

What's the Message – Lesson 35

Today we continue our study of the Book of Numbers with “Lessons in the Wilderness” Part Two.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Again we pray that the Lord will open your hearts and enable you to learn the easy way, not to repeat the mistakes of our spiritual forefathers. Amen.

Last time we studied three temptations that the people of Israel faced, and saw how those same situations face us today also. Today we shall look at some different examples of the most important lesson we all need to learn.

Let's begin with some verses at the end of chapter 14 of Numbers. These verses follow the pronouncement of God's judgment on Israel that they would wander for 40 years because they refused to follow His command, as we studied last time.

It has been said that sometimes it seemed that stubbornness was Israel's only strong suit. What these verses tell us is that they decided they would go to battle as the Lord had previously instructed, after all. In spite of the warning of Moses that the Lord was not with them now, and would not fight for them, they would go any way. But just as Moses had warned, they were defeated. It was a bitter lesson, indeed.

The next major event comes in chapter 16. In this situation we have a man named Korah, a Levite, who gathered a group of followers and rebelled against the leadership of Moses. We read in verses 2 through 4: *they rose up before Moses, with a number of the people of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen from the assembly, well-known men; and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said to them,*

“You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them; why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?”

This was an all-out rebellion, and it required drastic action on the part of God. So God told Moses to have the rest of the people to separate themselves from the group of rebels. Then Moses told the people that if God created some way new to punish them, it would be a sign to the congregation that these rebels have despised the Lord.

As we read in verses 31 and 32: *And as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split asunder; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the men that belonged to Korah and all their goods.*

As a famous old baseball player used to say, our last example today is “déjà vu all over again.” In chapter 20, verses 3 through 5, we read: *And the people contended with Moses, and said, “Would that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! Why have you brought this assembly of the Lord into the wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 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.”*

So Moses turned to God and was instructed to take the people to a certain rock, and Moses was to speak to the rock and command it to bring forth water. But here was a time the faith of Moses faltered. In a fit of anger, Moses said to the Israelites, *Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle.*

Now, Teacher, with this brief outline of events, we have three more examples of lessons the Israelites had to learn. But, what is the message for us?

In the first of these three examples, we see the Israelites deciding they would take matters into their own hands, no matter what God said. They would go and fight the Amelekites and Canaanites even though the Lord had said “No, I won’t be with you”. Of course, they were defeated. What was the lesson they had to learn? Obviously, to obey God.

In the second example, about Korah's rebellion, what was happening here? Once again we see someone assuming an authority that God had not granted them, and when they rebelled against his chosen leader Moses, they were actually rebelling against God. And the punishment was in dramatic fashion, so that there would be no question about who was in charge. We do this same rebellion in our lives, in so many different ways, don't we? We want to be the one in control, and tell God how it should be done. But it just won't work that way – we are not God, no matter how much we may pretend.

Our third example is the failure of not just the Israelites with their complaining, but also of Moses, and it cost him the joy of entering the promised land. God instructed Moses that out of His grace and mercy, He would provide the people with water. All Moses had to do was to speak to the rock and it would gush forth. But Moses turned that instruction upside down. Instead of mercy, Moses turned it into a threat of law. And in anger he struck the rock with his staff two times.

This was clear disobedience on the part of Moses, and he would be punished for it.

Can we summarize these three examples? Isn't the bottom line in each case the same? The lesson, no matter how you look at it, is the same – we should obey God at all times, in every way. It is a lesson the Israelites could never master. It is a lesson that we still have to learn, too.

Next time we will conclude our study of the Book of Numbers with Part Three of Lessons in the Desert.