

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

STUMBLING AT THE FINISH

Numbers 20:1-13

By

Steven J. Cole

September 2, 2018

© Steven J. Cole, 2018

To access previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

September 2, 2018
Life of Moses (26)

Stumbling at the Finish Numbers 20:1-13

When you're watching the Olympics, it's always sad to see a long-distance runner who is leading the race, but in the final lap, he stumbles and falls. All of his years of training toward winning the gold are ruined in the final lap.

It's been said that the Bible paints its heroes warts and all! Sadly, there are many great men in the Bible who ran well for a while, but later in life they stumbled and fell. David, who wrote so many beloved psalms, was probably in his fifties when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged to have her husband Uriah, one of David's loyal mighty men, killed in battle (2 Samuel 11). King Solomon, who had extraordinary wisdom and brought unprecedented prosperity to Israel, allowed his many wives to turn his heart to idolatry (1 Kings 11:3-4).

King Asa began by doing "good and right in the sight of the Lord his God" (2 Chron. 14:2). He made many godly reforms in Israel. But in the 36th year of his reign, rather than relying on the Lord, he stripped the silver and gold from the temple to hire a foreign king to fight against his enemies. When a godly prophet confronted him, rather than repenting, he became angry and put the prophet into prison (2 Chron. 16:1-11).

The godly King Jehoshaphat made many reforms, but later he allied himself with the wicked Ahab and his evil son, Ahaziah (2 Chron. 19:2; 20:35). King Joash began by repairing the house of the Lord and instituting reforms, but later he abandoned the Lord, served idols, and murdered the son of the man who had raised him (2 Chron. 24). King Hezekiah restored worship in Judah and saw the Lord bring amazing victories, but late in life he foolishly showed the Babylonian envoys all of his treasures, setting the stage for the later Babylonian invasion (2 Chron. 29:2, 36; 30:26; 32:22; 2 Kings 20:12-19).

There are more examples, but they all warn us that starting well is no guarantee of finishing well. Past faithfulness and obedi-

ence do not guarantee future faithfulness and obedience. Even a lifetime of walking with God does not ensure that we will finish well. Our text shows us one of the greatest men of God in history stumbling near the finish line. His mission and one desire had been to lead God's people into the Promised Land. But now he makes a single mistake and God tells him that he won't be the one to lead Israel into the land.

Numbers 20 is a sad chapter. It begins with a brief notice of the death of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, and ends with the death of Aaron. These notices are a grim reminder of God's judgment that none above age 20, except for Joshua and Caleb, would enter the Promised Land. Sandwiched in between is the account of Moses' anger toward the grumbling people, resulting in his striking the rock in disobedience rather than speaking to it, as God commanded. Because he and Aaron did not believe God to treat Him as holy before the congregation, God announced that neither leader would bring Israel into the land (Num. 20:12). We learn:

To glorify God, all believers, but especially Christian leaders, should seek to finish well.

While not comprehensive, our text reveals five essentials for finishing well. Moses did some of these, but he failed in others.

1. To finish well, go from your critics' presence into the Lord's presence.

This incident took place in "the first month" (Num. 20:1), which probably refers to the first month of Israel's last year in the wilderness (cf. Num. 20:22-29 with 33:38). Within a year, they'd be crossing the Jordan and heading into Canaan. They are at Kadesh, where almost 40 years before the ten faithless spies had persuaded the congregation not to go in and take the land. The same problem that Israel had encountered then (Exod. 17:1-7) surfaced again: there was no water. Rather than calling the nation to pray for water, the people contended with Moses (Num. 20:3-5):

"If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why then have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this

wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink.”

Then we read (Num. 20:6), “Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to them” So these servants of God went from the presence of angry, accusatory critics into the glorious presence of God.

That’s always a good thing to do when people criticize you or your service for the Lord: Take refuge in the Lord’s presence. Look at His glory as revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Savior was sinless and yet was relentlessly attacked by critics. So why should I, who am far from sinless, expect better treatment? Then, in the Lord’s presence and through His Word, evaluate the criticism. Perhaps it’s totally false and can be dismissed. But perhaps some of the criticism is valid and you need to learn from it. But whenever you’re criticized, you have a choice: You can counter-attack your critics; or, you can allow the criticism to drive you into the Lord’s presence, where you can experience a fresh glimpse of His glory. Moses and Aaron were on target on this first essential.

2. To finish well, deal with your besetting sin.

Chuck Swindoll (*Moses* [Thomas Nelson], pp. 305-311) argues that Moses had a lifelong anger problem that led him to this tragic failure at the end of his life. He points out that Moses was angry when he killed the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a fellow Israelite (Exod. 2:11-12; Acts 7:23-24). Forty years later, God called Moses to return to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh let Israel go. But even though the Lord had told Moses that He would harden Pharaoh’s heart, when Pharaoh repeatedly refused to let Israel go, Moses “went out from Pharaoh in hot anger” (Exod. 11:8), which was unnecessary. Later, when Moses went down from Mount Sinai and saw the people worshiping the golden calf, in anger he smashed the Ten Commandments (Exod. 32:19). While his anger may have been righteous, Swindoll (pp. 307-308) argues that God did not approve of his destroying those tablets. Moses’ unchecked pattern of anger is what now, 40 years later, caused him to strike the rock in anger, resulting in his being excluded from the Promised Land.

While some of Moses' anger was righteous, we need to be careful not to justify most of our anger as righteous. The Scottish hymn writer George Matheson said (source unknown), "There are times when I do well to be angry, but I have mistaken the times." Or, as Aristotle said (source unknown),

Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time and in the right way—that is not easy.

Maybe your besetting sin isn't anger. Whatever keeps tripping you up, Moses' failure warns you to identify that sin and deal with it now before it causes you to stumble at the end of your life.

3. To finish well, develop the habit of obedience in what may seem to be relatively small things.

When you first read this account, it seems as if the Lord is making a big deal out of a relatively small sin. He commands Moses to speak to the rock, but Moses, understandably frustrated with these constant grumblers, strikes the rock with his rod. As a result, the Lord denies Moses the fulfillment of what he has worked toward for the past 40 years. We may think, "What's the big deal? Isn't the Lord being overly harsh with His faithful servant who gave up a life of luxury in Pharaoh's palace to lead this ungrateful mob in this barren wilderness for the past 40 years? Where is God's grace?" (See Charles Simeon, *Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], 2:108-109.) But, we know that God is always gracious and never unduly harsh with His servants.

As we consider Moses' sin, we must conclude that *what may seem to us to be a relatively minor sin may be a major sin to God*. His ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8). God labeled Moses' sin as not believing in Him to treat Him as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel (Num. 20:12). Not to believe in God is in effect to call God a liar! It impugns His faithfulness! That's a big sin! Not to treat God as holy, especially as a leader of God's people, is to lower Him from His exalted throne where the angels cover their faces and cry, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa. 6:3). It may cause His people to disrespect or disregard Him. That's a big sin!

This incident is very similar to the one 40 years before when God directed Moses to strike the rock with his rod to produce wa-

ter for the grumbling people (Exod. 17:6). But this time, God directed Moses to take the rod, which was a symbol of his God-given authority; but instead of striking the rock, he was to speak to it. Moses began well by taking the rod, but then he disobeyed by striking the rock, not just once, but twice. You may wonder, "Why did God change the command from striking the rock to speaking to it, and why was He so severe with Moses for his disobedience?"

The apostle Paul tells us that the rock in the wilderness that produced water for the thirsty people was a type of Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). When Christ came the first time, He had to bear the penalty of our sins by being "wounded for our transgressions" (Isa. 53:5, New KJV). But Jesus had to suffer and die only once to make atonement for our sins, providing the living water of salvation for all who are thirsty (Rom. 6:9-10; Heb. 9:26, 28; 1 Pet. 3:18). Now that He has suffered and died for our sins, we only need to cry out to Him in prayer to satisfy our thirsty souls. So by striking the rock on this second occasion, Moses messed up the type of Jesus Christ and our salvation. And, as Pastor Roger Ellsworth observed (*Moses* [Evangelical Press], p. 224), "God is very precise about the whole business of salvation, and we must be precise as well."

Also, Matthew Henry observed (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], 1:659),

He bids him speak to the rock, which would do as it was bidden, to shame the people who had been so often spoken to, and would not hear nor obey. Their hearts were harder than this rock, not so tender, not so yielding, not so obedient.

So don't shrug off God's commandments as if they're no big deal. What may seem to you to be a relatively small thing may be a big thing to God! So to avoid stumbling at the finish line, go from your critics' presence into the Lord's presence. Deal with your besetting sin. Develop the habit of obedience in what may seem to be relatively small things.

4. To finish well, be careful to give God the glory for everything He uses you to accomplish.

When Moses struck the rock in disobedience to the Lord's command to speak to it, he said to the grumbling crowd (Num. 20:10), "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you

out of this rock?" The implication of that question was that Moses and Aaron were able to bring water from the rock. But as Alexander Maclaren observed (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 1:360), "He who claims power to himself, denies it to God."

Interestingly, God brought the water gushing from the rock in spite of Moses' disobedience. Sometimes in His grace God grants results in ministry in spite of our disobedience. So if you see success in your ministry, you have to be careful or you might start thinking, "My success is due to my great faith or because of something I did!" But results do not necessarily indicate faithfulness on the part of the one seeing the results! Some of the largest churches in America today are pastored by heretics, whereas some of the smallest churches are pastored by godly men who faithfully preach the Word and depend upon God in prayer.

The apostle Paul was always careful to give God the credit for any fruit that he saw in his ministry. When the Corinthians were boasting about whether they followed Paul or Apollos, he wrote (1 Cor. 3:5-7),

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.

Later, he explained (1 Cor. 15:10), "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." Concerning his ministry, he explained (Rom. 15:18), "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed." Or, again (2 Cor. 3:5), "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." His overall principle was (1 Cor. 10:31), "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Finally,

5. To finish well, believe God and treat Him as holy.

The Lord's perspective on Moses' striking the rock was (Num. 20:12), "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in

the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Unbelief was the root sin that led to not treating God as holy. Regarding unbelief, Alfred Edersheim (*Old Testament Bible History* Eerdmans], pp. 185-186) pointed out that the people despaired of getting into the land and directed their frustrations against Moses and Aaron. They were looking to Moses and not to God as the one who had not yet brought them into the land (Num. 20:4-5). On the other hand, Moses and Aaron despaired of getting into the land and directed their frustrations against this grumbling people. Moses and Aaron were looking at the grumbling people rather than to the Lord and His promise to bring them into the land. Edersheim observed, "But at bottom, the ground of despair and of rebellion, both on the part of the people and of Moses, was precisely the same. In both cases it was really unbelief of God."

The point is, when we look at people rather than the Lord, we're sure to grow frustrated, because people will always fall short in some way. Even a gifted leader like Moses had a lot of critics. And if leaders look at the people, they will get frustrated with their grumbling and many shortcomings. Look to the Lord!

Also, as F. B. Meyer points out (*Moses* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 176), Moses may have been trusting more in his rod than in the Lord. God had used Moses' rod to turn the Nile to blood and to separate the Red Sea. When we've seen a method that works, our tendency is to rely on the method for results, not on the Lord. Meyer also notes that faith had been Moses' strong point up till now. But our greatest strengths are often our greatest points of vulnerability. If I'm a strong preacher, I may mistakenly think that all I need to do is use my proven method and natural ability and everything will go well! So we have to be on guard against the sin of unbelief in God, which always means that we're trusting in ourselves. Faith looks to the Lord and His promises. He has promised to build His church and He uses some pretty rough material to build with, both with leaders and with people!

The Lord's other indictment of Moses and Aaron was that they had not treated Him as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel. The Lord repeats this charge in Numbers 27:14, when He reminds Moses, "for in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the con-

gregation, you rebelled against My command to treat Me as holy before their eyes at the water." Disobedience to God's commands means that we're not believing Him or treating Him as holy. As I said, the rock was identified with Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). Elsewhere in Scripture, God is called our rock (Pss. 18:2; 31:3; 42:9). So to strike the rock was to strike the Lord, who is identified with the rock. Also, when Moses implied that he, not the Lord, would bring water from the rock, he did not treat God as holy before the people.

As a result of Moses and Aaron not believing God to treat Him as holy, He imposed the penalty that they would not bring the people into the land. This must have been a huge emotional blow to Moses, who had spent the last 40 years enduring much hardship with the hope that one day he would set foot in the land. But later, in God's grace, Moses did stand in the land. He and Elijah stood with the glorified Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). In spite of our failures and disappointments in this life, we know that one day soon we will be with Jesus in glory, free from our sin and sharing His victory over sin and death!

Charles Simeon (*ibid.* 2:112) pointed out that Moses represents the Law, which can only condemn us, not save us. One violation of God's holy Law is enough to render us guilty of breaking the whole thing (James 2:10). One violation was enough to keep Moses out of the Promised Land. As Paul said (Rom. 3:20), "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight." To enter the land, we need the new Joshua—Jesus, the Savior, who fulfilled the Law perfectly (Meyer, *ibid.* p. 177). As Paul stated (Rom. 10:4), "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Put your trust in Him!

Conclusion

If you've never read the life of George Muller, I strongly urge you to do so. I first read *George Muller of Bristol* (A. T. Pierson, [Revell]) during the summer of 1970, and it changed my life. Muller was a man "who prayed earnestly that he might live a life and do a work which should be convincing proof that God hears prayer and that it is safe to trust Him at all times" (*ibid.*, pp. 15-16). For over 60 years, without making any needs known to supporters, he trusted God through prayer alone to provide for thousands of orphans.

At Muller's funeral service, a man related how a friend had said to Muller, "When God calls you home, it will be like a ship going into harbor, full sail." Muller replied, "Oh no! It is poor George Muller who needs daily to pray, 'Hold Thou me up in my goings, that my footsteps slip not.'" Pierson adds (p. 289) that the lives of men in Scripture who fell later in life were "a perpetual warning, leading [Muller] to pray that he might never thus depart from the Lord in his old age." Muller finished well!

Finishing well in life depends on running well now, no matter where you're at. To enter the race, put your trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. Then, each day meet with Him in His Word and in prayer. As Muller often advised (*ibid.*, pp. 314-315), "The first business of every morning should be to secure happiness in God."

Then, when you encounter problems, use them to drive you into the Lord's presence. Deal with your besetting sin, so that it doesn't trip you up. Develop the habit of obedience in what may seem to be relatively small things. Give God the glory for everything He uses you to accomplish for Him. Trust in Him at all times and treat Him as holy. One day you will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" You finished well!

Application Questions

1. When is it right to defend yourself when you're criticized? When is it wrong? Use Scripture to support your answer.
2. What is your besetting sin? What steps can you take to eradicate it from your life?
3. Are there seemingly small areas where you are not obeying God? Identify them and commit to obedience.
4. Are there areas where you're not believing God to treat Him as holy? Identify them and commit to obedience.

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2018, All Rights Reserved.