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Session 5 - End of an era

Bible Passages

Numbers 20:1-29

Brief Notes

We are jumping on a bit from where we left it last. Chapters 18-19 is another section of law, but in context they speak an encouraging word about God's provision of priests and of cleansing. Chapter 20 marks the beginning of a new section of narrative. It opens at Kadesh (v.1), where 38 years earlier they had rebelled and refused to enter the Promised Land, leading to God's decree that they would wander in the desert until that entire generation had died.

This section marks the conclusion to that judgment and their setting off again purposefully towards their destination, but this time to enter from the Eastern border in the Plains of Moab, which they reach in 22:1 and where they will stay until Joshua leads them across the Jordan into Canaan.

From chapter 33:48 it's clear we are now at the beginning of the 40th year since the Exodus, and these two chapters represent something of a turning point. Chapter 20 is essentially bleak, sandwiched at the beginning and end by the death of Moses' siblings; chapter 21 is more hopeful, sandwiched at the beginning and end by accounts of battles won. I would suggest focussing on the main story here about Moses' rebellion, but the rest of the chapter gives the context of death and difficulty.

More Rebellion from the Israelites (verses 2-5)

No water might seem a fair cause for complaint, but God had provided water in the past, and his faithful care was demonstrated day by day in the provision of manna, so this should have been an opportunity to trust. Verse 3 refers back to the story in our last study, Korah's rebellion, when in mercy God had spared them, but they say "we wish we'd died". The irony of verses 4-5 is that it is spoken in the very place where they had turned their backs on the abundant fruit brought back by the spies, tokens of the wonderful place Moses was leading them to; this "terrible place" was their choosing. Faced by any setback their first instinct is to moan, rather than trust.

The Rebellion of Moses and Aaron (verses 6-13)

Kadesh had been the scene of the people's great rebellion, because of which that generation was refused entry into the land; now it becomes the scene of Moses' and Aaron's great rebellion, because of which they are refused entry into the Promised Land. They "rebelled" (so v.24), and that is the focus in this story. It seems as though God is very harsh on Moses, so we need to understand what exactly he did wrong. Verse 12 speaks of a failure to trust and a failure to honour, both of which are identified again by the LORD in Deut.32:51 just before Moses dies (outside the land), so they seem to be the two lessons to be teased out.

The failure to trust

Disobedience seems to be the more obvious fault, but disobedience is unbelief: a failure to obey is a failure of trust (cf. Heb.3:18-19). Moses disobeys: instead of speaking to the rock, he speaks to the people; and instead of speaking to the rock, he strikes the rock. It might seem a relatively small matter to us, but presumably we should learn that disobedience does matter. Given the similarities with the previous episode in Exodus 17 (a link we are expected to make, since the same name "Meribah" is given to mark this event), maybe Moses assumed he knew what God would tell him, in which case this warns us against reading the Bible complacently as if we know what it will say.

The failure to honour

Again we should ponder how Moses failed to honour God as holy, and I think verse 13 helps if we think how God “was proved holy among them” here, ie how he showed himself to be holy. In part, surely, it was by the fact that he punished Moses and Aaron for their disobedience, but I think also in the way he graciously provided for the Israelites. God’s holiness means he is not like us: we would have let Moses off for his slip, but punished the moaning Israelites. But God made it clear (v.8) that that he intended to show grace to these rebels and provide water. Moses presumed he knew better, rebuking them as rebels, as though anger is what God felt towards them. In obscuring God’s grace, Moses failed to honour God as holy. When we are judgmental, quick to condemn and slow to forgive, when we are graceless, we fail to honour God as holy. It is striking that at this juncture God is more concerned with Moses’ failure to trust and honour him than with the whinging of the people, which indicates how seriously God views this.

We are like those rebellious Israelites, to whom God is wonderfully gracious. Jesus is the one better than Moses, who perfectly obeyed and perfectly reflected God’s character and will, and who does lead us into the promised land.

Discussion Questions

- We will focus on the story of Water from the Rock, but reading the chapter as a whole, what are the characteristics of this bit of the story?
 - The action takes place at Kadesh. What happened last time they were here?
 - What were the consequences of what happened then?
 - How is that reflected in this chapter?
 - We know from Nus.33:48 that it is now the 40th year, so the wandering and waiting is coming to an end. Miriam’s death might well indicate the passing of that older generation. Certainly, this is now predominantly the new generation, but do they seem any different from their parents?
 - How is their moan ironic, given where they are saying this?
 - The focus this time is not the people’s rebellion, but Moses and Aaron’s. How have they rebelled?
 - Verse 12 suggests two failings (see too Deut.32:51), what are they?
 - How have they failed to trust God?
 - How have they failed to honour God as holy?
 - Verse 13 says God “was proved holy among them”. How does God demonstrate his holiness in this story?
 - How would we have responded differently to the Israelites? And to Moses and Aaron?
 - How did Moses obscure God’s grace?
 - How might we do similarly?
 - How is this story a warning to us?
 - How might it encourage us?
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