

Lack of Trust  
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Numbers 20:2-13

“Flying off the handle.” We know what it means but do you know where the expression comes from? Is anger a sin?

One of the most appealing things about studying God’s word is that it reveals God’s servants in all their humanness. That includes Moses. Numbers 12:3 tells us, “...Moses was very *humble—more humble than any other person on earth.*” Four verses later in 12:7 God said of Moses, “*Of all my house, he is the one I trust.*” In God’s eyes Moses was humble and trust-worthy, yet it appears he had a problem with anger management.

Exodus chapter two tells us Moses murdered an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew. That act of rage sent him into forty years on the back side of the desert. Exodus 32 tells of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments to find the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. In his anger, he smashed the stone tablets, destroyed the calf, scattered its powder in water, and made the people drink it. Uncontrolled anger! That brings us to today’s text. After forty years of wandering because of the people’s lack of trust in God, now it was Moses whose anger and unbelief led to disobedience and consequences.

The point: Human emotions are not inherently sinful, but uncontrolled emotions can become sin when they lead to distrusting and disobeying God. The good news for Christ-followers: His Holy Spirit living in us can help us avoid that if we will let Him.

**Numbers 20:1–13 (NLT)** — **1** In the first month of the year, the whole community of Israel arrived in the wilderness of Zin and camped at Kadesh. While they were there, Miriam died and was buried. **2** There was no water for the people to drink at that place, so they rebelled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The people blamed Moses and said, “If only we had died in the Lord’s presence with our brothers! **4** Why have you brought the congregation of the Lord’s people into this wilderness to die, along with all our livestock? **5** Why did you make us leave Egypt and bring us here to this terrible place? This land has no grain, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, and no water to drink!” **6** Moses and Aaron turned away from the people and went to the entrance of the Tabernacle, where they fell face down on the ground. Then the glorious presence of the Lord appeared to them, **7** and the Lord said to Moses, **8** “You and Aaron must take the staff and assemble the entire community. As the people watch, speak to the rock over there, and it will pour out its water. You will provide enough water from the rock to satisfy the whole community and their livestock.” **9** So Moses did as he was told. He took the staff from the place where it was kept before the Lord. **10** Then he and Aaron summoned the people to come and gather at the rock. “Listen, you rebels!” he shouted. “Must we bring you water from this rock?” **11** Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the staff, and water gushed out. So the entire community and their

livestock drank their fill. **12** But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!” **13** This place was known as the waters of Meribah (which means “arguing”) because there the people of Israel argued with the Lord, and there he demonstrated his holiness among them.

- Their complaining was a familiar “tune” and the umpteenth verse was same as the first: *“Moses, why did you haul us out here into this wilderness to die? Why did you take us out of Egypt and drag us into this miserable country? No grain, no figs, no grapevines, no pomegranates—and now not even any water!”*
- It’s easy to see how Moses could get frustrated and angry, but leaders are held to a higher standard, so their complaining was no excuse for his behavior.
- Verse eight: God gave Moses and Aaron very specific instructions.
- When assembling or using something, do you follow the instructions or wing it?
- Why do you think people resist following instructions?
- *“I don’t understand why the chair collapsed; I used MOST of the bolts.”*
- Most of God’s instructions in scripture are clear. We must follow them completely.
- Verse nine: *“Moses did as he was told...”* He was obedient, until he wasn’t.
- *“Officer, I drove the speed limit for the first two hours can I get credit for that?”*
- Truth: Partial obedience is not obedience at all; it is disobedience.
- After decades of doing exactly what God commanded, Moses DIDN’T. Why?
- God called it out in verse twelve. Moses and Aaron, *“...you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel.”*
- Truth: Distrust is the foundation of disobedience.
- Disobedience is the outward result of an inward suspicion that God does not know best; that we think we know better than our all-knowing Creator.
- Moses didn’t trust God’s instructions, he wanted to help God with His miracle.
- He also wanted to help God in dealing with these irritating grumblers by yelling at them and pitching a rock bashing temper tantrum: *“Listen, you rebels!” he shouted. “Must we bring you water from this rock?”* WHAM! WHAM! (“We?”)
- Question: How did what he shouted in anger lead to borderline blasphemy?
- Warren Wiersbe: *“The main reason... God judged Moses and kept him out of the Promised Land was this: he exalted himself and failed to glorify God.”*<sup>i</sup>
- In verse 12 God basically said, *“You didn’t trust me, you disobeyed me, you took credit for my miracle, so ‘you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!’”*
- For centuries people have read this asking, *“Did the punishment fit the crime?”*
- Why would God be so hard on Moses for this outburst? Thoughts?
- One might say, *“After all the decades of being faithful to God why was the punishment so harsh?”* Let’s state it another way, *“After all the decades of direct contact with God and seeing God’s power, provision, and justice, why would Moses not trust Him, not follow His command, and take credit for the miracle?”*
- Leaders are held to a higher standard. Moses should have known better.
- There is another issue we can speculate about. Though scripture doesn’t specifically say this, God’s punishment may have not only been about Moses’ disobedience, it could have been because it was time for a new leader: Joshua.

- Moses had been God’s leader for bringing the slaves out of Egypt but a different kind of leadership would be required in the Promised Land.
- I think of Winston Churchill. He was celebrated as the great wartime leader of Great Britain during World War II. The war in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, and Churchill was voted out as Prime Minister two months later in July. The voters saw him as a war leader, and they wanted a change of leadership in peacetime.
- Moses begged God, to let him go into the promised land *“But the Lord was angry” and said, ‘That’s enough!’ Speak of it no more (Deut. 3:26).”*
- God let Moses climb a mountain and look at the land but not go in. Moses didn’t lose his relationship with God, but missed the blessing of the Promised Land.
- If we’ve trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, sin will not cost us eternity with Him but sin CAN cost us blessings in this life.
- Though Moses didn’t “finish well” let’s not forget how God used him so uniquely.

#### So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Was Moses’ failure due to pride, arrogance, or pure burnout and frustration? What we know for sure is that Moses allowed his emotions to push him into failure to trust God, failure to obey God, and foolishly taking credit for God’s work.
- As sad as Moses’ poor ending is, in a sense it should be an encouragement to us that even God’s greatest servants struggled with human frailty like all of us.
- Moses failed due to partial obedience. Partial obedience is not obedience at all; it is disobedience. None of us wants to one day say to God, *“I sort of obeyed.”*
- Moses’ disobedience came from failure to trust God (despite all he had seen God do.) Disobedience is the outward result of an inward suspicion that God does not know best; that we think we know better than our all-knowing Creator.
- Moses failed to control his emotions. We need to control ours.
- Again, Christ-followers have His Holy Spirit to help us control our emotions.
- We said last week, struggling to trust God in tough times is not a sin, it’s an emotion. Uncontrolled emotions become sinful when they lead to distrusting and disobeying God. The Holy Spirit will help Christ-followers trust if we will let Him.
- Like the father in Mark 9:24 we can cry out to God, *“I do believe, but help me overcome my unbelief!”*
- Finally, Moses ended poorly because he became confused about who he was and Who God IS. We dare not look at God’s hand at work and even think that “we” had anything to do with it. God will not share His glory! (Isaiah 42:8)
- If Moses could fail so can we. That should motivate us to ask God for His help to live out what the old hymn says, *“Trust and Obey...there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”*

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<sup>i</sup> Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Nu 20:1–13). Victor Books.