Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

Imagine if you arrived home after church and the front door was open and the lock smashed, and, sure enough, the TV and jewellery and computers were stolen. And then imagine that you contacted the police and they called you a couple of days later to say they had caught the thief. What would you be thinking about? Justice. Criminals should get what they deserve! We, now try and imagine that you had stolen something and been caught and were now standing in front of a judge. What would you be thinking about? Mercy! Not getting what you deserve. And this highlights the fact that with us justice and mercy are competing or opposite things that depend on entirely your perspective.

And the fact is that many people think the same in relation to God. They believe that God must be either just or merciful, but He cannot be both. And of course, they prefer to think about God only as merciful. It is the basic thrust of the three questions in this Lord’s Day – How can God demand perfect obedience from those who can’t give it? Why can’t God ignore or overlook our sin? And doesn’t the Bible teach that God is merciful?

Well, what we are going to see today is that **God’s justice and mercy are essential components of our salvation**. And we are going to see this against the backdrop of what we just read in Numbers 20. And get ready to see how similar we are to the people described in this account, but also how this account is a beautiful picture of what the Bible teaches about salvation in Christ.

Context: Well, v1 tells us that the congregation of Israel was at **Kadesh**. And it was at Kadesh, 40 years before, that because 10 spies and the people refused to trust God’s promise to bring them into the Promised Land, Moses was commanded to lead them in wandering about the wilderness so that a whole generation of unbelievers could die off. And as we come to chapter 20, that wandering is almost over. Israel is back at Kadesh and the events of this account take place.

So we will walk through the 4 parts of this account – **the People and the Lord**, **the Leaders and the Lord**, **the Lord and the Leaders**, and **the Lord and the People**.

1. So first of all, from, vv2-5, **the People and the Lord**.
   1. The situation that faced the people was dire; they were a vast crowd and in this wilderness country there was **no water**. The rule of thumb I have heard is that you can survive for three minutes without air, three days without water, and three weeks without food. So it must have been around three days since they had passed a stream or run out of water in their water bags. So they were *desperate* for water.
   2. And it is very important for understanding this episode to note that this was **not the first time** that Israel had been in a dry place where there was no water. On another occasion when the people were thirsty, Moses had struck a rock, water had flowed, and he had called the place *Meribah*, which means “quarrelling.” So an important question here in Numbers 20 is: What have the people learned from that episode and how the Lord has provided for them during their wilderness wanderings?
      1. Well, not much, it seems. For first of all, look at ***how*** they complain in v3: “*Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord*.” They wished that they had died like the generation of unbelievers that died over the 40 years. And this is a disgusting complaint. How could they complain like this after everything God had done for them?
      2. But note also ***who*** it was that they complained to. They quarrelled with Moses and Aaron and said, “*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 grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink!*” But was it M&A fault that the people were in the Wilderness? No. Was it M&A fault that the people had been forced to wander for 40 years? No. Again, it is quite shocking!
      3. And notice also that name of the **LORD** is in capital letters in vv3&4. So they use God’s special, covenant name, but it’s as though the Lord should be their ‘good-luck charm’; that they don’t deserve trouble because they are the LORD’s people.
   3. But congregation, aren’t we so like these people? Aren’t we also prone to blame others for whatever happens or does not happen to us? And we too are shocked when trouble comes into our lives, and we can be very slow to remember God’s faithfulness when trouble comes along. Yes?
      1. We talked about this at a Bible study recently. Someone recalled a TV cartoon program where some terrible disaster happened. And there was a church next door to a pub. And when the disaster happened, all of the Non-Christians in the pub walked out and went into the church and all of the Christians in the church walked out and went into the pub.
      2. Maybe it’s not the pub for you; maybe it’s chocolate or lashing out at someone else, but we can be as faithless as these Israelites.
      3. Oh how we need Jesus! Oh how we need His perfect obedience! Oh how we need His faithfulness!
2. Well, that’s the people. But vv6-10 are about **the Leaders and the Lord**.
   1. Having heard the people’s complaint, Moses and Aaron walked straight to the tent of meeting, or the Tabernacle, and they fell on their faces before the Lord. To their credit, they didn’t stand there and argue with the people; they sought the Lord and His response. And the Lord told Moses to take the staff, which is probably the staff that had budded and blossomed overnight to signify that Aaron was God’s anointed High Priest, and to tell the rock to yield its water so the people and their cattle can drink. And we will come back to the response of the Lord in our fourth point, but let’s continue on and **note what Moses did wrong**:
      1. In v9 he took the staff, so far, so good, and in v10, he gathered the people, so far, so good, but then he spoke to the people and said, “*Hear now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?*” Oh oh! That was not a part of the Lord’s instructions, was it? God didn’t express anger toward the people; He just said go and tell the rock to yield water.
      2. And you can hear the **anger** in Moses’ words, can’t you. He is saying, Must I do this, again? Why are you so rebellious? So instead of the people seeing another example of the Lord’s patient and faithful provision, it comes across as begrudging and even angry. So Moses’ feelings got in the way of God’s glory.
      3. But note also that Moses spoke his own name when he should have spoken the Lord’s name. For instead of pointing to God as the provider of water He said, “*Shall* ***we*** *bring water for you out of this rock*?” And asking it in the form that He did changed the sense from, fear not, the Lord will provide you with water, to something like, I don’t even know if I want to do this for you. I am sick to death of you. When will you learn?
      4. But then it got worse! For instead of *telling* the rock to yield its water, Moses struck the rock, with the staff, twice. And so now he was directly disobeying the command of the Lord. **Psalm 106:33** offers some commentary on this episode: “[*The people] angered [the Lord] at the waters … and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips*.”
      5. So the Lord was lost in the background as Moses delivered the water. And so, Moses robbed God of His honour.
   2. But congregation, again, this is a sin we easily fall into as well: It happens, for example, when **parents lose their rag with their children and fail to put the Lord at the centre of discipline**. So rather than explain to their child that they are sinning against the love and mercy of God they just shout or hit or complain about how the child’s behaviour upsets Mum or Dad. But it happens even when we do kind deeds but we fail to say why we do it – because of God’s love to us in Christ. And so, God is robbed of His glory.
      1. And contrast this with the Lord Jesus in the Gospels; He always gave the glory to the Father. He, who is God Himself, never got in the way of the Father!
3. Well, in the third section, from v12, the focus switches to **the Lord and the Leaders**. And here we see that God is just and that He must punish sin, but that He is also merciful.
   1. God said to Moses, “*Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them*.” So because of this sin, after leading the people out of Egypt and around the wilderness for 40 years, Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter the Promised Land.
      1. So what do you think when you read that? Do you think, Wow! That seems harsh? Poor old Moses. He put up with far more than I would have with that miserable bunch of grumblers. So, yes, He lost his rag a bit here and he smacked the rock with the staff. But who wouldn’t have? Isn’t it just a little over the top; to not let him enter Canaan? Is that your reaction?
      2. Or what about the story of **Uzzah**? Do you remember him, boys and girls? He just put out his hand to steady the Ark of the Covenant because it was slipping off the cart and he was destroyed on the spot. Was that really necessary? Or what about **Ananias and Sapphira**. NT. One lie! Dead!
      3. We often question God’s just judgment, don’t we? And when we do, we are raising the same objections raised in our Lord’s Day – how can God demand perfect obedience from those who can’t give it? And why can’t He just ignore our sin? Why can’t He just be merciful?
   2. But congregation, when God punishes sin, He is only doing what He *must* do, as a holy and just God, and **what He said He would do**. Q/A 10 quotes **Deut. 27:26**: “*Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them*.” And in **Deut. 8:1**, God said, to and through Moses, “*Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live … enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers*.” So this judgment would not have surprised Moses.
      1. And remember also that Moses was an **office-bearer/leader**. His sin was a leadership sin. Think about the uproar during lockdown when while we were all locked up at home, the Health minister went for a bike ride and a beach trip. What was the cry? That is unjust! So imagine what message the Lord would have sent to the people if He ignored Moses’ sin and punished theirs?
      2. Moses was supposed to represent God to the people and the people to God. Moses was supposed to point people to Jesus Christ. But instead, his sin taught the people a bad lesson about God. So that is why the consequences were severe.
   3. And this is a good place for us to note that this is **not an OT/NT thing**. Jesus said, “*For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*.”He said, “*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect*.” God’s just standards are no different today than they have ever been. A *perfect* God can only be satisfied with *perfect* obedience.
   4. And so, if eternal life depended on Moses’ obedience, he would be lost. Just this sin would have been enough for him to lose the Promised Land and to lose heaven. But this is where the good news of the gospel – God’s mercy in Jesus Christ – comes in! You see, there is more that the Bible tells us about Moses and his eternal destiny.
      1. When Jesus appeared on the Mt. of Transfiguration, Elijah was on one side and who was on the other? Moses!
      2. And In **Hebrews 11**, Moses is listed as one of the heroes of faith. And all the people on that list are on it not because they lived perfect lives, far from it!, but because they believed in God’s promises.
      3. So on the Day of Judgment, Moses will hear the words we read from **Matthew 25**, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*.” Even though he did not receive an inheritance in the Promised Land of Canaan, he will receive an inheritance in heaven!
      4. And this is because eternal life is all about the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus. Even though Moses lived 1500 years *before* Jesus, Moses believed God’s promise to send Messiah, and that his sins would be dealt with in Messiah. And that is why God can show eternal mercy to Moses. So God is just; there were consequences for Moses’ sin. But God’s ultimate justice in relation to Moses’ sin was endured by Jesus Christ on the cross, which is why Moses receives eternal mercy!
4. And it is essentially the same for you and me. Let’s see this as we finish with our fourth focus, from v10, which is, **the Lord and the people**.
   1. The same warnings that Moses had heard from God about the consequences for disobedience he had passed on to the people (Leviticus 26). So they knew what would happen if they disobeyed the Lord and did not trust Him. So if we read here that Moses struck the rock and fire came out of the rock and destroyed all of the people, men, women, and children, it would have been no more than they deserved. God is just, and He would only have been doing what He had warned He would do if they sinned like this. But what do we read, instead? Despite their quarreling/rebellion, the Lord provided water! So the Lord was merciful; He didn’t treat them as their sins deserved. Why?
      1. Well, a few moments ago I quoted Psalm 106:33 where it says that **it went ill with Moses on account of the people**. So the leader of the people got punished but the people had their deepest need met. And that is the perfect illustration of salvation in Christ. If we are believers, Jesus is our leader. And He was punished on the cross so that we could receive our deepest need – mercy – forgiveness and eternal life!
      2. But we learn more about how to understand this episode from **1 Corinthians 10:1-4**: There it says, *“[The people] all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ*.” So the believers in the crowd that day drunk the water and thanked God for it and confessed their sins and believed that God would send Messiah.
         1. And for you and me, today, it is not nearly as difficult. We don’t have to look at a rock and water and figure out what it means about a Messiah. Jesus has come. He is the Son of God. And He died on the cross so that our sins could be washed away by His blood. He received the eternal punishment; God’s just anger was satisfied; so that you could receive mercy! God’s justice and God’s mercy are the message of the cross. Justice is poured out on Jesus so that mercy can be poured out on you.
         2. Do you believe this? And I ask this question because 1 Cor. 10 goes on to say that many people, in fact most of those who drunk the water that day, did not believe in God’s promises about Messiah. So they received good gifts from God but they did not believe and honour and thank and trust Him. And all of those people and any today who refuse to believe in Jesus will receive justice from God; not mercy.
         3. And if this is you, then on Judgment Day, you will be in Jesus’ left and you will hear, “*Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. … And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life*.”
         4. I hope you will instead be on the right of Jesus, with Moses and those in the crowd that day who believed and all those who have Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. I hope that you long to hear Jesus say to you, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*.”

Amen.