

# Striking the Rock (Numbers 20:1-13)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

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## I. Introduction

- a. The Israelite nation is wandering in the Wilderness. Due to the rebellion of the people when the 12 spies were sent out to explore Canaan for 40 days, the nation was sentenced to 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness.
- b. As we have discussed several times, the Israelite nation foreshadows the church.
  - i. Even though they all were “baptized” in passing through the Red Sea in escaping Egypt, they must endure a time of trials and temptations. They are being tested in the Wilderness.
  - ii. Most of those who were “baptized” and “ate the spiritual food and drank the spiritual drink” will fall in the Wilderness due to sin and, therefore, will not make it into the Promised Land (**1 Corinthians 10:1-13**).
  - iii. We can learn from those who were successful in remaining faithful to the end, who entered the Promised Land (Joshua and Caleb). We also can learn life-saving lessons from those who fell because of sin.
    1. Everything on this journey is to teach us, the Christians.
- c. In the book of **Numbers**, we encounter important prophecies about Jesus Christ, the One to come, given 1400 years before His birth in Bethlehem. For example:
  - i. The regulations concerning the Passover Lamb foreshadow Christ.
  - ii. The story of the red heifer and the water of purification (prior message), which early Christian writers saw as a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ and the spiritual cleansing we can receive through His death.
- d. **Numbers 20**, the subject of this lesson, includes:
  - i. Moses striking the rock, a sin that prevents both Moses and Aaron from entering the Promised Land.
  - ii. The death of Aaron on Mount Hor.

- iii. In this message, we will discuss at length questions that many Christians have wondered: “Why wasn’t Moses able to enter the Promised Land? Why did Moses face such a severe consequence for simply striking a rock?”

## II. Moses Struck the Rock

- a. Read **Numbers 20:1-13**.
- b. Storyline.
  - i. Mariam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, dies and is buried at Kadesh.
  - ii. The people do not like it in Kadesh. There is no water for them or their cattle. Neither does the land produce things to eat, such as figs, pomegranates or grapes.
  - iii. The Lord gives Moses clear instructions:
    - 1. Moses is to *take his rod* with him.
    - 2. Moses is to *take his brother Aaron* with him and *gather the assembly* before “the rock”.
    - 3. Moses is then to *speak to the rock* before the people, and it will give forth water.
  - iv. Moses generally follows the instructions. He takes his rod and Aaron, and they gather the people before the rock.
    - 1. However, Moses strikes the rock twice with his rod.
    - 2. He also says, “Must we bring water for you out of this rock?”
      - a. **Question:** Does that sound like Moses is lacking humility or taking credit for this? Or that he is unrighteously angry with the people?
      - b. Regardless of the underlying reason, the Lord rebukes both Moses and Aaron and tells them that neither will bring the people into the Promised Land.
        - i. Now, both Moses and Aaron are destined to die in the Wilderness.
    - 3. This place will be referred to as “*the Water of Contention*” (or “*Waters of Controversy*” / “*Waters of Strife*”).

c. **Question:** Why was such an *extreme punishment* given to these two men of God?

i. Let us first consider Aaron.

1. Did he do anything else wrong over the course of his time in Egypt and in the Wilderness? I can think of two other examples:
  - a. Aaron was responsible for fashioning the golden calf and then making excuses and refusing to take responsibility for it (**Exodus 33**).
  - b. Also, Aaron and his sister were envious of Moses and unfairly criticized him regarding his Ethiopian wife (**Numbers 12**).
2. However, the Lord did not disqualify Aaron from entering the Promised Land for either of those (seemingly greater) sins! It was his role in the incident with striking the rock that disqualified him. (**Numbers 20:22-29**)
  - a. The terms “*Waters of Controversy*” (**Numbers 20:24**) and “*Waters of Contention*” (**Numbers 20:13**) are exactly the same in the Greek of the LXX.
  - b. This makes it clear that Aaron died in the Wilderness and was banned from entering Canaan because he “provoked the Lord” in the incident where he and Moses brought water out of the rock, in **Numbers 20**.

ii. Let us consider the track record of Moses.

1. Did Moses do anything else wrong in (nearly 120 years of) his life?
  - a. The only other sin that comes to mind is his reluctance to go on the mission that God called him to at the burning bush encounter in **Exodus 3**. There, it says the Lord was very angry with Moses when he repeatedly tried to get out of that assignment.
  - b. I can't think of anything else that Moses did where the Lord was unhappy with him.
  - c. While most heroes of faith stumbled and sinned in some significant way during their life, that does not appear to

be the case with Moses. While not flawless, he did lead an exemplary life of faith.

2. Moses would later beg the Lord to relent and allow him to enter Canaan with the rest of the Israelites. However, unlike other times when Moses appealed to the Lord for mercy, in this case, He would not relent.
  - a. Read **Deuteronomy 3:21-29**.
  - b. Moses pleaded with the Lord to let him enter the Promised Land.
  - c. However, the Lord shut down Moses' request and told him never to speak about it again. He would only see the land of Canaan from a distance.
    - i. It would be *Joshua*, the assistant of Moses, who would lead the people into the Promised Land.
    - ii. Recall that the man we know as the Old Testament 'Joshua' was originally known as Hoshea, the son of Nun. His name was changed to 'Jesus' (Greek, in the LXX) or 'Joshua' (in Hebrew), as explained in **Numbers 13:8-16**.
- iii. Consider what happened many years earlier, the first time water came from the rock.
  1. Read **Exodus 17:1-7**.
  2. The instructions this first time with the rock were *almost* exactly the same as in the later account in **Numbers**. In the earlier **Exodus 17** incident:
    - a. Moses was told to take the rod in his hand and stand before the rock and strike it.
    - b. Moses did this before the people.
    - c. Water came out of the rock.
  3. The biggest difference: while both times he was told to take the rod, Moses was told the *first time* to *strike the rock*, but the second time he was told to (just) *speak to* the rock.
    - a. Again: What is the big deal? It is *just a rock*, and it worked just fine when Moses did it that way (striking the rock) the first time (in **Exodus 17**)!

- d. **Consider:** Let us consider why this minor difference might be so significant in the sight of the Lord. A few other instances where a specific requirement might seem insignificant to us, but in fact, had great significance that would only become clear over 1,000 years later.
- i. **Example No. 1:** When eating the Passover Lamb dinner, don't break any of the bones of the lamb.
    1. This odd requirement was stated in **Exodus 12:46** and **Numbers 9:12**.
  - ii. **Example No. 2:** While it was fine to have yeast in the house for 51 weeks of the year, anyone who had it in the house during the week after the Passover Lamb was slaughtered would be cut off from the community.
    1. This requirement was specified in **Exodus 12:19-20** and **Deuteronomy 16:4**.
  - iii. **Example No. 3:** Not only did the Israelites need to kill the Passover Lamb and eat its flesh on the eve of the Passover; they also had to paint some of the blood of that same lamb on the doorframes of their houses, or the residents would be struck dead.
    1. Why such an extreme penalty if such very specific rules were not followed (**Exodus 12:7**)?
    2. Why wouldn't some *red paint* have been good enough to indicate to the angel of death that he should avoid that household?
  - iv. **(Hidden) Reasons for Those Requirements:** In all three examples, the requirements were so specific, and in some cases, the penalties for not following these seemingly unnecessary requirements were VERY IMPORTANT because they were provided to point prophetically to Jesus Christ.
    1. The requirement to *break none of the lamb's bones* was to foreshadow Jesus on the cross 1400 years later. He would be the ultimate Passover Lamb, and none of his bones would be broken (in contrast with the legs of the two crucified on either side of Him).
      - a. We see this fulfilled after Jesus died on the cross, in **John 19:31-36**.
    2. The requirement to *get rid of all the yeast* in the house and in the community for seven days after the Passover Lamb was

slain foreshadowed how Christians must now get all the sin out of our lives and our community, the church.

- a. Paul explained that in **1 Corinthians 5:6-12**.
3. The blood of the lamb on the door that protected the Israelites within foreshadowed how the blood of Christ protects us from destruction.
    - a. "...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the *precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.*" (**1 Peter 1:18-19**, NKJV)
- e. **Questions:** Is it possible that there was some *prophetic significance* regarding the staff striking that unusual rock, from which the water came? Was that intended to reveal something about Christ, which is why a (seemingly minor) violation of instructions had such dire consequences?
    - i. Was there something extraordinary about that rock?
    - ii. Read **1 Corinthians 10:1-4**.
      1. "...and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and *that Rock was Christ.*" (**1 Corinthians 10:4**, NKJV)
      2. The rock that produced water from which they drank "was Christ", according to Paul.
      3. Therefore, how they *treated* this rock takes on much greater significance!
    - iii. Throughout the Old Testament, unusual rocks (or stones/rocks that did unusual things) were used to foreshadow the Christ.
      1. In **Matthew 21:42-44**, Jesus quotes one such prophecy and alludes to a second one.
      2. In **1 Peter 2:4-8**, the apostle Peter refers to Jesus as the "living stone" and quotes three Old Testament prophecies where the Christ is portrayed in prophecy as a stone or rock.
      3. We discussed *over ten Old Testament prophecies* involving a 'stone' or 'rock' foreshadowing different aspects of Christ in a lesson posted on our website.

- a. See notes to the lesson: *Christ, the Living Stone (1 Peter 2:4-8)*, dated 12/13/2020.
- iv. Now let us consider that rock, which could be struck by the rod once, but not a second time! If that rock was 'Christ' (figuratively), it makes sense to me that the following might be the reason for the severe consequences of striking it (Christ) with the rod of wood a second time.
1. In **Exodus 17:1-7**, Moses was told to strike the rock (= Christ) with his wooden rod, after which it produced water.
  2. In **Numbers 20:1-13**, Moses was told to speak to the rock (not to strike it again with the rod).
    - a. Certainly, this story is a reminder that we should do exactly what the Lord tells us. However, I believe there is something much more significant going on.
    - b. In many places in Scripture, early Christian writers saw references to wood that did unusual things (especially if that involved a stone or water) as foreshadowing the wood of the cross of Christ.
  3. Therefore, since that rock "was Christ", *IF* the wooden staff of Moses foreshadowed the cross...
    - a. ...*perhaps* the reason this act disqualified Moses from entering the Promised Land with the rest of his people points to the fact that Jesus would be crucified (rock struck by the rod) *only once*.
      - i. "so Christ *was offered once* to bear the sins of many..." (**Hebrews 9:28**, NKJV)
      - ii. "For Christ also *suffered once for sins*, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit..." (**1 Peter 3:18**, NKJV)
    - b. This reminds me of the warnings to Christians in **Hebrews**, that if we deliberately keep on sinning, we can reach a point where we would be, in effect, *crucifying Christ a second time*. That would disqualify us from entering our promised and desired destination: eternal life.

- i. “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they *crucify again for themselves the Son of God*, and put Him to an open shame.” (**Hebrews 6:4–6**, NKJV)
  - ii. “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (**Hebrews 10:26–31**, NKJV)
4. Possible takeaways from this story of striking the rock for us:
- a. If the wooden rod represents the cross, the rod striking the rock could represent Christ suffering and dying on the cross.
  - b. Christ suffered on the cross once, for all time.
  - c. If, after we have been forgiven our sins, we deliberately turn back and fall away, they would be, in effect, crucifying the Son of God for a second time.
  - d. We must respect what Jesus did for us on the cross. When we sin, we must repent and turn back to Him, so that the blood of Christ can wash our sins away.
  - e. However, we also need to be sober of the fact that through deliberate sin after becoming a Christian, one



can reach a point where our hearts are so hardened that we can no longer be brought back to repentance.

- i. At that point, no sacrifice for sins remains.
- ii. **CAUTION:** Several times I have seen the term “falling away” used carelessly by Christians. Sometimes it has been applied to someone who has stopped coming to their church, or who gets involved in sins, or who has spiritual struggles. However, let us be careful how we use the term “falling away” *in the sense it is used in **Hebrews 6***.
  1. We see in the New Testament several examples of Christians sinning seriously after their conversion, yet having the hope of repentance and restoration.
    - a. See examples of this in **1 Corinthians, Acts 8, Revelation 2-3**, etc.
  2. Therefore, let us *NOT* overreact to this sobering message to the point of despair!
- f. However, at the same time, may we *never come even close* to figuratively “crucifying again the Son of God”.
  - f. A few thoughts on ‘decoding’ mysteries hidden in the Old Testament.
    - i. In my childhood, manufacturers of certain cereals and candy (like *Cap’n Crunch* and *Chex* breakfast cereal, or *Cracker Jacks* candy) would insert small toys in their boxes to entice children to pester their parents to buy that product.
      1. I recall digging into these boxes before my siblings to find the little plastic toy contained therein.
      2. One of the classic prizes was a special “decoder ring”, consisting of two dials on a ring. With it, you could write out messages to a friend that could only be decoded with the benefit of one of these rings!
      3. *Ovaltine*, a powder added to milk to produce a malted, chocolate-flavored beverage, sponsored the television show ‘*Captain Midnight*’ in the 1950s. If you sent in the cover of an Ovaltine jar to the company, they would send you an ‘official’ *Cadet* membership card and a *secret decoder ring*!

- ii. Likewise, there are some things that are planted in the Old Testament Scriptures that are in the form of a code.
  - 1. However, you don't need one of these special rings.
    - a. You don't even need to buy anything.
    - b. We can learn from Jesus, the apostles and early Christian writers.
  - 2. Plus, what we now have is much greater in so many ways.
    - a. Instead of being able to understand coded messages from '*Captain Midnight*', we can now receive and understand hidden messages from "the *captain* of our salvation" (**Hebrews 2:10**).
    - b. Also, the messages we can decode are mysteries hidden from ancient times, which now have been entrusted to us.
      - i. "But we speak the *wisdom of God in a mystery*, the *hidden wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory...." (**1 Corinthians 2:7**, NKJV)
      - ii. "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and *stewards of the mysteries of God*." (**1 Corinthians 4:1**, NKJV)
- iii. Some classic things that are 'coded' into the Old Testament, which we have touched on today, include:
  - 1. A *rock* or *stone* (especially if it does something unusual) = (often) Christ.
    - a. From Irenaeus, bishop of the church in Lyons, in Gaul (modern-day France), writing c. 180 AD:
      - i. "On this account also, Daniel, foreseeing His advent, said that a stone, cut out without hands, came into this world (**Daniel 2**). For this is what 'without hands' means, that His coming into this world was not by the operation of human hands, that is, of those men who are accustomed to stone-cutting; that is, Joseph taking no part with regard to it, but Mary alone co-operating with the pre-arranged plan. For this stone from the

earth derives existence from both the power and the wisdom of God.

- ii. “Wherefore also Isaiah says: ‘Thus says the Lord, Behold, I deposit in the foundations of Zion a stone, precious, elect, the chief, the corner-one, to be had in honor.’ So, then, we understand that His advent in human nature was not by the will of a man, but by the will of God.” (**Isaiah 28:16**)
    - 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 21.7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 453)
2. *Wood* or something *made of wood*, such as a rod = (often) the cross
- a. Read **Wisdom of Solomon 14:3-7**.
    - i. This quote is in the context of a discussion on the importance of wood.
    - ii. The passage refers to the Flood of Noah, in which arrogant giants perished, but a righteous few were saved.
    - iii. “For the wood was blessed through which righteousness comes.” (This statement makes me think of the cross of Christ.)
  - b. From Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
    - i. “Righteously also do we, possessing the same faith as Abraham, and taking up the cross as Isaac did the wood, follow Him.”
      - 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 4, chapter 5; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 467)
      - 2. Here Irenaeus is referring to the story of **Genesis 22**, where Isaac carried the wood up the mountain to the place where Abraham was supposed to sacrifice his son.
  - c. From Justin Martyr, writing c. 160 AD:

- i. "...His [*Jesus*] crucifixion, was symbolized both by the tree of life, which was said to have been planted in paradise (**Genesis 2-3**), and by those events which should happen to all the just. Moses was sent with a rod to effect the redemption of the people (**Exodus 4, 7**, etc.); and with this in his hands at the head of the people, he divided the sea (**Exodus 14**). By this he saw the water gushing out of the rock (**Exodus 17**); and when he cast a tree into the waters of Marah, which were bitter, he made them sweet (**Exodus 15**).
- ii. "Jacob, by putting rods into the water-troughs, caused the sheep of his uncle to conceive, so that he should obtain their young (**Genesis 30**). With his rod the same Jacob boasts that he had crossed the river (**Genesis 32**). He said he had seen a ladder, and the Scripture has declared that God stood above it (**Genesis 28**). But that this was not the Father, we have proved from the Scriptures.
- iii. "...Aaron's rod, which blossomed, declared him to be the high priest (**Numbers 17**). Isaiah prophesied that a rod would come forth from the root of Jesse, [and this was] Christ (**Isaiah 11**). And David says that the righteous man is 'like the tree that is planted by the channels of waters, which should yield its fruit in its season, and whose leaf should not fade.' (**Psalms 1**)
- iv. "...David affirms that God comforted him with a rod and staff (**Psalms 23**). Elisha, by casting a stick into the river Jordan, recovered the iron part of the axe (**2 Kings 6**) with which the sons of the prophets had gone to cut down trees to build the house in which they wished to read and study the law and commandments of God; even as our Christ, by being crucified on the tree, and by purifying [us] with water, has redeemed us, though plunged in the direst offences which we have committed, and has made [us] a house of prayer and adoration."

1. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho a Jew*, chapter 86; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 242)
  2. According to Justin Martyr, it was no coincidence that Moses was instructed to, “*lift up your rod*” when the Lord commanded him to stretch out his hand over the sea and divide it. (**Exodus 14:16**).
  3. Justin saw the rod of Moses, through which great miracles were done, as foreshadowing the cross of Christ.
3. *Water* = (often) baptism or the Holy Spirit
- a. Baptism examples
    - i. Red Sea crossing (**1 Corinthians 10:1-3**)
    - ii. Flood of Noah (**1 Peter 3:19-21**)
    - iii. Naaman’s cleansing in **2 Kings 5** (Irenaeus, in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 574)
  - b. Holy Spirit examples
    - i. [*To the Samaritan woman at the well*] “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.’” (**John 4:13-14**, NKJV)
    - ii. [*At the Feast of Tabernacles*] “On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” (**John 7:37-39**, NKJV)
      1. Recall that the Feast of Tabernacles was associated with the time of wandering in

the Wilderness (**Leviticus 23:33-43**), during which time the Israelites had to live in *tents* or *tabernacles*. This was the time during which the Lord gave them water from the rock!

2. Also recall that in **John 14 and 16**, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would only come after He went away (was crucified and died on the cross).
4. *Water + Wood* (when both occur together in the Old Testament)
    - a. “For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through *water, and faith, and wood*, containing the mystery of the cross; even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters with his household.
    - b. “Accordingly, when the prophet says, ‘I saved you in the times of Noah,’ as I have already remarked, he addresses the people who are equally faithful to God, and possess the same signs. For when Moses had the rod in his hands, he led your nation through the sea. And you believe that this was spoken to your nation only, or to the land.
    - c. “But the whole earth, as the Scripture says, was inundated, and the water rose in height fifteen cubits above all the mountains: so that it is evident this was not spoken to the land, but to the people who obeyed Him: for whom also He had before prepared a resting-place in Jerusalem, as was previously demonstrated by all the symbols of the deluge; I mean, that by *water, faith, and wood*, those who are afore-prepared, and who repent of the sins which they have committed, shall escape from the impending judgment of God.”
      - i. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapter 138; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 268)

### III. Some Concluding Takeaway Thoughts for Us

- a. God had His reasons for disqualifying Moses and Aaron from seeing the Promised Land.

- b. We need to take the commands of God seriously and simply do what He says, not adding to it nor taking away from it, *even if we do not at the time understand the reason for the command.*
- c. We can see Christ and the cross foreshadowed in allegorical style prophecies as well as the more straightforward type. These prophecies use rocks, water, wooden things, etc. throughout the Old Testament Scriptures to plant mysteries that have now been revealed to us!
- d. With some insights from Jesus, the apostles and early Christians, we can better understand these hidden prophecies and mysteries.
- e. Christ would be crucified “once for all time”. After we have been forgiven our sins, let us never “crucify the Son of God” again through deliberate sin that will harden our hearts to the point where we can no longer be brought to repentance.
  - i. Moses and Aaron lost their lives over a rock that the Lord provided to teach us important lessons about Christ and our salvation.
  - ii. Let us never forget those crucial lessons!