

Lack of Trust

GOD CALLS HIS PEOPLE TO TRUST HIM IN EVERY SITUATION.

Trust is a critical aspect in everyday life. You trust that your car will start in the morning and that the brakes will stop you. You trust that the other drivers on the road around you will drive safely. You trust that your drinking water is safe and that your food is free from contamination that will kill you. You trust that the lights in your house will illuminate when you flip the switch. And here's a big one: you trust the alarm will go off in the morning to awaken you on time. Trust is a part of life each and every day. We depend on and trust in certain things.

What happens when you can't trust something you should be able to trust in? An event happened in the Chicago area in 1982 that resulted in a radical change in everyday life in our world. A popular over-the-counter medicine designed to reduce pain and fever was suddenly poisoning people in the Chicago area. After at least seven deaths, the product was recalled nationwide. The discovery was made that the medicine had been tampered with and laced with potassium cyanide. Although the identity of the person who tampered with the medicine has never been ascertained, the result of this incident was that from that point onward, the product was sold in triple-sealed and tamper-proof packaging. People ought to be able to trust in what they take for a headache, but in this instance, such trust proved fatal for some. The result of this incident was the creation of a brand-new way that over-the-counter medicines are delivered to the consumer.

Look at trust from the opposite point of view. What happens when you should trust but you choose not to? Are there consequences? Probably so. Some may be minor consequences that have little impact. However, sometimes the consequences can be severe and even fatal. Someone might declare, "I don't trust seat belts; if I have a wreck and the car catches fire, I could die." Such rejection of trust in a seat belt could be more tragic than a remote possibility of a car fire.

As the nation of Israel continued to travel toward the promised land, time and time again they were called on to trust God. Unfortunately, they often chose not to trust God and the consequences were usually severe.

Numbers 15:1-22:1

The structure of the book of Numbers centers around three cycles of rebellion by the children of Israel against God and His appointed leaders Moses and Aaron. Cycle one ended in Numbers 14:45 with the disobedience of the nation as they tried to force their way into Canaan against God's will. Cycle two is found in Numbers 16:1-19:22. The third rebellion cycle is in 20:2-25:18. Rebellion cycle 2 includes a rebellion of Levites and some from the tribe of Reuben who rejected the exclusive nature of the priesthood of Aaron. They resented the special role that the family of Aaron played in the worship of the Lord God. The rebellious Levites were not content with their role of service to the tabernacle; they wanted to be priests as well. God judged the rebels by having the earth open up and swallow the leaders of the rebellion. In addition, God destroyed by fire 250 others who had joined in the rebellion (16:16-40). Instead of repenting, the people continued to complain against Moses and Aaron (vv. 41-42). In response, God sent a plague among the people that consumed 14,700 of them. The plague was only averted when Aaron took an incense burner and carried it throughout the camp, standing between those who were alive and those who had died (vv. 43-50).

Throughout these cycles of rebellion in the book of Numbers, challenges to the leadership of Moses and Aaron stand out as a key issue. In many ways, the event described in Numbers 17 laid to rest much of these leadership issues. God Himself took the initiative to resolve this source of strife. God instructed the leaders of each of the twelve tribes to bring a wooden staff to the tabernacle. The name of each leader was written on his staff. These staffs were then placed in the tabernacle before the ark of the covenant. Overnight, the staff of Aaron not only sprung leaves, but it blossomed and produced almonds (17:1-11). Through this miraculous sign, God put His seal on Aaron as the legitimate high priest of the nation. This staff was kept in the tabernacle as a permanent reminder to all future generations that Aaron and his descendants were God's only choice for the priesthood of Israel.

Despite their rebellion, the Levites had not forfeited their right to serve at the tabernacle. In chapter 18, God affirmed the ministry of the Levites in relation to the priests. The priests were responsible for the tabernacle interior and its furnishings. The Levites' responsibilities covered the external parts of this place of worship. In all of this, the holiness of God was paramount. Chapter 19 details the purification ritual specifically

for uncleanness associated with death. Remember, 14,700 people had just died. An entire generation would die in the following years of wilderness wandering. Those who dealt with the handling and burial of the dead would become ceremonially unclean. This would require a special purification to allow them back into the community.



The Problem (Num. 20:2-5)

As the Israelites journeyed toward the Plains of Moab, they entered the Wilderness of Zin. A shortage of water led to more complaints. The Israelites quarreled with Moses and questioned why he would bring them to such an inhospitable place that lacked food and water.

VERSE 2

There was no water for the community, so they assembled against Moses and Aaron.

Chapter 20 begins with death of Miriam (v. 1) and closes with the death of Aaron (vv. 23-29). In between is detailed Moses and Aaron's disobedience to God as to how He commanded that He would provide water for the Israelites (vv. 2-13). Implicit in the narrative from this chapter forward is the thought that the years of wandering in the wilderness brought about by the disobedience of the nation of Israel were ending. Moses once again assembled the nation in the Wilderness of Zin on the southern edge of the land of Canaan. As before, they were camped at Kadesh, the site from which the twelve spies had been sent to explore the promised land (20:1; see chap. 13-14). That they were back at Kadesh is significant. Their return to Kadesh points to the wasted time and lives of an entire generation lost because of their unbelief and refusal to obey God.

The area of Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin was known for a number of abundant springs. The Bible speaks of these springs as the Waters of Meribah (or "strife"; 20:13; 27:14). The first encampment at Kadesh had presented no shortage of water. This time, however, things were different. Several possibilities have been proposed as to why the Israelites found no water. First, it might have been a year of drought or an

excessively hot season that dried up the water. Secondly, it could be that the Israelites were not camped in exactly the same spot in the Wilderness of Zin as before. Or thirdly, the large population may have simply used up all the water that was present at the springs.

The entire community of Israelite people **assembled against Moses and Aaron** to lodge their complaint. The word *against* is key for it reflects anger and hostility. This new generation of the children of Israel were following closely in their parents' footsteps. The entire incident recalls the earlier episode at Rephidim when God commanded Moses to strike a rock to produce water (Ex. 17:1-7). Moses called that place "Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling]" because of the arguing of the people. That incident also followed a serious challenge to Moses's and Aaron's authority (chap. 16).

VERSE 3

The people quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD."

Because of the scarcity of water, the people **quarreled with Moses**. The people were so distraught, they expressed a preference to have died in the wilderness. "**If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD**" possibly contains a double meaning. This statement could refer to the most recent incident of the rebellion led by Korah where over 14,700 people died (chap. 16). Thus, they were expressing the wish to have joined them in death. Or it could be referring to the entire generation who had died in the wilderness because of their unwillingness to enter the promised land after the spies returned from their reconnaissance mission (chap. 13-14). Quite possibly, it could refer to both instances. Their thinking was that anything would have been better than slowly dying of thirst.

VERSE 4

"Why have you brought the LORD's assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here?"

The people had forgotten the One who was leading and providing for them and started blaming Moses for bringing **the LORD's assembly into this wilderness**. As far as they were concerned, Moses was to blame. He had failed in his leadership; he must have led them astray!

This blame on Moses is enhanced by the people identifying themselves as *the LORD's assembly*; that is, the people that God had chosen.

The people most likely thought that since they belonged to the Lord, He would not have led them astray. Therefore, their current situation must have been Moses's fault.

VERSE 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!”

Moses was accused of guiding the nation into an **evil place**. Although not many of this new generation of the Israelites would have remembered life in the land of Egypt, in their complaint to Moses they indirectly compared their current situation to life in Egypt. Their feelings echoed words spoken years earlier as the nation marched away from Mount Sinai: “We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now our appetite is gone; there’s nothing to look at but this manna!” (11:5–6).

The truth is this wilderness was not where God purposed for them to be. They were to be in a land “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:7-8,17). Years earlier the twelve spies had brought back samples of the fruit of the promised land (Num. 13:23). They knew of its bounty. Where they were now certainly was not a place of **grain, figs, vines, and pomegranates**. The Israelites could have been in that bountiful land had it not been for the previous generation’s rebellion against God. Now with their words, this present generation exhibited that same attitude of unbelief and rebellion against God.



Explore Further

Rather than focus on the land flowing with milk and honey, in their murmuring the Israelites “remembered” the various foods of Egypt. Read the articles “Honey” on page 764 and “Milk” on pages 1101–1102 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What was the appeal of a land “flowing with milk and honey”? In their crisis, why would the Israelites have been drawn back to the foods of Egypt rather than looking forward to what awaited them in the promised land of Canaan?

The Plan (Num. 20:6-8)

Hearing the people's complaint, Moses and Aaron went to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell facedown. The Lord spoke to Moses, instructing him to take Aaron and assemble the people. He and Aaron together were to speak to a rock. Water would come from the rock to provide for the people and their livestock.

VERSE 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.

Moses was God's appointed leader over the entire exodus event. **Aaron** was given to Moses as his spokesman when Moses balked at God's call to lead (Ex. 4:10-16). Although Moses always took the lead, oftentimes the two brothers were listed together as leaders of Israel. When Moses and Aaron heard the complaints of the people, they hurried from **the assembly** (congregation) of the Israelites to the tabernacle, called here **the tent of meeting**. This move was most likely partially to get away from the escalating dangerous emotions of the crowd, but also to intercede before God on behalf of the people.

Once they were at **the doorway** of the tent of meeting, Moses and Aaron **fell facedown**, an action of intercession before God on behalf of the people. Laying prostrate before God is one of several prayer positions found in the Old Testament and was a frequent position for Moses as he interceded for the Israelites (Num. 14:5; 16:4,22,45).

Moses and Aaron interceded before God most likely because they were frightened for the people. After all, the people once again were rebelling against God. Moses and Aaron over the years had witnessed firsthand the consequences of such rebellion.

In response to Moses and Aaron's intercession, **the glory of the LORD appeared to them**. This served as a reminder of God's presence with them and the special relationship that Israel had with God as His people. The continued presence of the Lord God with Israel was a distinguishing mark for the nation (Deut. 4:7).

The appearance of the glory of the Lord at Kadesh during this controversy mirrors the appearance of the glory of the Lord at Kadesh during the first visit to that oasis when the Israelites refused to enter the promised land (Num. 14:10). This was no coincidence. This manifestation of God's glory gave weight to the instructions that God delivered to Moses.

VERSES 7-8

The Lord spoke to Moses, “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.”

No record exists of the actions of the Israelites during the years of wandering in the wilderness due to the sin of rejecting God’s command to enter the promised land. What we do know is that this was now a new generation of adults confronting Moses and Aaron. However, just like their parents, they doubted God’s provision for their needs. Such unbelief certainly deserved God’s wrath. Instead, God chose to deal with them in mercy and grace. His plan was to graciously furnish them with the water they needed for themselves and their livestock. God would demonstrate to this new generation not only His power, but also His mercy and grace. He would provide a miracle of mercy and not an act of judgment.

God’s instructions to Moses were twofold. He was to **assemble the community** so they could see God’s power and miracle of provision for themselves. He was also to **take the staff** with him to meet the people. The Hebrew word for *staff* can also mean “rod,” and various texts and translations speak of the rod of Moses, the rod of God, or the rod of Aaron (Ex. 4:2,20; 14:16; 17:9; Num. 17:8-10.) The various passages that talk of the staff of Moses and the staff of God suggest that these refer to the same item. Sometimes it was called the staff/rod of Moses and other times it was called the staff/rod of God. Instances exist, however, where God called on Aaron to use his staff to perform God’s bidding. These instances include calling down a number of the plagues in Egypt (Ex. 7:19; 8:5). Then, of course, we have the account of God choosing the staff of Aaron over the staffs of the other tribal leaders in the context passage for this session (Num. 17:1-10). So which staff was God speaking of?

A clue can be found in verse 9 where it says that Moses took the staff from the Lord’s presence. In Numbers 17:9-10, Moses was commanded to put the staff of Aaron in the Lord’s presence in the tabernacle. Here Moses was instructed to remove that staff in the tabernacle from the presence of the Lord and to take it with him as he assembled the people.

Why take the staff when Moses was simply going to speak to the rock? In the first instance of God providing water from a rock at Rephidim, Moses used the staff to strike the rock in obedience to God’s command (Ex. 17:6). That was not God’s plan here at Kadesh. Most likely the staff was a visible reminder of Moses’s authority under God.



Explore Further

Explore the term “staff” further by reading the article “Rod, Staff” on page 1374 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revise and Expanded*. Note the slight difference between a rod and a staff. Pay attention to the variety of ways the rod and the staff were used. Read Psalm 23:4. How do these various uses for the rod and staff give us confidence in our Great Shepherd?

The Result (Num. 20:9-13)

Moses and Aaron summoned the people to the rock where Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water poured forth. However, since Moses and Aaron did not trust the Lord to provide water as He said He would, God declared a punishment. Moses would not lead the people into the promised land.

VERSE 9

So Moses took the staff from the LORD’s presence just as he had commanded him.

God’s instruction to Moses was that both he and Aaron were to gather the people and speak to the rock to bring forth water to quench the thirst of the people and their animals. As such, Moses and Aaron would become God’s agents in providing for the needs of the people. Moses began in obedience to God by taking **the staff from the LORD’s presence** and carrying it with him to the rock outcropping where God had directed. The phrase **just as he had commanded him** points to a continued pattern of obedience on Moses’s part. The similar phrase, “just as the LORD had commanded him,” is found multiple times in the book of Exodus speaking of Moses’s obedience to God (Ex. 34:4; 40:16,21,23,25,27,29).

VERSE 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?”

With this verse, everything suddenly changed. Instead of speaking to the rock as God had instructed him to do, Moses angrily confronted the people. One can almost hear the exasperation in Moses's words. His patience with the people evidently had finally reached a breaking point. The use of the word **rebels** highlights the anger that Moses felt. Here was an entire shift in attitude by Moses from one who pleaded before God on behalf of the people to one who was consumed by anger against the people.

The statement of Moses, **“Must we bring water out of this rock for you?”** indicates Moses had lost sight of the fact that he was not the miracle worker but only the instrument that God would use. By claiming that he and Aaron would produce water from the rock, Moses was stealing the glory away from God.

VERSE 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.

Not only did Moses sin in his angry words, but he also sinned in disobeying God's direction to speak to the rock. Remember, God was mercifully preparing to furnish the people with the water they so desperately desired. Instead of speaking and acting with the same kind of grace and mercy with which God was acting, Moses reacted with anger and a physical manifestation of that anger: he **struck the rock twice with his staff**. While that was how water was miraculously produced in the prior incident at Rephidim (Ex. 17:5-6), that was not God's plan in this instance.

After Moses *struck the rock*, water did come out of the rock face. Through this miracle God graciously provided **abundant water** for the people. The disobedience of Moses and Aaron did not stop God from being merciful to the people. He dealt with the people as He had purposed. Now, God would deal with Moses and Aaron.

VERSE 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.”

While Moses was the one who struck the rock, Aaron was implicated as being complicit in this disobedience. God held both of them guilty

because of this action. As a result, God’s judgment came on both by forbidding either of them from entering the promised land. In the passage concerning Aaron’s death (vv. 24-29), God declared: “Aaron will be gathered to his people; he will not enter the land I have given the Israelites, because you both rebelled against my command at the Waters of Meribah” (v. 24). Moses also was told that because of his disobedience his death would occur before the Israelites entered the promised land (27:12-14).

God’s indictment against Moses and Aaron was the fact that they **“did not trust me to demonstrate my holiness”** before the Israelites. God desired to bring glory to Himself in the sight of Israel through a miracle of water flowing from the rock. Moses and Aaron got in the way of God’s purposes and stole glory from Him. God had desired to show His full power and might to the people, but Moses and Aaron distracted from that with the fit of rage they exhibited.

VERSE 13

These are the Waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the LORD, and he demonstrated his holiness to them.

The phrase **Waters of Meribah** echoes the earlier incident at Rephidim (Ex. 17:5-7). There God contended against the people. Here, however, God also contended against His disobedient leaders Moses and Aaron. The text indicates that through this incident, God **demonstrated His holiness** by providing water to the people. He also demonstrated His holiness by the consequences for Moses and Aaron’s disobedience—bringing severe punishment on His chosen leaders of His people.



Explore Further

Read the article “Holy” on page 758 of the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. God is holy in that He is separate from His creation. God is also holy in the sense that He is perfect in all His attributes, including His moral purity. God in His holiness calls His children to be holy (Lev. 20:26; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). What does it mean that you are to be holy? How can you demonstrate such holiness in the way you live your life each day?
