

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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Moses Disobeys

Numbers 20:1-13

Key verse: “The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them’” (Numbers 20:12)

I think that the thirstiest I have ever been was during two-a-day summer football practices. The temperature would often climb to nearly 100 degrees. Our coaches would allow us only a sip of water during practice, plus they gave all the players salt tablets before each practice session. The salt only made us thirstier.

These days, players don’t routinely take salt tablets, and players are encouraged to drink generous amounts of water during practices. But in my day, dehydration was considered a virtue, I guess. One thing I’m sure of, I learned what it means to be thirsty, really thirsty!

I think back to those days when I read this account in Numbers 20. The Israelites are still in the desert and now there is no water for them to drink. Moses has a multitude of really thirsty people on his hands.

So what did they do? They “gathered together against Moses and against Aaron” (v. 2). And they began to do something which, with 40 years of practice, they had become quite good at doing: They began to *grumble* and *complain*. “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to bring us to this wretched place?” (v. 5).

The location of this story is significant. This is Kadesh, the same place where, some 40 years earlier, the people had believed the faithless report about “giants in the land” and rebelled. Now, the Promised Land lies before them again. Yet, their response is not much different this time. Unbelief and rebellion mark their complaint. As someone wisely said, “We fail to learn that we haven’t learned anything from history”!

Once again, under pressure from the legitimate need for water and from the rebellious people, Moses and Aaron call upon God for help. The Lord speaks to Moses and tells him: “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus, you shall bring water out of the rock for them” (v. 8).

It is important to read carefully those words, then compare them to how Moses followed—or failed to follow—God’s instructions. Moses said: “Listen, you rebels,

shall we bring water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff" (vv.10-11).

Suddenly, it is not only the people who are rebellious and disobedient. Now, it's their leader Moses. Quickly, God spells out the consequences of Moses' disobedience: "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring the assembly into the land that I have given them" (v. 12)

Why does God respond to Moses' actions with such a severe consequence? Some have said it is because of the importance of Moses' leadership position. It is true that much is expected of those whom God calls to lead His people.

An obvious factor in God's punishment would seem to be Moses' disobedience. God told him to "command" or *speak to* the rock. Instead, in anger, Moses struck the rock with his staff.

The Bible itself offers further insight into the reason for God's punishment of Moses. Psalm 106:32 speaks of this incident at Kadesh and notes: "For they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips." The Psalmist indicates, then, that Moses' problem was with his *words*. Here is what Moses said: "Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" (v. 10, *italics mine*).

Moses, with Aaron at his side, felt the pent-up anger and frustration of leading an often rebellious and disobedient people for 40 years. In his anger, Moses exalted himself, saying, "What do we have to do?" His words were "rash" and irreverent. And he dishonored the Lord before the people in a very public way. So, God says "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness [or *to set me apart*] before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given you" (v. 12).

It is a sobering story, isn't it? It warns that rebellion and disobedience can rob us of God's best blessings. However, did you notice that, even with the judgment, God's *mercy and grace* come rushing out, like water rushing from a rock?

The people repeat their sad cycle of unbelief and disobedience. Moses and Aaron dishonor God before the people. Perhaps, on this day, no one *deserves* anything but punishment. Yet, look what God does. The text says that when Moses strikes the rock, "water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drank" (v. 11).

God's blessing pours out—generously, abundantly. Mercy and grace are given, not because anyone that day deserves it, but because it is God's nature to be merciful and gracious.

The lesson for our lives is important. Our attitudes and actions do have consequences. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows" (Galatians 6:7). Yet, God's mercy and grace are greater than our sins. His

blessings pour into our lives, like water gushing from a rock, to satisfy our thirsty souls. Thanks be to God!

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