

# NUMBERS

## Chapter 20

### *The Death of Miriam*

**And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.**

**20:1–29** This chapter begins with the death of Miriam (v. 1), concludes with the death of Aaron (v. 28), includes the record of the conflict with Edom (vv. 14–21) and centers on the tragic sin of Moses (vv. 11–12). Such was the sad beginning of Israel’s last year in the desert. (CSB)

**20:1** *first month.* The year is not given, but a comparison of vv. 22–29 with 33:38 leads to the conclusion that this chapter begins in the 40th year after the exodus. Most of the people 20 years old or more at the time of the rebellion at Kadesh (chs. 13–14) would already have died. (CSB)

Moses did not record the year Miriam died. Cf 33:36–39. (TLSB)

*at Kadesh.* The larger part of the desert wandering is left without record. The people may have gone through a cycle of roving travels, seeking the water sources and the sparse vegetation, supported primarily by manna. But their circuits would bring them back to the central camp at Kadesh, the scene of their great rebellion (chs. 13–14). They have now come full circle; the land of promise lies before them again. (CSB)

**20:1** In the 40th year, a new generation of Israelites arrives where the nation stood 38 years before. Those over the age of 20 have died. Sin brought about the destruction of those who distrusted the Lord. Yet in His mercy, God raises up a new generation. Rebellion has a cost, but God is ever ready to start afresh and fulfill His promises. • Prepare me, O Lord, for new things by equipping me with Your timeless truth and love through Christ Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)

### *The Waters of Meribah*

**2 Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! 4 Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” 6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the LORD appeared to them, 7 and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 8 “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.” 9 And Moses took the staff from before the LORD, as he commanded him.**

**20:2–13** Cf Ex 17:1–7, where the Israelites also had “quarreled with Moses” over lack of water. At Moses’ intercession, the Lord gave them additional evidence that He was able to supply all their needs. (TLSB)

**20:2** *no water.* Forty years earlier, the Lord had instructed Moses to take the staff he had used to strike the Nile (Ex 7:17) and to strike the rock at Horeb to initiate a flow of water (Ex 17:1–7). Now, 40 years later, at the place of Israel’s worst acts of rebellion, the scene was recurring. The children of the rebellious nation now desire to die with their parents; the complaints about the bread from heaven are repeated by the sons. (CSB)

**20:3** The younger generation showed no greater trust in the Lord than did their elders. This generation could not remember events in Egypt, but they did remember their parents’ complaints and repeated them. (TLSB)

**20:5** *this evil place?* The wilderness. (TLSB)

**20:8** *tell the rock.* Moses was told to take his staff, through which God had performed wonders in Egypt and in the desert all these years, but this time he was merely to speak to the rock and it would pour out its water for the people. Cf. Ps 114:8. (CSB)

At Rephidim, God commanded Moses to “strike the rock” (Ex 17:6). (TLSB)

**20:2–9** Moses faces the same situation as before: grumbling Israelites protest against Moses, Aaron, and God for lack of water. As before, Moses and Aaron humble themselves before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and God opens His hand of mercy. When struggles and complaints hamper you, turn to the Lord in humble prayer He will hear and honor your requests faithfully, in accordance with His good and gracious purposes. • Lord, we often doubt Your Word. Send Your Spirit to strengthen us, that we may pray confidently and lead boldly. Amen. (TLSB)

*Moses Strikes the Rock*

**10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” 11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. 12 And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the LORD, and through them he showed himself holy.**

**20:10** *hear now, you rebels.* At once the accumulated anger, exasperation and frustration of 40 years came to expression (see Ps 106:33). (CSB)

Hbr *hammorim*, does not have the same root as “Meribah” (quarreling) and “Marah” (bitterness), but makes similar sounds, echoing one another as the events in 20:2–13 echo the events in Ex 17:1–7.

*shall we bring.* “Meek” Moses also had clay feet (12:3). His endurance and patience were exhausted. He felt he had to assert himself against the rebels or at least take some credit for the miraculous supply of water. (TLSB)

**20:11–12** *twice ... did not believe.* Instead of letting the Word of the Lord reveal its power (v 8), Moses sought to make his contribution to the miracle by striking the rock twice. (CSB)

**20:11** *struck the rock twice with his staff.* In his rage Moses disobeyed the Lord’s instruction to speak to the rock (v. 8). Moses’ rash action brought a stern rebuke from the Lord (v. 12). The nature of Moses’ offense is not clearly stated in this text, but these factors appear to be involved: 1. Moses’ action was a

lack of trust in God (v. 12), as though he believed that a word alone would not suffice. 2. God's holiness was offended by Moses' rash action (v. 12), for he had not shown proper deference to God's presence. (CSB)

**20:12** *you shall not bring this assembly into the land.* The end result of Moses' action is sure: Neither Aaron nor Moses would enter the land of promise. Of their contemporaries only Joshua and Caleb would survive to enter the land. The inclusion of Aaron demonstrates his partnership with his brother in the breach against God's holiness. (CSB)

**20:13** *Meribah.* The same name was used 40 years earlier at the first occasion of bringing water from the rock (Ex 17:7, where it is also called Massah, "testing"). Ps 95:8 laments the rebellion at Meribah and Massah. (CSB)

To distinguish this incident from the one at Rephidim, this place is called Meribah of Kadesh (or Meribah-kadesh, Dt 32:51). (TLSB)

*He showed Himself holy.* The Lord distinguished His power, authority, and grace from Israel and her leaders. (TLSB)

**20:10–13** Meribah means "quarreling." Moses' words "shall we" indicate that he and Aaron were claiming credit for the miracle of water, not attributing it to God. Every good and perfect gift comes from the Lord. God's servants act as conduits of His kindness. As you serve each day, reflect by asking yourself, "How has God made me a blessing to others in my duties?" Though you will stumble in faith, as Moses did, know that your merciful Father will not cast you aside but will receive you unto Himself by grace alone. • Father, form in me a humble attitude of service and a repentant heart. Amen. (TLSB)

#### *Edom Refuses Passage*

**14** Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom: "Thus says your brother Israel: You know **all the hardship that we have met: 15 how our fathers went down to Egypt, and we lived in Egypt a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers. 16 And when we cried to the LORD, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. 17 Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or vineyard, or drink water from a well. 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.**" **18** But Edom said to him, "You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you." **19** And the people of Israel said to him, "We will go up by the highway, and if we drink of your water, I and my livestock, then I will pay for it. Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more." **20** But he said, "You shall not pass through." And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force. **21** Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory, so Israel turned away from him.

**20:14–21** Moses' attempt to pass through the territory of Edom by peaceful negotiation and payment for services rendered is met by arrogant rebuff. (CSB)

**20:14** *king of Edom.* By turning northward from Kadesh, the Israelites could take a direct route to the Transjordan Valley, past the descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother (Gn 25:21–26; 36:1–8). God's curse of the Canaanites does not include the Edomites, Israel's relatives through Esau. Therefore, an attack on them was forbidden. (TLSB)

*your brother Israel.* The people of Edom were descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob (see Ge 36:1). (CSB)

**20:17** *king's highway*. The major north-south trade route in Transjordan, extending from Arabia to Damascus. (CSB)

Important caravan route and military road; ran northward to Damascus from Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqaba. Route existed already in the third millennium BC. It crossed Edomite and Moabite territory and continued east of the Salt Sea and the Jordan as far north as Damascus. The name may mean it is fit for a king to travel, as opposed to more difficult routes. (TLSB)

**20:18–19** *Edom said ... Israel said*. King of Edom and Moses represented and spoke for their people. (TLSB)

**20:19** *water ... pay*. Note how precious water is in this region. Its value underlies many struggles and stories in Scripture. (TLSB)

**20:20** *large and strong force*. The show of force by Edom caused Israel to turn away so as not to risk conflict with this brother nation. Israel was forbidden by the Lord to take even a foothold in Edom (see Dt 2:4–6). (CSB)

**20:21** Although the Israelites promised peaceful passage through the land, they were forbidden to trespass on Edomite territory (Dt 2:4–6). The king of Moab responded negatively to a similar request by the Israelites (Jgs 11:17–18). Denied the use of the King's Highway by their kinsmen and forbidden to employ warlike measures, the Israelites took a circuitous route around Edom and Moab (21:4; Dt 2:4–9). (TLSB)

**20:14–21** Moses appeals to the Edomites for passage on the basis of history, and he promises to pay for water. Yet, Edom denies them passage. The tensions between Jacob and Esau, renewed here, persist throughout Israel's history. How sad when relatives cannot trust one another. How enduring the consequences of rivalry. Seek peace and fairness within your family. Above all things, pray for the forgiveness of sins as you forgive those who trespass against you (Mt 6:12). How blessed is the mercy of Jesus, our Brother (Heb 2:10–18). • Father, we thank You for Your grace, which traded our sinful lives for the sinless life of our Brother Christ Jesus. Amen. (TLSB)

#### *The Death of Aaron*

**22** And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. **23** And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, **24** “Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. **25** Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them up to Mount Hor. **26** And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there.” **27** Moses did as the LORD commanded. And they went up Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. **28** And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar his son. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. **29** And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron thirty days.

**20:22** *Mount Hor*. Other than its proximity to the border of Edom (v. 23), nothing is known for certain about its location. (CSB)

Territory in the vicinity of this mountain is called Moseroth (“chastisements”; 33:31; cf Dt 10:6). Exact location unknown. (TLSB)

**20:24** *gathered to his people*. A euphemism for death (see, e.g., Ge 25:8, 17; 35:29). (CSB)

*because you rebelled.* Aaron had joined Moses in rebellion against God (v. 12); his impending death was a precursor of Moses' death as well (see Dt 34). (CSB)

**20:25** *Aaron and his son Eleazar.* There was no doubt about Aaron's successor, just as there was no doubt about Moses' successor (see Dt 34). (CSB)

**20:26–28** While Aaron was still alive, his garments were to be placed on his son; only then did he die. (CSB)

**20:26** *strip Aaron.* Death would defile the garments. Cf ch 19. (TLSB)

**20:27** *in the sight.* To confirm the change for the congregation. (TLSB)

**20:28** *put them on Eleazar.* Transferring his office. (TLSB)

**20:29** *mourned for him.* His death (and that of Moses) marked the passing of a generation. The old generation was now nearly gone; in 40 years there had been almost a complete turnover of the people 20 years old or more. (CSB)

Luther: "I don't like to see examples of joyful death. On the other hand, I like to see those who tremble and shake and grow pale when they face death and yet get through. It was so with the great saints; they were not glad to die. Fear is something natural because death is a punishment, and therefore something sad. According to the spirit one dies willingly, but according to the flesh the saying applies 'Another will carry you where you do not wish to go' [John 21:18]" (AE 54:65). TLSB)

**20:22–29** Moses and Aaron install Eleazar as high priest. Aaron dies for his disbelief at Meribah (v 12). In death, he joins the rebellious generation who were lost in the wilderness. Today, rebellion is sometimes glorified. However, the Lord calls His people to peace, which He pronounces through His ministers in the word of blessing (Nu 6:24–26). Rejoice in and pray for His peace. • Lord, preserve Your Word among us, and grant us wise and peaceful hearts through Christ, our great High Priest. Amen. (TLSB)