

Numbers 20

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[0 : 00] Sidney Carter was a liberal Christian in the 60s. His theology is a little bit wonky to say the least. It's hard to work out what he's getting at in lots of his songs. And Lord of the Dance, do you remember that? Whatever that's about.

It was a Friday morning is another song, the day Jesus was crucified. And in one of the verses he imagines a conversation that took place between the thief on the cross and Jesus. And the conversation goes like this. God is up in heaven and he doesn't do a thing. With a million angels watching and they never move a wing. It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me. I said to the carpenter hanging on the tree.

It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me. I said to the carpenter hanging on the tree. I think that resonates with the way a lot of people think.

That God is to blame for the mysteries and the troubles of this world. And God is to blame for the miseries and the troubles of my life.

[1 : 11] It's God they ought to crucify instead of you and me. It amazes me, doesn't it? I'm sure it amazes you that people who still don't believe in God have managed to get very angry with him when things go wrong.

And there's a sense, isn't there, where that's what's happening in our passage. Look at verse 13 of Numbers 20. These are the waters of Meribah where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord. And through them he showed himself holy. And who did they quarrel with? If you read the earlier verses, like we did, they were quarrelling with Moses and Aaron.

And they are, aren't they, a very insensitive group, these people. Moses and Aaron have just lost their sister, we're told in the opening verse. And Miriam has just been buried. And while they are still grieving the loss of Miriam, a mother in Israel, the people begin to quarrel with them.

But it's not Moses and Aaron they're quarrelling with, is it? Verse 13 tells us the Israelites literally quarrelled with the Lord. And he showed himself holy among them. It's a familiar story.

[2 : 26] We've seen it over and over again in Numbers, especially from chapter 11. It's like Christmas TV, isn't it? How many times do you have to watch? National Lampoon's vacation.

It's bad enough the first time, isn't it? But you have the rerun. And then the rerun. And it's a bit like that in Numbers. You have these reruns of moaning and moaning. They're always complaining.

They never stop grumbling. And here we go again in chapter 20. But what we need to see is the quarrel is not so much with Moses and Aaron, but with God. Three things from the passage.

Let me tell you what they are. Because they're so good. The first point is God in the dock. The second point is God on the rock. And the third point is God with his flock.

Dick Lucas says my points are perennially dull. But they are brilliant, aren't they? God in the dock.

[3 : 22] So the word quarrel in verse 13. Now, it's a technical word. It's the word to launch a complaint. It's a legal term. It's not just moaning and groaning. We know they're good at that.

But what they're actually doing here is they're formally instituting a lawsuit against God. That's what the word means. They are putting God on trial. They are indicting him for crimes against humanity.

One of the most famous sermons ever preached in America was by Jonathan Edwards.

It's called Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. But Numbers 20 is the opposite, isn't it? It is God in the hands of angry sinners. That's what's happening here. And it's no wonder that God says about these people, they provoked me in the wilderness.

They've got an attitude problem. When children, your kids, have got an attitude problem, what do you do? Don't tell me what you do. But you send them, I hope, maybe to another room to calm down, don't you?

You send them somewhere to get some perspective. And why these children of Israel, why are they still wandering around in the desert? Why are they wandering around? And it's not, isn't it, because Moses has got the map upside down.

[4 : 31] It's because of their attitude problem towards God. And God has sent them back into the wilderness to sort them out. And that's what's happening. It's not their circumstances. Often we blame our circumstances for our attitude.

But it's not that. It's their attitude. So they wandered in the desert for 40 years, round and round. And the 40 years are nearly up. And they're giving Moses and Aaron a hard time.

But it's God that they're angry with. I know of a man whose wife, I think it would be fair, treats him atrociously.

In my hearing, she's put him down in public. And she lashes out at him with her tongue. And someone said to him, why do you put up with this?

And he said, well, some years ago we lost a child to cancer. And she's angry with God. And she can't lash out at God. And so she takes her out on me.

[5 : 32] She's angry with God and not me. And Moses might have said the same thing here. Moses and Aaron, they are the victims of a displaced anger. And look at verse 2.

There was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together. They gathered together against Moses and against Aaron. And it goes with the job if you're a leader.

It doesn't matter if you're a political leader. Or a leader in the church. It goes with the job. You must be willing to be the general dog's body. But you also must be willing to be the scapegoat when things go wrong.

It's part of the pressure of pastoral ministry. People will dump on you what they have against God. And I'm thinking of this congregation or whatever here.

But it is something that you see in church life. That people will dump on you what they have against God. And you've got to be able to discern that. Otherwise you'll go under as a church leader.

[6 : 33] And that's what's happening here with Moses and Aaron in verse 3. And the people must quarrel with Moses. And said, would that we have perished when our brothers perished before the Lord.

That was chapter 16. Do you remember that? Korah's rebellion. When the ground opened up literally and swallowed them up. And they're saying we would have rather come under the judgment of God than depend on his grace and mercy in the wilderness.

What a thing to say. That's despised the goodness of God. The God who's kept them alive for 40 years. The God who's sent a manna from heaven.

In one of the chapters in Deuteronomy. He says that God gave him sandals that didn't wear out.

Can you imagine that? Sandals that didn't wear out. You could work out that in children's shoes.

We'd make a fortune, wouldn't we? Wouldn't we? And there was water gushing out of a rock for them. He kept them alive. And they say we'd rather have rebelled against you like our brothers and sisters.

[7 : 31] And perished in the wilderness than to go on living like this. It's a dreadful thing to say. Look at verse 4. Not only do they despise the goodness and the grace of God to them over such a long time.

But they question his purpose. Verse 4. Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness that we should die here, both of you in our castle? Because it wasn't Moses that had brought them.

It was God who did. It was God in the pillar of cloud and fire. It was God who led them through the wilderness. But they say to Moses, why? What is the purpose of this? This is pointless.

Why did he bring us out of Egypt? Why did he bring the Lord's community into the desert that we in our lives don't should die here? Why? And of course the answer is that because their destination was not the desert but the promised land.

This is Abraham's covenant. This is what God has promised them. That they would be God's people in God's place and in God's protection. And that's where they're heading. That's where we're heading.

[8 : 31] That's the why of it all. That's the why of what is happening in your life and in my life. If you're going through a hard time. If you're in a dry place. If you're stuck in a rut.

If you're tempted to complain against God and say, why do these things happen? Well because he's taking you somewhere. And you have to take the blinkers off, don't you?

And realise that this life isn't the only life that there is. And don't think that the circumstances that you find yourselves in tonight are a dead end. No, God is allowing these things because he wants to take you somewhere.

To a land of milk and honey. Thomas Carlisle, he wrote about 18th century England. If you know anything about the 18th century, before the great revival, it was spiritually and morally bankrupt our country.

In some ways it's really encouraging to read to see what God did. It was a span of this today. And this is what Thomas Carlisle wrote. He said of the culture of his day, he said, Their stomach was alive, their soul extinct.

[9 : 38] That's how he sums up what England was like in the 18th century, before Whitefield and Wesley. Stomach alive, soul extinct. And that is where these people are, aren't they?

In the numbers 20, they are stuck in the wilderness. And they're between the slavery of Egypt and the promise of, Canaan. And for 40 years, God has miraculously provided them with food and drink. Stomach alive. But they still don't trust him. And instead of trusting him and learning what he has to teach them in their trials and difficulties and wanderings, they quarrel with God. They put God in the dark, so to speak.

So what does God do about it? Well, secondly, God on the rock. Verses 6 to 8. Verse 6. And then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and he fell on their faces, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

We see that again and again with Moses, that he deals with these people, and they come to him and moan and grumble and groan, and he goes, when your friends despise, forsake you, you take it to the Lord in prayer, and he intercedes for his people, and he falls on his face before God.

[10 : 57] And the Lord appears to him, and the Lord says to Moses, 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 out the rock for them, and give drink to the congregation and their candle. Let's go to the staff. Now, it's a little bit complicated, but it's really worth following, alright?

If you know how the New Testament picks up this passage, it's incredible. So in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, Paul really gives a summary of Numbers 20.

And he says, these things happened for us. They happened for you tonight. Let me read you from 1 Corinthians 10, verses 3 and 4.

It says about the people in the wilderness, that they all ate the same spiritual food. And they all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

[12 : 02] That's a very strange thing to say, isn't it? The rock was Christ. Obviously, it's speaking metaphorically, not literally. They all drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

It doesn't mean that there was a kind of whacking great rock following around the wilderness. I know there's a kind of rabbinical tradition to that. I don't think it's that. What he means is this, that God, what God did for them for those 40 years, God provided for them food and drink.

It can only be explained in terms of Christ and his finished work on the cross. There's no other explanation. On what basis can a holy God feed and water rebel sinners?

And the only basis on which God can do that is Christ and his finished work on the cross. And this incident in Numbers 20 is telling us that. Now, it gets more complicated.

This incident is identical to another incident, isn't it? Exodus 10. Exodus 17. It's almost exactly the same. In fact, Exodus 17 is so similar to Numbers 20 that liberal commentators want to say it's just one story that's been told twice and the editor kind of messed up.

[13 : 23] That misses the point completely. What is it about a desert? What do you need in a desert, children? What do you need in a desert? What do you think you need? Noah.

Water. Water, that's right, isn't it? You don't need water once if you're there for 40 years. You need it again and again. It's not something that's going to happen once or twice. It's an everyday thing. It's something continually happening.

You don't need to go far and you'll always need water. So the question is on what basis will God provide water to a rebellious and constantly grumbling and complaining people?

Why should he do that? Now again, remember this is 40 years on from the rising generation. These are the people in Numbers 20 who will go into the promised land. It's an up and coming generation and are they any better than their forefathers?

There's no difference between Exodus 20 and Exodus 17 in Numbers 20. They're exactly the same. So what does God do? Well again, look at Numbers 6-8 in Numbers 20.

[14:28] Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to attend to the meeting and they fell on their faces and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, take the staff. Take the staff.

What staff? Take the rod. The staff that Moses had struck the Nile with in Egypt and the Nile turned from water into blood. It's the same rod.

Same rod in Exodus 17 as Numbers 20, 40 years later. It's an instrument of judgment. It's an instrument of judgment to set people free. And so here are these people.

They complain with Moses but they're really quarreling with God. And they've got the nerve to put God in the door and what does God do? Well he says, take the staff. Take the staff of judgment. He's put up with this for so long. And God says, take the rod. Now they're in trouble. Take the rod with which I struck Egypt.

[15:25] Take the rod. They're in trouble. What does Proverbs say? Spare the rod. Spoil the child. Some of you would have heard the horrific words from your father.

Get the slipper or something like that. Something similar. The rod is an instrument of punishment. In the Pentateuch if I look to the Bible if a man committed a crime he can be brought before the leaders and given the rod.

Some of you are old enough to remember getting the rod in school. Okay. God says to Moses take the rod. These people they are provoking me in the wilderness. They do nothing but complain.

They are quarreling. They are blaming me. Now take the rod. They're in for it. Is God now going to give these people what they deserve? In Exodus chapter 17 verses 5 and 6 God says to Moses take the rod and strike the rock.

And interestingly he says in Exodus chapter 17 and I God will stand before you by the rock. Strike the rock Moses and water will come gushing out for the people to drink.

[16:37] Do you see what that means? God is taking the rod for his people. He's taking the caning that his people deserve. He puts himself into the hands of angry sinners.

Is God the old to crucify instead of you and me? I said to the carpenter hang on the tree and that is exactly what has happened isn't it? That God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself taking the punishment that our sin and rebellion deserves.

It is God they ought to crucify. It is God they were crucifying instead of you and me. And now again 40 years later the scene is repeated but notice the difference. The only difference between these two incidents Moses is told to take the rod and speak to the rock.

Do you see that in Exodus 17 take the rod strike the rock and I'm standing there by the rock. But Numbers 20 is Moses take the rod and speak to the rod and out of it will come rivers of living water. According to Don Carson because he says it I'm willing to stand by it he says this is what he says God is making a simple laden point in the light of 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 4 which shows Christ to be the antitype of the rock it's hard to resist the conclusion that the reason God insisted the rock to be struck in Exodus 17 and forbids it here is that he perceives a wonderful opportunity to make a simple laden point.

[18:11] The ultimate rock from whom life-giving streams flow is struck once and no more. And that is Don Carson's point and I think he's right.

Do you remember how God instructed Moses to build the tabernacle? Do you remember those sermons? Probably you don't. Of details on the tabernacle. Exact details.

So exact you get it twice in the book of Exodus. And the instructions that God gave to Moses were on the pain of death. That if they made it up as they went along if they worshipped God in the way that they went along if they had a crazy idea no this is the better way to do it they would have been punished because God wanted it just so.

Why? Because to do it in any other way would distort the picture. Distort the gospel. Christ is the rock who accompanied them through the wilderness.

Christ is the rock that was smitten for us. We sang it and closed the service last week. Rock of ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee.

[19 : 17] Christ is that rock that took the caning we deserve once and for all. It's not once upon a time is it? but it's once for all time. Jesus died the just for the unjust to bring us to God.

It's unique. It's finished. There's no doubt that that's how Jesus saw himself. So think of John's gospel John chapter 6 and 7.

You know the story he feeds the multitude in the wilderness and then he stands up and he says I am the bread from heaven your fathers they have manna in the wilderness but if anyone is hungry I'm the bread you need.

Come to me the bread of life feed on me and you'll never be hungry again. Then in John 7 you have the feast of the tabernacles. What was that all about?

It was this community all went and lived in tents. They commemorated the book of Numbers living in the wilderness. But Jesus didn't go to the feast of the tabernacles. And so in John 7 he doesn't arrive he's halfway through and the disciples wonder where is he?

[20 : 25] And then at the end on the last great day of the feast great day of the feast commemorating the book of Numbers and the wanderings where they all lived in tents and the whole thing culminates on the last day and the priest pours out water on the altar and he calls to mind the rock in the wilderness and in John 7 through 37 John says on the last great day of the feast when all these people have gathered to remember their wanderings in the desert at that crucial moment when the priest lifts the water over the altar and the water cascades from the altar Jesus appears out of nowhere it says it says in a loud voice you can imagine what on earth is this heckler doing in a loud voice he says if anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink and out of his belly will flow rivers of living water and John says he said that about the Holy Spirit who had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been crucified but once the rock is smitten once the saviour is crucified out from heaven comes those rivers of living water the day of the feast of Christ and so if anyone is thirsty

Jesus says forget about religion come to me I'll give you water to drink and not only that I'll make you a source of living refreshment for all around you and out of your belly will flow rivers of living water isn't that interesting to see what he's doing he's deliberately identifying himself as the rock in the wilderness if you want water in the wilderness you have to come to me I suspect some of you tonight find yourself between a rock and a hard place stuck in a rut going round and round feeling dry you feel you're always running on empty you're not really sensing the presence of God in your life what do you do do you try hard and go Jesus said he'd come to me is Jesus your food and drink that's what 1 Corinthians 10 is about how did the people survive in the wilderness with all that sin well Jesus was their food and drink

C.S. Lewis in the Chronicle of Narnia and the silver chair and the episode where Jill sees the lion Aslan Jill which she sees Aslan she's frightened she runs into the forest and Lewis says she wore herself out she so wore herself out that she was about to die of thirst or so she thought just then she heard the gurgling of the brook in the distance and she got up and she went towards the sound she was about to take of the water in front of her and the lion spoke to her are you not thirsty said the lion I'm dying of thirst said Jill then drink said the lion may I could I would you mind going away while I do said Jill the lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk she realised that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience the delicious rippling noise from the stream was driving her nearly frantic will you promise not to do anything to me if I do can said Jill

I make no promise said the lion Jill was so thirsty now that without noticing it she had come a step nearer do you eat girls she said I have swallowed up girls and boys women and men kings and emperors cities and realms said the lion it didn't say this as if it were boasting nor as if it were sorry nor as if it were angry it just said it I dared come and drink said Jill then you will die of thirst said the lion oh dear said Jill coming another step nearer I suppose I must go and look for another stream then there is no other stream said the lion it never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the lion no one who had seen his stern face could do that and her mind suddenly made itself up it was the worst thing she ever had to do but she went forward to the stream knelt down and began scooping up water in her hand it was the coldest most refreshing water she had ever tasted you didn't need to drink much of it frequented your thirst at once you thirsty

Jesus said come to me isn't there somewhere else you can come no there is nowhere else Augustine said God has made us himself and we are restless until we find our rest in thee and the only way that is going to happen is through Jesus ah but if I come will he do something to me well

yes but you've still got to come and if you're thirsty Jesus says can don't come to church come to me and I will give you water of life and out of your valley will flow rivers of living water and that brings me to the last point God on the dock God on the rock and thirdly God with his flock verses 9 to 12 and here's a surprise isn't it I remember having this read to me when I was a little boy and being absolutely horrified verse 9 Moses took the staff from before the Lord as he commanded them and then

[26 : 31] Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly and the church together before the rock and he said to them here now you rebels shall we bring water out from you from 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 the livestock and the Lord said to Moses and Aaron but because you did not believe in me shall hold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel the land that I have given them I think it's difficult to be sure precisely what was the nature of Moses saying but something snapped inside of Moses instead of doing exactly what God told him to instead of speaking to the rock which God told him to he actually strikes the rock now not once but twice and he obviously is doing that in anger because you can tell that from the words he strikes listen you rebels verse 10 must we bring water out of the rock again he's lost it doesn't he Moses repetition it says in Hebrews is that he was the meekest man in all the earth we've seen that over and over again haven't we in severe provocation

Moses goes away from the people and falls on his face before the Lord in prayer he doesn't lash out but here he does and in his anger he speaks it advisedly he misrepresents God and he distorts the once and for allness of the sacrifice of Christ the finished work he's been exasperated by Christ by his people and Psalm 106 it brings that incident together we sang it in our opening Psalm in verses 32 there's a great insight there Psalm 106 Psalm 106 in verse 32 and 33 they angered him my God of the waters of Meribah and it went ill with Moses on their account for they made his spirit bitter and he spoke rashly with his lips that's numbers 20 it combines Exodus 17 and numbers 20 interestingly in those verses they promote him let me apply this in two ways the first application is that you and

I need to think of the effect that our sin has on other people you and I need to think of the effect that our sin has on other people you and I need to think on the effects of our attitudes our wrong attitudes have on other people they do because it caused Moses to stumble didn't it and that is serious motives missed out on leading people to the promised land I can think of one faithful minister who served the Lord faithfully for 40 years and ruined it in the last six months of his ministry he insisted that he knew best on who his successor was and relationships were severed the church was split and a wonderful ministry was spoiled ruined that's what happened to Moses and what caused this to happen it was the bad attitude among the people and what

I'm saying is we need to watch ourselves not only for our own sake but for the sake of those we're travelling with Hebrews 10 you know the kind of salad passage Hebrews 10 where there's four letters and one of those letters is that we are to provoke one another to love and good works and so much more as we see the day approaching that's our job not just to provoke one another that's what's going on in Numbers 20 they were provoking one another they were provoking their leaders exasperating but we are to provoke one another to love and good works and so much more as we see the day approaching we're in this together we're not on our own you don't live the Christian life on your own we're not there yet are we we live in the now and the not yet and the problem with these people is they wanted the promised land right in the wilderness they wanted the land flowing with milk and honey and we want that we want perfect healing and perfectly content lives and we want it now but we're not there yet and God is taking us there and we need one another to help each other as we go to provoke one another to love and good works not to anger and discouragement do you remember do you remember there's another episode in Moses life in Exodus chapter 2 do you remember that he's a prince in Egypt comes to Numbers chapter 20 and he says this is so unlike Moses this isn't like

Moses is it the meekest of men and here he is he flies off into a rage he flies off the handle this isn't like Moses actually yes it is and so you go back to Exodus chapter 2 and he's a prince of Egypt and he sees the Egyptian overlord treating the Hebrew slave and what does he do he lashes out and he kills him he buries him in the sand it's 80 years ago he was a young man that's why he had an EV dupe in the first place wasn't it and now all these lose years later but what I'm trying to say is it shows us that we must never give up in our fight against sin sin can lie dormant in your heart for a

lifetime only for it to come to life when you least expect it John Owen his great work on killing sin he says this if you don't kill sin sin will kill you he's got another little bit let me paraphrase it it's not just killing cutting the head off you've got to keep the sword on the neck of your sin you must never assume that it's dead and gone isn't that your testimony of mine you think I've dealt with it it's gone [32 : 56] I'm over that I'm never going to have any trouble with that again when somebody tells you that they're lying because sin has a habit of resurrecting itself just like it did in Moses life and it doesn't mind this fiery nature flares up at the wrong moment this self confident spirit he saw this Hebrew slave being mistreated and he chases it into his own hands and here it is again must we bring water out of the rock we are you going to do it Moses are you going to save the people of course not well whatever the precise nature of Moses sin he's not doing exactly what God told him and he so misrepresents the gospel picture he takes matters into his own hands he sees himself in this passage as Israel's deliverer and I don't know what the precise nature of the failure was but Moses failed didn't he as every human leader still fails and this is a sad chapter in some ways because it's the chapter where they all die

Miriam dies at the start Aaron dies at the end and Moses is not far away God buries his workers but he carries on his work and if you look to human shepherds they will fail you because God himself is the great shepherd and when leaders let you down which they will it is to him that you must look and it is him to him you must come to the best of men are men and best and so you go to the shepherd the good shepherd because the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want let's pray to him