

Numbers 20: The Faith of our Fathers

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“Then the children 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.”

-Exodus 20:1

As we continue through the book of Numbers, we reach a chapter that signifies a true passing of the older generation. Even though, from a narrative perspective, it seems as though these events happen quickly after the rebellion of Korah, there are small details in this chapter, and future chapters, that tell us that this event happens towards the end of the forty years of wilderness wandering. The first clue we get is that the nation of Israel begins to go towards the promised land in verse fourteen of this chapter, and second in Numbers 33 we are told that Aaron's death (which happens at the end of this chapter) happened in the final year of the wandering. Which means that over thirty years have passed between the events of the last couple chapters and this one.

Chapter 20 is a relatively short chapter that bookends with the deaths of Moses' two older siblings, Miriam and Aaron. This fact, coupled with the time frame of this chapter, should tell us the purpose or the intent of this chapter. The older generation, the ones who saw the rise of Egyptian tyranny, and God's delivery from that tyranny are beginning to pass away. But these deaths are not caused by plagues or curses, instead they are now beginning to pass away naturally.

As such, the narrative of the book will begin to shift, and in a sense, become seemingly redundant. The reason for this is that when a generation passes away, a society undergoes a type of chaos where the up and coming generation has to learn to step into the positions of authority left by their forefathers. What this chapter is really about, is what a transition like this will look like and how to best navigate it.

To give a brief overview, this chapter contains five key events that I will list below:

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1. The death of Miriam.
2. Another round of complaints from the nation of Israel, this time about the lack of water.

3. Moses and Aaron pray to God for a solution, and God tells them to speak to a rock and that water will flow out. However, Moses and Aaron fail to heed God's counsel, they exalt themselves above the word of God and are punished by God telling them that they will not enter into the promised land.
4. The nation tries to pass through the land of Edom towards the promised land, but they are rebuffed by the Edomites.
5. The chapter ends with Aaron passing on his role to his son, and then dying.

In order to understand this transition better we will take each of these five points in turn. I do believe that learning about this type of transition will be incredibly relevant for us today. This is the type of transition that happens in a small family when the children leave home, and also when the parents die. But on a larger scale, it is a way to understand the current turmoil in our country. Right now the older Baby Boomer generation is beginning to step out of positions of power and pass away. As such, the younger generations like Generation X and the Millennials are now taking over. Much of the instability that we feel right now is coming from this one thing.

The events that we are reading about in Numbers 20 all correspond in some way to the passing of the older generation. The younger generation has to wrestle with the paths left to them by the generation that came before them. We have to come to terms both with their faults and seek to do better than them, but we also have to learn from the good things that they did. Unfortunately we tend to handle these transitions poorly and either blame the earlier generation for all our problems, or idolize them to an unhealthy degree.

In many ways, the previous generation has failed the younger generation of Israelites, and while we should point out the failure of the older generation, we also must acknowledge that they did lead their children out of slavery and to the border of the promised land. So hopefully as we study this passage we can learn these lessons well and apply them to our own lives.

The Death of Miriam

"Then the children 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

While this is, admittedly, a very short description of Miriam's death, since she has been such a consequential figure within this book, and redemptive history. After all, it was

Miriam who placed her brother Moses into the famous ark that allowed him to be saved from the Egyptian infanticide plaguing the Israelites. It was through this simple act of faith that a young Miriam allowed her brother to be raised in the house of Pharaoh and thus gave Moses the ability to become the savior that God intended for his people.

Miriam is also described as a prophetess within the book of Exodus, she leads the women in worship towards God after the crossing of the Red Sea, and apart from her failure in Numbers 12, she has been an important facet in the development of the nation of Israel. So why does she receive such a short eulogy? This seems to be a facet of Biblical and ancient narrative. The women in the text will receive attention in their lives, but there is a type of “sacredness” shown to their death. Meaning that the details are kept private and intimate.

Far from this being a denigration of women, as most modern people presume, this seems to be a preservation of the dignity of women. This same pattern is shown to the various matriarchs of Genesis, from Sarah to Leah, but even Mary’s death, the mother of Christ, is not recorded for us in Scripture.

Generational Differences

While there is more to say on this topic, let’s move on to see the significance of Miriam’s passing and how it relates to the overall narrative. As stated before, Miriam’s death represents the passing of the older generation, not from plague or curse, but simply from old age. The primary thing that is lost when an older generation dies is the wisdom learned through personal experience, and it is this personal experience that seems to divide the generations in a significant manner.

Since generational differences are being studied quite a bit recently, this is a point that is more easily understood by us today. Whenever a cataclysmic event happens, it tends to fragment a generation, even within a single household. Take my generation as a more recent example. I was born in 1990, which means that I was born after the end of the Cold War. I have no memories of the threat of the Soviet Union or the terror or nuclear war that was ever present through those tense decades between the end of World War 2 and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This lack of experience can help explain why the fear of communism, and even nuclear war, doesn’t affect my generation the same way it affects the older generations. This is why my generation is much more comfortable with open socialism, and even communism. It is also why we weren’t as concerned about the war between Russia and Ukraine. We didn’t directly experience these things, and so they don’t really affect us.

So even though me and my brother are only separated by nine years, there is a world of difference between his childhood and mine.

But even in the Millennial generation, a crucial part of my childhood was the terrorist attacks on September 11th 2001. I remember going to school that day and watching the footage live from New York with my sixth grade class. But I also witnessed an incredible rise in patriotism and unity that followed that attack. That event left a mark on my generation and motivated me to join the Marines out of high school in order to fight the terrorists responsible for that attack.

However, those who are just a few years younger than me don't have any direct memory of these events, what is fresh in their mind is not the attack that led to the war, which they had to merely hear about, but the long, drawn out wars that followed, and the ignominious endings of these wars. They witnessed the rise of Isis after our pull out from Iraq, as well as our pull out from Afghanistan that resulted in the return of Taliban rule just a few short years ago.

It is the responsibility of the older generation to preserve those memories for the younger generations, so that they can learn the lessons that we did and that they might not return to our mistakes. If we aren't careful to do that, the older generation is instead led by the complaints of the younger generation. This is, more or less, what we see in the story of Numbers. Miriam represents the generation that remembered Egypt before the oppression. This makes her different than Aaron who was too young to remember this time, and Moses who was born during the oppression.

We have seen how that older generation has, in some ways, polluted the nation of Israel with their nostalgic memories of pre-slavery life in Egypt, which is why God has vowed to kill off every person who was older than forty. This generation had allowed the complaints of the younger generation, and their flawed memory of Egypt, to drive the incessant complaints of the nation. However, this was also the generation that witnessed the miracles of the Exodus. This means that the up and coming generation in Israel's leadership have no memory of slavery or of the Exodus. They had to be told about the brutality of the Egyptians as well as the wonderful miracles performed by God in the wilderness. All they remember is the brutality of the wilderness and the gradual demise of the older generation.

This is why, narratively, it makes sense that this rebellion happens right before the nation ends its wandering in the wilderness. The younger generation doesn't remember the miracle recorded in Exodus 17 when God gave them water from the rock, they only

remember the wilderness. And we can see that the older generation has done a bad job of preserving this memory because they led the rebellion against God.

Before we dive into that point though I want to wrap up this point by looking at our current generations in light of this. Since the younger generations don't have any memory of the terrorist attacks, it makes sense that they would not really understand the threat of radical Islam. But the fact that even the older generations are "forgetting" this threat means that we have not "guarded" the memory. But what's going on in our country is more than this. We are also forgetting the threat of tyranny that our forefathers fought against, and even the dangers of Nazism and Communism.

As a Millennial I was shocked when the popular artist Kanye West released a song entitled "Heil Hitler" last year. But this has been followed by a relatively fast "warming" to Nazi doctrine. I was equally shocked when I heard younger people saying that the terrorist attack on September 11th was relatively justified and actually quoted Osama Bin Laden to prove their point. These moments may be shocking, but they reveal a point that this passage is making to us. When the older generation fails in their job to guard the memory of the past, the mistakes of the past are much easier to fall into.

On a smaller scale, this happens in a family when the parents fail to recount their own stories to their children. The wisdom of their fathers are contained in these stories, without them we all but guarantee that our children repeat our mistakes and the mistakes of our own parents. We must prepare our children to face the ghosts of our own past, and we do this primarily by teaching them our stories.

"And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.'" So the people bowed their heads and worshiped."

-Exodus 12:26-27

The Waters of Meribah

"Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before the LORD! "Why have you brought up the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here? "And why have you made us come up out of Egypt, to bring us to this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink."

-Numbers 20:2-5

As I said before, the account of this rebellion follows directly after the death of Miriam, and I believe that this is an intentional point that Moses was making when he recorded the story this way, and maybe by God in allowing Miriam to die at this exact point in history. Regardless, this story is a clear repeat of Exodus 17. In Exodus 17, the nation of Israel had just come out of Egypt and began wandering in the wilderness. But, since the wilderness didn't have any water, they complained against God and Moses and God allowed for Moses to strike a rock and water flowed from it.

It seems that the area that they were wandering in for the past forty years had natural sources of water that they could drink from. But now that they are once again in a desolate place. While it isn't clear of the age of those leading this rebellion, there are elements of the story that would suggest that it was the older generation. The evidence for this is that they call those who died in Korah's rebellion "brothers", meaning that they were more than likely contemporaries with them. But also they do have a memory of Egypt.

Because of this, you would expect that God would judge them harshly for this rebellion, but God doesn't do this. As a matter of fact, God responds even more gently than He did back in Exodus 17, since He made a provision for water to come from the rock by Moses merely speaking to the rock instead of having to strike it. Why this gentle response? There will be more harsh judgments coming up, but I think that God was eager for the younger generation to see the provision of God in the same way that the earlier generations were able to witness that profound miracle.

This miracle was the last of a series of miracles in which God provided for His people. These miracles began with God making bitter waters sweet, then giving meat and manna for food, and then bringing water from the rock. This was God's way of showing His people that they could depend on Him, not only for defense, but for their daily needs. But why not tell Moses to strike the rock like He did before? There is no clear reason given in the text, (though there is an interesting prophetic reason we will get into later on). Looking at the structure of the text I can't help but think this has something to do with Aaron's rod coming back to life. In order to show this, let's look at how God responded to Moses back in Exodus 17:

"And the LORD said to Moses, "Go on before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel. Also take in your hand your rod with which you struck the river, and go. "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock in Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. So he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah,

because of the contention of the children of Israel, and because they tempted the LORD, saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?"

-Exodus 17:5-7

The original miracle was performed by the same rod of authority and power that God used to strike the waters of Egypt. God also makes it a point that this miracle was to be done in front of the elders of Israel. This seems to be God establishing the hierarchy of the nation. That the "staff" of authority and tradition was being given the ability to lead and bless the nation of Israel and not merely as a tool of judgement and wrath against the enemies of God. This corresponds nicely to the giving of the Law which happens in the next couple chapters.

But now in the wilderness, God performs a different miracle. Instead of the rod being a tool of rigid authority, it has come back to life and born fruit. It could be that God is showing His people that now that authority and tradition have been established, it no longer needs to be yielded as a weapon, but could instead be a structure of peace and stability.

This is again a facet of every new structure. When a nation or even a new business comes into being, it is only able to grow through difficulty and striving. Since nothing is established, when authority asserts itself it must do so with aggression. But once a system is established, it can be merely held as opposed to wielded. Think about a family. When children are young, discipline must be immediate and without much communication. The reason is because the child is too young to understand why he is being disciplined or what it is accomplishing for them.

But as they get older, they start to understand the purpose of punishment. And now a parent can merely "hold" their authority without having to necessarily "wield" it against their children. They can "speak" to them and receive results without having to "strike" them. But there is more to this that we will get into in a sec. To wrap up this point, while the rebellion of the leaders was bad, God used this instance to teach the new generation an important lesson that their elders had failed to give to them. That God *can* and *should* be relied upon to provide for their needs. He doesn't just give His people commands, He also gives them the grace necessary to fulfill their calling.

This is an amazing grace of God. While it isn't an excuse for the older generation to fail in their duty to prepare the younger generation, it shows that even if the older generation fails, God can still be faithful. We should never presume on God doing this, but there are many instances that I have heard about where God allowed for a child to learn an important lesson that their parents never taught them. In fact, sometimes

people will learn these lessons even if their parents are teaching them something completely different. This is a kindness of God that should never be expected, but it should always be appreciated and praised.

The Fall of Moses

“So Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and they fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the rod; you and your brother Aaron gather the congregation together. Speak to the rock before their eyes, and it will yield its water; thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock, and give drink to the congregation and their animals.” So Moses took the rod from before the LORD as He commanded him. And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the LORD, and He was hallowed among them.”

-Numbers 20:6-13

Now we get to the most tragic, and well-known parts of this chapter, the fall of Moses. Even though God had already sentenced the older generation to perish in the wilderness, besides Joshua and Caleb, it was all but assumed that Moses and Aaron would be exempt from that judgement. And based on how God words His discipline towards Moses, it seems as though, up until this moment, that was true, Moses and Aaron were indeed supposed to lead the nation into the new land. However, in a singular act of impropriety, after forty years of faithful service to the nation of Israel, God rescinds His offer to bring Moses and Aaron into the land.

At surface level, this seems like an over-reaction on the part of God. So let's take some time and dissect this passage and figure out why God came down so harshly on these two men. To preface this, I want to point out that all of this is in the context of a chapter about legacy. In other words, with all the examples we will go through, none of them really have to do with the *immediate* nature of Moses' sin, but instead the long term effects of his action.

I also want to point out that even though I am referring to this as “Moses' sin”, we are told that Aaron is also punished. It seems that, much like the issue with the golden calf

in the Exodus or in Miriam's rebellion a few chapters earlier, Aaron's chief character flaw is that he seems to lack the assertiveness necessary to really stand up for his convictions, instead he is almost "dragged" into other people's rebellion with little to no resistance. So before I talk about the real sin, it seems as though God holds people guilty of passive sin just as culpable as those who commit active sin. To put that another way, if we have the power and authority to stand up to an evil action and we don't do it, we are going to be held accountable for the action, even though we didn't personally commit it.

But let's break his sin down into a couple categories, first, Moses failed to give God glory, second, he yielded to wrath, and finally, he didn't teach the people the right lesson.

Glory to God

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

-Numbers 20:12

When most people read this story we tend to focus on Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it as God commanded. While Moses' actions certainly play a significant role in this sin, and we will talk about that later, this is actually not the main thing that Moses did wrong. Notice that when God gives Moses His judgement, He doesn't actually refer to the significance of Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it. Instead He merely says that Moses "did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel..." What this means is that Moses' primary sin was a failure to "hallow" God, which is a word that means to give God glory or to show God as holy before the people.

The main line that we get from Moses that shows the true spirit of his rebellion comes in verse 10 when Moses says:

"Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?"

-Numbers 20:10

Notice the language, "Must we..." Moses does not ascribe the miracle to God, but he instead points the attention at himself. As we have talked about before, Moses' primary sin has never been pride, as a matter of fact, in this chapter he again falls on his face before God. I believe that this line was spoken out of wrath, which we will discuss in a second, but the implications of his sin are actually quite severe.

As we have spoken about before, the people of God are coming from the land of Egypt, a land in which the ruler of the people is a true manifestation of the divine among the people. The Pharaoh is not considered a man, but a god who rules over man. As such, it has been a constant problem in the narrative of Exodus and Numbers for the people to go to Moses for help, as opposed to God. And in the other instances, Moses has been really good about pointing this error out to the people of Israel. Consider what he said in Exodus 16 when the people complained about a lack of food in the wilderness:

“Also Moses said, “This shall be seen when the LORD gives you meat to eat in the evening, and in the morning bread to the full; for the LORD hears your complaints which you make against Him. And what are we? Your complaints are not against us but against the LORD.”

-Exodus 16:8

Moses is quick to show the people that it is God who had led them to the place they were, and God who would provide the miracle. He even shows them that they were wrong to complain against Moses and Aaron considering that it is God who is over them and that their complaints were ultimately against Him. This partially explains why God gives different instructions to Moses for bringing water from the rock.

In Exodus 17 God orders Moses to strike the rock with his rod. This is partially because the authority of Moses and Aaron was still being established in the nation and God was using the staff of Moses, which represents Moses' authority and the traditions of the elders, to bring forth water. But now that the leadership of Israel is well established over the course of forty years in the wilderness, God now needs to be shown to be the One providing for the new generation.

Remember that this generation is about to face the very foes that sent their parents running forty years prior. They *need* to trust in God's provision. By striking the rock with his staff, Moses is doubling down on the error of the people. He is once again showing that it is *his* authority that is bringing forth water and nothing else. If he instead “prayed” to the rock, God would be vindicated and shown to be the primary provider and protector for the people.

Herein lies the lesson for us today. One temptation of the youth is to complain against our elders the way that the nation complains against Moses and Aaron. To blame them for all their problems and truly believe that their life would be infinitely better without their forefathers. But hidden within that complaint is a form of idolatry. If our forefathers are so powerful in our lives that *all* of our problems can be blamed on them, then they

have the power of God. And even if they are unworthy and wicked gods, they still take up residence in our hearts as gods nonetheless.

This gives space for the equal and opposite mistake, which is merely the other side of that coin, the temptation to deify our forefathers. The younger generation would be sorely tempted to make Moses and Aaron the gods of their lives. To treat the “rod” of Moses, namely his authority and the beauty of the traditions that came before, as a god. This is the same mistake of the older generation that God had to wipe out. They, in some sense, deified their past, always looking back on it with rose colored glasses, without the ability to see the flaws and issues contained within.

Many today are making the same mistake. The progressive youth look at the past century as an unmitigated disaster. A world run by misogynistic racists who left a chaotic and disjointed mess for us to clean up. The conservative youth look at the past with nostalgia that they never knew or experienced. They imagine the world of the past as a veritable utopia that the present day politicians have spoiled and they dream of returning to that golden age, no matter the cost.

And people who see the world like this are liable to swing violently between these two extremes. Those who see the past as perfect, the second they see flaws in what they were told immediately swing all the way into believing that they were deceived all their life and the past was actually an awful place. But those who saw the past as irredeemable, if they see any good, might be tempted to believe that actually they had been lied to and the past was a utopia. Both are examples of deifying the past.

To put this point more simply, to see our forefathers as either without fault, or without virtue is to see them as gods. The only way to see our forefathers for what they were, namely mortal *men*, we have to see clearly both their faults and their virtues. Only when we do this properly can we go further than our parents did. If we only see their faults, we are ill-prepared to integrate their virtues and while we might avoid their mistakes, we will run headlong into brand new mistakes that they had the wisdom to avoid. But if we only see their virtues, we will repeat their mistakes and double down on their failure.

God is trying to raise this generation up to do this properly. But instead of Moses participating with God in showing this beautiful truth to the people of God, he doubles down on the error of the people and sets himself up as a god before their eyes. He did not hallow God before them, and so in order for God to correct this false perception, He has to come down hard on Moses and forbid him from leading the people into the land. If Moses had been allowed to lead the people into the land, the idolatry of Moses and Aaron would have only grown more pervasive and destructive.

The Wrath of Man

“And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank.”

-Numbers 20:10-11

The interesting thing about Moses' sin though, is that I don't actually believe that pride was motivating his failure, but instead wrath. The text itself hints that this is the case in multiple different places, so let's look at the evidence. First, we know that this is a sin that Moses struggled with. What makes Moses such an amazing leader is that he is brave, confident, and has high levels of conviction. These are all amazing qualities for a leader, but, as in all things, our greatest failures are the shadow of our greatest successes.

Going all the way back to Exodus 2, when Moses killed an Egyptian task master, Moses tends to do the “right thing” but at the wrong time and in the wrong way. To put this another way, Moses has a tendency to use force when it isn't necessary and I think that this story is a good example of this. God gives Moses a peaceful method of resolving the conflict, but he instead resorts to what worked last time, namely striking the rock.

Second, we can see the wrath of Moses in the text itself. He starts by addressing the people as “rebels” something God never told him to say, and then he strikes the rock twice. There are a couple reads on this fact, one is that God doesn't allow water to come forth the first time, giving Moses an opportunity to repent, but instead he doubles down and hits the rock again. The second is that the water began to come out the first time, but Moses was so wound up that he struck the rock twice. Either way, we see that Moses, having lost his temper, had lost his self-control.

But even so, if Moses is responding in wrath, why is he speaking in a proud way? The simple answer is that when we are motivated by wrath, we are tempted into provocation. Meaning that when someone is provoked, they tend to reflect the version of themselves that their opponent is provoking them towards. Consider how Moses recounts this event in the book of Deuteronomy, keeping in mind that he would have spoken these words, at most, just a few short years after this event:

“The LORD was also angry with me for your sakes, saying, ‘Even you shall not go in there. Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall go in there. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it.’”

-Deuteronomy 1:37-38

Moses blames the nation of Israel for not being allowed into the land. Many people read this as either a contradiction, or as Moses “editorializing” the events to make himself look better. I don’t actually read it this way, instead I think Moses is revealing the nature of his sin. By saying that God was angry at Moses for the “sakes” of the people of Israel, he is saying that he didn’t actually believe the words he was speaking or the actions he took. So why did he do it? Once again, when provoked we live down to the expectations of the people provoking us. Consider the following Proverb:

“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him.”

-Proverbs 26:4

There is a warning given here about engaging with a “fool”, this is someone who is convinced of their own path and *won’t* see reason. The danger is that if we engage with such people we can become provoked, and by doing this we can become “like them”. Let’s take a common example of this. Let’s say that there is a couple trying to have a discussion and one member immediately accuses the other of being angry and out of control. Even if this isn’t true, being accused of being angry tends to make people angry. So in order to prove that they aren’t angry, they begin to shout that they aren’t angry.

Here is an example of provocation. By someone merely suggesting that they are angry, they are provoked into anger. This is why Solomon warns us:

“Better to dwell in a corner of a housetop, Than in a house shared with a contentious woman.”

-Proverbs 21:9

A contentious woman is someone who is not looking to listen or to engage in dialogue, but someone hell bent on fighting. In such cases, Solomon says we would be better off living on a rooftop than staying with this person. However, when we don’t engage a “fool” they will believe themselves to be “right”:

Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes.”

-Proverbs 26:5

This is why we engage with people who are provoking us, we don’t want them to think they “won” the argument, but the wisdom of this Proverb is that it is better to be thought wrong, than to give up your character. I love how Mark Twain put this point:

“Never argue with stupid people, they will drag you down to their level and then beat you with experience.”

-Mark Twain

We can read this story as an example of provocation. The people of Israel are almost taunting Moses by referencing Korah’s rebellion, claiming that he led them out of a fruitful land, and by totally ignoring the last time that water came from the rock. By having Moses speak to the rock, God was giving Moses an opportunity to not fall for their provocation, to speak to God and not address the folly of the people. But Moses falls for their provocation. He is in essence saying “you see me as a tyrant who has led you to the wilderness to die, I’ll show you.”

But by doing this, he becomes what they were taunting him to be. They characterized Moses as a type of god. By attributing the Exodus to Moses and not to God, they are treating Moses as their sovereign. And when he responds, he responds in the way a god would, by claiming glory for themselves. This is why we are warned in Scripture:

“So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.”

-James 1:19-20

We are to be slow to wrath, because wrath is not an innately bad thing. Notice that Moses is “successful” in his use of wrath, albeit for a short time. Herein lies the flaw in wrath, it achieves short term results with long term problems. A parent may achieve discipline in their children by acting in wrath, but long term, they have not actually shaped their character, but merely scared them into submission. God seems to allow for this miracle to happen to teach us this important lesson. Wrath is attractive and provocation is near impossible to avoid, but it always results in short term victory and long term pain.

I might be able to “win” an argument in wrath, or prove a point using wrath, but it is never the right decision, even if avoiding the conflict means that people will assume you are in the wrong. If Moses simply spoke to the rock, who represents God, we will speak about this more in a moment, he would have been ignoring their taunt altogether. He would have provided for their needs without ever having to address his critics. This is again something that Moses has done honorably through Exodus and Numbers. Instead of defending himself, he has relied on God to do it for him. To give Moses a good defense here, he has spent forty years in the wilderness with the Israelites and his sister just passed away. But still, Moses as the leader bears a heavy burden and unfortunately he couldn’t quite make it to the end.

One lesson we can learn from the cross is that on a long enough time scale truth will always be revealed. Jesus was crucified as a criminal, but vindicated by God in the resurrection. Even if we have to wait til the resurrection, it is always best to wait for the justice of God to vindicate us rather than trying to vindicate ourselves.

“Be angry, and do not sin. Meditate within your heart on your bed, and be still.”
-Psalm 4:4

Teaching the Wrong Lessons

“Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.”

-1 Corinthians 10:1-4

As I have alluded to earlier, the rock in this story is a representation of God. Although Paul puts this point explicitly in the 1 Corinthians, it is something that the ancient people would readily understand. God is referred to as a Rock throughout the Bible:

“Do not fear, nor be afraid; Have I not told you from that time, and declared it? You are My witnesses. Is there a God besides Me? Indeed there is no other Rock; I know not one.’”

-Isaiah 44:8

This is not a fact unique to the Jews, most ancient peoples referred to their gods as “rocks”, since rocks are ancient, they touch the heavens, and are powerful and “immovable”. By the way, this was almost certainly not some small stone, but probably a “rock” like a hill or a giant boulder. When Moses struck the rock in the Exodus, this is a picture of how our God is willing to humble Himself. He provides nourishment for His people, but He is willing to be questioned and even rejected by His people.

This symbol is fulfilled in Christ when He is literally struck in order to give to us the water of life. That is why it is no mistake that when Christ’s side is pierced, water and blood flow from the wound. The nourishment of our souls could only come through the death of Christ. But now, Moses is asked to merely ask the rock for water and it would respond. This is God calling His people to have a relationship with Him. Not merely to wait on their leadership to provide for them through their authority, but to actually humble themselves and pray before the Lord who hears them and cares for them.

In the New Testament this is again literally fulfilled. After being struck, the grace of God flows freely from the Son. He doesn't need to be struck again in order to forgive or redeem us, we need only to ask:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. "For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."

-Matthew 7:7-8

"...that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation."

-Romans 10:9-10

This is the role of the leader, not to point to ourselves, but to use our authority to point to God. Instead of being an example of humble prayer before God, Moses reinforces the false belief of the people, that they should go to Moses and he would provide for them. This is the greatest burden of the leader, not to point to ourselves, but to point to God who has given us our authority to steward for His glory. This is the toughest challenge of a leader, to be sure to give glory to God, as Jesus teaches us:

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

-Matthew 5:16

The problem with idolatry is not found in excellence per se, which is a tempting thought for most people, but in a lack of praise. Many in the Protestant church especially fear the beauty and the excellence of the church. We, rightly, fear this because we have seen how the glory of the church has been worshipped in the place of God in the excesses of Catholic worship. But, many have gone the opposite way, they fear excellence and beauty in the church and sometimes even boast about the mundane so that God receives glory. Not understanding that the heart of man is not dissuaded by the lack of beauty, but the soul of man is made thirsty when it is deprived of beauty and excellence.

God doesn't take the authority from Moses, but he gives Moses a way to perform an incredible miracle, while praising God and giving Him immense glory. But instead, Moses fell to his wrath and exalted himself. Praise will always be the antidote to idolatry, and so a church who praises God is the one who can see things clearly.

I was thinking about this in relation to a new movie that recently came out about Michael Jackson. While I haven't seen the movie, I know that the film left out the end of Michael Jackson's life when he was accused of child molestation. Whatever you think about his guilt or innocence in this matter, what this reveals to me is that we naturally want to elevate idols. Those who really loved his music and his story don't want to see the ugly parts of his life, while those who don't like him or don't care about his music are more able to look at the more disturbing parts of his story.

What we need to remember is that all power, beauty, truth, and goodness descend from God alone. When we are praising a person, while we are praising their gifts and talents, more than this, we are praising the God who gave them these things. Just as it was wrong to complain against Moses and Aaron because it was God who was ultimately leading them, so it would be wrong to praise Moses and Aaron because it was God who was providing for them. To praise God *through* His work in man is a genuinely difficult thing, but one that a mature Christian must learn to do. And this is also the job of every true leader. Not to denigrate themselves, but to seek to praise God in the gifts that He gave to them.

Fighting Between Brothers

"Now Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom. "Thus says your brother Israel: 'You know all the hardship that has befallen us, 'how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we dwelt in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians afflicted us and our fathers. 'When we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent the Angel and brought us up out of Egypt; now here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your border. 'Please let us pass through your country. We will not pass through fields or vineyards, nor will we drink water from wells; we will go along the King's Highway; we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.' " Then Edom said to him, *"You shall not pass through my land, lest I come out against you with the sword."* So the children of Israel said to him, *"We will go by the Highway, and if I or my livestock drink any of your water, then I will pay for it; let me only pass through on foot, nothing more."* Then he said, *"You shall not pass through."* So Edom came out against them with many men and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory; so Israel turned away from him."

-Numbers 20:14-21

I won't dwell on this point too much, but we have to remember that the Edomites are descended from Esau. Part of moving forward from the legacy of our forefathers is to face the same challenges that they did. In the book of Genesis Esau and Jacob fought for most of their lives. However, at the end of their lives they made amends and lived at

peace with each other. Unfortunately, the Edomites don't seem to have learned this lesson from their father and see the children of Jacob, the Israelites, as an enemy instead of as brothers.

This is an important note, when we refuse to move forward, we are doomed to repeat the struggles of the past. But for the Israelites, God is calling them beyond this struggle. They are not to fixate on destroying Edom, but in order to enter the promised land they first have to deal with this conflict. This is again where the stories of our ancestors can help us. Even though they have to repeat the struggle of their ancestor, they can do so knowing the delivering power of God to solve that conflict in the past.

The Passing of the Priesthood

“Now the children of Israel, the whole congregation, journeyed from Kadesh and came to Mount Hor. And the LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron in Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying: “Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against My word at the water 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; for Aaron shall be gathered to his people and die there.” So Moses did just as the LORD commanded, and they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. 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. Now when all the congregation saw that Aaron was dead, all the house of Israel mourned for Aaron thirty days.”

-Numbers 20:22-29

This is how the story ends. There are a couple ways to look at this event, and like most things in the Bible, I think that both interpretations are accurate. The first way to see this is as a hopeful end to the chapters. Although Aaron had a checkered past, and failed to lead the people into the promised land, he dies with honor and with the knowledge that his son will succeed where he had failed.

As a parent this is incredibly encouraging. Just like Moses and Aaron, we will, unfortunately, fail to lead our children into the fullness that God has for them. This is another way to read the stories of Moses and Aaron. While they did fail, they failed in such an understandable, and almost unavoidable way. What this means is that as parents we try to do our best, but we do so knowing that we will eventually have to let go of our kids, let ourselves be stripped of our office, and trust God to lead them forward to their full potential, which is what the promised land represents.

The second is a negative read. This read sees Aaron being stripped of his robes as a public type of humiliation. While this is a harsher read, it is also hard to read this chapter without seeing some form of humiliation here. But once again, just because the harsher read is true, doesn't make the more positive read false. I think the balance is to see both at the same time. That while Aaron being stripped of his authority is a shameful thing, because he legitimately did fail to lead his people, and his children into the land, the mantle is given to his son, not a total stranger.

We also see a beautiful humility in Aaron. There are other figures in the Bible who are asked to step down and they refuse, choosing instead to rebel against God and hold onto their power. A perfect example of this would be king Saul, who when he was asked to step down to let David take over the kingdom, he became jealous and murderous towards David trying to kill him.

The humility of Aaron to walk through this process with dignity is one of the reasons why his death is mourned by the people. In Christopher Nolan's film "The Dark Knight" one of the heroes of the film, who unfortunately becomes a villain, ironically states "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain."

This line continues to resonate because we see it as being true. When we have authority, choosing to give it up, choosing to step aside at the proper time is one of the hardest challenges that we face, especially if we are asked to step aside because of a failure on our behalf. But those who can't let go of their legacy end up becoming unwitting villains.

This would be parents who can't let their kids grow up, individuals who can't own up to failures, and even those who would drain all their resources and dignity to hold onto fame and power even when their time has come to an end. The greatest lesson a father can teach a son is how to die well. How to meet your end with dignity and with faith.

This "stripping" of authority is also an important facet of avoiding idolatry. This is one of the reasons why our founders made sure that the president only served in four year increments and why it became tradition, and later law, that they could only serve two terms. They gave up their authority to remind the people that they were just men, the real authority came from above.

Early Christians had a similar tradition. Every Good Friday they would "strip" the altar of all its decorations. This was done to commemorate Christ, who we will finish our talk by discussing, but also to remind the people that what makes the church special is not the

altar or the ornamentation, but the presence of God that fills the souls of the faithful. While a humbling act, by being stripped of his office, Aaron was able to teach his son, and the rest of the next generation this important lesson, the priest is just a man, it is the office that comes from God and it is God who gives us authority.

More than this, for us as believers, there is an incredible prophecy of Christ made here. That even though Christ didn't fail us, the people of God were not ready to enter into the promises of God when He came. Instead of being accepted, He was rejected. Instead of being glorified, He was stripped naked and murdered on a cross. And unlike Aaron, this happened to Him without Him committing a single offense.

But like Aaron, by allowing Himself to be stripped of glory, He clothed His children in glory. Our own failure and unrighteousness is now covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ. We belong to Him and we find rest in Him. Just as the Israelites were weary from their wandering in the wilderness, so were we. Wandering in the aimlessness of our own sin and our own attempts to make our lives enough to please our image of God. But the true God comes in the flesh, allows Himself to be killed, so that we might be forgiven. This is the true One whom we glorify, and in Him we find our home.