

WHEN LEADERS FALL

Numbers 20:1-13

It was such a small thing, striking the rock. No one was hurt. And even if Moses was a bit angry, he had been provoked. Those whining people he led were never satisfied! And besides, he had faithfully led these people for 40 years. Shouldn't God cut him a little slack if he slips and makes a dumb mistake?

Apparently God doesn't measure sin like we do! We tend to think of moral failure in a spiritual leader in terms of sexual immorality, financial misconduct, abuse of power or brazen hypocrisy. Yet none of these categories seems to work in defining Moses' moral failure. He struck a rock with his staff. What's the big deal? Yet for this sin, he was forbidden to enter the land of promise.

TABLE TALK

1. Read together, out loud the story of Moses' moral failure. Numbers 20:1-13
2. Then briefly share your thoughts on these two questions:
 - a. What was the real nature of Moses' sin?
 - b. Why was God's reaction so severe?

I. Observation: What does it say?

- A. Compare Numbers 20:1-13 with Exodus 17:1-7.

Perhaps the first thing that strikes us about the incident in Numbers 20:1-13 is how similar it is to the incident in Exodus 17:1-7 which occurred almost forty years earlier. Let's compare the two stories:



	<u>Exodus 17:1-17</u>	<u>Numbers 20:1-13</u>
Where?	Rephidim (1), Horeb (6)	Zin, Kadesh (1)
New name	Massah and Meribah (7)	Meribah (13)
The situation	No water (1)	No water (2)
The people and Moses	They quarrel and grumble. <i>Why did you bring us here?</i> They are ready to stone him (2-4)	They quarrel with Moses <i>Why did you bring us here?</i> (2-5)
The people and God	They put the Lord to the test (2,7)	They quarrel with the Lord (13)
Moses' reaction	He cries out to the Lord, <i>What am I to do...?</i> (4)	He goes to the tent of meeting and falls face down (6)
God's instructions	<i>Take the staff... strike the rock...</i> (5-6)	<i>Take the staff and speak to the rock</i> (8-9)
Moses' response	Moses <u>obeys</u> (6)	Moses <u>disobeys</u> . He strikes the rock twice! (10-11)

B. Apparently, Moses had a long history of issues with anger.

- *Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew.... Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. (Ex. 2:11-12)*
- *Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh. (Ex. 11:8)*
- *When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. (Ex. 32:19-20)*



Other than the murder of the Egyptian, these and other expressions of anger could be classified as “righteous indignation.” There is no indication that Moses sinned. However, in Numbers 20, Moses clearly crossed over the line. He lost it. He blew his cool. He let his temper get out of control. What we see here looks like **rage**.

C. Moses was **vulnerable**.

Although we should in no way try to justify, rationalize, or explain Moses' sin, the biblical data makes clear that at this moment he was perhaps more vulnerable to moral failure than at any other moment in his life.

- 1) His sister Miriam had just died (20:1).
- 2) This was not just a test for the people. It was a **re-test** (see Ex. 17:1-7). Moses' frustration must have been great:

** Won't these people ever learn?*

** And this is the new generation! They are just like their parents!*

D. The constant **grumbling and complaining** of the people.

The never-ending whining of the people must have surely been wearing Moses down. (Exodus 14:11-12; 15:24; 16:2-3; 17:2-3; Numbers 11:1,4-6; 14:1-4; 16:1-3).
How long, O Lord? I can't take this any more!

E. Moses is **old** and undoubtedly **tired**.

This is probably the fortieth year of the wilderness wanderings (compare Numbers 20:22-29 to 33:37-39).

F. The exact nature of Moses' sin is spelled out in verse 12.

*Because you did not **trust in me** enough to **honor me as holy** in the sight of the Israelites... (Num. 20:12)*

Elsewhere, the sin is stated a bit differently:

- *Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you **rebelled** against my command at the waters of Meribah. (Num. 20:24)*



- ...both of you (Moses and Aaron) disobeyed my command to **honor me as holy** before their eyes. (Num. 27:14)
- ...both of you (Moses and Aaron) **broke faith** with me in the presence of the Israelites at the waters of Meribah Kadesh... and because you did not **uphold my holiness** among the Israelites. (Deut. 32:51)

G. Though Moses was not allowed to enter the land of promise, he was allowed **to see it** before he died from the top of Mount Pisgah (Nebo).

- Numbers 27:12-14.
- Deuteronomy 3:23-28; 32:48-52; 34:1-4.

H. Moses prayed fervently that God would reverse the penalty for his sin, but was denied his request.... at least **temporarily**.

At that time I pleaded with the Lord: O Sovereign Lord... Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan.... Because of you the Lord was angry with me and would not listen to me. "That is enough," the Lord said. "Do not speak to me anymore about this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah.... Look at the land with your own eyes, since you are not going to cross this Jordan. (Deut. 3:23-27)

However, 1400 years later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses did indeed enter the land of promise. (Matthew 17:1-3)

I. Look again at that rock.

The rabbis had a tradition that the water that flowed from the rock at Massah-Meribah (Ex. 17:1-7) actually followed the Israelites in their wanderings through the desert providing a continuous miraculous flow of water for their journey. Paul may have been influenced by this thought when he wrote:

*1 For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. 2 They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3 They all ate the same spiritual food 4 and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was **Christ**. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)*



II. Interpretation: What does it mean?

A. This is a test!

Why would God permit a situation where there is “no water”? Is this some kind of a test from God? Or is this an attack (temptation) from Satan? And who is being “tested” here? The people? Or Moses?

All through the wilderness wanderings, God is testing the people:

- *There (at Marah, bitter water) the Lord... **tested** them. (Ex.15:25)*
- *I will rain down bread from heaven.... In this way I will **test** them and see whether they will follow my instruction. (Ex.16:4)*
- *Do not be afraid (of the thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai). God has come to **test** you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning. (Ex. 20:20)*
- *Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to **test** you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Deuteronomy 8:2)*
- *If a prophet... appears among you... and says, “Let us follow other gods”... you must not listen to the words of that prophet.... The Lord your God is **testing** you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Deuteronomy 13:1-3)*

What God did during the Exodus, He does often:

- *God tested Abraham. He said to him... “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering.... (Genesis 22:1-2)*
- *These are the nations the Lord left to test all those Israelites who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan.... They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord’s commands... (Judges 3:1-4)*
- *But when the envoys were sent by the rulers of Babylon... God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart. (II Chron. 32:1)*
- *Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit... was led by **the Spirit** in the desert, where for forty days he was **tempted** by **the devil**. (Luke 4:1)*



- *“Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” Jesus asked this only to **test** them, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. (John 6:5-6)*

God does not tempt (entice to evil). But God certainly does test.

When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. (James 1:13-14)

	<u>Testing</u>	<u>Temptation</u>
Source	From <u>God</u>	From the <u>world</u> , the <u>flesh</u> (evil desires), or the <u>devil</u>
Purpose	To <u>reveal</u> what is in our hearts To strengthen us To teach us to trust God To make us <u>closer</u> to God	To <u>entice</u> us to evil To destroy us To make us doubt God To make us more <u>distant</u> from God
Outward appearance	Painful, difficult, confusing It feels like a <u>temptation</u>	Painful, difficult, confusing It feels like a <u>test</u>

TABLE TALK

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of **your faith** develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (James 1:2-4).*

1. Imagine how things might have been different if Moses had responded to his trial (test? temptation?) in accordance with James 1:2-4.
2. Describe a “trial” you are currently experiencing. Does this feel more like a “test” (from God) or a “temptation” (from Satan)? Does it matter?
3. What would it look like for you to “consider it pure joy” as you experience this trial?



B. To whom much is given, much will be required. (Luke 12:48)

Moses, because of his great privileges and blessings, is held to a **higher standard**.

*You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will **punish you** for all your sins. (Amos 3:2)*

The sin of Moses helps us to better understand how growth in holiness increases our responsibility and accountability. To be great in the Kingdom does not mean perks and benefits. Rather, it means we have been entrusted with the "**weight of glory**."

For momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.... (II Cor. 4:17 NASB).

C. S. Lewis helps us to understand the burden of being chosen to reflect the glory of God.

Indeed, how we think of God is of no importance except insofar as it is related to how He thinks of us. It is written that we shall "stand before" Him, shall appear, shall be inspected. The promise of glory is the promise, almost incredible and only possible by the work of Christ, that some of us, that any of us who really chooses, shall actually survive that examination, shall find approval, shall please God. To please God... to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness... to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son – it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is. (The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses. Simon & Schuster. 1962. page 34.)

C. Now we are better able to understand the real nature of Moses' sin: He **dishonored God**, he did not **sanctify** the Name.

You did not honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites.... (Num. 20:12; 27:14).

Moses was a representative of the Holy One. Consequently, the people he led would form their opinions about God by **watching Moses!** His words and actions reflected upon the character and purposes of the One he served.

The biblical text emphasizes the public nature of Moses' sin. This only aggravated the seriousness of what was happening.

- *You did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy **in the sight of the Israelites**... (Num. 20:12)*



- ...you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy **before their eyes**.
(Num. 27:14)
- ...you broke faith with me **in the presence of the Israelites**.... (Deut. 32:51)

Moses brought disrespect to God when he:

1. Called the people **insulting names**. *Listen, you rebels...* (Num. 20:10)

When a man loses his temper, often the first place to see the tragic results is how he uses his **tongue**.

- Name calling.
- Swearing.
- Ranting and raving.

Listen to how Paul links together the problem of anger with sins of the tongue:

In your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.... Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.... Be imitators of God.... (Eph. 4:26 – 5:1)

2. Moses implied that *he and Aaron* were able to **provide water**, rather than God.

*Must **we** bring you water out of this rock?* (Num. 20:10)

Moses seemed to have forgotten that God (not Moses!) was the leader and provider for the people! He seemed to take credit for things that belonged only to God. He seemed to forget that all his authority and power was **derived** from God. God was the leader. He was only a spokesman.

The drama of this is heightened when we realize that the staff Moses used to strike the rock was the staff that had budded, sprouted blossoms and produced almonds! (Num. 17:1-13)

3. He **doubted** God.

- *Because you did not trust in me enough...* (Num. 20:12)
- *You broke faith with me....* (Deut. 32:51)



It was unbelief that kept the people of Israel out of Canaan when they rebelled at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14:11). It appears that Moses is guilty of the same sin!

4. He acted in an undignified manner.

He said rash words and then struck the rock twice rather than speaking to it. (Num. 20:10-11). The Psalmist describes the event this way:

By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips. (Psalm 106:32-33)

Striking the rock (often a symbol of God in the Old Testament!) in anger is a serious break of protocol. God is holy, and by his actions and attitudes Moses is showing extreme disregard for the One he serves. The real sacrilege is seen when we remember "that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4)

When men do not treat God as holy, or sanctify the Name, then God Himself has to step in and vindicate His own holiness.

- *These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them. (Num. 20:13)*
- *Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored. (Lev. 10:3)*

III. Application: How do I apply this to my life?

A. Life is a marathon... not a 100-yard dash. The point is to finish strong.

Moses' failure came near the end of the race. After forty years of sterling performance... failure!

B. The more I grow in spiritual maturity, the more I will become aware of the "weight of glory."

To be great in the Kingdom means an increase of responsibility and accountability. It means I will be held to a higher standard. To them much is given, much will be required.



3) God's solution to anger.

a. Seek to **imitate** Jesus.

Notice carefully the things that made Jesus angry:

- Rejection of the truth, hard hearts. (Mark 3:5)
- Hindering others from coming to Christ. (Mark 10:14)
- Profaning that which is holy. (John 2:13-17)
- Unrepentant, willful refusal to bow the knee. (Rev. 6:12-17)
- The things that made his Father in heaven angry. (Rom. 1:18; 2:5-8; Eph. 5:3-7)

Notice carefully the manner in which Jesus expressed his anger:

- He did not belittle or demean people.
- He did not swear and use foul language.
- He did not get violent.

b. Be **slow to anger**. (James 1:19-21)

Have a long fuse. Listen first. Pause. Reflect. Identify your triggers.

c. Develop **self-control**. (James 3:1-12)

The **works of the flesh** include "hatred, discord, fits of rage, and dissensions." The **fruit of the Spirit** begins with love and ends with self-control. (Gal. 5:19-26).

d. Leave room for **God's wrath**. (Romans 12:17-21)

Many times we will not see full justice done in this world. When we try to even the score, we often make the situation worse. Trust in God. He will one day make all things right.

e. **Do good** to those who hurt you. (Matthew 5:43-48; Romans 12:14, 17-21)

Hate sin. Love sinners. Overcome evil with good.



- f. **Forgive** (Matthew 18:21-35; Ephesians 4:32)

When we forgive, we remove the splinter from the wound so things can begin to heal. Only God can bring healing. But forgiveness helps to make this possible.

TABLE TALK

1. "A man is as big as the thing that makes him angry." Do you agree?
2. What makes you angry?
3. How do you express your anger?
4. What have you learned from Moses' sin about anger?
5. How can we pray for you?

