, what he will do. And the people of Israel are like this, and they persisted in reinterpreting life in Egypt while blaming Moses for not taking them to a better place. They do not own their own failure to trust God, and their failure to walk in faith. They have to find someone else to blame.

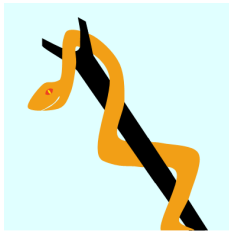
16:42 tells us that the cloud of the Lord then covered the tabernacle. This must have been a physical manifestation of the glory of the Lord that was not typical. Something noticeable was happening that the people could interpret as a response from God. It is the same language of the appearance of God’s glory from chapter 14 which stopped the people from stoning Moses and Aaron and Caleb and Joshua. So, now in this chapter 16, as God’s glory appears, a plague goes forth among the people. And then Aaron makes atonement for Israel and that stops the plague. And then God instructs the congregation, “We are going to have another test to prove that Aaron is indeed the head of the priesthood. And what follows is the story of the budding of Aaron’s staff as confirmation that he and his descendants are truly set apart by God for the priesthood. And again, I will leave the details of that story for you to observe yourself.

These two rebellions highlight the contentiousness of the people and how that contentiousness targets the leadership of Israel. The leaders are always the target. Moses and Aaron are the targets. So, they are claiming belief in God. It is not God who is the problem. It is Moses and Aaron who are the problem. Time and again they fail to persevere through tribulation with proven character. They had to find somebody else to blame. They have been given opportunity after opportunity to trust God and see him come through for them and grow in the hope of his good promises. But they fail to trust. They do not trust Moses, and they do not trust God. And failing to trust, they never grow in hope. This Grumbling Generation is a hopeless generation. We see that there is no hope in the final words of the narrative, which comes in Numbers 17:12-13.

<sup>12</sup> Then the sons of Israel spoke to Moses, saying, “Behold, we perish, we are dying, we are all dying! <sup>13</sup> Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the LORD, must die. Are we to perish completely?”

There is no understanding of God. There is not trust. There is no hope.

## Snake on a Pole (21:6-20)



The narrative then picks up again in chapter 20 with the third incident of grumbling. I am going to skip ahead to chapter 21 to our fourth and final incident, so that I can then come back to the third incident of Moses striking the rock. The last moment of complaint shows, as a whole, no change in the Grumbling Generation. It is the same refrain from 40 years before when they could not persevere for 3 days. This is Numbers 21:5.

The people spoke against God and Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food.”

After this, there is no dialogue with Moses, no verbal rebuke. I guess there comes a time when words exhaust even God. He just sends in snakes. The text calls them fiery serpents. Its not clear whether fiery refers to a burning sensation caused by the venom or whether the adjective describes a certain kind of viper. Either way, it fits with the theme of God’s burning anger against this continually stubborn people.

In an odd move, God instructs Moses to design a bronze serpent and put it on a pole to give the Israelites a means of expressing faith. It reminds me of baptism. The ritual of baptism does not confer grace or work some kind of magic transformation that changes a person, making them acceptable to God. But baptism does provide a person with a way of expressing faith in Jesus Christ. And faith in Jesus Christ does change a person. Baptism also symbolically mirrors and actual spiritual reality, the union of Christ.

God explains the purpose of the bronze serpent in 21:8, “Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.” The physical object provided a means by which Israelites could express faith in the word of God. They were told to look at the bronze serpent, and they would live. To receive the blessing, they have to believe those instructions and look. It is not some magical power that comes from the snake that heals them. The looking is an act of faith. And then God heals them. We are not told how much God took into account the extent of faith being expressed by the Israelites when they looked. Did God require an expression of repentance, an acceptance that they indeed deserve the punishment they had received? We are not told that. We are just told that if they look in faith, they will be healed.

This story is our fourth monument of grace in the books of Moses, our monument from Numbers. Jesus compares himself to this bronze serpent in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3:14, saying, “<sup>14</sup> As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” Jesus is speaking of himself being lifted up on the cross. He uses this obscure reference while speaking to a teacher of the Law who would have known the story and the context. Jesus knew Nicodemus would get the reference.

We can immediately see an abstract similarity between the snake being lifted on the pole and Jesus being lifted up on a cross since both require faith and both result in salvation. But we need to think carefully to come up with the exact parallel. Are we saying Jesus is the snake? Are we saying a snake is the savior? When you look at a cross and see Jesus there, how does that compare to looking at the pole and seeing the snake? What is the snake? The snake is the curse. The snake is a just punishment for the sin committed by individual people and expressed together by a whole rebellious community. It is not the whole community that sins apart from individuals. Individuals sin. And they might do it as a group. Now, when you look at the cross, what is the curse? Is the curse Jesus? No, not exactly. The curse is the death of man. The wages of sin is death. We have, each one of us, sinned in our rebellious hearts against the holy God of all creation. And we stand condemned as a whole community of humanity. Because each of us as individuals have sinned. When we see the dead man on the cross, we see the judgment we deserve. The snake represents the curse. When they saw the snake on the pole, they saw the curse they deserved, and they trusted God to save them from the

curse. When we see Jesus on the cross, we see the curse we deserve. It should be me on the cross. But with the cross, we see even more. We see what they didn't see with the snake. We see the means of our salvation. Jesus took my place. He took the curse, the death of man, and so, while seeing the curse, I also see my Savior. He took my place. He took our place.

The Torah continues to remind us that the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?", is answered, "A gift of grace received through faith." In Genesis, Abraham did not walk through the covenant sacrifice. God did. In Exodus, the Israelite's firstborn did not die. The blood of the lamb covered them. In Leviticus, the Day of Atonement employs two goats; one to show that blood covers the law, taking the sinner's penalty, and the second shows that God has removed the penalty of sin far from his people. He has taken it out of the camp. Here in Numbers we encounter another monument of grace in the law of Moses. Despite all the people had done through 40 long years of murmuring and complaining, God still provides the way of escape from the just penalty of sin. Look at the curse, up on the pole, and trust God to take the penalty from you. Let's read a little further of what Jesus said to Nicodemus,

<sup>14</sup> As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

That last incident of grumbling is amazingly connected to a monument, a symbol, of God's great grace to save.

### **Moses Strikes the Rock (20:1-29)**

Let's turn back now to the example of grumbling I skipped in chapter 20. On our timeline, the rebellion with Korah seemed to happen at the beginning of the 40 years in the wilderness. This example seems to happen at the end.

20:1 tells us the people arrived at Kadesh during the first month. And we are not told the year. I think we can guess the year. After chapter 20, events are going to start to pick up speed with Israel on the move to the Jordan river, experiencing opposition and doing+

battle along the way. In chapter 20, the deaths of both Miriam and Aaron are reported. Chapter 20 also has Israel returning to Kadesh, the site from which Israel failed to enter the promise land. I believe we are supposed to deduce that this is the beginning of the end of the wandering. We are in the first month of the 40<sup>th</sup> year. The end of the period is marked by the deaths of two of the most prominent leaders of the first generation in the same place where the failure of that generation took place. In a sense, we are back where we started, and yet, the death of Miriam punctuates how much this generation lost.

It is not hard to feel great sympathy for Moses. His has carried this faithless generation for 40 years. Now, his sister has died. And right on cue the grumbling of the people rattles through the camp. Numbers 20:2-5.

<sup>2</sup> There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup> The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! <sup>4</sup> Why then have you brought the LORD'S assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? <sup>5</sup> Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."

It is amazing to me that Moses did not snap right there. He does not respond, though. God appears to him and to Aaron and says,

<sup>8</sup> "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink."

So, Moses gathers the people and says to them,

<sup>10</sup> ...“Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” <sup>11</sup> Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

Now Moses snaps. His anger came out against the people. And God was not pleased. God responds quite harsh in the next verse saying,

<sup>12</sup> ...“Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

That is quite severe. After all his labor and all his faith, bearing this stubborn people, Moses now is not going to be allowed to enter the promise land with the next generation. He will die in the desert with the Grumbling Generation. And for what? What did he do? Now, we have talked before about how biblical narrative rarely states the nature of a person's heart. We infer that inner reality by the response of God or by the following consequences that work out in the narrative. The words of God here are not the patient words Abraham received when he complained of having no child. This harsh punishment immediately reveals God's displeasure, so we know right away that something is going on in Moses' heart.

The text gives us two small hints. First, in his angry confrontation with the people, Moses says, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” Moses says “we.” “Shall we bring forth water for you?” He puts the intention on himself and Aaron, communicating that they are the ones with power to provide water. The text then tells us that Moses, “lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod.” God had not told him to strike the rock. God told Moses to speak to the rock.

And normally, that would probably not be a big deal. The point is not that God hands out harsh punishment to people who fail to get the details exactly right. God is not concerned with whether you speak to the rock or strike the rock. Way back in Exodus God told Moses to strike the rock to bring out water. Here he tells him to speak to the rock. Speaking is an acceptable way, striking is an acceptable way. What matters is the state of Moses' heart. Did he choose to strike the rock as a communication of his anger, to show his power, to bring the focus of attention on himself? Yes, he did. Yes, he did. That is why God is so angry. These two points, “shall we bring forth water” and the striking of the rock, they might suggest something. We are not sure at first. God's response clarifies the issue for us. In his rebellion Korah charged Moses for exalting himself over the assembly of the Lord. That was a false charge. But here Moses makes it true. In a moment of anger, he does exalt himself above the assembly. And God sees the anger operating in his heart. God sees bitterness take root. A foothold has been opened for Satan to use. I am reading into that a little bit. I can't exactly explain the state of Moses' heart. I am really not sure. I am guessing. What I know is that God sees something. And God sees something that makes him angry.

We know that Moses has sinned. We cannot see exactly how, but the immediate rebuke of God makes clear that there is sin going on. But even recognizing that Moses snapped, giving into anger or frustration or pride, why such a harsh punishment? His sister just died. He has borne this people for 40 years. To this point he has always deferred to God. He always allows God to validate his leadership, to exalt him. He has argued with God for the people. He has shown righteous anger, and he has shown sacrificial compassion. Why would God be so harsh in this one small slip up to forbid Moses entry into the promise land? Moses was the one person who has faithfully held on to the vision of the promise land, and now God says, “You will not enter in.” Wow, God. That really does not seem compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness and truth. Is that the way you treat your long-suffering servants?

But here is one of the problems in judging God's judgments. We only see what is. God sees what would have been if he had not stepped in with discipline. We cannot know what God prevented.

Where might the heart of Moses gone, if God had not intervened? How many leaders fail in their last years of ministry out of fatigue or busyness or lost relationship with God? And if the leader falls, what might be the consequence for the community? It is one thing when a single man falls. It is another when a leader of thousands falls.

What might have been? Let's consider another case. This is also a case of severe punishment. And it is a case of what might have been. I am using my imagination. I can't really know. I am trying to put myself into God's place, to see what he might see that we do not see. I am thinking of the case of Ananias and Saphira. It is a New Testament example. Our current example is during a critical period of transition at the birth of Israel. Theirs is also a critical time period at the birth of the church. People are selling land and giving proceeds to the church to help fund the revival going on in Jerusalem. Ananias and Saphira sell a piece of land and give only a portion to the church. And God is not concerned with whether they give all, or they only give a portion. The problem is that they lie about it. And when confronted with the lie, Ananias says, "We gave the whole sum." And God strikes him dead. And then Saphira comes in later, not knowing Ananias has been struck dead, and repeats the lie, falling dead in her turn. Why such a harsh punishment? We do not know. But we can imagine.

In lying about giving the whole sum, Ananias and Saphira are copying someone else who really did sell a piece of land and give the whole, give everything he received to the church. And they want the same recognition they saw that guy receive. Do you remember who it is? Who's the guy who sold the piece of land and then gave all the money to the church? It is Barnabas. And it is mentioned right before the story of Ananias and Saphira. So, we are supposed to make that connection. Now, some time later, the church has been scattered and news comes to the apostles that through the witness of some who were scattered, Jews and Gentiles in the coastal city of Antioch have believed in Jesus. And they decide to send Barnabas to see what God is doing and to strengthen the work. Now this is where I am using my imagination. What if God had not struck down Ananias and Saphira? What if they had continued on as leaders in the church? And what if the apostle sent them to lead the young movement in Antioch?

Something of huge significance happens in Antioch. Barnabas goes and begins a ministry of teaching, then he thinks about that former Pharisee Paul who is not far away in Tarsus. No one has heard from Paul for a while. After Jewish leaders sought his death, and he was sent from Jerusalem, he dropped out of the story of Acts. But Barnabas, son of encouragement, did not forget Paul or the power of his teaching. Barnabas thought, this is exactly what Paul needs. I will go get Paul. It's a win-win. It will be good for Antioch. It will be good for Paul. So, Barnabas goes and recruits Paul to come help him. Does Ananias, if Ananias is leading the church in Antioch, does Ananias ever go and get someone like Paul to help him in ministry? He is the top man in Antioch. They all look to him as the one sent from the apostles. He is teaching. The work is growing. Does Ananias go and get someone with a better testimony, better training, more powerful preaching to come join him in the work? No. That never happens. Ananias is concerned with his own image; his own position. He would never invite someone like Paul to come join him. Maybe someone lower than him that he can mentor. And he can still be the top guy. But not Paul. The fledgling church would be without Paul. We would have no work of Paul, no missionary journeys, no letter to the churches in Rome or Galatia or Ephesus or everything else Paul wrote. None of it would exist.

Now, I am not saying that we have any idea that the apostles really would have sent Ananias and Saphira. I am saying that leaders make an impact. And we can imagine what kind of impact Ananias and Saphira might have had if God did not remove them.

God protected the early church from the hypocritical, self-centered leadership of Ananias and Saphira. We never know what God's harsh discipline may be protecting the church from. We see what is. God sees what would be. Coming back to Numbers we are faced with the same problem. God sees what might be. We do not know whether this is the moment that the leader's heart is turned; that this is the moment the root of bitterness takes hold in Moses; the moment that Satan



gets a foothold; the moment Moses builds a wall between himself and God. Was this that small, yet critical moment, that the heart of Moses changes course. It has been said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Now, that is not an exact truism, but it communicates a lot of wisdom. How many men can navigate with integrity the kind of authority given Moses over an entire nation where he has served in the roles of prophet, priest, and king? How many men can serve in such a position without giving in to the pull of pride and power? We empathize with Moses over the death of his sister and the constant grumbling of the people. We empathize. We have compassion. At the same time, we also know the human heart, and we can imagine the dark grip of bitterness finally taking hold in his heart.

God sees something. We do not know what he sees. But he sees something. And it is ugly. It has the potential to derail the whole ministry of Moses, to topple Moses and the people of Israel with him. God grabs hold of that worm and crushes the life out of it. The harsh discipline of God is also the abundant grace of God. I believe the Lord here is strengthening Moses to finish out the race set before him. He has still got to get the people to the Jordan river, he has still got to transfer power to Joshua, he still has to write the first five books of the Bible. None of that has happened, yet. The rebuke of God works as a surgeon's knife to cut out the cancer just beginning to form, resulting in new strength of heart and soul.

There is no retort from Moses, no complaint. I believe he saw where his heart was taking him. I do not know how long it took him to see the punishment as grace. I imagine it was a struggle over time to come to terms with what had happened. Moses is a real man. The rebuke and punishment could not have been easy to receive. He really did want to go into the promise land. He was still talking to God about it even after he had settled the people in the plain of Moab just across the Jordan river. He wrote about his longing in Deuteronomy 3:23-28. He says this.

<sup>23</sup> "I also pleaded with the LORD at that time, saying, <sup>24</sup> 'O Lord GOD, You have begun to show Your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand; for what god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Yours?' <sup>25</sup> Let me, I pray, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.' <sup>26</sup> But the LORD was angry with me on your account, and would not listen to me; and the LORD said to me, 'Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter. <sup>27</sup> Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes to the west and north and south and east, and see *it* with your eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan. <sup>28</sup> But charge Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him, for he shall go across at the head of this people, and he will give them as an inheritance the land which you will see.'"

I imagine that Moses came to terms with this reality before he died. His role was not to take the people into the land. And whether or not that was a result of sin, God would incorporate that into his good plan for the next generation. Moses stayed faithful and true to the end. And the death of Moses provided for a better transition of new leadership. Joshua had to step up. Joshua had to lead the people into the promise land. It would be time for new leadership over a new generation. And that would work better if Moses was held back and Joshua went on. God works things out for the good of those who love him even when working that out is a consequence of our sin.

I want to end by adding two additional lessons of leadership to the four we considered in our last lesson.

1. First, we see here the principle that leaders are held to a higher level of accountability. The discipline on Moses is quite harsh. As a leader the temptations are intensified, and the consequences are more damaging to a greater number of people. So, the accountability is higher.
2. Second, God works the failures of leaders into his own good purposes. Perhaps a leader ought to pursue a vision of perfection, striving to be holy as God is holy. But the healthy leader also knows that is not an attainable goal on this side of heaven. It is a direction to move in. A high goal to shoot for. But not a realistic standard to judge oneself by. Integrity requires honest confession of sin and failures and mistakes. Integrity requires letting go the phantom of perfection. There is something

quite wrong with the perfect leader. A leader who comes across as perfect, must be working a bit too hard at hiding his flaws. A flawless leader is a good actor. This is why leaders have to have people with whom they can be real. Or the little failures of pride and lust and bitterness will take hold, eventually root secretly and grow in a dark closet, finally coming to light with devastating effect. Leaders need friends who will stand in the place of God and communicate loving rebuke. A leader who cannot take rebuke is a timebomb slowly ticking. We honor, respect, and support our leaders, but we do not put them on the impossible pedestal of perfection. They must be allowed to fail and encouraged to get up and keep going. So, that don't get to that place when they do fail it is a catastrophe, and they really are disqualified from ministry.

God's rebuke of Moses was harsh, but in its harshness, it was also gracious. God sees what we do not. The heart of his leader was turning. And God directed it back on course, both for the sake of Moses and for the sake of the people. May God rebuke you. And may God rebuke me, and keep our hearts flowing fresh, as we receive rebuke, confess our sin, receive his forgiveness, and are filled with the goodness of his Spirit as we continue to walk with him.

### Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important or strange or interesting or confusing as you read about the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16:1-40?
2. Go back and observe Numbers 12:1-15. What stands out to you in the rebellion of Miriam and Aaron?
3. Compare these two rebellions.
  - a. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of Moses? What is similar or different?
  - b. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of God? What is similar or different?
  - c. What stands out to you when you compare the words and actions of those opposing Moses and Aaron? What is similar or different?
4. Considering God's tough love discipline on Moses in Numbers 20, how might that put God's discipline of Miriam in a new light. In what way was that discipline potentially protective and in what way restorative?
5. What do you see different about Moses' words and behavior in Numbers 20 from these two earlier cases of rebellion? Can you imagine the potential turning of Moses' heart in Numbers 20? Thinking of other human leaders describe a potential scenario that begins with this moment for Moses. Describe what might have happened in his heart, how that might of affected his heart over time, how that might have affected his behavior over time, and what effects that may have had on the ministry of Moses and on the Israelites.
6. Describe a situation when you think God disciplined you for your own benefit and for the benefit of people you love and influence.