

9. The Sin of Moses and Aaron (4Q 2009—People on the Move: The Book of Numbers)

Biblical material: Numbers 20, 21; John 3:14, 15; James 4:4–15.

Quote

- There is no such thing as a minor lapse of integrity. *Thomas J. “Tom” Peters*
- God places the heaviest burden on those who can carry its weight. *Reggie White*
- God allows us to experience the low points of life in order to teach us lessons we could not learn in any other way. The way we learn those lessons is not to deny the feelings but to find the meanings underlying them. *Stanley Lindquist*
- Though our feelings come and go, God’s love for us does not. *C.S. Lewis*
- Many a humble agnostic, worshipping an unknown God, is nearer to the Kingdom of God than is a theologian confident in his theology... Many an ‘atheist’ is rejecting false conceptions of God which he assumes to be Christian beliefs about Him. Many an agnostic has a reverence for the unknown God which puts to shame the pride of a superficial dogmatist. *Frederic Greeves*

Questions

What do we learn from this story—that God is petty and easily offended, even by his friends? That he’s unforgiving in some ways? How do we see more clearly the challenges of representing God to others? Why were the people still complaining—and what does this tell us about human nature? Why did God use the image of a snake to bring healing—what do we read into symbols?

Bible discussion

After enduring so many complaints it was certainly very human of Moses and Aaron to become frustrated. Their actions however did not reflect what God had told them in Numbers 20—and the assumption of the “God” role (“must *we* bring water out of the rock”) set a dangerous precedent. God has to express his displeasure clearly. Yet it seems the Israelites didn’t care, as they went on complaining anyway. In Numbers 21 they make the same complaints, and Moses has to intercede for these ungrateful people once more. The idea that looking at a bronze snake would heal them has seemed strange to some...

Once again here in Numbers we have God dealing with a far from ideal situation, and yet still willing to take the risks of being misunderstood—even by his usually-faithful friend Moses. We need to look beyond the immediate circumstances and ask what God is trying to accomplish in his dealings with his people.

As a side-note we need to realize that in the space of this chapter Moses lost both his sister and his brother. How would that have left him feeling? And yet he continues...

Comment

“And then when His best friend, after putting up with the Israelites for forty years and being such a marvelous representative of God, when he lost his temper and smote the rock, God said, ‘For that you may not enjoy the thing you have looked forward to more than anything else in your life. You may not go in to Canaan.’

“What do you think of that whole story? It’s dealt with at some length in Numbers, and there’s more on it in Deuteronomy. It’s a major event here. God seems to be kinder to the grumbling people than to His trusted friend. What do you think of God’s treatment of Moses? You remember, it starts in Numbers 20, but there’s mention in several places... Now how do you interpret that story? Remember, the universe is looking on. How many times does God win a friend like Moses and Abraham? And God has been accused of being arbitrary, exacting, vengeful, unforgiving and severe. And the angels watched God tell His best friend, to whom He could talk face to face, as a man speaks to his friend, ‘Because of what you did at the rock, I will not let you into Canaan.’

“Is that not exacting, severe, even arbitrary, unforgiving. He even says, ‘Don’t pray to Me anymore about this matter. Speak to Me no more about this matter.’ I mean, the way God treats Moses would stand very high, wouldn’t it, in our scale of evidence, important evidence, as to the truth about God? That He wouldn’t let the grumbling people in, might make sense. They didn’t want to go in anyway, did they? They said, ‘We’d rather die in Egypt. We don’t want to go on.’ Well then, let them have their way. Let them die in the wilderness. Moses was longing to go in. And all he does is smite the rock, and he can’t go in.

“Now how would you understand that? This *really* reveals God to us. It seems to me, this is one of the highlights in the whole Bible that reveals the kind of person God is, and what He wants of His children, and how He will treat His children in the end. Now, what do you think about that?...

“Moses showed himself to be a real friend of God. And I think one of the chief qualities of a friend is jealousy for your reputation. Moses was jealous for God’s reputation, just as Abraham had been, when God told him about Sodom and Gomorrah.

“But now at the rock, Moses shows no concern for God’s reputation. Instead, he’s angry, when God isn’t. And Moses stands at the rock and says, ‘You ungrateful rebels; must *we* bring forth water from this rock?’ And he hits it twice. And I’d venture, before his rod hit the rock twice, he realized what he’d done, and he repented.

“But why would God take that so seriously? Isn’t this where the whole great controversy began? When a highly trusted person who came from the very presence of God, and reflected the brilliant glory of God, and therefore was regarded as speaking with almost unlimited authority—Lucifer, the Light-bearer, began to misrepresent God. He began to picture God to the angels as exacting, unforgiving and severe, a harsh God who laid arbitrary requirements on His people, just to show His authority and test their obedience.

“The whole disastrous controversy that has spread throughout this universe began when a highly trusted person began to obscure and pervert and twist the truth about God. And I doubt anybody in the audience in the wilderness gave that any consideration at all. But the angels knew. They knew how that whole thing began, and they could understand why God would take it so seriously. And God could turn to the angels and say, ‘Any questions about why I’m not letting Moses in? He’s always been My best friend, and he will remain My best friend. But he did something, and I’ve forgiven him. But I must go on record before My family in the universe that the most destructive thing you can ever do is to misrepresent Me. That’s where it all began, and that’s why it’s costing Me so much to clear up all these misunderstandings.’

“I believe that Moses’ sin is the most destructive sin a person can ever commit. And it’s not just disobedience. It’s not destroying a symbol. But it is misrepresenting God. Now

how often, have you ever prayed at night, 'If today, to my children I left the impression Lord, that You are in any way arbitrary, vengeful, exacting, unforgiving and severe, then I'm sorry for that more than some other terrible things I may have done.'

"When do we worry about that? Has anybody ever been disfellowshipped for misrepresenting the character of God as arbitrary, vengeful, unforgiving and severe?

"You can even preach that God has said, 'Love Me, or I'll torture you for eternity.' Well not in an Adventist church. Here you can only preach, 'Love Me, or I'll torture you as long as you deserve, and then you'll die.' That's all right. But in the eyes of the universe, they know how this thing began, and they've been celebrating its end for a long time, when Jesus answered all those questions about Himself and His Father.

"Against that understanding, what Moses did was potentially so destructive and so hazardous, that God said, 'I must go on record as saying that that is the thing that has caused all the trouble all along—when someone who is very much trusted twists and perverts the truth about Me.' A *Graham Maxwell, The Picture of God in All Sixty-Six, Tape 'Numbers.'*

Ellen White Comments

"I feel like weeping every time I read of Moses' mistake, with its consequent bitter disappointment. The children of Israel had come to a place where there was no water. Forgetful of how many times the Lord had delivered them, they murmured and complained, and found fault with Moses. Moses and Aaron sought the Lord, and he bade them speak unto the rock, and promised that water should flow forth. But Moses was provoked with the people because of their unreasonable course, and he spoke hastily in anger. 'Hear now, ye rebels,' he said, 'must we bring you water out of this rock?' He smote the rock twice with his rod, and the water came forth. But the Lord had not told him to smite the rock. 'Speak ye unto the rock,' was the instruction given to him, 'and it shall give forth his water.'

"'And the Lord said 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.' Moses entreated of the Lord to let him pass over Jordan, but the Lord would not permit him. With this one exception, he had been so faithful and so true—why was this disappointment placed upon him?—Because of his position. If his disobedience had been lightly passed over, it would have made of little account the requirements of God before the people. {RH, December 9, 1909}

Moses smote the rock in wrath, and took the glory to himself. The continual waywardness and murmuring of the children of Israel had caused him the keenest sorrow, and for a little he forgot how much God had borne with them, and that their murmuring was not against Moses, but against God. He thought only of himself, how deeply he was wronged, and how little gratitude they manifested in return, for his deep love for them.

As Moses smote the rock, he failed to honor God, and magnify him before the children of Israel, that they might glorify God. And the Lord was displeased with Moses, and said that he should not enter the promised land. It was God's plan to often prove Israel by bringing them into strait places, and then in their great necessity exhibit his power, that he might live in their memory, and they glorify him. {1SG 41-2}