

**May 31**

**Scriptures:** Read Numbers 19 & 20

**Key Verse:** “Take the rod; ...gather the assembly together Speak to the rock... thus you shall bring water for them out of the rock...” (Numbers 20:8)

## **Overview**

The extensive uncleanness that resulted from the plague of judgment (Num.16) and the burial of so many bodies at one time required a special ceremony of purification. God, in His wisdom, provided a simple way to purify the Israelites from the defilement caused by contact with the dead; the answer came through the unblemished red heifer. This served as a gracious provision, especially because of the hardships in the wilderness, to make cleansing readily available. Yet if a person defiantly refused to be cleansed, it was very serious, and he was to be “cut off from among the congregation” (19:20).

The red heifer was not a sacrificial animal, but one through which ceremonial cleansing was provided. It was to be slaughtered, not sacrificed; killed outside the camp, and not at the altar. It was to be totally burned, all at one time with cedar wood, hyssop, and some scarlet cloth (symbols of purification). The blood was also burned with it, except for a small amount taken by the priest, Eleazar, to sprinkle with his finger “seven times directly in front of the tabernacle” (19:4).

The ashes were of primary importance, for when ordinary water was mixed with them, it became the water of purification. “For if the ... ashes of a heifer... sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ... purges your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb.9:13-14).

We are not told the year in which the events of chapter 20 took place, but if we compare chapter 33:38, we are led to conclude that it was the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt, meaning that it was the people of the second generation who, in just one more year, would be entering the Promised Land.

Here we read of the death of Miriam and Aaron; both died within a short time of each other (Moses’ death was not very long afterward, Deut.32:49-50). It seems God told Aaron in advance of his forthcoming death and, in preparation, his high priestly robes were passed on to his son, Eleazar (20:28), showing that although Aaron died, the priesthood remained.

Like their fathers before them, this generation was prone to complain, this time about the water shortage. In another place, forty years before, God had miraculously supplied water from a rock and on this first occasion Moses had been told to strike the rock with his rod (Ex.17:5-6). On this second occasion, when God told Moses He would do a similar miracle, Moses was only to “speak to the rock” and the water would come forth (20:8). This time Moses disobeyed God: He lost his temper and patience at the complaining crowd of “rebels”. Although he was most meek (12:3), he did have human weaknesses, something that the inspired Word of God does not hide about its heroes. So Moses spoke to the people, not to the rock; he and Aaron did not give God the credit and glory (“must we bring water...?”) and in anger he struck the rock twice (20:10-11).

Even though God disapproved of the means, He was faithful to His word and did indeed supernaturally provide the water from the rock. Moses' actions, however, marred the holy image of God and His punishment was alike for both brothers. Sadly, neither would be permitted to enter the Promised Land (20:12). Moses' hopes and dreams, since the time he had left Egypt, were to joyously lead the people of God into the land; now, because of his sin, that dream was shattered. God did allow him to see the land from the mountain where he died (Deut.34:4-5), and, much later, to visit the land at the time of Jesus' transfiguration (Matt.17:3).

A further difficult time that Moses faced shortly thereafter was with Edom. Probably desiring to arouse sympathy, he called the Israelites Edom's "brother" (20:14), since the Edomites were descendants of Esau, Jacob's (Israel's) brother. However, their pleas to pass through Edom's territory were strongly rejected, even to the point of Edom sending soldiers to guard their border, thus forcing Israel to make a more difficult journey of an extra fifty or sixty kilometers through the hot, barren desert. Israel's prophets frequently denounced Edom's many acts of hatred toward Israel, and the end result was God's judgment of destruction (Ezek.35:5, 11; Obad.10).

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, we worship You for Your great and mighty acts of mercy to a rebellious and complaining, human family. Grant us the grace to listen carefully to all Your Word and to carry out Your instructions for our lives.