

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD DOES NOT GUARANTEE AN EASY LIFE

Numbers 20:1-29

INTRODUCTION

A year ago today one of the greatest sorrows that can come upon a human being came upon our dear friends, Fred and Charity and their four children: their daughter and sister, beautiful four-year-old Patience drowned. How desperately they have missed and continue to miss this precious little blonde haired girl. Yet, while the sorrow is still overwhelming, Fred and Charity have continued to hold fast to our Lord Jesus Christ. As I know many of us have heard them say over this year, it is only the knowledge of Christ's love for Patience and for them that sustains them in the grief. The love and support that many of you have given to them over this year has also played a significant part in their being able to stand and hold fast in the midst of the anguish. I want us to take a moment to pray for the family that God would be pleased to continue that work of sustaining their faith and comforting them in the midst of the distress her tragic death has brought.

O Lord we rejoice that you are the Father of mercies and God of all comfort who comforts us in every affliction. We praise you that our Lord Jesus suffered not only the misery of physical death but the torments of hell for all who believe so that death no longer terrorizes us. We know that by the work of Jesus little Patience is safe and happy in your presence. O Lord grant to Fred and Charity and little Fred and Larry and Love and Trinity the joy of your salvation. May they discover in deeper and greater ways that you alone are their rock and their salvation. May they not be shaken because you are at their right hand, because you have made known to them the path of life and will fill each of them with eternal joy in your presence. Won't you fill each of them now with joy and peace as they trust in you so each one will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. And Father we ask that you would enable us to be those friends who helpfully bring to them the hope of the gospel. Give us compassion and courage to love them in ways that will help them to bear the grief. Grant that this sorrow would be a spur to them and to us to not seek life here on this earth but to seek our life in Christ and his salvation. We pray in the name of our gracious and loving Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. I would encourage you during these next weeks to daily hold them before our Lord in your prayers.

We live in a world where 4 year olds drown and chronic diseases strike us and spouses who pledged to love each other forever betray and hurt one another and babies grow up to break our hearts and unemployment robs us of our homes and our dignity and leaders let us down and oil spills destroy our environment. We live in a world where we fail to keep our promises and we fail to love others and we fail to keep ourselves pure. The sorrows and sins that inundate the world create massive uncertainty about the future. It is often difficult, in view of these troubles to imagine that we or anyone else will ever make it safely to heaven. Trials that shatter faith in a good God and besetting sins argue against any of us making it through this wilderness world into God's heavenly kingdom.

Chapter 20 of the book of Numbers reinforces this view of reality. It begins and ends with the deaths of two of Israel's leaders, the sister and brother of Moses, Miriam and Aaron. Between these two tragic deaths is more sin and rebellion against God, the failure of people who ought to be counted upon and unjust opposition. This chapter makes us wonder if it is possible for anyone to make it into the Land of Promise. While most of what happens in this chapter is suffering and sin, yet we also discover that the God who promised to give to Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan is yet at work and is going to fulfill his promise to preserve his people and bring them into the land. This chapter describes the reality of living in this world but also shows us that God graciously overcomes all human resistance and suffering in order to bring his people safely home. This chapter shows us the nature of the world we live in and why it is that heaven is not gained by human effort but can only be gained because of God's gracious work.

MAIN POINT

Our only hope of going to heaven is God's grace because...

I. We live in a world of death, disappointment and defiance (vv.1-9)

Miriam died in the first month of the 40th year after Israel left Egypt and Aaron died on the first day of the fifth month of the 40th year. Thus, chapter 20 records a 4 month period of time. We know this because we are given the date of Aaron's death in Numbers 33:38. That means that some 38 years have passed from the end of chapter 14 when God told Israel they would wander in the desert until everyone 20 and up was dead to the beginning of chapter 20. This announcement of Miriam's death, especially in light of the fact that the last time she was mentioned was when she rebelled against Moses' leadership in Numbers 12 is to be viewed as part of God's judgment on that older generation. Her death reminds us that the wages of sin is death. But, while Miriam's death is another sign of God's anger against sin, yet it also includes the ritual cleansing that involves the ashes of the red heifer (chapter 19), which we saw last week was a foreshadowing of the death of Christ whose blood purifies our conscience from acts that lead to death. Every death in Israel reminds of both God's wrath against sin and of God's grace through Christ that enables believing sinners to escape death.

While camped at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin the water ran out. You will remember that Israel ran out of water once before, during the second month of their exodus from Egypt, which is recorded for us in Exodus 17. Just like 40 years ago at Rephidim, on the way from Egypt to Mt. Sinai, the people quarrel with Moses because they have no water. Thus the history of Israel in the desert begins and ends with the people quarreling with Moses about the lack of water. Like all disappointed humans their bitterness overflows the bounds of all propriety. They exaggerate their difficulty, forgetting God's previous provision of water from the rock. They say it would have been better to have been burned up by the divine fire and buried alive with insubordinate Korah and his compatriots than to be thirsty in the desert. Not only do they exaggerate their situation, forgetting God's grace but they also blame shift. It is Moses' fault that they don't live in the comfort of slavery in Egypt but they now live in the desert. It is Moses' fault that they have not come into the land of Canaan where there are figs and vines and pomegranates. It is Moses' fault that they have no water.

Here is a perfect description of that madness, that exaggeration and blame-shifting to which disappointment and bitterness will drive us. This sounds like a parent, disappointed with the behavior of their teenager who declares, "I wish you'd never been born. You have brought me nothing but trouble and heartache since you were born. You have ruined my life. There is no hope for me because of what you have done." Or like the spouse disappointed by the failures of their husband or wife who asserts, "Marrying you was the worst decision of my life. You have made me miserable for the last 30 years. It would be better to have never met you and never had these children with you and never built this life with you. You have brought me nothing but sorrow for 30 years." Like the Israelites these disappointed tirades leave God out of the picture. Like the Israelites these accusations are not simply a rejection of people but a rejection of the God who delivers from Egypt and makes marriages and gives children. Like the Israelites, these disappointed litanies of woe fail to take responsibility for our own behaviors.

In light of the story we have been reading in the book of Numbers, when we read this angry defiance of God and then see Moses and Aaron fall on their faces before the tabernacle and the glory of the Lord appears, we expect wrath. The last time this series of events happened in Numbers 16 God sent a plague that killed 14,300 Israelites. This story sounds like it is heading in the same direction. But that is not what happens here. God graciously commands Moses and Aaron to take the staff of Aaron from the Holy Place and to go with the people and speak to the rock so that God will provide water again for the people from the rock. There is no anger, no wrath from God. He ignores the wicked rebellion of the Israelites and simply provides for their need. Why does he not respond with wrath but with his unmerited favor?

The simple answer is because God has a plan he is working out and at this moment his plan requires he respond in grace to Israel. Israel deserves wrath but God responds in grace. For most humans, most of the time, this is what our experience is like. We daily rebel against God and yet God graciously provides us with food and

clothing and shelter and family and work and all the pleasures of this world. The apostle Paul tells us that God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. When God is good to us we should not assume that the kindness we are experiencing is due to our goodness and obedience. We should not make the mistake of assuming that God is happy with us because life is going well. Rather, we should be astonished that God is so kind to us in view of our sinfulness and we should go to God and tell him we are sorry for our sins and thank him that he is being kind to us not because we deserve it but because he is a kind and merciful God. We should thank him for Jesus whose blood purifies our conscience from dead works. Don't mistake God's gracious provision of your earthly needs for his approval of you and your behavior. Respond to his kindness with gratitude and repentance for your sins.

II. We live in a world where the best men fail (vv.10-13)

Verse 9 tells us that Moses did what the Lord commanded. The first sentence of v. 10 reinforces this portrait of Moses and Aaron obeying God: they gather the people together before the rock. It would appear that once again the people of Israel are going to be saved by the intercession and work of their prophet, Moses and their priest, Aaron. However, in the middle of v. 10 the story takes a sudden twist. Rather than speaking to the rock, Moses speaks to the people. What he says is discordant with what God told him to do on two counts. First, he denounces Israel for being rebels. While it is true they are rebels, God never told him to denounce Israel. He simply commanded Moses to provide them with water. Second, he clearly takes on far more authority than God had given to him. Moses says it is not the Lord who will provide water but he and Aaron who will do it. He is full of himself and full of contempt for Israel. Then he disobeys God's direct command. He does not speak to the rock but he angrily and arrogantly strikes the rock with Aaron's budded staff not once but twice. God, contrary to what the people deserve and contrary to what Moses and Aaron deserve, makes the water gush from the rock and the people and their livestock drink.

Now the Lord speaks to Moses and Aaron. We find out in this speech exactly what is happening. First, they did not believe in Yahweh and second, as a result they did not treat him with the respect and honor that he is due. That phrase, "treat me as holy," is the same word that is used in the first petition of the Lord's Prayer, which is: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Every true Christian prays first that God's name would be hallowed, that is, treated as holy. So by thinking about what Moses and Aaron failed to do we can come to a clearer understanding of what it means to trust God and as a result treat his name as holy. First, what does it mean that Moses and Aaron did not believe in Yahweh? It doesn't mean that they didn't believe he existed. They didn't become atheists in the middle of v. 10. It doesn't mean they didn't believe he had saved Israel or that he was not at work or that he didn't have any authority. It wasn't that they didn't believe God was going to bring water out of the rock. They knew God would provide the water. They were in the midst of obeying him when they stopped believing in him. At the heart of their unbelief was this: they didn't believe that God's way was the best way. They believed they knew better than God what the situation required. They believed in themselves and they followed their own desires and thoughts rather than God's clear word. God said, gather the people, stand before them with Aaron's rod and then speak to the rock. Moses and Aaron believed Israel needed a taste of anger and condemnation. Moses and Aaron did not believe that the best thing was to graciously provide water but the best thing was to put Israel "in his place" and to show them who was boss. They believed expressing displeasure while showing them who had the power was the best way to get Israel to knock off the belligerence.

Second, they did not treat God as holy because they wanted to be treated as holy. They were mad that the Israelites were not respecting them. They took the anger of the Israelites and their complaints personal. They failed to recognize that the rebellion of the Israelites was not against them but against God. They were tired of being harassed by these people and so they wanted to put them in their place and make sure they knew who was boss. But, in asserting their own authority they treated God's authority with contempt. They did not honor God because they wanted the people to honor them. I don't know about the rest of you but I can certainly relate to Moses and Aaron at this point. I have regularly taken the disrespect and disobedience of my children personal. Rather than recognizing their disrespect of me for what it is: a failure on their part to trust and love God, I have

felt personally attacked by my children and rather than simply disciplining them as God instructs I have responded with anger and given them a tongue lashing, just like Moses does here. I have used their failure as an excuse for my anger. As we will see, my reaction against my children's disrespect is like Moses' reaction, evil and wrong.

This passage affirms what I have repeatedly told you about the nature of saving faith. Faith does not only believe that God will do what he promises but that what God promises and commands is the best thing in the universe. When you believe that God will do what he says and that what he says is better than everything else, then you will live in a manner that honors him, that treats him with the respect he alone deserves. When you say you believe in Jesus you are not simply saying you believe he died for you and will take you to heaven but that you believe being with him and following him is better than every other pleasure in the world. This is what Moses and Aaron did not do. While acting as if they were obeying God, they were in fact disobeying him. Don't miss the irony in this story. They accuse Israel of being rebels while they are rebelling. God says about them the same thing he said about Israel in Numbers 14 when they refused to go into the land of Canaan: they did not believe in him and they did not treat him as holy. Thus, the same thing is going to happen to Moses and Aaron, they will not get to go into the Promised Land. They, along with that older generation, like their sister Miriam, will die outside the land.

What do we learn from this tragic episode? First, God's plan does not depend upon any human being. God needs you to do his work as much as he needs you to make the sun rise each day. Second, all men, regardless of their position in the church or their station in life are accountable to God. As Paul says in Romans 14:10 & 12, "...we will all stand before the judgment seat of God... each of us will give an account of himself to God." Third, faith in Christ is both trusting him to do what he says and believing that what he says is best. Thus, all who trust in Christ seek to follow his word. If you have no interest in his word and in following him, then you do not believe in Christ. Fourth, don't take the anger and insults of others personal. When people are angry they are fighting against God, not you, even though it feels like they are insulting you. You are to exercise whatever authority God has given you and you have the right to protect yourself, but it is not your job to make people pay. God will make sure that everyone pays. Fifth, while Moses and Aaron represented God and, as we have seen, foreshadowed Jesus in their work as prophet and priest, yet they were mere men. Thus, we learn that we must trust in Jesus, not the men and women he sends to represent him and to tell us about him. If your faith in Christ depends upon the faithfulness of other human beings, you are not going to hold on to Christ. Finally, notice that the story ends with the assertion that "through them God showed himself holy." In other words, while the people rebelled and Moses and Aaron did not believe, yet God's purpose to glorify himself went forward. He glorified himself in both the gracious provision of water and in his just condemnation of Moses and Aaron. So do not ever think that human sin will derail God's ultimate purpose to have his name regarded as holy. No one and nothing can successfully resist this great and glorious God.

III. We live in a world where reasonableness is rejected (vv.14-21)

I only want to make one brief point about Edom's refusal to let Israel pass through his land. Moses' appeal for permission to take the shortest route to the eastern edge of Canaan on the King's Highway through the land of Edom is reasonable in every way. Edom ought to permit Israel to go through their land for these reasons: First, Israel and Edom are brothers. The nation Israel is descended from Jacob and the nation Edom is descended from his twin brother Esau. Thus, Edom ought to have sympathy on Israel out of family loyalty. Second, Israel is at the end of a long history of suffering and so human pity ought to move Edom to assist the suffering Israelites. Third, Israel is clear in their intentions. They only want to travel through; they will not interfere with or take anything that belongs to Edom. Finally, they offer to pay for even the water they drink. In other words, if Edom will not let them pass through out of human kindness, they should do it out of economic self-interest. However, in spite of the reasonable request the Edomites muster their army and threaten war with Israel if they try to pass along the highway. Israel refuses to fight but takes the long way around to get to the Promised Land.

Isn't this how life goes? You can see a clear road ahead and yet in spite of your best intentions and in spite of the reasonableness of your request, you are forced to take the hard road, the long way around. People who ought to love you and help you oppose you and make your life hard. What will you do? Will you make war on those who unjustly oppose you? Will you abandon the road to heaven because it is too hard? Or will refuse to fight and take the hard way, trusting God to bring you home?

IV. We live in a world where one man died so that many will live (vv.22-29)

The death of Aaron feels unjust to me for two reasons. First, Moses did all the talking and the acting at Kadesh. Aaron was present but passive. Second, Aaron would not be in trouble if Israel had not gone crazy again. Calvin makes the point in his commentary that as the people watch Aaron climb that mountain they ought to be thinking about the fact that their sin was greater than Aaron's and thus if this is how God is treating Aaron, how much worse treatment do they deserve? However, his death is just because he could have interrupted his brother. He could have done what Caleb and Joshua did when the people rebelled. He could have believed God and treated God as holy by confronting his brother, but he did not. Thus his death is just.

There is a serious question that the death of Aaron and later of Moses outside the Land of Promise raises. They are accused by God of doing what the whole nation of Israel did at Kadesh Barnea, refuse to believe in the Lord and thus not treat him as holy and they are subject to the same punishment as the older generation: death outside the land. In the NT the disobedience and death of the older generation is twice used as a symbol of the punishment of hell which will come on all who refuse to trust in Christ to the end of their lives. Thus, both the OT and the NT present that older generation, dying in the wilderness, as being under God's eternal condemnation. So, what about Aaron and Moses: are they in hell or did God take them to heaven? There is a clue to their eternal condition in the way Aaron's death and later Moses' death is recounted. Aaron, we are told, "was gathered to his people." This same phrase is used to describe the deaths of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and later Moses. It is a reference to eternal life. The person who dies will join those members of God's people who have gone before him. This phrase is never used in reference to any of that older generation. Their death is always described with the language of judgment. Thus, while Aaron and Moses suffer earthly loss for their disobedience by not entering the Land of Promise, yet they by God's grace are brought into God's eternal kingdom.

However, while this passage is an account of Aaron's death, the main thing that the text emphasizes is the transfer of the priesthood from Aaron to his oldest surviving son, Eleazar. The main point is that in front of the entire nation of Israel, God transfers the authority of the high priesthood from Aaron to Eleazar, thus ensuring that there will always be a priest to represent the people. Aaron ascends the mountain dressed in all the finery of the high priest and Eleazar, after the death of his father, in full view of the people of Israel, descends, dressed as the high priest and immediately begins the work of interceding for the people in the tabernacle.

It would be hard to miss the portrait of our Lord Jesus in this exchange. He ascended that hill outside of Jerusalem, outside the camp to die for the sins of the people. He would not have gone up that hill and died if it were not for our sins. But then he arose and ascended into God's holy place, dressed in true holiness, into heaven itself where now he intercedes for all those who trust in him. His presence before God's throne in the Most Holy Place is our assurance that though we have sinned and rebelled against God, yet we will be accepted into heaven because he is there as our high priest.

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