



▸ *Lack of Trust* ◀

GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO TRUST HIM IN EVERY SITUATION.

NUMBERS 20:2-13

People generally fall into two categories—those who read and follow the instructions and those who think they can figure it out as they go along. Those who fall into this latter category may do so because of heightened self-confidence, impatience, or a history of past successes. Sometimes, though, at the end of the project, those in the second category may be left with extra, unused parts or an end product that doesn't quite look like it was supposed to.

 **Do you find yourself in category one or two? Why do you think that is your tendency? On what kinds of tasks is it most important to follow instructions all the way to the end?**

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

NUMBERS 15:1–22:1

Numbers 11:1 states that “the people began complaining.” This introduces a series of seven rebellions, which continue through chapter 21. In Hebrew writing, the climax of a series usually occurs in the middle. True to form, the fourth complaint was the most serious offense.

(1) Numbers 11:1-3 mentions a general complaint about hardships. Rather than being grateful for God’s provisions, the people focused on their discomfort. God responded with fire. Moses prayed, and the fire and complaints ceased.

(2) Numbers 11:4-34 records the people complaining about their daily manna. Moses told God that the pressure was too great to bear. God instructed him to appoint seventy elders to help.

(3) Numbers 11:35–12:16 says Miriam and Aaron complained about Moses’s wife. Their greater complaint was that God seemingly spoke only to and through Moses. God struck Miriam with a skin affliction. Moses prayed, and God healed her.

(4) Numbers 13:1–14:45 tells of twelve spies going into Canaan for forty days. Ten brought back a negative report, and the Israelites refused to enter. God caused the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for one year for each day the spies were in Canaan.

(5) Numbers 16:1-50 says Korah staged a rebellion against Moses. He enlisted ring leaders to help him, then others joined in. God was ready to destroy the Israelites. Moses interceded. The earth opened and swallowed Korah and his ring leaders. God then rained fire down on all the others. When the Israelites complained about what had happened, God sent a plague through the camp.

(6) Numbers 20:2-13 tells of the people again complaining about water. God provided water from a rock after Moses struck—rather than spoke to—the rock. This is the focus of today’s study.

(7) Numbers 21:4-9 says the people again complained about the food and water situation. God responded by sending serpents into the camp. They bit the people, who then died. The people repented, Moses prayed, and God told him to raise a bronze snake on a pole. All who looked upon it recovered.



Read Numbers 20:2-13. Note what Moses and Aaron did right and what they did wrong.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PROBLEM (NUM. 20:2-5)

² There was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moses and Aaron. ³ The people quarreled with Moses and said, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD. ⁴ Why have you brought the LORD’s assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? ⁵ Why have you led us up from Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It’s not a place of grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates, and there is no water to drink!”

VERSES 2-3

The Israelites were in the Wilderness of Zin, at Kadesh-barnea (v. 1). They had been there forty years earlier. From there, Moses had sent twelve spies into the land, and the people decided against entering Canaan (13:26). In the intervening years, they wandered in the wilderness. All aged twenty and above died during those four decades (14:26-35).

The need for water had been an ongoing problem. This was one of their earliest challenges after crossing the Red Sea (Ex. 15:23-26). Later, at Rephidim, likely just north of Mount Sinai, God supplied water by having Moses strike a rock (17:1-7). That was forty years earlier; most of this generation had not seen that miracle.

Verse 2 says the people **assembled against** their leaders. Although not violent, they were intense and assertive. The Israelites **quarreled** intensely with Moses and Aaron.

When the people complained about a lack of water forty years earlier, they asked: “Why did you ever bring us up from Egypt to kill us . . . with thirst” (Ex. 17:3). Here they said they would have preferred to have **perished** with their **brothers** who had died. They likely were referring to those who died following Korah in his rebellion against Moses.

VERSES 4-5

The Hebrews were not posing a question; rather, they were making an accusation. This is often the case with a question that begins with “why?”—especially if the *why* is followed by *would*, *have*, or *did you*.

The terminology the Israelites used, the **LORD's assembly**, repeats the phrase Korah and his followers used when they staged their rebellion against Moses (Num. 16:3). These are the only two occurrences of the phrase in the book of Numbers. The phrase created a Moses-versus-them scenario and underscored the severity of both challenges to Moses's leadership.

The question clarifies the Israelites' concern. They thought they and their animals were about to die of thirst in **this wilderness**, meaning in this vast desert. Deuteronomy 1:19 describes it as the "great and terrible wilderness."

Verse 5 drips with irony. The **you** is plural; the people blamed Moses and Aaron for leading them from Egypt. They evidently had forgotten about the Lord's deliverance "from the forced labor of the Egyptians" and their "slavery to them." They gave no thought of God redeeming them "with [His] outstretched arm and great acts of judgment" (Ex. 6:6).

Also, they called Kadesh-barnea **this evil place**. What an irony! God had led them to "an extremely good land . . . flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 14:7-8). This was Joshua's and Caleb's description of Canaan. The people could have been in "an extremely good land"; instead, they were in an *evil place* because of their lack of faith.

Finally, the people longed for the food they had in Egypt. They spoke of **grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates**. These, though, were not foods from Egypt. While in captivity, they had "cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic" (11:5). Had they entered Canaan, they could have been enjoying grain, figs, grapes, and pomegranates—instead of manna.



Why do we tend to romanticize "the good old days," even though they weren't always so good?

THE PLAN (NUM. 20:6-8)

⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting. They fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. ⁷ The Lord spoke to Moses, ⁸ "Take the staff and assemble the community. You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch, and it will yield its water. You will bring

out water for them from the rock and provide drink for the community and their livestock.”

VERSE 6

Numbers 11–21 records the Israelites’ seven rebellions or complaints. With each, Moses (and sometimes Aaron) interceded for God’s people. Among the seven, this is the only one that specifies where Moses and Aaron made their inquiry before the Lord. Saying they **went from the presence of the assembly** underscores the Moses- and Aaron-versus-them situation.

Facedown was the common position when interceding for God’s people. Moses and Aaron did this when the Israelites refused to enter Canaan. They also fell facedown when God threatened to destroy His people after Korah’s rebellion (Num. 14:5; 16:22). Jesus assumed this same position when He pleaded, “let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). Each instance was of a desperate prayer. The position communicates an anguished and humble attitude.

VERSES 7-8

The LORD spoke to Moses. How simple, yet profound, is this statement. It occurs thirty-two times in the book of Numbers, beginning with chapter 1, verse 1. This was the voice Moses first heard at the burning bush (Ex. 3:4). It was the voice that spoke creation into being. This voice declared at Jesus’s baptism, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased” (Matt. 3:17).

One cannot help but wonder about God’s voice at the tent of meeting. Did only Moses hear it? Was God addressing only Moses—but both men heard His voice? Or was God’s voice audible at all? Scripture does not say.

Scripture does say what Moses and Aaron were to do. Did the **staff** belong to Moses or Aaron? If to Moses, he previously used it while tending his father-in-law’s flocks. It became a snake in the courts of Pharaoh. The Nile turned to blood when Moses struck the water with it. More likely, the staff was Aaron’s. In Numbers 17, God miraculously caused Aaron’s rod to bud, blossom, and produce almonds—all in one night. Afterward, God told Moses to “Put Aaron’s staff back *in front of the testimony* to be kept as a sign for the rebels” (Num. 17:10, emphasis added).

With rod in hand, Moses and Aaron were to **speak to the rock**, and water would come forth. This was different from when God instructed Moses to hit the rock with his staff so water would pour

forth and the people could drink (Ex. 17:6). Most people in the Numbers 20 community had not seen that happen.



What kinds of difficulties get you facedown—either literally or figuratively—before the Lord?



KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. (See Psalm 146:5-10; Isaiah 41:10.)

THE RESULT (NUM. 20:9-13)

⁹ So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence just as he had commanded him. ¹⁰ Moses and Aaron summoned the assembly in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?" ¹¹ Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, so that abundant water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. ¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them." ¹³ These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD, and he demonstrated his holiness to them.

VERSES 9-11

Moses took the staff *from the LORD's presence*, meaning from the tabernacle. He did *just as* God had *commanded* him. This had been Moses's practice since first encountering God at the burning bush. How long, though, would that last?

Moses's and Aaron's patience was gone. They were exhausted and they overreacted. The verb *summoned* carries the idea of convening a group for a specific purpose. This would not be an informal assembly or meeting. God had given the directive, and Moses was responding obediently.

The multitude gathered in front of the **rock**. This word referred to a bare-face cliff. Thus, Moses was bringing the crowd to the base of a cliff wall.

Emphatically, Moses demanded they listen to what he had to say. The Hebrew term for **rebels** typically refers to individuals who are defying God. The people had complained about a lack of water and food before. What was different this time? Moses had not responded like this before. Thus, Moses's anger—rather than the people's behavior—caused this outburst.

In asking, ***must we bring water out . . . ?***, Moses was calling attention to Aaron and himself. *Must we* is radically different from *must God*. Any accolades and praises would go to him and Aaron. Even though Moses asked, *must we bring*, he evidently struck the rock alone. Despite God's instructing Moses to speak to the rock, he instead struck it twice.

Did God withhold His blessing because of Moses's disobedience? No, water gushed out, enough to satisfy the thousands and thousands of people and their cattle. God did not punish the people because their leader had defied Him.

How much water did God provide? The psalmist said, "He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink as abundant as the depths. He brought streams out of the stone and made water flow down like rivers" (Ps. 78:15-16).

VERSES 12-13

Instead of speaking to the rock (v. 8), Moses struck it. How did striking the rock indicate Moses and Aaron did not trust God to demonstrate His **holiness**? Scripture does not say, but a few connections could apply. First, God is holy. This fact echoes throughout the Bible. God calls His followers to be holy. To disobey was (and is) a sin and thus a violation of His holiness. Second, to flagrantly defy God's instructions meant the person thought he knew better than God. Moses and Aaron placed their plan in front of God's plan. God saw this as an act of rebellion (see v. 24). Third, hitting the rock to get water could appear to be a magician's or sorcerer's trick. Or the assembly might have thought this was a skill Moses had learned as a shepherd. But for water to come out because someone spoke to the rock was beyond human explanation. Moses's action moved the focus away from God—His power, uniqueness, and ability—and put it instead on Moses.

Because they had not followed God's instructions to the end, neither Moses nor Aaron would enter Canaan. This was the final and ultimate Moses- and Aaron-versus-them scenario in this story.

The word **•Meribah** means "contention" or "strife." The name reflected the people's quarreling with God rather than trusting Him fully and obediently.

Events at Meribah demonstrated God's holiness in two ways. First, God showed He was faithful. Second, by punishing Aaron and Moses, God showed that He expects obedience from all of His people. A person's status does not influence or dictate God's expectations. He expects all of us to trust Him.



What does it say about God's character that He provided such an abundance of water?



BIBLE SKILL: *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a key Bible teaching.*

Numbers 20:9-13 records the failure of Moses and Aaron to follow God's instructions exactly. As a result, God did not permit them to enter the promised land. Read the passage, noting how the Israelites frustrated Moses and Aaron (v. 10), yet God held the leaders accountable for their disobedience. Do you think God holds leaders to a greater degree of accountability or the same? Explain your answer, using Hebrews 13:17 and James 3:1 for additional insight.

APPLY THE TEXT

- + Believers can trust God even when current circumstances appear bleak.
- + We can turn to God with our needs and concerns.
- + Believers should recognize that ignoring God's instructions leads to consequences.



Moses and Aaron fell facedown before the Lord (v. 6).

Have you experienced “facedown” situations? What advice would you offer to members of your Bible study group about how to pray for those issues?



In what areas has God given you specific instructions?

How closely are you following those? What changes do you need to make to get back on track?



Memorize Numbers 20:12.

Prayer Needs
