



THE STORY OF *Everything* LUKE 24:27

In the award winning book *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon Vanauken (Van) recalls his relationship with his wife, Davy, and their commitment to put their love before all else. As the intensity of their love for one another grows, they move to Oxford for studies and make friends with many people, one being C.S. Lewis.

Struck by the happiness of these intelligent, witty, and well-read Christians, they begin to wonder if there is something to the Christian faith. While both are onboard with the journey to explore Christianity, Van notes that Davy was more passionate, more unquestioning, and more ready to embrace God, while he is reluctant.

Their journey takes them to Virginia where Van accepted a teaching position at a college. During their time there, they started a small Christian study group with some students. Davy, throwing herself into the pursuit of faith, seems to have put God and Christ ahead of their love for one another. Davy's pursuit of faith causes Van to become jealous, feeling that God has displaced him as her primary love.

But soon afterwards, Davy comes down with a deadly virus, and after a few months dies. And suddenly, Van finds himself struggling over the death of the person who had been everything to him. Without her, he feels immense grief and loss. He writes: "I didn't want God aboard. He was too heavy. I wanted Him approving from a considerable distance. I didn't want to be thinking of Him. I wanted to be free....I didn't want us to be swallowed up in God. I wanted holidays from the school of Christ."

But through his friendship with C.S. Lewis, Van comes to understand that the loss of Davy is not God's harshness, but rather a severe mercy that opens the door for him to explore what he had resisted when Davy was his everything.

We love to talk about mercy. But there are many times in life that mercy is severe. It hurts. The pain rouses us from our doldrums and awakens us to the deeper need that we have – the need for God. And Numbers 20-21 recall two incidents in the history of Israel that are the Lord's severe hand on a disobedient people, yet are expressions of his abundant mercy. So let's...

See the Kindness in the Severity of God

When we arrive at Numbers 20, Israel has been in the wilderness for 40 years. They are getting ready to go into their new homeland. Moses has led two generations of Israelites. The first generation did not want the promises of God. As we saw last week, God had guaranteed them the land he had promised to Abraham. But their unbelief kept them from going and taking the land, so the Lord said that all those 20 and older would die in the wilderness.

Now, with the previous generation dying off, including Moses' sister Miriam (20:1-2), we hope that things have improved for Israel and that she has learned her lessons. But what we find is that the past has a way of repeating itself. The people are against Moses, they quarrel with him, and they repeat the same sin that the previous generation had. In Exodus 17, the



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people had been led out into the wilderness, being freed from slavery and bondage. As soon as they have they gotten out into the wilderness they begin to grumble and complain that Moses has brought them out in the wilderness to die. Now here in Numbers 20, the same thing happens. The men, women, children, and livestock are out in the wilderness. God has made them numerous – probably a couple million of them! But there is no water. And the people need water. They are desperate.

For forty years Moses has been dealing with people who grumble against him, who accuse him, who quarrel with him and are against him. And time after time, Moses has had to forgive the people and pray that the Lord will show them mercy. Moses is a pastor *par excellence*. He does what every good leader should do – forgives and prays. And this is what he does again. He seeks their good when they accuse him of seeking their death. He even risks himself by calling out their rebellious hearts.

But things go terribly wrong after he leaves the presence of God. What does Moses do that is so wrong?

To understand what went wrong, we need to go back 40 years earlier when the people of Israel were in the wilderness with their children and cattle and had no water. At that time in Exodus 17, they quarreled, grumbled, and complained against Moses. Moses had forgiven and prayed for the people. And the Lord had commanded Moses to take his staff, go to the rock, and the Lord's presence would go between the rock and Moses. Then Moses was to strike the rock; but in striking the rock, he would have to strike the cloud of the presence of the Lord. God would provide, but the Lord would take the blow and be the servant providing the water.

This time, in Numbers 20, Moses was to take the staff and speak to the rock. But in his anger against the people, Moses spoke to the people and struck the rock, and for this he is told he cannot go into the land. This seems pretty severe. What's the big deal?

The Lord says that Moses did not believe the Lord and he did not regard the Lord as holy (v. 12). When Moses went into his speech in v. 10, he stands as Israel's judge, condemning them for their unbelief, calling them rebels. But he also gets a leader's complex, saying, "Shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" He thinks that Israel's deliverance is dependent upon him. He acts like he is Israel's Judge and Redeemer. So when he strikes the rock, he is letting his anger get the better of him and he is speaking his own mind, not the word of the Lord, and he is showing Israel what they deserve by hitting the rock. He uses the staff that symbolizes God's authority and power how he wants. He abuses the power and authority given to him. And like many leaders do in frustration, he acts like he's God. This is why Psalm 106:33 says Moses spoke rashly, and James 1:20 tells us that anger does not bring about the righteous life God requires.

Yet at the moment Moses strikes the rock, what happens? There, in the desert, at least a couple of million of men, women, children, plus livestock, the struck rock pours out water. We aren't talking just a trickle. We are talking swimming pools full of water gushing out of this rock. To



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a grumbling, quarrelsome people, what does God do? He provides ABUNDANTLY so that the entire nation and the livestock can drink.

From there, the Israelites move backward – it feels like they’re returning back to the Red Sea as they head towards Edom. So, in Numbers 21, their complaining gets worse. Now they don’t just complain about Moses; they speak against God (21:5). Their complaints now pull together all of the previous generation’s complaints, and they make it one massive complaint – the food is insufficient (11:4-6); we’ll die out in the wilderness – we’d rather be in Egypt! (14:2-3); and we have no water (20:3-5)!

In that moment, the Lord sends fiery serpents (21:6) who bite the people. Their hearts have become full of poisonous venom – they want to go back to Egypt, to slavery. So the Lord sends snakes with poisonous venom to remind them of the poison of Egypt and the serpent who came into the garden of Eden to lie and destroy. In other words, their hearts have become full of the poison of the first serpent, full of pride and evil.

But Moses – always the prayer-filled, forgiving leader that he is – prays for the people (21:7). He is praying for mercy. He is praying for forgiveness. He is praying that the people would be delivered. And what does the Lord do?

He commands Moses to make a fiery serpent, put it on the top of a pole, and instructs Moses to tell the people that if they are bit by a snake, they should look up at the symbol of their judgment and they will be healed. Now this seems quite magical to us. But what God is doing is requiring the Israelites to look up at the object of their judgment on the pole. They must look up to the symbol of power and authority. And by looking at the object of their judgment, they have to acknowledge that the Lord has rightly brought upon them the punishment that they deserve. It is their confession, “We have sinned. Only you, Lord, can deliver us.” And it is by faith that they can be saved.

And this is precisely what happens. The punishment for grumbling and complaining against God is severe, but mercy comes to those who look at the symbol of their judgment, acknowledge their sin, and find healing there.

Here is the mercy of God! To a grumbling, complaining people, he provides. And all of these things are intended to point us to...

See the Glory of Christ

When Jesus encounters Nicodemus, a proud spiritual man in John 3, he calls him to look away from his excellence and instead look outside of himself to find healing. This spiritually proud man is one of the great teachers of Israel, yet he comes to Jesus in darkness and fails to understand how you can be born again. So Jesus recalls the story of the bronze serpent and calls on Nicodemus to do the same thing as Israel had done – that the wages of sin is death. But to the one who lifts their eyes, looking at the one who will be lifted up like the bronze serpent, and acknowledging that it is the poison and sin in his heart that has put Jesus on the cross, they



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will find that the poisonous venom of pride that threatens to kill them can be healed. By looking to the cross, the place of judgment, it is acknowledging that it is our sin that put Jesus there. And by that acknowledgement, we find the saving power that heals a prideful heart.

This is the way to be born again – you look at up to the mercy of God at the cross and acknowledge you put Jesus there. You crucified him. You killed him. And in that humble confession, he is able to remake you – being born again.

It is a severe mercy. Repentance feels severe. It tears us. It humbles us. It feels like it is our undoing. And yet it is the place where the waters of mercy flow abundantly, just like Israel experienced from the rock.

Sometimes the way the Lord deals with us feels unfair. Israel gets abundant water in the desert. But what about Moses? After praying for a grumbling people and pleading for God’s mercy upon them so that they would not be destroyed, Moses loses his cool, speaks his own mind instead of speaking the words of God, uses God’s authority in an abusive way by striking the rock, and the result is that he cannot enter the promised land. He will die in the wilderness, just like the rest of the grumbling generation. Where is the mercy for Moses?

In Numbers 20, there are the loud shouts of mercy for Moses. Who tells this story about Moses’ failure? Moses has told this story. He has passed it on. He has recorded his failure and sin and passed it down to Israel and to us. Moses’ confession is forever remembered: “I failed.” Here is Moses’ repentance recorded for Israel, you, and me.

The result of his repentance is a great mercy. While he didn’t get to lead the people into the Promised Land, Matthew 17 tells us that Jesus went onto the mount of Transfiguration with three of his disciples. While there, a bright cloud overshadowed them (v. 5) – the cloud of God’s presence that had descended on Sinai and guided Israel through the wilderness. And who appears with Jesus? There is Moses, in the presence of God, in the promised land.

And here is the glory of Christ. You may fail miserably. Your anger may get the better of you and you may sin in ways that you never could have imagined. That sin may limit you in painful ways in this life – keeping you from hopes, dreams, and opportunities. And God may say, “I’m not going to allow you to go forward here.” But the God who redeems uses his severe mercy to teach us that we don’t get into the promised land by great leadership skills or incredible giftedness, but by the mercy of a Saviour who takes us there.

As Van wrote to C.S. Lewis, what Lewis helped him discover was that through the loss of Davy his attachment to her had prevented him from fully exploring the claims of Christianity. In Davy’s death, Van concludes, she has freed him to pursue and explore his own faith. Without her, he is finally able to find the deep love of God for him – the very thing Davy had wished for him. And now, his desire for Davy’s happiness have also been fulfilled – she is now truly happy having joined God. Her death felt severe. But it was a great mercy.



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This is the severe mercy of the Lord: he will wean us from every earthly thing so that we discover that the way we get to the land of hope and glory is not by our ability, but by the abundant mercy of God. And in that, we can rejoice at our present sufferings, for they are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18)!