

Numbers Chapter 20 v 14 - 21

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[0 : 0 0] in our Bibles. We're back in Numbers chapter 20. We've been there for the last two weeks when we looked at a little bit of a biography of Miriam who we're told died. And then last week we looked at that particularly well-known passage where Moses and Aaron struck the rock in contradiction to God's Word that God provided water and we looked at how that applied to us.

And we're going to continue from there. But just read verse 1 and then we'll go over to verse 14 and then read to the end of the chapter or read to verse 22. So chapter 20 of Numbers, that's page 157 if you haven't found it yet. First of all, the first part of verse 1. In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin. They stayed at Kadesh. Then go over to verse 14.

Verse 14. Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom saying, this is what your brother Israel says. You know about all the hardships that have come on us. Our ancestors went down into Egypt and we lived there many years. The Egyptians ill-treated us and our ancestors. But when we cried out to the Lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard or drink water from any well. We will travel along the king's highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we've passed through your territory. But Edom answered, you may not pass through here. If you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword.

The Israelites replied, we will go along the main road. And if we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We only want to pass through on foot, nothing else. Again they answered, you may not pass through. Then Edom came out against them with a large and powerful army. Since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them. Well let's come back then to God's word. We've asked and prayed that he would speak to us. We've sung and asked him to speak to us. So let us see what it is that he has to say to us. Numbers chapter 20 and those verses 14 to 22 in particular. I'd ask you to have them open in your Bible before you.

[2 : 5 7] We've spent time in worship and praise of God in prayer and in singing. And there's many reasons of course why God is worthy of our faith and worthy of our worship. I'm sure that if I was to go around the room, each of us could think of a different reason why God should be worshipped and praised and trusted. I might speak of his power or his might or his wisdom or his knowledge. I speak of his love or his grace and on and on we could go talking about and thinking about reasons why God is so worthy of praise and faith. But there's one thing especially about God that makes it possible for us to trust him and to worship him. And that is the fact that God speaks. If God did not make himself known, if God was silent, if he was uncommunicative, then we would know nothing of him. Nothing of his other attributes, his other qualities that would cause us to worship and believe in him. The God of the Bible is the God who speaks. And in fact from the very beginning that is how we relate to him and how we know about him. Almost at the very first action of God is that he speaks. Genesis chapter 1 verse 3, and God said. From the moment on God has continued to speak. Once he'd created man and woman,

Adam and Eve, again, God immediately enters into conversation with them, speaks of them at the garden, and we're told that he would talk with them and walk with them in the midday. Throughout the Old Testament we meet men and women to whom God spoke over and over again. God's voice is heard as he teaches, instructs, comforts, meets with men and women throughout the centuries. And then for hundreds of years God is silent. Soon after the return of the exiles from Babylon, nearly 500 years before the birth of Jesus, God stops speaking. No prophets proclaim God's living word. No angels are sent as messengers showing and declaring God's will. Until we get to Luke chapter 1. Then the silence is broken as the angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth will have a son, and this son will be a prophet, the first prophet for many generations.

He would prepare the way for God's most eloquent voice. Jesus, God's speech made flesh. The opening words to Hebrews remind us of this great truth. For the writer says there, in the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he's spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom also he made the universe. That's why when we get to John's gospel we find that this son of God God is called the word of God. He's the visible word of God, the tangible word of God, the one whose life and whose voice proclaim the exact speech of the living God. And though our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended to his father's right hand, back to the home for which he left in heaven, he continued to speak by his Holy Spirit, by the New Testament, as the Spirit made God's word known to the apostles and they recorded it for us.

Now you might say, why have I brought such an introduction to this passage in Numbers chapter 20? What is all this about the very speaking and talking and communicating of God got to say here in the life of Moses and God's people?

[7 : 15] Well there's something that happens in this passage which struck me forcibly as I was studying and thinking through this passage. And what strikes me is that, I'll come to it in a moment, but all the way from the beginning of Numbers God has been speaking.

In fact, the very first verse of Numbers chapter 1 and verse 1 records the fact that God spoke to Moses. The Lord spoke to Moses.

And then almost every other chapter begins in the same way. Chapter 2, the Lord said to Moses.

Chapter 4, the Lord spoke to Moses. Chapter 5, chapter 6, chapter 8, chapter 9.

Every one of them nearly begins with, or at least during that chapter, talks about the Lord speaking to Moses or to God's people. And in the last few chapters which we've looked at in past weeks, again we've had the same thing.

Chapter 17, verse 1, the Lord said to Moses. Chapter 18, verse 1, the Lord said to Aaron. And immediately, even prior to this passage here, in chapter 20, we find the Lord speaking again.

[8 : 36] Verse 7, the Lord said to Moses. And then immediately after this passage, chapter 20, verse 23, at Mount Hor, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron.

And into chapter 21 and so on and so forth. But there is a passage here where God does not speak. God is silent.

His voice is not heard. There is no direction from God. There is no instruction from God. Now that isn't completely the case. Because when we turn to Deuteronomy, and I encourage you to turn there with your finger still stuck in Numbers 20 if you can.

And we find that Moses tells us, as he recounts what God did in that episode, that in fact God had given instructions to begin with.

In Deuteronomy chapter 2, all through this passage, Moses has been relating and reminding the people how God dealt with him, was faithful to them for 40 years and so on. And he says in chapter 2 of Deuteronomy, verse 2, Then the Lord said to me, So God had given them instructions how to deal with the Edomites.

[10 : 27] And just to remind you and refresh you who the Edomites were, they were the descendants of Israel. That's Jacob's brother, Esau. Remember? Isaac had two sons, twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

Jacob received the blessing of God through him. The line, as it were, of God's Savior and Messiah would come. But Esau did also receive God's blessing in a very temporal way, a physical way.

God would bless him and give him a great family and so on. So the Edomites are those who were the descendants of Abraham and of Isaac, but not of Jacob.

And so that's why when Moses speaks here and God speaks there, he says, Your brother. This is your brother Israel. They were related. Yes, several hundred years down the line, but they were still relations.

What I find here is that there is something of a silence from God, and we'll come to that in a moment. See, the Edomites refused to let Israel and Moses through the land.

[11 : 38] They refused them permission to cross, not once, but in fact twice. Now, Moses had been faithful. He had done all that God had said. Remember the instructions God gave that we're told about in Deuteronomy 2?

Moses uses very similar words. This is what your brother Israel says, and he recounts to them about how they'd gone through great difficulties and hardship, and God had led them and guided

them.

And then he asks permission to go through their land, promising not to walk on their fields, promising, in fact, in the second request to pay them for any water or food they ate.

He talks about the King's Highway. Now, the King's Highway was a trade route that ran basically north to south to the east of what we call the Red Sea, or the Dead Sea, rather, and the River Jordan.

It went all the way down. And at this time, the Israelites and Moses were in the south. And if you look at the Dead Sea, they were to the south and to the east of the Dead Sea. And Edomite land was sort of there in that part of the country.

[12:42] So Moses did all that God wanted him to do, using his very language. But when he gets to the border, as God has commanded, and he's doing what God has commanded him to do, suddenly we're met with this silence.

Where is God at the border? Why doesn't God let them through? Why doesn't he give them instruction as to what to do? When this wall, as it were, comes against them of the Edomite army? God says nothing. God does nothing. In every other place, he does. In fact, when we go into the next chapter, as we will do, hopefully in the future, we'll find that again.

There was an army that came against the people. The King of Arad came against them. And they cry to God, and God answers them, and they win a battle.

And that's how it goes on. There's lots of battles to come. But here, there seems to be a silence. We're not told why God did not speak to them.

[13:48] We're not told why God did not give them direction or act on their behalf as he'd done before and as he does later. We must be very careful, of course, that we don't read too much into the silence of God here.

That we don't start to, as it were, speculate as to why that was. Was it because the people had sinned against God? Remember, in asking for the water and grumbled against him?

Was it because Moses and Aaron had sinned against the Lord, and that's why God didn't speak? We've got to be careful not to speculate. We've got no evidence of that. But we do have a great deal of help here, I believe.

A great deal of help for us. What do we do when God is silent? How are we to react in those times in our lives where we have no word from God, where it appears to us that God isn't doing anything or saying anything?

I'm sure that you, dear Christian, know something of this. There are times when we come to prayer and it feels to us as if God is not listening to our prayers.

[14:59] Praying and praying, and it's not just that we don't get an answer from God, we don't get what we ask of God, but it seems as if we're just not getting through to God. There are times when we pick up the Bible and we read it, and it's as if we're just, it makes no sense to us.

It doesn't feed our soul. We don't find ourselves stirred or moved or quickened. There are times we come to church on a Sunday and people are singing and worshipping God, and we are as well, and we hear the same sermons as them, but it fails to move us.

God's word fails to convict us. It fails to say anything to us. We go away as empty as when we came in. Now, dear friends, we cannot assume, and we must not assume, that God's silence or seeming inactivity is a direct result of our personal sin.

There may be times when that is the case, but that isn't always the case. See, there's no mention here that Moses or the people prayed, but it doesn't mean that actually God's silence was because they didn't pray.

We don't know whether they prayed or not. It would be very strange, in fact, for Moses not to pray. He was a man of prayer. Whenever he faced a situation or a circumstance or a difficulty, we're told, as we looked just last week, he'd go to the Lord, he'd go to the tent of meeting, he'd seek God's face.

[16:29] It may well have been the case that he prayed. We don't know, and again, we mustn't speculate. But we can often come to very foolish and unhelpful conclusions about our own spiritual state, or that of other believers too, if we spend too much time searching for a reason which is not plain to us.

Now, there are occasions when we should, before the Lord, seek his face. We should search. And, in fact, the psalmist says, Search me, O Lord. See if there's any wicked way within me. But there

are times and seasons in the life of a believer where God appears to be silent.

Every believer goes through that. The psalmist went through it. Psalm 83, in verse 1, O God, do not remain silent. Do not turn a deaf ear.

There's other psalms as well that are like there. This silence from God is perplexing for us, as it was for believers then. They couldn't fathom out why God would not speak to them or answer their prayers.

Perhaps you, dear friend, are going through a similar time even now. On the surface to everybody else, you give the appearance that all is well, and you're here on a Sunday evening, and so on and so forth.

[17 : 50] But in your soul, in your heart, in your life, in your relationship with God, there seems to be a silence. A silence. A quietness. Where are you, Lord?

If that's the case, then, dear friends, the first thing I want to do is to urge you not to become overcome with self-guilt. Do not be overwhelmed with some sort of grief as if what's happening to you is unusual or peculiar to you alone.

Many of the dear saints of old often wrote about these times of spiritual silence. Every believer will experience this from time to time.

Every child of God will go through a time when God is silent, even, of course, our Lord Jesus Christ. For there on the cross, he had to endure the silence of his Father for three hours, we're told, from noon to three o'clock.

And at the end of those three hours, he cried out, surely as part of the experience, as it were, of the silence of God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

[19 : 03] Now, we, of course, understand something of why the Son knew the silence of the Father, because he was bearing upon himself the sin of the world. He was enduring hell, that separation from God.

It was that unique occasion in their eternal relationship. And, of course, ours is different. But the wonderful thing is, we now have one who understands what it is to endure the silence of God. We have one who is our Savior, our great high priest, who sympathizes with our weaknesses, who knows what it feels like to be far from the Lord.

What can we learn for ourselves when we experience something similar? What can we learn from this occasion of one of several where God is silent and does not speak to his people?

We've done everything, perhaps, that we know we should do. We've prayed. We've sought the Lord.

[20 : 18] And we've asked even for prayer from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Pray for me, please. I'm feeling this sense of silence. We've continued reading the Scriptures day by day in the hope that God's Word will speak to us.

Perhaps we've even spent more time in the Scriptures than we've done before, hoping that somehow something from the Word will speak and break the silence that we feel ourselves to be in. We've not missed the opportunities to hear God's Word preached or taught.

We've sought out, perhaps, even the counsel of fellow believers and said, Lord, look, I'm going through this time. What do you think? How can you give me or advise me? And yet, like Moses and God's people here, we've been confronted with a wall of silence.

What we understood, as it were, to be the door that God would have us to go through, the door that God has opened to us, and that certainly would be the sense for Moses after the instructions he received, that God wanted them to go through the land of Edom, God wanted them to follow that path on their way to the promised land, but that door has now been closed, and it's been closed very tightly.

What should we do now? Should we stand still and wait? Wait that perhaps the Lord might open it to us in time.

[21 : 41] Well, certainly, perhaps, that certainly it is right for us to wait on the Lord. Waiting on the Lord is not simply sitting and twiddling our thumbs, waiting for God to do something.

We continue to pray, we continue to read the scriptures, we continue to use what we call the means of grace, fellowship together, and so on. To wait on the Lord is to trust him when nothing seems to be happening.

To wait on the Lord is to believe that he knows what he's doing, that he's not forsaken us, but is faithful to his promise. It may be that that silence that you sense from God is God simply saying,

wait and trust, see what I will do.

Now, it's interesting, isn't it, that Moses perseveres, doesn't he, with the king of Edom. He sends one message, this long message, imploring him, encouraging him to, on the basis of their blood relatives that he should let them through, and he gets a very clear no.

In fact, he gets a threat. You try it, and we'll come and attack you. He perseveres, and he sends another message back, we will go along the main road, and we'll pay for it, and so on and so forth.

[22 : 58] It may be that God wants us perhaps to push a bit harder. Perhaps the reason that God has withdrawn, at least seemingly, from us is because he wants to draw us after himself.

He wants us to spend more time in prayer, more time in the word, more time amongst God's people. It may be that, in fact, he wants us to persevere, press on after him.

We read that psalm at the very beginning, Lord, I thirst for you as one who's in a dry and thirsty land. I hunger for you. Perhaps you and I have become a little bit cool towards God.

We've taken for granted that he will speak to us. We've taken for granted that he is there, and we've become complacent with him. Perhaps God wants us to push a bit harder, to seek him more earnestly.

But then we read, don't we, that this second, final refusal comes with force, an army behind it, and so Moses knew that the way ahead was closed.

[24 : 06] closed. Unless, of course, he called the people to war against Edomites. The door is shut. What would he do?

Well, he knows what he must not do is go to war with them. Remember when we read there in Deuteronomy in chapter 2, I'll just remind it for you, the instruction that God gives, do not provoke them to war.

So, though Moses didn't know what he should do, he knew what he shouldn't do. What he shouldn't do was to go to war against them. And though there may have been a very large army of Edomites, the reality was that he had a very, very large army behind him, should he have wished to pursue the matter.

But he knew what God did not want him to do. Sometimes God's will for us is far simpler than we make it. If God is silent about what we should do, is it the case that actually we know what we shouldn't do?

We're faced with a choice. God appears to be silent. We cannot go ahead or continue in the way that we hoped or planned because there is this barrier, this silence, this wall.

[25 : 29] It's obvious that we cannot go that way, though we might be tempted to force our way through. We know that's not what God wants us to do. Is it that the way that we shouldn't go is made very plain to us?

God has forbidden it. God has said to go that way, to sort out this difficulty, to resolve this issue. Maybe there's a temptation to become or act in an ungodly way, a way that is contrary to his revealed will, and we're tempted to go that way.

It would seem to circumnavigate or push through or bring us into the situation where we want to be, but we know that it's not what God has said. He said no to that. So that we don't know what to do, we do know what we shouldn't do.

So Moses had only one other way to go, didn't he? Around the Edomite territory. Verse 21, since Edom refused to let them go through their territory, Israel turned away from them.

God was silent for a time. We don't know exactly why, and we must be careful not to presume to know why, but God had a purpose in it, and the purpose was ultimately that they should go around the territory.

[26 : 57] God was silent for a time, but not forever. And dear friends, if at this moment, at this particular time, as we are seeking God's will, as we're seeking to follow him, there's a sense of his silence, then do not be overwhelmed with sorrow or grief.

Believe me and believe God's word when he declares to us that you will hear his voice again soon, that it will not be forever, that it will not be for always, but there is a reason perhaps we do not understand.

Keep on just doing what you know God wants you to do, and in his time, he will bring us through that war.

In Isaiah chapter 30, there's a wonderful promise that God makes to his people, a people who are about to know a great heartache, in one sense, a time of great silence from God, and God assures

them and says to them this, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it.
Well, let's pray together, shall we?