

More Than a Rock

Numbers 20:1-13

By Billy Dempsey

Kelly has prayed for us so we will go right to the reading of God's Word. Numbers chapter 20 beginning with verse 1.

And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.

Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy.

All men are like grass and all their glory like the flower of the field. The grass withers. The flower fades. But, the word of our God stands forever.

Gospel Pattern and the Context of Numbers 20

This series, as you remember, is the Gospel in the Old Testament or Jesus in the Old Testament. That's what we want to remember tonight. We'll see the Savior as well as we'll see the need of a Savior.

Just a couple of comments. The end of chapter 20 which we did not read records the death of Aaron. And, that event, the death of Aaron, shortly after these events place these events--in fact all the events from chapter 20 through the end of Numbers chapter 36--in the fortieth year of the exodus. According to Numbers chapter 33 verse 38, Aaron died in the fortieth year after the people of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt on the first day of the fifth month. So that means that the events recorded in this passage take place among the children, the second generation, the children of those who had left Egypt in the exodus, those who had been born and reared in the forty years of wandering in the desert waiting for their entrance into the land that God had promised them. Remember Numbers chapter 13 and 14, the whole nation is in Kadesh where they are gathered now at the edge of the land and Moses sends forth the spies. And the spies bring back, really, an unbelieving report. They say the land will gobble us up. And it was Joshua and Caleb who said, "No the Lord will help us." And of course they brought evidence of the good fertility of the land and the congregation quailed before the difficulty. That was when God said, "This generation will die in the desert and it will be their children that I take into the land." Well, this is that generation of children.

These events that we're talking about tonight in chapter 20--part of which we're talking about tonight--are bracketed by first generation death: Miriam, verse 1, records her death. Moses' sister, a leader among the women of Israel. Aaron, verses 22-29, which we did not read at the end of the chapter. And, remember, death, here, bracketing these events that we're about to talk about are the result of God's judgement on unbelief. First, as demonstrated by the people. We just talked about who did not believe that God would give them the land of the Canaanites and that was Miriam. Miriam was part of that first generation. Finally, in Aaron's case, death because he did not believe God in his command to bring water from the rock simply by speaking to it. Both cases, God's promised salvation--this is important to us--God's promised salvation is to be accepted by his people by faith. That is the lesson that God is teaching his people: the importance of faith.

The Quarrel of the People

Well, let's go back and look again at the quarrel of the people. We see it, really, in verses 2 through 5. There was no water for the congregation. They assembled themselves together against Moses. If you know the exodus story, this sounds just exactly like their parents in Exodus chapter 17 when they are brought to a

place where there is no water. This is a people who have lived, literally lived, by God's hand every day of their lives for the last forty years. They have gathered manna every day, except the Sabbath. They have drunk from springs that God has led them to. In this instance, as they are thirsty and they see no water and they gather against Moses and Aaron. "Would that we had perished!" In this instance, they show themselves to be no different from their parents. They are not a better generation.

They are different generation; they are not a better generation. They need to understand faith. They need to exercise faith. They need to trust God just as much as their parents did. Instead, in their unbelief--listen to what unbelief does to them. We need to hear that because unbelief does the same thing to us. Instead, in their unbelief, they find fault. They find fault with God providence. "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord!" Well, they're talking about the generation that had largely passed from scene dying in the wilderness. They're finding fault with God's providence in leaving them alive and promising them entrance into the land. "Oh would that we had perished!" In their unbelief, they find fault with God's leading. Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, this wilderness!, that we should die here both we and our cattle. They find fault with God's leading. Just remember, where is Moses leading these people? He's leading them wherever the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire are taking him. They're telling Moses, "Why have you done this?" What is Moses doing but follow the clear leading of God? They're finding fault with the way God is leading them.

Fault with God's Provision

They're finding fault with God's provision. "Why have you made us come up out of Egypt?" Oh, they always bring up Egypt. "Egypt is just that wonderful place where life was so good and they were so happy and everything was just so wonderful to bring us to this evil place." Unbelief makes the past look brighter and the future look bleaker. That's exactly what unbelief is doing here and they're finding fault with God's provision. It's not a place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates. There's no water to drink. Again, what did they eat and drunk for forty years that God has not first provided? They're talking like people--this is a clue now to who we are as well--they're talking like people who expect to be someplace other than where God has placed them in the present. They sound like a people who expect already to be in the land. Sometimes you and I think like a people, talk like a people, sound like a people who already expect that we ought to be in heaven. Things ought to be so good. Things shouldn't be this hard. Things ought to be just better! We talk like a people--unbelief! encourages us to talk like a people who act like we ought to already be in heaven. Let's be careful. Let's learn from our forbearers here that unbelief causes us to find fault with God's providence and his leading. Unbelief, here and now, causes us to expect that we ought to already be there. That's not what God has for them. He has

them here. Here, for them right now, is a waterless desert. They've got to figure out how to trust God here. That's what he's going to help them with.

Israel's Unbelief

Unbelief--let's say this before we go to God's command to Moses and Aaron--unbelief causes people, causes us, to be impatient, suspicious, ungrateful and wrong-headed. These people are arguing with Moses. They are angry with God. Let's understand that. Let me say that again. Unbelief, causes people, causes us to be impatient, suspicious, ungrateful and wrong-headed. If you want documentation of that go to Genesis 3. That's exactly what you find unbelief doing. Deceit and unbelief--you see it all on display right there in Genesis 3 with the woman and with the man.

God's Command to Moses and Aaron

Let's move to God's command to Moses and Aaron. Wisely, as they hear all this from the people, what do Moses and Aaron do? They flee to God! They leave the presence of a rowdy mob, the congregation all up in arms and they flee to the presence of God. And, graciously, he meets them. He doesn't toy with them. He doesn't stand distant from them. He's not apart from them. He shows them. He appears there. His glory appears. His presence is there. He's coming to help them. He's coming to help his people. He's coming to help these two men help his people. God is gracious and when we call out to him he comes to help, he comes to aid, he brings his presence and his power. He answers prayer. That's why we're praying tonight because we expect God to answer our prayer in some way. And, he tells them plainly and clearly what they must do to help these people.

God's Continuing Faithfulness

First of all, he says, "Take this staff." I think the staff that he's talking about is not the staff of Aaron that budded. I don't think that means to the people what the staff of Moses means. It was the staff of Moses that they saw strike the Nile and turn it to blood. It was the staff of Moses that they saw bring the plagues. It was the staff of Moses that was held out over the Red Sea and brought their deliverance as God worked to separate that water and allowed the nation to pass on dry land. And, once again, Moses held out his staff and the sea closed over their enemies. It was the staff of Moses that they have equated with the work of God for their salvation. That's the staff that God tells Moses to take and use in the presence of the people or to have in the presence of the people. There is no role for the staff other than remembrance. There's no role for the staff other than remembrance. They'll remember hearing from their parents and grandparents

how Moses, with his staff, struck the rock at Rephidim and brought water from the rock, water for ever need from the rock. So, they would remember this. Its presence in Moses hand would remind the people of all the deliverance that they had seen and enjoyed and all the provision that they had enjoyed from God's hand. Seeing it would remind them of God's mighty redemptive acts. Its impact would be to focus their attention on the God who has done so much for them. That's what this is all about: to focus their attention on the God who's done so much for them. How would he not continue to do much for them?

Remember now, he's the one who's led the to this place. He's led them to a place with no water. Moses did not take a wrong turn. He's led them to a place in which they would soon feel their need for water. He is intent to show them, once again, what he will do for them. But, first he creates the need, that sense of need. Does he work with us any differently? I don't think so. I think he leads us into dry places to show us his mighty power that he will do. He puts us in trial to show us the mighty power that he bends for our good. How do we not love God more? How do we not love God more when we find ourselves in hard places? We love God more because we see how much he does for us. We don't sense our need of him in the easy places. We sense our need of him in the hard places. God, in his grace, leads us into easy places. God, in his grace, leads his people into hard places to in order that we might see what he does for us, see new and afresh how he loves us and what he will not--he'll do anything for us. We've got the benefit of Romans chapter 8 where Paul says, "How we he who spared not his own son but freely gave him up for us all, how we he not also freely give us all things?" We see that. They're going to see that right here. They won't have Romans 8 yet, but they're going to see what God does for them.

Moses' Unbelief

And, so, God calls them to assemble the congregation. "You and Aaron your brother tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them. Give drink to the congregation, to the cattle." One more time. It's though they needed it. But, yet, one more time, God in his grace dealing with their wrong headedness, God in his grace will show his doubting people a vivid display of his power, an unlikely method of saving them (water from a rock), and they will learn more about trusting him. They will see his nearness to them in their need and have an opportunity to be instructed in his character, particularly in his mercy, his active pity to relieve their suffering. That's a great plan. But, then we meet the rebellion of Moses and Aaron. No surprise to God. The rebellion of Moses and Aaron. With the command of God now ringing in his ears, it's not been a day and a half, it's been more like a minute and a half that he's left the tent of meeting and left the presence of God. Who does Moses speak to? It ain't the rock! God said nothing about talking to the people. God said to speak to the rock. Well, Moses doesn't speak to the rock. Moses speaks to the people. And what does he say? "Hear now you rebels. Shall we bring water for you out of this

rock?" Calvin remarks on Moses inconsiderate fervor here. German commentators Keil and Delitzsch point out that Moses' words were certainly fitted to strengthen the people in their unbelief. Psalm 100:6 talks about this incident, describes Moses as speaking rashly with his lips. Now, we understand--I mean, just in our little family--people can just absolutely crazy and push you to do anything. Moses has got a whole nation. He's got a million plus people and they're in open rebellion, you know? He's off his leash. That doesn't excuse him. That helps us understand him. We've been there. Our families push us off our leash. Our co-workers push us off our leash. Our spouses push us off our leash. We get it. There's no excuse. There's no excuse here. God tells him to speak to the rock. He flogs the sheep.

And then, worse, Moses, verses 11 and 12: "Moses lifted up his hand, struck the rock with his staff twice. Water came out abundantly and the congregation drank and their livestock." The people had their need met. God graciously meets the need of the people despite of the crookedness of the mediator, in spite of the wrong of the mediator. God meets the need of his people. But, listen to what he says: "The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did believe in me.'" He doesn't say, "Because you lost your temper." He doesn't say, "Because you had a mental breakdown. Because you slipped your leash. Because you let these people get under your skin." No, no, no. Those are all periphery issues. God speaks to the heart issue: "Because you did not believe in me." Moses fault, Aaron's fault is not a fault of self-control. It is a fault of unbelief. Unbelief. "Because you did not believe in me. To uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel. Therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." Once again, notice the importance of belief. God cites Moses and Aaron for unbelief in the matter of striking the rock.

The Rock: A Type of Christ

The rock is more than a rock. It's a rock; it's a legitimate, physical rock, certainly. But, it's more than just a rock. It's a type of Christ. They don't get that. We don't get that until Paul helps us get that. But, God is showing his people by baby steps what it means for them to be his people and for him to be their God. He's led them to a place with no water, a nation of more than a million people, and they feel their need. In that wilderness without water, it's not a matter of thirst, it's a matter of life. They will perish if water doesn't come to them, if they don't find water. Their parents have been in the same circumstance. Moses, under God's command, brought forth water from the rock Rephidim as we've already said. They would've heard of God's amazing provision. Now they find themselves in the same state of need. God has saved their lives once with water from a rock, a very unlikely source of any kind of salvation. This time the rock is only to be spoken to, not struck. What could God be teaching his people?

Paul, as I mentioned a second ago, sheds some light for us. He says in 1

Corinthians chapter 10 that all, he's talking about the nation of Israel in their wanderings, "They all ate the same spiritual food. They all drank from the same spiritual drink. They drank from the spiritual rock that followed them and the rock was Christ." God is using their physical need to prepare them to understand the larger reality of their spiritual need. He provides their physical salvation by a very unlikely means, water from a rock, a rock that is struck once and the next rock is not to be struck again. That's a pointer. That's a pointer that they will understand generation and generation and generation later. That's a pointer to Christ who was once slain, who was once crushed, who was once struck for our salvation and who now ever lives to make intercession for us. In his rash and angry unbelief, Moses takes the attention of the people away from God's gracious provision and the pointer of the future work of the Savior. And he places it squarely in his own un-required work of striking the rock. In his anger, Moses and Aaron obscure God's holiness in the eyes of the people. God's apart-ness, God's separateness, God's purity--they obscure his holiness. Of course, they pay a price. God still showed himself holy, but outside the framework of their obedience.

The Grace of God

Note the grace of God here. The people and the cattle get the water they need in abundance. They, like their parents, are the beneficiaries of an unlikely salvation. Now, I'll make that point again about an unlikely salvation. Because, how is salvation--how were we expecting that God would save us by sending his son to the gas chamber of the day, the electric chair of the day, the lethal injection of the day, for his son to die as a criminal? How were the people of God to expect--it was an unlikely salvation. It's salvation from a corner totally unexpected unless you become familiar to God's ways. God's introducing him to his ways. That he's going to bring salvation from a totally unlikely source that they would never come to on their own.

The Justice of God

Note the justice of God here. Moses has called the people rebels. God refers to this instance in dealing with Moses further five more times in the remaining months in Moses' life. Three of those times, guess what God calls Moses? He calls him a rebel. Moses and Aaron finish their lives before their work is done. They die before they complete their work as mediators, before they bring the people into the land. Moses' work as the mediator between God and his people is incomplete. As a man, Moses is an imperfect mediator. Moses and Aaron both require the work of another mediator. One who does the will of his Father perfectly on their behalf and our behalf. One who is struck once and ever lives to intercede. One to whom we flee to find grace and mercy in time of need.

Christ, the Water of Life

And, by the way, what did Jesus say about the water? Remember John chapter 7 when he stood up at the Feast of Tabernacles that was the feast that commemorated the wandering in the wilderness. He stood up at the water ceremony, the last and the greatest day of the feast. And, he said, "Come to me, believe in me, and I'll give you water to drink and you'll never thirst and it will become a living well coming out of you." He's talking about the work of the Spirit. The Rock struck once and never struck again brings the Water of Life to us. That's what we have when we trust Christ. That's what we have when we are his and we gather here to pray and we live life out there in the world in our families and at work and in our neighborhoods and going to Wal-mart and buying gas. We live with the water of life percolating up and spilling over and splashing and touching everybody around us. That's what Jesus does. Those people in the desert drank to their heart's content from the rock that God provided. You and I, because that symbol is fulfilled, drink to our hearts content of the grace and the love and the mercy and the fulness of Christ. You and I can then turn to our spouses, to our children, to our in-laws and outlaws, to the people we work with and we can bring that fullness of the water of Christ, that abundance of the Spirit's presence and joy and peace and do abundant good as we just live and walk out the gospel day by day. Well, let's pray and then we'll go to the rest of our prayer meeting.

Father, thank you for the water of life. You gave your people the water of life. Even when they didn't trust you, you gave it to them. And they had abundance. Even when their mediators were wrong, you gave it to them. Thank you that our Mediator is perfect and is perfectly brought us to you and has perfectly fulfilled all that you required of us. And, so, help us percolate out the abundance of life that you've given to us in Him. Thank you. We make our prayer in Jesus name and for his sake, Amen.

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