

Anger Danger

Numbers 20:1-13

What happened?!

In a few moments time, Moses “flamed out.” But according to Numbers 12:3, he was the meekest man on the face of the earth! In a moment of fiery passion, he echoed the anger of irritating people. And for Moses, this was “the beginning of the end.” He had served the Lord honorably by serving Israel for more than forty years. But because of his furious anger, God barred Moses from the Promised Land. And reaching that land had been one of Moses’ most important goals for more than forty years.

What happened?!

Dear friends, if the meekest man on the face of the earth did this, where does this leave the rest of us? We have to find out what happened, and learn from it. And there is a door of hope in our valley of trouble here. To Israel, the Rock symbolized the Lord God. (Deuteronomy 32:3-4: **“³ Because I will publish the name of the LORD: ascribe ye greatness unto our God. ⁴ He is the Rock, His work is perfect: for all His ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is He.”**) Note how this is applied in Deuteronomy 32:30. Also note the very interesting application to believers of advanced age in Psalm 92:14-15.) 1 Corinthians 10:4-5 reminds us that these things (referring to the Old Testament stories about Israel) were our examples. And that the Rock from which they drank (in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20) represented Christ. Ultimately, going to the Promised Land was about the coming of the Promised Lord (who would be born in Bethlehem). From our Redeemer’s death for our sins and rising again flow the living waters that can quench our spiritual thirst. The dramatic difference in the woman of Sychar in Samaria (John 4) shows us that this change is taking place even today. But what happened to Moses ought to alert every one of us to the danger of anger.

Let’s go right to the heart of the problem. We can begin with the big problem, and work our way out to what led to this problem. Read Numbers 20:10-11. **“And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also.”** Take special note of the words, **“Hear now, you rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock?”** Moses, the meekest man on the earth, had a problem. What was it?

Arrogance

Arrogance is an unwarranted feeling of importance. This is a terrifying trait, but here it is, in Moses, the meekest man on the earth. Throughout his life, he had repeatedly humbled himself before the Lord and the people he served. And this should be a warning to every one of us. We have never “arrived” at a sufficient level of maturity. “Arrogance” is an ever present danger, even among (or especially among) mature believers. When Moses used the word, **“we,”** he was taking partial

responsibility for something that only God could do. In fact, the people may have thought “we” referred to Moses and Aaron since Moses didn’t mention the Lord in verses 10-11. What happened?!

Moses and Aaron had made exactly the right choices in verses 6 through 9:

“ 6 And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto them. 7 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 8 Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. 9 And Moses took the rod from before the LORD, as he commanded him.”

- They left the presence of quarrelsome people to get alone with the Lord
- They humbled themselves before the Lord
- They received confirmation that the Lord was hearing them, for the glory of the Lord appeared.
- They also received specific instructions from the Lord. Verse 9 tells us that they listened to the Lord and obeyed His Word by taking the rod.

But after that, everything began to fall apart. We need to find out why. If we are to be alert to “anger danger” we must examine this text carefully. These words are of special importance to anyone in spiritual leadership in a home, a class, a church or a nation. Every husband, every wife, every father, every mother, every teacher and every pastor should give this story careful thought.

“Sympathetic Rebellion”

This passage alerts us to the great danger of a “sympathetic rebellion.” Our science teachers taught us about “sympathetic vibrations.” Webster’s dictionary defines them as, *“a vibration produced in one body by the vibrations of exactly the same period in a neighboring body.”*ⁱ You will probably feel these when a large truck goes by on the interstate this morning. Moses may have left the presence of the assembly, but it’s clear that their sinful words never left his mind. In a “sympathetic rebellion,” not unlike a sympathetic vibration, Moses was in harmony with the rebels, not the Lord. In his rage, the meekest man on the earth did not honor God with his words or actions. Yes, the water flowed, and the people drank, but this cost Moses dearly. In this story in Scripture, there is hope for us: the Lord told Moses and Aaron exactly what they had done wrong. We can learn from this (verses 12-13): **“¹² And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. ¹³ This is the water of Meribah [strife]; because the children of Israel strove with the LORD, and he was sanctified in them.”**

- *The spiritual leaders did not believe God.* In what way? The leaders “failed to believe that God was ever going to change this rebellious people. [They] doubted the power of God to change hearts.”ⁱⁱ Were the people wrong? Yes! But in this moment, the Lord did not specify their rebellion nor threaten them with judgment. This is important. Remember that the goodness of God also leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4). God had things under control. But Moses clearly felt that the warning was missing and he spoke rashly.

- *They did not sanctify the Lord in the eyes of the people of Israel.* To “sanctify” means to treat as holy or set apart as holy. For instance, in His model prayer, Jesus prayed, “Hallowed [or holy] be Thy name.” But in their rashness, the leaders represented the Redeemer of Israel like a raging reactionary. This included screaming at the people about their rebellion, disobeying God’s instruction (to speak to the rock), and striking the rock not once but twice. This is an important warning for anyone in spiritual leadership. No one is exempt, not even a prophet of God. Consider for instance, Ezekiel 2:8, **“But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee; Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house: open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee.”** We could crowd God’s revealed Word out of our minds by dwelling on the rebellious reactions of people. But here is hope: we could crowd their rebellion out of our minds by God’s Revelation (the Word of God – Colossians 3:16).
- *They experienced tragic results.* They were kept out of the Promised Land (a goal they had held dear for forty years).

What happened?! What led up to this tragic event? Psalm 106:32-33 explains what happened: **“They angered him [God] also at the waters of strife, so that it went ill with Moses for their sakes: Because they provoked his spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips.”** If we can learn how Moses was provoked, we might be able to avoid this tragedy.

Warning Signs on the Road to Anger Danger

It may be that some of us are already on the road to this kind of rebellion. If you use your Bible like a set of binoculars, you might see this coming long before you have a problem. Then, you could turn away from frustration and tragedy. What led up to this tragic event?

- ❖ **When you are going through the same old problem all over again, v.1:** For Israel, things were on the verge of fulfillment, vs. 1. Yes, they were **“in the desert of Zin,”** but the Lord had miraculously provided food and water in each of the 14,600 days of their wilderness wanderings. They were **“in Kadesh,”** where they had been forty years before when the majority of their spies brought back an evil report (Numbers 13). **“In the first month”** they should have thought about the Passover and their deliverance from Egypt by the Lord God, four decades before. But here they were, going through **“the same old same old”** problem right on the edge of the Promised Land. Moses may have been acting from his memories (from the last time they faced this problem, Exodus 17:1-6) instead of thinking through each phrase of God’s instructions.
- ❖ **When you are suffering in a time of grief, v.1:** Moses’ dearly beloved sister, Miriam, had just died. Undoubtedly, he was grieving over her passing.
- ❖ **In the midst of a crisis, vs. 2-5:** Physically: Their health was in jeopardy (for there was no water). Emotionally and Spiritually: The people rebelled. They said that death would be preferable to their present situation. In their rash thinking, their dead brothers were better off. So they took out their frustrations on their leaders. They revised the history of Israel in their imaginations, so Egypt was better than **“this evil place.”** Instead of depending upon God’s promises, they denied that there were any blessings in the Promised Land.

And in the words of Psalm 106, **“they provoked [Moses’] spirit, so that he spake unadvisedly with his lips.”** (This kind of harsh speech is described in Proverbs 12:18.)

Practical Applications

- ✓ Be wary of this temptation when you are on the verge of something big. Also be alert in times of grief. Or when others are being carnal and completely unreasonable, watch your tongue.
- ✓ Don’t lean on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6). Moses did. Instead, trust in the Lord with all your heart.
- ✓ Sanctify the Lord in your heart so that you can be ready to give humble answers (1 Peter 3:15).
- ✓ Slow down to give careful consideration to each phrase of a passage in God’s Word, especially in times of crisis. Moses suffered the consequences of “partial obedience.” On this occasion, Moses was supposed to speak to the Rock, not the people. Much that is on our hearts should be expressed in prayer to the Rock, not to rebellious people.
- ✓ When you are angry, don’t let corrupt words proceed from your mouth, Ephesians 4:29.
- ✓ Remember that you are the master of the unspoken word, but once spoken, it may master you.
- ✓ Be careful not to enter into a “sympathetic rebellion” with those you lead. Moses probably felt that his speech and actions were justified, because he compared them with the rebellion of the people. People’s sins are never a good standard by which leaders can judge their actions. They have to turn to God alone and listen to Him.
- ✓ If you confront the sin of your spouse, your child, or another believer be careful to use Galatians 6:1. Consider yourself, for you are also in danger of being tempted. When you must confront the sins of others, give very careful thought to your own sin. Begin the process by asking these humbling questions: “Did they learn this from me?” “Did they follow my example – or lack thereof?” “Is there something I need to confess to the Lord and to them before I proceed to confront their sin?”
- ✓ Don’t assume that God will always use you the way He always has. Your position of influence is a privilege; use it wisely.

May God grant every one of us the grace to avoid these tragedies. Beware the dangers of anger.

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ⁱ Merriam-Webster dictionary, “Sympathetic vibration,” accessed at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sympathetic%20vibration>

ⁱⁱ Dr. David Shumate, Unpublished notes on Numbers 20:1-13. “The Greatest Danger for Parents (and other leaders) in the Crisis”