

INTRODUCTION

Guidelines are written for people to follow. For example, when you buy a product, it usually come with a manual. It explains how to fully utilize all the functions. However, more than likely there is a warning on page one of the booklet. The message alerts you that there may be danger if you do not follow the manufacturer's guidelines. Sometimes mistakes will happen if we trust our instinct and skip the instructions. We may end up spending extra time to assemble a product, or getting frustrated over why certain functions do not work as they should. We get mad and complain that the product is dumb. With my wife's permission, I used the following story in an older sermon. A few years ago, she baked some chicken for our sons for lunch. When my younger son was eating the meat, he commented: "Mom, the chicken tastes funny." I turned my head and looked. Goodness! It was still pink in color. It was not fully cooked. Some of you like to eat sushi with raw fish. But this was chicken. My wife looked at the package again. It reads "ready to cook" but she thought it says "ready to eat." Therefore, she thought the meat was edible once it was re-heated for a few minutes. I grumbled at her that sometimes she does things by relying on feelings rather than written guidelines. By God's grace, my sons did not have an upset stomach afterward. We will make silly mistakes when we overlook guidelines. The result can be a good laugh. In some cases, there may be irreversible consequences. In Numbers chapter 20, Moses and Aaron failed to obey God's direct order. The outcome was dreadful. Today, God gives us a clear instruction manual for life called the Bible. Read it, obey it and we will continue to enjoy God's grace. Therefore, the lesson for Moses, Aaron and us is the same: blessings will only come when we follow God's directions.

EXPLANATION

1. 神的指示 God's Instructions

In the story, God's people faced a new crisis. They ran out of water. They encountered the same trouble before. God gave Moses and Aaron specific instructions on how to solve the problem. Before we look at that, let us review **verse 1**, which gives us a few pieces of key information: In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. The verse says "the first month" but it does not give us the year. Toward the end of the chapter we learn that Aaron also passed away. In the record of the Israelites' itinerary in chapter 33, we are told that Aaron's death happened at the end of the 40 years of wilderness wandering. Also, later in the second half of chapter 20, the Israelites changed their route and turned east toward Edom. It was because God was about to lead them into Canaan. Therefore, there are enough evidences to confirm that God's people were getting near to an end of God's 40 years of disciplinary period. Verse 1 also draw a closure to Miriam's life. In chapter 12, God used leprosy to discipline Miriam for the jealousy over her brother Moses. She and Aaron were upset that God spoke directly to Moses but not to the two of them. Since that incident, we have not heard anything about Miriam until now. A prophetess quietly disappeared from the scene. The verse also indicates that the Israelites were at Kadesh in the desert of Zin. The map on the screen will give us some idea of their possible location. Now the

people grumbled that they had no water. After God provided water for them, the place was named Meribah, meaning “quarreling” as a remembrance for the people’s complaint. Thirty some years ago, there was a very similar incident. It is recorded in Exodus chapter 17. Later the place also received the same name. Bible scholars debated whether those were two separate events or the same one. We shall see that there were a few differences that lead us to believe that those two were isolated incidents. It is possible that there could be more than one Meribah. The name was to remind future generations about the experience of their ancestors, rather than helping people identify the exact geographical locations. Just for the sake of comparison, there are 33 cities in U.S. called Springfield scattered in 25 states. In Wisconsin alone, there are five of them! Therefore, if someone asks you to meet him in Springfield, Wisconsin, be sure to ask which one he refers to. It is also possible that there are more than one Meribah in the Bible. If we put the two grumbling events side-by-side we see quite a few similarities. People complained about the threat of death to themselves and their livestock. They questioned why they left Egypt. Then we also observe some differences. In Exodus 17, Moses was the target of people’s complaint. But now, they blamed Moses and Aaron. In both incidents, the servant(s) prayed to God for help. The biggest difference that separates the two incidents was God’s instructions on how to resolve the problems. **Exodus 17:5-6** read: 5 The Lord answered Moses, “Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. 6 ... Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” ... God told Moses to use his staff to hit a rock, then water would gush out. In contrast, God ordered Moses in **Numbers 20:8** – “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.” Can you see the difference? This time God told Moses to say to the rock, then water would come out. God requires our full compliance to His commands, not a half-done job. Partial submission means no submission. Years later, the Israelites asked for a king. God chose Saul to be their king despite their disobedience. He asked Saul to send his soldiers to completely destroyed the Amalekites. But Saul spared the Amalekite king, and saved the best animals for himself. When the prophet Samuel confronted Saul, he lied twice that he had fully followed God’s instructions. Saul even made an excuse that it was the people’s idea to preserve the best animals to be offered to God. In **1 Samuel 15:22**, the prophet condemned Saul, saying: ... “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” God wants our hearts more than any gift we present. Some people promise that they will attend church when they have time. But they are too busy traveling after they finally retire. Other people say they will donate a substantial amount to the church if they win a lottery. But what God wants is a joyful giving out of what we make from our hard work. When our hearts are right with God, we will fully follow His instructions.

2. 神的定罪 God’s Indictment

God gave Moses clear instructions of how to get water. However, Moses failed to do what God said. That led to God’s indictment of both Moses and Aaron. After the two servants were done praying, they met the Israelites at a rock. Moses brought his staff. He then rebuked the people in **verse 10**: ... “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” The NIV translation is more accurate in this case – Moses used “we,” meaning both him and Aaron, instead of “I” in the Chinese Union Version. Can you feel the anger in Moses’ words? The situation is like a

dumb husband provoking his wife. The lady responds: “Should I still cook dinner for you tonight? Sorry, the kitchen is on strike until further notice!” Moses thought that the rebellious people did not deserve his care. In his anger, Moses took action. Look at **verse 11**: Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. Was the problem solved? Indeed, everyone had water to quench their thirst. Did Moses do what God instructed him to? God asked Moses to speak to the rock. However, Moses hit the rock twice out of his rage. Because Moses disobeyed God’s command, he was indicted by God. He said to Moses and Aaron in **verse 12**: ... “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.” We may think that the punishment was too severe for the mistake made. Just one error and it caused Moses and Aaron to lose the privilege to enter Canaan. That was the promise they had been waiting all their lives! Who cares about how the water came out? As long as Moses got the job done, speaking to the rock or striking it did not make any difference. It does not matter to us, but it does to God. Let us read God’s indictment again. He convicted Moses and Aaron two sins: distrusting and dishonoring God. Moses clearly deviated from God’s clear instructions. Moses might have thought that since striking the rock worked before, he could simply repeat the same action. Moses did not trust God that a verbal command would be sufficient. Trusting God means believing that He will make things happen in His way. Therefore, our proper reaction should be following God’s instructions precisely. Many years later, once the Israelites were transporting the Ark. They put the ark on a cart and used a pair of cows to haul it. **2 Samuel 6:6-7** records an accident: 6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nakon, Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God, because the oxen stumbled. 7 The Lord’s anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God. We feel sorry for Uzzah. We believe that he did the right thing to prevent the Ark from hitting the ground. Why did God kill Uzzah? It was because the people forgot God’s prior instructions. Uzzah was not authorized to move the Ark, let alone touching it. God only allowed the Levites to carry the Ark by the poles on both sides of the equipment. Therefore, the Israelites did it wrong from the start. Going back to the Numbers. Not only did Moses and Aaron distrust God, they also dishonored Him. The two servants dishonored God by not giving God the glory in the miracle. Moses attracted people’s attention to himself. By hitting the rock, Moses showed the people that it was him who relieved their thirst. But why was Aaron indicted too? He was with Moses the whole time. Aaron also knew God’s instructions. He could have stopped Moses from hitting the rock. But he did not do so. Therefore, Aaron bore the consequence of the same sins that Moses committed. We wonder: “The two men were involved in more serious sins before. Why God did not judge them earlier?” Aaron carved a golden calf and led people to idol worship. Moses grumbled to God a few times and wanted to die. All we can conclude is that we deserve God’s justice if He disciplines us according to our sins. But if God pardons us, it is out of His grace. God sees His glory very seriously. God’s heart is pleased when we obey what He says. **1 John 2:4** reads: The man who says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. God is our Lord and we are only His servants. If we say we trust God, then we should obey His commands. Very often we focus on the results. We think that getting the job done is the most important thing. Sometimes I ask my sons to do certain things. Before I can finish my instructions, they may get impatient, saying: “I know, I know.” They think they are too smart to listen to me. Sometimes, they complete half the task, while other times they make a mess. They have to learn that trusting my words is as important, if not more important than finishing the work. We can make similar mistakes in

ministries. We often trust our little human wisdom or our experience. We believe we know everything. The fact is that God does not really need our help. He can send His angels to accomplish the work. God's heart is pleased if we submit to Him and follow His instructions.

CONCLUSION

Blessings will only come when we follow God's directions. Our story ends with an interesting note in **verse 13**: These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them. The place was called Meribah, meaning "quarrel" because people argued with God. The Israelites complained to God. But God showed His glory despite people's rebellion. Here, there was a word-play in the name of the place. The original name for the location was Kadesh. The Hebrew words for Kadesh and "holiness" have the same root. The symbolic meaning is that when God's people followed His instructions, then God received glory and His people would be blessed. On the contrary, quarrel would be the result when people disobeyed Him. In preserving God's glory, He had to discipline His people. God cares about the process more than the result. In the books of Exodus and Numbers, there is a statement that appears 13 times: "Moses did just as the Lord commanded him." Moses obeyed when God sent him and Aaron to Pharaoh, when God gave detail blueprints on how to construct the accessories in the tabernacle and when God told him how to prepare the priests for ministries and observed the Passover. When Moses followed God's instructions there were favorable results. In God's eyes, the ends do not justify the means. It is true that our mistakes and even sins can never thwart God's plan. We see plenty of examples in the Bible: Jacob used trickery for his own gains, king David committed adultery and murder, and Judas betrayed Jesus. However, we will suffer the consequences for not trusting God. Jacob was pursued by his brother, cheated by his uncle and became a cripple. Strife and death happened in David's family. David was almost dethroned by one of his sons. Judas was crushed by his guilt that he hanged himself. God desires to bless us. Read the Bible and follow what God says, then we will be blessed. God gives us His Word to read, but we say our life is too busy. God calls us to His church to worship Him and study His Word. But we think we have more important things to do. God asks the single people to marry Christians only, but we feel confident that we will convince our spouses to become believers. God tells us to honor Him with our offering, but we are too reluctant to contribute our hard-earned money. God orders us to respect our parents and discipline our children. He also asks the wives to submit to their husbands. But we say whoever has a stronger voice in the family or makes more money will be the boss. We wonder why there are conflict and disharmony among our family members. God ordained Jesus as the only way to salvation. But many people say they find an alternative path in another religion or they can save themselves through their good work. If we treat God's Word as suggestions instead of commands then more than likely we will ignore His warning. The result can be tragic. On September 10, 2019, Sioux Falls, South Dakota was hit by three tornadoes around midnight. The estimated wind speed was about 130 mph. Eight people were injured. The situation could have been worse because most people in the city did not receive any warning. An employee in the city's 911 dispatch center did not follow the written instructions to initiate all 77 of the city's warning sirens. Instead, only one quarter of them were activated. Therefore, only some residents knew that tornadoes were imminent. Fortunately, most of the sirens were sounded in the part of the city which sustained the major damage. One person's error almost caused a catastrophe. Today, God gives us a choice. Obey Him, follow His commands and we will be blessed.