

# The Sin of Moses and Aaron



## SABBATH—NOVEMBER 21

**READ FOR THIS WEEK’S LESSON:** Numbers 20; Numbers 21; John 3:14, 15; James 4:4–15.

**MEMORY VERSE:** “ ‘Go up to the highest slopes [hills] of Pisgah. Look west and north and south and east. Look at the land with your own eyes. But you are not going to go across that Jordan River’ ” (Deuteronomy 3:27, NlrV).

**ISRAEL WANDERED IN THE WILDERNESS FOR MANY YEARS.** Finally the people reached Kadesh-Barnea on the southern border of the Promised Land. They had gone through so much. By now the people surely should have learned their hard lessons from the Lord. They should have been ready for the Lord to use them. But sadly, they were not.

This week we will study about the mercy and grace<sup>1</sup> of God and about the faithlessness, sin, and unthankfulness of His people. From Adam and Eve in Eden until the period of the Laodicean church<sup>2</sup> today (Revelation 3:14–18), we often find that God gives His mercy and grace to those who have been weak. Most of them have failed to claim the promises of victory,<sup>3</sup> faith, and a pure life that God offers. At the same time, we find God’s willingness to forgive those who stumble and fall, even those who should have known better. For example, the great Moses himself, in a moment of weakness, became impatient and showed a little too much pride. He then lost sight of the God who had done so much for him. So, if even Moses can fall and need grace, what about the rest of us?

1. grace—God’s gift of forgiveness and mercy (kindness) that He freely gives us to take away our sins.

2. Laodicean church—a symbol (word-picture) of the condition of God’s people during the last days. The Laodiceans show a lack of fire (desire) and willingness to do God’s work.

3. victory—the act of winning the battle over, or winning the struggle against, something, such as sin.

**SUNDAY—NOVEMBER 22****WHEN GIANTS FALL  
(Numbers 20:1–3)**

Water stopped flowing in Israel's camp at Kadesh-Barnea. This problem could have provided a wonderful opportunity (chance) for the people of Israel to turn to God for help. God always had taken care of them in the past. Why should it be any different now? But the people quickly forgot the past and turned on Moses and Aaron with their old complaints.

**What did the Lord command Moses to do in Numbers 20:1–3? But what did Moses do differently? Moses was the meek and faithful servant of God. So, why do you think that he showed such an unusual lack of faith and trust at this time?**

In some ways, it is easy to understand Moses' frustration. First, Moses had just buried his sister. No doubt, he was feeling pain over that. And then to hear these people make the same complaint that their forefathers had made years ago? Anyway, in the Lord's eyes, none of these problems excused Moses' action.

"The water flowed plentifully to take away the thirst of the people. But Moses had done a great wrong.

He had spoken to the people from an irritated [angry] feeling. . . . When he blamed them, he grieved the Spirit of God. He also did some harm to the people. Moses' lack of patience and self-control was clearly shown. So, the people had a good reason to question whether or not Moses' past actions had been under God's direction. Even worse, Moses' action caused them to excuse their own sins. Moses, as well as they, had done God wrong. The people said that from the beginning Moses had acted in ways and made decisions [choices] for Israel that were not always the best. But now they had found the excuse they needed to refuse to accept all the warnings and scoldings that God had sent them through Moses."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*,<sup>4</sup> page 417.

Even the most faithful and hard-working servants of the Lord need to be careful. What makes Moses' sin even worse was that it was done by someone who had been given great honors and rights. Think of all that Moses had been shown of God's power. Think of all the wonderful visions<sup>5</sup> that the Lord had shown to Moses too. But, even with all that honor, Moses let his anger rise up and take over at a weak moment in his life. What a warning this should be for the rest of us.

4. *Patriarchs and Prophets*—patriarchs were leaders of God's people in early Bible times, such as Abraham and Isaac, or other leaders of Israel, such as Moses; prophets are men or women who are given messages by God to give to His people.

5. visions—special messages from God that are seen in the mind or in a dream or in a trance to help a person know God's will (plan).



Moses struck the rock.

Think of a time that you felt pushed too far and did something terrible and sinful. How often did you wish you could have turned back the clock and undone the damage? What lessons have you learned from this experience that could help you to not do the same thing again?

### MONDAY—NOVEMBER 23

#### DEATH OF AARON (Numbers 20:23–29)

**What important points does Numbers 20:23–29 make about the death of Aaron? What lessons can we learn from this story for ourselves and whatever work we are doing for the Lord?**

Chapter 20 opens with the death of Miriam and ends with the death of Aaron. The older generation<sup>6</sup> was passing away. The new generation was to take up where the older one had left off. We find the same thing in our church today. One generation goes, and a new one arises to take over the responsibility (work; duty). The important question remains, How much will the new generation learn from the mistakes and successes of the older one?

Notice the difference in the stories of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. Miriam's death was reported in just one short verse. It is almost as if her death came suddenly and unexpectedly. How different the record of her death is from Aaron's, which is clearly foretold.

Before Aaron's death, Aaron, Moses, and Aaron's son, Eleazar, go to the top of Mount Hor. In the sight of the people, Moses takes off his brother's priestly robe and puts it on his nephew, Eleazar. This act is a powerful symbol<sup>7</sup> of the transfer (change) of power from one generation to another. Aaron was soon to die, but the work of the high priest must go on. In other words, the work and mission<sup>8</sup> of the church is greater than any one man or woman. We faithfully must do our duty, but sooner or later we pass from the scene, and others pick up where we left off.

6. generation—all the people born about the same time. Your parents belong to one generation. You and your friends who are your age belong to another generation.

7. symbol—an object, mark, sign, or person that stands for, or means the same thing as, another object, idea, or thing.

8. mission—the special duty (work) for Jesus that a church sends a person or a group out to do.

It is hard to imagine just how sad this event must have been for everyone involved. Moses knows his own death surely would follow soon. He removes the priestly robe from his brother and puts it on his nephew, Aaron's son. No doubt, Aaron regrets (is sorry for) some of his past failures. But he knows that he is soon to die. And Eleazar stands before Aaron, knowing his father will soon die. Eleazar now accepts the heavy responsibility of the high priest. Meanwhile, down below, the children of Israel watch the whole thing unfold.

**If you were to die tomorrow, what legacy<sup>9</sup> would you leave behind? What have you done for the Lord's work? How can you better use the little time that you have left (James 4:13–15)?**



Aaron's work as high priest passed on to his son, Eleazar.

## TUESDAY—NOVEMBER 24

### AN UNTHANKFUL HEART (Numbers 21:1–5)

Esau was the oldest of Isaac's

sons. Esau's children became the nation of Edom. They refused to let Israel pass through the borders of their land. So Israel had to go around it. (Read Numbers 20:14–21.) The people of Edom held the territory (land) going south from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah.

**What were the people's complaints in Numbers 21:1–5? Think about all that had happened to them and all that they had gone through. Could there have been several good reasons for their complaints?**

The people of Israel might have thought that they had good reasons for their complaints. But the Lord clearly did not agree. After all, God had given them special help every day of their travels. They had all the water they needed, even in a desert. They had bread from heaven to eat, angels' food (Psalm 78:25). And they had peace and safety under the shadowy cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. There was not a weak person among all the people. Their feet had not swelled on their long journeys. Their clothes did not wear out (Deuteronomy 8:3, 4; Psalm 105:37). No doubt, they had their struggles, their problems, and their fears, as we all do. But the people of Old Israel were so focused on their problems that they forgot God's blessings that had been theirs for so long. The people were so used to God's mercy, grace, and

9. legacy—heritage; history; what you leave behind for others after you die.

goodness that they forgot God. And once we take things from God without being thankful, it is very easy to forget about them.

**What are some things that you forget to be thankful for in your life? Why is that such a foolish thing to do?**

The only cure for being unthankful is to thank the Lord each day for what He has given us. This is why praise is so important. God does not need our praise. But we need to praise the Lord as much as we can, because praise reminds us of just how much we have to be thankful for to the Lord.

**Write out your own psalm of praise. Put in it all of the things that you have to be thankful for. Imagine if you were to sing it every day. How could this help you from falling into the sin of being unthankful to God?**



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### WEDNESDAY—NOVEMBER 25

#### THE FIERY SERPENTS (SNAKES) (John 3:14, 15)

The people of Israel might have thought they had good reasons for their complaints. But it is clear that the Lord does not agree with them. After all these years in the desert, all these years of experiencing how God worked among them, what do they do? They bring up the same old complaints against Him again! No wonder the Lord was not happy with them. What made their complaints even worse was that they just had experienced a victory (win) over the people of Canaan.

**How do we understand Moses' work as an intercessor<sup>10</sup> in Numbers 21:5–9? Why did the people really need an intercessor at that time?**

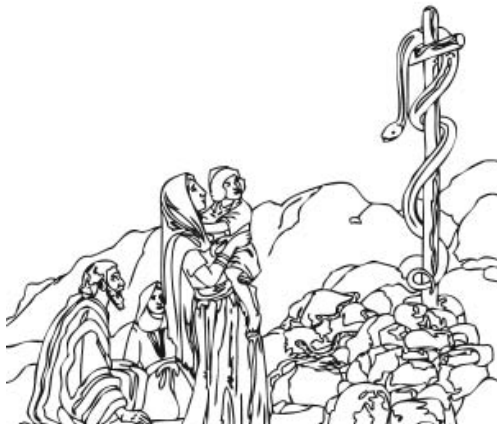
There are about 35 different kinds of snakes in Palestine. Some are very poisonous. The poisonous serpents that lived in the wilderness<sup>11</sup> were called “fiery serpents” because of the terrible sting caused by their bite. As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, a great many people were attacked by these poisonous snakes. In other words, God did not send the snakes upon the people. Instead, He took His protection away from them, and they then suffered the results.

10. intercessor—a person who serves as a go-between and peacemaker between two opposing sides.

11. wilderness—an area in which few people live that is not used for farming and is more or less in its natural state.

**How does Jesus connect the event of the serpents to the plan of salvation in John 3:14, 15? In what way have we all been bitten by fiery serpents?**

The bronze serpent on the pole was not enough to stop the bites from killing people. The people had to look at the bronze snake. They had to make the choice to obey and then accept by faith that God would heal and save them. In the same way, the death of Jesus itself does not automatically bring salvation<sup>12</sup> to the world. Yes, Jesus' death made salvation possible. But just as the people in the wilderness needed to look in order to live, we have to trust in Jesus and believe in Him. In this way, we may receive what He so freely and kindly offers.



The people were told to  
“look and live.”

**How have you known in your own life the healing power of Christ, even now? What other hurts do**

**you need to bring to Him to receive comfort and strength to move on and heal from great pain?**

### THURSDAY—NOVEMBER 26

#### THE FIRST VICTORIES (Numbers 21:10–33)

Nearly 40 years earlier, Israel attacked the people of Canaan in this same area and were badly beaten (Numbers 14:40–45). That generation of Israel died during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. And a new one was now prepared to pick up where the older one had left off.

**Read Numbers 21:10–33 and answer the following questions:**

- **What promises did the Hebrews make to the pagan<sup>13</sup> King Sihon? What was offered in those promises?**
- **Who attacked whom? Verse 23.**
- **What happened before the battle that Israel fought against King Sihon? How was this plan different from the one Israel followed with King Og in Numbers 21:33–35?**

“These nations on the borders of Canaan would have been saved if they had not rebelled against God’s word and refused to allow Israel to march through their lands. . . . The Amorites<sup>14</sup> were idol [false gods]

12. salvation—God’s plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death; the gift of eternal life; being saved.

13. pagan—having to do with the worship of idols (false gods) or nature instead of God.

14. Amorites—people living on the hills of Canaan, who were the enemies of Israel during early Bible times.

worshippers. Their lives were filled with great wickedness. But God left them alone for four hundred years. . . . All the miracles<sup>15</sup> of God's work in bringing Israel from Egypt were known to the Amorites. Enough proof was given to them."—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 434.

Note the difference in war plans against the two kingdoms. Israel did not politely ask to pass peacefully through King Og's land. Rather, the Lord led the king and his armies away from their own cities. Their cities "were fenced with high walls, gates, and bars" (Deuteronomy 3:5, KJV). Og's army left the safety of their cities to attack Israel. This made it easier for Israel to beat them. With God's help, Israel defeated King Og and his Amorite army in the field of battle.

The victory over Sihon and Og is forever remembered in song (Psalm 135:10–12; Psalm 136:18–26) and in the minds of the people (Judges 11:18–22).

**Forty years after entering the desert, the children of Israel finally entered the Promised Land. But think about all the time wasted because of their own lack of faith and trust. They had proof of God's leading. How much precious time are you wasting, not moving ahead in faith? How can you better learn to trust in God's promises and act on them now instead of wasting time?**

### FRIDAY—NOVEMBER 27

**ADDITIONAL STUDY:** Read Ellen G. White, "The Smitten Rock," pages 411–421; "The Journey Around Edom," pages 422–432; "The Conquest of Bashan," pages 433–437, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

"Nicodemus was being led to Christ. The Savior explained to him about the new birth. And Nicodemus wished to have this change made in himself. How could it be done? Jesus answered the unspoken question: 'Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. The Son of Man must be lifted up also. Then everyone who believes in him can live with God forever' " (John 3:14, 15, NIV).

"Here was ground that Nicodemus knew rather well. The symbol of the uplifted serpent made plain to him Jesus' mission. When the people of Israel were dying from the sting of the fiery serpents, God told Moses to make a brass snake. Moses was to lift it on high in the middle of the camp. Then all in the camp who would look upon the serpent should live. The people well knew that in itself the serpent had no power to help them. It was a symbol of Christ. The image [likeness] of the destroying serpents was lifted up for their healing. So, in the same way, Jesus was made 'in the likeness of sinful flesh.' And He was to be their Savior. . . . Whether for the healing of their wounds or the forgive-

<sup>15</sup> miracles—extraordinary (amazing; great) events believed to be signs of the power of God. Examples of miracles are Peter's walking on water and Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead.

ness of their sins, they could do nothing for themselves. They could only show their faith in the Gift of God. They were to look and live.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 174, 175.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

❶ Think about the story of the fiery serpents. Talk about having to act on faith. Just by looking at the bronze serpent, the people were saved from certain death. There was no natu-

ral explanation for why they were healed. The people’s lives depended on God’s special act to save them. How does that truth show the plan of salvation too? What should this fact tell us about how helpless we are on our own, without God? How should this fact keep us humble?

❷ In what ways might we be making some of the same mistakes as the children of Israel? Why is it always so hard to know what our own spiritual weak points are?