

# CHANGING WANDERERS INTO WORSHIPERS

## From the Exodus to the Promised Land

### When a Leader Fails

Numbers 20:1–13, 23–29

SEARCHING  
THE  
SCRIPTURES

STUDY



#### LET'S BEGIN HERE

The failures of a spiritual leader will always affect—directly or indirectly—those he or she leads. These reverberating consequences bid all leaders to stay awake, avoid autopilot, and lead as God intends.

*“It’s a serious price to pay when you, as a spiritual leader, fall.”*  
—Chuck Swindoll

While the world often relishes the failures of Christian leaders, God relishes His leaders’ successes. God wants His leaders to follow His Word closely and model the life of trust He wants us all to live. We’ll see that today through Moses’ wrongdoing.

In this study of Numbers 20 with Chuck Swindoll, we’ll glean wisdom from the failure of Moses so that we not only lead with more faithfulness but also encourage those who lead us to press on in zeal, integrity, and faith.



#### YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

The book of Numbers records God’s grace and mercy as well as His severe judgment toward the rebellious Israelites. They failed to trust God’s provision and follow His Word. The Israelites grumbled against God, rejected His manna, and then complained about His appointed leader Moses.

In our last study on Numbers 13–14, we saw the spies induce fear among the whole congregation and dissuade them from entering Canaan. God disciplined the people for their lack of faith and sentenced that generation to die in the wilderness.

After forty years of wandering, “the whole community of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Zin and camped at Kadesh” (Numbers 20:1). During the first five months of that fortieth year, just prior to Aaron’s death (33:38), the children of the faithless first generation sang the same faithless refrain, prompting Moses and Aaron to sin as well. Numbers 20 captures these tragic events.

#### Quotable

*If Moses didn’t  
trust God,  
then the people  
of Israel wouldn’t  
trust Him.  
Spiritual leaders  
must model  
trust in God.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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## STUDY

### When a Leader Fails

*Numbers 20:1–13, 23–29*

Before we dive into the nuts and bolts of today's passage, take a moment to quiet your heart before your Father in heaven, and write a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to give you clarity and spiritual strength through this study. As Chuck said, "There are times that a spiritual leader is required to do things that the flesh absolutely would not do."

#### **Observation: *Searching the Scriptures* Step One**

You don't need a master's degree in theology or the aptitude of a forensic scientist to spiritually profit from your Bible study. God revealed Himself through the plain languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek which we can sufficiently translate into English. How amazing is the thought that we can peruse God's Word in our own language to grasp the bone and marrow of what God wants us to know for life and faith. We begin by first performing a slow reading of the text, tending to each word rather than sprinting past them.

#### **Numbers 20:1–13—The Lord Shows Himself Holy**

Carefully observe *Numbers 20:1–13*. Record important findings below.

The Israelites rebelled. How did the congregation compare the land in which they resided with the land God promised?



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How did Moses and Aaron respond to the congregation's complaining, and what happened to them while in the tent of meeting?

List the three commands God gave to Moses? (Numbers 20:7–8)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

How did Moses disobey God? (20:11)

How did God describe Moses' disobedience? (20:12–13)

*“He strikes the rock. He doesn’t care what they think. He doesn’t care what God thinks. Right now he is lost in his own uncontrolled fury or wrath, maybe borderline rage. . . . I think Moses is disappointed with God.”—Chuck Swindoll*



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#### Numbers 20:14–21—Israel Rebuffed by Edom

Slowly read *Numbers 20:14–21*, and list the top five observations you find in this text.

#### Numbers 20:22–29—When Aaron Joined His Ancestors in Death

Carefully read *Numbers 20:22–29*. Record your top five observations below.

Where was Aaron buried, and who took over his role as high priest?

In Exodus 23:22, God promised the Israelites He would be an enemy to their enemies and oppose those who opposed them so long as they followed all His instructions. As we see in Numbers 20 and the previous passages, they didn't obey His voice, so we read of the consequences of their rebellion: hostility with Edom and the death of Aaron. Moses' angry overreaction had drastic consequences for the whole congregation as well as his own future.



#### **Interpretation: *Searching the Scriptures* Step Two**

During interpretation, we seek to understand what the author meant. Interpretation gets to the heart of the biblical text so we can know how God is working today. We must interpret the passage before trying to apply it to our lives lest we do what God no longer wants us to do.



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#### **Searching the Scriptures Review Tip: Interpretation**

During interpretation, we use additional resources like a Bible commentary or Bible dictionary. Bible dictionaries contain articles written by scholars summarizing their research on pertinent topics for understanding the Bible. If you don't own a Bible dictionary, we recommend you buy *The New Unger Bible Dictionary*, Chuck's favorite. Also, we provide links to free online dictionaries in case you don't have one on hand.

Begin interpretation by looking up the following names in your Bible dictionary. Record what you learned that is especially insightful.

*Aaron*

*Miriam*

*Edom*



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In Numbers 20:10, Moses said, “Must we bring you water from this rock?” But the water came out not because of Moses’ power. It came from God’s. Perhaps due to the duress from the loss of his sister, Moses let anger drive him into irrational disobedience against God’s command which we read in Numbers 20:11. Scholar R. Dennis Cole says,

Moses’ actions were tantamount to that of an idolatrous pagan magician, and thus Milgrom notes, “Here, in a direct address to his people, Moses ascribes miraculous powers to himself and Aaron. Indeed by broadcasting one word, *nôšî’*, ‘we shall bring forth’”—Moses and Aaron might be interpreted as having put themselves forth as God.<sup>1</sup>

Using this cultural insight, how did God’s response to Moses in Numbers 20:12 counter the significance of Moses’ actions before the people of Israel?

*“Moses . . . modeled unbelief. . . . He was now an out-of-control leader acting in unbelief. . . . He assaulted the holiness of God.” —Chuck Swindoll*

In his sermon, Chuck said Moses might have reached the third or fourth level of the five levels of anger. Here are the five:

1. *Mild irritation* creates in us an uneasiness brought on by an unpleasant disturbance.
2. *Indignation* develops as a reaction to something that seems unfair or unreasonable.
3. *Wrath* impels us to express our anger through revenge or defense.
4. *Fury* occurs when we introduce acts of violence. Moses probably expressed fury.
5. *Rage* drives people to lash out with the most intense anger—brutal violence or murder without the slightest remorse or self-awareness.



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Because Aaron disobeyed God as Moses did, God punished him. While Numbers 20:22–29 depicts God’s judgment upon Aaron, how does it also convey God’s grace—both to Aaron and the people of Israel?

Moses and Aaron defied God. They would have to endure their punishment—Aaron on Mount Hor and Moses on Mount Nebo. God’s grace abided even amidst His punishment of the two exodus leaders. Did you read how long Israel mourned the death of Aaron? The average period of mourning for the death of an Israelite lasted seven days. For Aaron, they mourned thirty.



#### **Correlation: *Searching the Scriptures* Step Three**

The self-aware and spiritually sensitive leader remains painfully alert to his or her shortcomings—from major sins to petty mistakes. Psalm 25 has been a spiritual refuge for men and women of God, whether great leaders or obscure servants.

Take time to bathe your mind and heart in the prayer of *Psalm 25*.

Using even just a short section from this psalm, record below a prayer in the same spirit of humility, uttering the same need for direction and wisdom to lead well.

Now consider your leaders. Using the language of this psalm, write a prayer for them. Afterward, consider sending a quick note to let them know you’ve prayed for them.

Tragically, some leaders fall. The article “*What to Do When a Leader Falls*” offers guidance to those who have experienced the failure of a Christian leader.



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#### Application: *Searching the Scriptures* Step Four

In his sermon on Numbers 20, Chuck provided four helpful application principles for incorporating the truth of this passage into our lives.

1. *Serve others patiently . . . even as they irritate you.* When you sense the signs of impatience, such as feelings of frustration or urges to lash out, stop! Don't let impatience drive you to make a terrible mistake.
2. *Obey God completely . . . even if the reason be unclear.* Even though you can't make sense of every part of God's plan, do what God says without questioning.
3. *Accept God's plan willingly . . . even during your skepticism.* Doubts may plague you, but don't let them stop you from receiving God's instructions and following through.
4. *Submit to the Lord continually . . . even when it creates discomfort.* Obedience flows from a heart of surrender. Find peace by doing what God says and leaving the results with Him.

Using one of Chuck's principles or one you've created based on your study of Numbers 20, reflect on what needs to change in your life, and record below what the Lord brings to mind. This could include thoughts or behaviors. Perhaps you need to ask someone for forgiveness or keep your mouth closed when you get frustrated.

Record one verse you want to remember from our passage today.



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Record below what you learned about God from this study.

Let's end our study with a quote from Hebrews 12:1–2:

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.*



#### A FINAL PRAYER

*Father, please keep my eyes always upon You and my heart set always toward Your ways. How tempting it is to turn to comfort and convenience rather than doing the right thing, the loving thing. Help me to lead well, to trust You fervently, and to love others diligently. I pray that Your Son might be glorified in my life. In His name, amen.*

#### ENDNOTE

1. R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 329.



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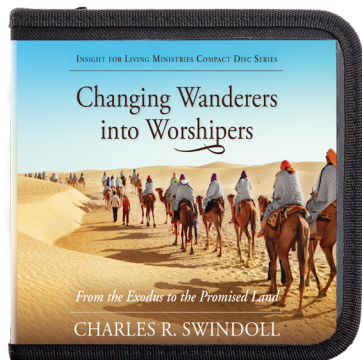
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# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

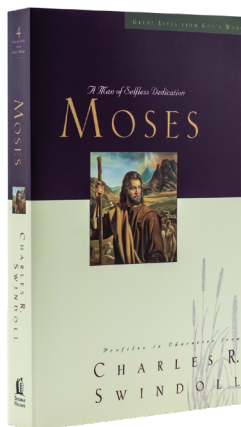
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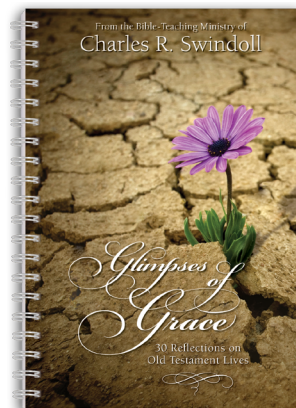
## Tools for Digging Deeper



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