

MOMENT BY MOMENT
The Life of Moses: Deliverance Through Faith
Numbers 20:1-13
 Chadron Berean Church

One of the most helpful ways to think about a life of faith is to look at it as a series of moments. Life is a string of moments, and in any given moment we can either walk in faith or not. Each moment we must choose to act in faith or not. That's sort of where we're going with today's study on the life of Moses as we learn some important lessons for staying on the path of faith.

We pick it up this morning with the Israelites on the last leg of a 40-year journey from Egypt to the promised land, so we're fast forwarding quite a bit now. They journeyed from Egypt to Sinai. Then from Sinai to the edge of wilderness where they failed to enter the promised land due to lack of faith. Then they spent 38 years on a long, wandering path of disbelief. You have to think that many in the next generation are here now and they are on their way to the promised land again where they face a familiar test.

1 Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there. 2 Now there was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. 3 The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had breathed our last when our brothers breathed their last before Yahweh! 4 Why then have you brought the assembly of Yahweh into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? 5 And why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us into this evil place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."

I. THE PEOPLE OPPOSE MOSES AND AARON. (VV. 1-5)

So as Israel sets out again to the promised land, they're tested again. And they don't do so well. They sing the same old song—complaining and rebellion. But it's here that Moses' sister, **Miriam**, dies and is buried. She has been a key figure and so her death is specifically mentioned. By the end of the chapter, **Aaron** will also die on Mount Hor (vv. 23-29). So death bookends this chapter and what happens in between isn't pretty. These deaths are a graphic reminder that the sin of unbelief is serious and because of their lack of faith in Yahweh, an entire generation of Israelites failed to enter the promised land. They're people who clearly want God's blessings, but not God Himself. Only two of them, **Joshua** and **Caleb**, who believed Israel could take the promised land with God's help, will actually enter it (Num. 13-14). Other than them, all the leaders – Moses included – succumbed to the same temptation as the people.¹ But of Joshua and Caleb it says they had "*a different spirit*" and desired to follow Yahweh fully.

But take special note that all these years have gone by for Israel. They have seen God provide. They have seen God deliver. God was very patient and instructive in showing them who He is. But they just never learned to trust Him moment by moment. Instead, their complaining has become the conditioned reflex. It's a habit they just can't seem to break. Complaining—not

faith—is the autopilot, and that’s not good because autopilot is the flesh, the sin nature. It’s the natural response. But such is the life lived without faith: a wandering, weary path, void of satisfaction.

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 Yahweh appeared to them; 7 and Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 8 “Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.”

So Moses and Aaron **fall on their faces** in prayer, driven there by fear and frustration. In response, God tells Moses to take his **rod** (which has become a symbol of God’s powerful presence) and **assemble the congregation** before a certain rock. And while they look on, he is to **speak** to the rock and without him touching it, God bring forth water from it. Remember, this hard, dry, lifeless desert rock. Thus, it will be made clear that God alone has provided this water and God would vindicate Moses again as God’s man. The last time where Moses was to *strike* the rock for water would come out (Ex. 17:6). This time he is to *speak* to it. By the way, I don’t recommend talking to rocks in the sight of everyone. People might think you’re crazy. It’s not the most winsome thing a Christian can do.

II. THE UNBELIEF OF MOSES. (VV. 9-13)

9 So Moses took the rod from before Yahweh, just as He had commanded him; 10 and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” [notice the word “we”; you can imagine Aaron there shaking his head in agreement in the same spirit as Moses] 11 Then Moses raised high his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. 12 But Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe 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.” 13 Those were the waters of Meribah because the sons of Israel contended with Yahweh, and He proved Himself holy among them.

So honestly, this is the ugly, human, sin nature side of Moses. He’s just like the rest of us, and we all know how and why he does it if we’re honest. You experience an unpleasant or irritating situation enough—over and over again, but it doesn’t stop or something breaks or the children won’t listen or stop complaining, etc.—the pre-conditioned response building up is to lash out in frustration or anger. It’s like you just black out in rage. You lose control, and it brings out the worst in you, right? We all have moments like that we wish we could take back. Well, the *repeated* rabble of the people get to Moses just like that. And rather than *speaking* to the rock, Moses *strikes* it twice.

For millennia people have been discussing what Moses did wrong. Was it that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it? Was it that he did it in anger? Was it that he did more than God said and didn’t follow God’s exact Word? Was it that he and Aaron took the credit for this miracle? In verse 10 they say, “Shall we bring forth water for you?” Was it that he struck the rock twice and ruined a picture, or type, of Christ in it? In **1 Corinthians 10:4**, Paul likens Jesus to the rock

in the wilderness, so some people assume that since Christ only needed to be smitten once, Moses ruined the typology there but the Bible doesn't explicitly make that connection. I think the root of our answer is right there in verse 12: **unbelief**. God says, *"Because you have not believed Me."* So the anger, the striking instead of speaking, the taking of credit ("we"), and the failure to regard God as holy, all stemmed from *a moment of unbelief*. We need to understand that Moses had clear instructions. He knew what God told him to do—he just didn't do it. Plain and simple. He didn't *believe* God's way was best. He thought he would do it *his* way—the worldly, fleshly way. And it's a moment that Moses would regret immensely because his **discipline** is that he doesn't get to enter the promised land now. Even though, it says in chapter 14, Moses **prayed 3 times** for God to reverse this judgment, God says no and to not ask Him again. And Moses was meek enough to accept God's discipline after that.

I hope by now in our study, we have the deepest respect and love for Moses. He is to be admired. We have learned so many good things from him. But he is a sinful human too. And what you need to know is that this isn't Moses' first moment of rage. Moses has been struggling with anger his whole life. His rage has been demonstrated several times. In Exodus 2:12, he struck down an Egyptian in rage. In one meeting with Pharaoh, it says he left Pharaoh's presence in **hot anger** when he really didn't need to (Ex. 11:8). At Mt. Sinai when he came back down from the mountain with the beautiful tablets God made (by the way Moses is the first to download information onto a tablet from a cloud), he saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf and it says his **anger burned** and he threw those tablets from his hand and shattered them at the foot of the mountain (Ex. 32:15-19). After that, God had Moses make tablets of his own (34:1-4). He says to make two more like the ones *"you shattered."*

So Moses may have been meek, but it's clear that even near the end of his life anger was a problem, and it would cost him. God tolerated this anger practically his whole life. God had disciplined him. Worked with him. Shaped him. Humbled him. Shown him the way. But Moses was still letting his anger flare before the congregation. And I think by God finally laying down this harsh discipline in the last days of Moses' life, God is saying to Moses, *"That's enough. I have a sanctification program for your life, and your sanctification – who you become – is more important than what you do. I don't care if what you do is as important as leading Israel into the promised land, you're not taking this anger with you to the grave. I care about you too much. I care about your relationships too much. And I know you care about My glory. So we're going to deal with it once and for all."* And what a good God Moses has to care for him enough that he won't let him keep shattering his own life and shattering the reputation of God—whom we all know Moses loves and wants to honor more than anything in his life. Moses needs this discipline to keep in on the right track.

In application, let's just look at some principles here to keep us on the right path – the path of faith and rest. Remember, in any moment, we can choose one path or the other. **Proverbs 24:5-6** says, *"Let your eyes look straight ahead; fix your gaze directly before you. Give careful thought to the paths for your feet and be steadfast in all your ways. Do not turn to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil."* So let's use these principle to give careful thought to our path in life.

1. Obedience stems from **belief**.

We can tell what path we are on by our response. If we are on the path of unbelief, it will manifest itself in disobedience. We will see the works of the flesh (Gal. 5:19-21). Disobedience and unbelief or obedience and faith are sometimes likened to two sides of the same coin. When we disobey, we're not walking in faith/belief. We do not believe in that moment. However, when we're walking in faith, we'll be walking in obedience. One man said, *"When you know God's will and you willfully move in another direction [and Moses did], that is unbelief, plain and simple."*² You're turning a deaf ear to God. Even **Hebrews 3:18-19**, referring to the Israelites, reads, *"And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief"* (NASB). It's amazing that Moses was one those who didn't enter His rest, and yet his name is in the hall of faith for moments of great faith. It goes to show us that one moment we can be walking in faith and the next we can be walking in unbelief, and you don't find rest in unbelief. Even though we can have faith that saves, we must have a *walk of faith* to continue to experience deliverance from sin.

2. Obedience honors God.

In any moment we can choose to honor God or not. And God says Moses' angry moment **failed to treat God as holy** before Israel (v. 12). In James' words, the anger of Moses did not achieve the righteousness of God (Jas. 1:19-20). But Moses wasn't leading by example. I would venture to say that some of the anger we see in the people of Israel stems from Moses responding in anger to the people. They were feeding off of his example as he let his spirit go unchecked. It became a vicious cycle of anger and Moses was not showing them the way.

And that's important because Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. They had a special function on the earth to be mediators for God and a light to the nations. Nations were to look to them and see what a wise and holy and good God they had by observing their lives. They were to demonstrate how people were intended to live in God's created order.³ Well, as the church, we have basically the same function. We have a heavenly calling to live out where we are to walk in a manner worthy of that calling, *"with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love"* (Eph. 4:1). But when we live in disobedience or we let the flesh control us, it is like breaking commandment #3: we're taking the Lord's name in vain before a watching world.⁴ We take His name in vain not just by using His name as a curse word, but by claiming to be Christians and then living as rabble.

3. Who we become is more important than what we do.

What you *do* doesn't matter if you aren't *becoming* like Christ. That's why God disciplines His children whom He loves. Moses was forgiven but the painful consequences remained so that he wouldn't slip into this habit of anger so easily again. It was time to work on it.

4. Our only hope for deliverance from sin is through faith in Christ.

There's a host of practical applications I could give you this morning to help you overcome anger or lust or other sinful reflexes in your life. I would recommend recognizing the patterns in your life. When and how and why does it happen? What triggers it? You can memorize Scripture to help. You can get an accountability partner, maybe join an accountability group. My wife and

I, in discussing this passage this week granted each other the right to just step in and stop each other if we ever see the other starting to go down this path. To remind each other that it's just a moment and it's not worth it. Lashing out won't satisfy or give rest. Hey, like the hymn says, we're all "prone to wander." Pride comes before the fall. So maybe grant someone permission to speak into your life when you start to get off track.

But despite all of that, we need to know that our victory over sin ultimately and only comes from the power that is in Christ through His Spirit in us. The Law wasn't enough. Moses wasn't enough. They can't deliver the way we need to be delivered. We need Christ. Jesus said, *"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scriptures said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive"* (John 7:37-39). We need to trust in Jesus Christ and thus be born again spiritually by His Spirit, and that's where the power comes from. That's where the water of life is found. We have zero hope for our anger or lust or whatever outside of Christ. We had a man visit our church just the other day who said he was an alcoholic his whole life and tried AA and all of that, but only Christ could set him free and now he's a deacon in his church. That's the power of God. And the Spirit is going to work and help us in our weaknesses and continue to make us into the image of His Son until we enter glory (Rom. 8:26-30). Amen?

For some reason on Friday morning, I decided to type the title of my sermon into Google and see what came up. Sometimes I do that and find helpful illustrations or books. This time, a hymn came up called "Moment by Moment" by a contemporary of D. L. Moody and Civil War hero, Major D. W. Whittle. I don't recall ever hearing this and I couldn't believe how well it went with the message. It really affirmed this message in my heart.

Dying with Jesus, by death reckoned mine;
Living with Jesus, a new life divine;
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine,
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.

Moment by moment I'm kept in His love;
Moment by moment I've life from above;
Looking to Jesus till glory doth shine;
Moment by moment, O Lord, I am Thine.

2. Never a trial that He is not there,
Never a burden that He doth not bear,
Never a sorrow that He doth not share,
Moment by moment, I'm under His care.

3. Never a heartache, and never a groan,
Never a teardrop, and never a moan;
Never a danger but there on the throne,
Moment by moment He thinks of His own.

4. Never a weakness that He doth not feel,

Never a sickness that He cannot heal;
Moment by moment, in woe or in weal,
Jesus my Savior abides with me still.

¹ Thomas Constable, *Notes on Numbers* (2023 edition), 113.

² Charles R. Swindoll, *Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 312.

³ Peter Goeman, “OT Law and the Christian – Pt 1” from The Bible Sojourner podcast. August 2, 2019.

⁴ Peter Goeman, “OT Law and the Christian – Pt 2” from The Bible Sojourner podcast. August 9, 2019.