

8. The journey Moses couldn't finish

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When Karen and I get to go somewhere for an out of town trip, obviously there is excitement for both of us. But we both noticed that once we get there, even though we enjoy our time together, we look forward to come back to our home, our own bed, and our own things. In other words, we'd like to finish our journey.

If you were Moses, can you imagine what it would be like to hear from the Lord that you are not allowed to enter into the Promised Land cannot finish this 40 year journey because of your one-time disobedience to the Lord? Wasn't it too harsh for the Lord who forgave the ever-complaining Israel people time after time for forty years? But it is more than keeping a leader in a higher standard. We will learn more about it in this study. I am hoping that we can cover four chapters from chapter 17 to chapter 20 tonight.

A. THE BUDDING OF AARON'S ROD

Numbers 17:1-5 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and get from them a rod from each father's house, all their leaders according to their fathers' houses--twelve rods. Write each man's name on his rod. 3 And you shall write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi. For there shall be one rod for the head of each father's house. 4 Then you shall place them in the tabernacle of meeting before the Testimony, where I meet with you. 5 And it shall be that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom; thus I will rid Myself of the complaints of the children of Israel, which they make against you."

The Lord wanted to prove once and for all that He had chosen Aaron and his sons to serve as priests, and to teach them that any more ignorant attempts on the part of any other tribe to seize the priesthood would meet with the wrath of God.

The test was simple. Out of the twelve rods from twelve tribes, the owner of the rod that has a blossom is the one God chose as a high priest – blossoms from a piece of dead wood. How can anyone ask for more evidence than that?

Numbers 17:8-10 Now it came to pass on the next day that Moses went into the tabernacle of witness, and behold, the rod of Aaron, of the house of Levi, had sprouted and put forth buds, had produced blossoms and yielded ripe almonds. 9 Then Moses brought out all the rods from before the Lord to all the children of Israel; and they looked, and each man took his rod. 10 And the Lord said to Moses, "Bring Aaron's rod back before the Testimony, to be kept as a sign against the rebels, that you may put their complaints away from Me, lest they die."

I really believe that our Lord God has a great sense of humor. First of all, He created Jack Laverty and Jerry Hamby to give us entertainment; and He not only brought blossoms on the dead rod, but also ripe almonds.

I am sure that as each tribal leader was taking his own rod back to their tribes, it became a constant reminder to rebels and malcontents not to challenge the God-given authority of the high priest Aaron. But Aaron's rod was not returned to him. It was to remain in front of the Ark of the Covenant. Aaron's rod joined the stone tables of the law of Moses and the jar of manna within the Ark of the Lord.

However, the interesting thing is that these memorials were put in a place where no one would ordinarily see them, because they were located in the Holy of holies where no one was allowed to be with the exception of a high priest once a year and Moses on rare occasions such as this chapter presents.

But should anyone of a later age dare to question the unique and holy place of the Aaronic priests in the service of the Lord, this memorial of God's symbolic choice of Aaron would stand poignantly in opposition to his audacity.

I believe that these Israelites had a fear of judgment from the Lord, but they didn't have a true fear of God that came from the love for God in their hearts like many so-called Christians in America.

B. DUTIES OF PRIESTS AND LEVITES

Numbers 18:1-3 Then the Lord said to Aaron: "You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. 2 Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. 3 They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die--they and you also.

Very little is written in the Book of Numbers about Israel's 38 years of wandering, although a list of their camping places is found in Numbers 33 as we will see. It's probable that the instructions in chapters 18 and 19 were given by the Lord while Israel was still at Kadesh-Barnea before the wandering began. However, when you get to chapter 20, the nation has completed its thirty-eight years of wandering and is back at Kadesh.

These Israelites had been stubborn and rebellious, and the Lord had chastened them for it, but in spite of their disobedience, the Lord had been faithful to care for them.

Even though God's presence in the tabernacle in their camp was the distinctive mark of the Israelites; even though they were the only nation to have the glory of the Living God who was with them and went before them for their protection, they were terrified of Him and even having the tabernacle in their camp.

It was the responsibility of the Levites to assist the priests in their tabernacle ministry. As long as they did what the Lord told them to do, there would be no judgment sent to the people.

C. THE LORD IS MY PORTION FOREVER

Numbers 18:20 Then the Lord said to Aaron: "You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.

What a beautiful thing for the Lord to say to Aaron and his descendants that He is their inheritance! We, too, have this very promise for us. After all we are a chosen generation and a royal priesthood through Jesus Christ. This inheritance cannot be bought, cannot be taken away. It only can be given to those who are called through the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 2:9 But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

D. YOU, TOO, THE LEVITES

Numbers 18:26 "Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: 'When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord, a tenth of the tithe.

The Jewish people didn't always obey God's command for tithing and as a consequence the ministry at the tabernacle and temple suffered which brought a spiritual collapse of the nation.

It has not changed a whole lot since then. Less than 10% of born-again Christians tithe in America. A lot of people are willing to give God credit, but so few ever give Him cash. Those who don't tithe will have a lot of explaining to do in heaven when they face the Lord.

If our question is, "How little can I give and still be pleasing to God?" our heart isn't in the right place at all. We should have the attitude of some early Christians, who essentially said: "We're not under the tithe – we can give more!" Giving and financial management is a spiritual issue, not just a financial one.

Luke 16:11 Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?

The Lord expected the Levites to tithe what they received and share it with the high priest. Several years ago I heard email conversations that went on back and forth among some of the Calvary Chapel pastors whether they should tithe or not. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Their garbage excuse was, "I am serving the Lord and all that I have belongs to Him." That excuse doesn't hold water. How do they expect their congregation to tithe and give offerings when they themselves were not doing it?

E. LAWS OF PURIFICATION AND RED HEIFER

Numbers 19:1-5 Now the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 2 "This is the ordinance of the law which the Lord has commanded, saying: 'Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring you a red heifer without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which a yoke has never come. 3 You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, that he may take it outside the camp, and it shall be slaughtered before him; 4 and Eleazar the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger, and sprinkle some of its blood seven times directly in front of the tabernacle of meeting. 5 Then the heifer shall be burned in his sight: its hide, its flesh, its blood, and its offal shall be burned.

To the 21st Century born-again American Christians, this law of purification do not have a whole lot of meaning, but to the orthodox Jews in Israel as well as around the world, it means so much. Because all these people want to build their temple on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem so bad, but even if they can build it there, they can not use it unless they go through this law of purification by using a red heifer according to this chapter.

In other words, they are going to slaughter a red heifer to purify their temple right before the abomination of desolation by the antichrist which will happen at the middle of the Great Tribulation. Don't worry, we are not going to be here to watch that from CNN. But Obama will.

By the way, interestingly, they refer to their future temple as their third temple – Solomon's temple as the first one, king Herod's temple as the second one, and the

future one the third. They don't consider the temple built under the leadership of Ezra as the third temple, because it was not as magnificent as the other two.

Ezra 3:12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of the fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this temple was laid before their eyes. Yet many shouted aloud for joy,

If you'd like to read more about the orthodox Jewish point of view regarding the third temple and red heifer, you can visit this web site. Please note that what you see does not entirely reflect what the Scripture says. Much of their point of view is from the Talmud which is the collection of ancient Rabbinic writings consisting of the Mishnah and the Gemara, constituting the basis of religious authority in Orthodox Judaism. http://www.templeinstitute.org/red_heifer/red_heifer_contents.htm

F. A FATAL MISTAKE

Numbers 20:2-13 Now there was no water for the congregation; so they gathered together against Moses and Aaron. 3 And the people contended with Moses and spoke, saying: "If only we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! 4 Why have you brought up the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we and our animals should die here? 5 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." 6 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. 7 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 8 "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." 9 So Moses took the rod from before the Lord as He commanded him. 10 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?" 11 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. 12 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." 13 This was the water of Meribah, because the children of Israel contended with the Lord, and He was hallowed among them.

Between chapter 19 and 20, there was 38 years of wandering in the wilderness. Now that they were back at Kadesh Barnea, we find that Moses' sister Miriam in v1 and his older brother Aaron died in v22-29.

Including the new generation, the entire congregation was doing what they do best – complaining. Their need was real, but the response of Israel was filled with unbelief and bad attitude.

Difficulties either bring out the best in people or the worst; they either mature us or make us more childish. Israel's words and attitudes revealed clearly that their hearts were still in Egypt. What a picture of the professed immature Christian who still loves the world and turns to the world for help whenever there's a problem!

1 John 2:15-17 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the

world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not of the Father but is of the world. 17 And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

Moses, after doing what God had told him to do for 40 years, then did something God had not told him to do. No doubt he was fed up with their complaints.

It doesn't matter how weary Moses was, he still didn't honor the Lord or obey His commands. Worse yet, Moses not only took the rebellion of the people against the Lord too personally, he also over-magnified his own partnership with God in v10. Moses spoke as if he and God would do the job, as if they divided the work 50-50; as if God couldn't bring water unless he was around to speak to the rock. His lapse into contempt while the people led him into a lapse of subtle pride.

We've seen many well-known Christian leaders who fall into this trap – self-imposed importance, somehow they start to think that they are too important for God to go on without them. I guarantee you that God deals with that kind of attitude real quickly.

Worst of all, Moses misrepresented the Lord. The New Testament makes it clear this water-providing, life-giving rock was a picture of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 10:4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ.

Jesus, being struck once, provided life for all who would drink of Him, much less again twice, because the Son of God needed only to suffer once on the cross.

Hebrews 10:10-12 By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. 12 But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God

God said only Joshua and Caleb would survive from that generation in Numbers 14:30, and that included, Miriam, Aaron, even Moses himself.

G. APPLICATIONS

- 1) A fear of the Lord that comes from our love for Him is far better than a fear of His judgment.
- 2) Difficulties either bring out the best in people or the worst; they either mature us or make us more childish.
- 3) Before we act, let's take a brief moment to ask ourselves how we represent our Lord to the unbelieving world since we carry His name.

9. The lesson from a donkey

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Just about all of you remember an old TV sitcom "Mr. Ed" that showed a talking horse. There are a few recent movies that portray animals speaking to humans in human language, such as "Dr. Dolittle".

I am so glad that animals don't speak, of course, my neighbor's dumb dog barks day and night including in the middle of night. If they could speak, it would be very noisy all over the world, don't you think?

We sometimes use the phrase "dumb animals," but we find out that a donkey was smarter than a rebellious master who was going against the Lord's command. This is the most unique incident in the Bible, if not in the history of the universe, an animal speaking to a man who should have known better.

A. THE BRONZE SERPENT

Numbers 21:4-9 Then they journeyed from Mount Hor by the Way of the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the soul of the people became very discouraged on the way. 5 And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." 6 So the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. 8 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live." 9 So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

The Israelites defeated the Canaanites at Hormah with help from the Lord, but courage in the battle must be followed by endurance in the race. Otherwise, it would be a short lived victory in one battle of a long war.

It didn't take long before the difficulty of the march made the people impatient and they started complaining against the Lord and His spokesperson Moses again. The word "worthless" they used was full of contempt against the Lord. These people had gotten so accustomed to their blessings from the Lord that they detested it and called it "worthless".

They rejected God's gift of life and health from heaven, so He sent them suffering and death from the earth, and many of them died. The word "fiery" in Hebrew is "saraph" which means "burning". I wouldn't be surprised if the serpents were poisonous with their venom and gave torturous death to the Israelites.

Jesus used the bronze serpent to illustrate His own death on the cross in John 3 as we already studied it before:

John 3:14-15 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.