

God Requires
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Numbers 20:1-13

Do you ever read an account from scripture where a Bible character messes up, gets punished by God, and in your mind (while still having a heart of reverence for God,) you say, *“Lord, I know you are a Holy God with the sovereign right to carry out justice but isn’t that punishment a bit harsh?”*

The first example that comes to mind for me is Uzzah. You might say Uz-who? Who was that? In 1 Chronicles 13 King David is orchestrating the return of the Ark of the Covenant to where it belonged and they are moving it with an ox cart. Two brothers, Uzzah and Ahio were driving the cart. David and the Israelites are singing, dancing, and praising God and then oxen stumbled, the ark shifted, and Uzzah did the natural, common sense thing, he grabbed the ark to steady it.

“¹⁰ And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and he struck him down because he put out his hand to the ark, and he died there before God.”

“Lord, doesn’t that punishment seem harsh? He was trying to keep the ark out of the mud.” God had given specific instructions never to touch the ark, “lest they die” (Numbers 4:15.) King David never should have been using amateur movers (literally two men and an ox cart) to transport the ark. David the leader disobeyed God’s specific instructions and Uzzah paid the price. Numbers 20:1-13 is about a different leader, Moses, and the high price he paid for disobeying God.

The Big Idea: Disobedience to God’s clear instructions brings painful consequences. This especially applies to God’s leaders. Following God means following Him fully.

Numbers 20:1–13 (ESV)

20 And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there. ² Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. ³ And the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! ⁴ Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? ⁵ And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.” ⁶ Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them, ⁷ and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ⁸ “Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle.” ⁹ And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him. ¹⁰ Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” ¹¹ And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. ¹² And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” ¹³ These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy.

- The Israelites had complained many times before. In fact, this wasn't the first time they grumbled about no water (Ex.17:1-7.)
- Moses had been dealing with grumbling Israelites for almost forty years. Perhaps his patience was wearing thin.
- It's easy for us to shake our heads saying, “those whining Israelites,” but in fairness this was a real crisis. Yes, they should have recalled all the times God had provided and simply trusted Him, but how many times have we been “in their sandals?” We know God HAS provided in the past but in the moment we freak out that this time He might not.

- Look at Moses and Aaron's response, what they did right and wrong.
- Verse six: **How did Moses and Aaron get it right? What did God tell Moses to do with his staff or rod? Bonus question: How was this different than the water crisis in Exodus 17?**
- Wouldn't it have been easy for Moses to think: *"This is like that time back in chapter seventeen! I don't need to bother God, I know what to do – hit that rock!"* Ever been there? Have you ever thought, *"I don't need to ask God for guidance because I've seen this movie before!"* To Moses' credit he didn't just rush ahead, he did come to God. But, he still messed up!
- **Verse eight: What were God's specific instructions? Verse nine: What do the last few words of verse nine say?** So far, so good!
- **Verse ten: What is the first indication that Moses is deviating from God's instructions? Why were Moses' angry words disobedience? Did Moses have a "besetting sin" of an anger problem (ie. He killed an Egyptian, broke the tablets, etc.) How was the use of the word "we" a sure sign of disobedience?**
- Verse eleven: You might say this is the "crowning blow" (play on words) of Moses' disobedience. He takes his staff and strikes the rock twice.
- First, the good news: "abundant water gushed out and community and their livestock drank." And they all lived happily ever after, right?
- Let's look at the rest of Moses' disobedience to God's instructions.
- Was striking the rock just anger and frustration? Perhaps, but there is no indication he was out of control. We might speculate that Moses got confused because of that other time with a rock and water. That's not likely because God's instructions were very specific.
- Verse twelve: **Straight from the mouth of God to Moses what was Moses' real disobedience? What was God's punishment?**
- Moses didn't trust God and chose to "enhance" God's plan with a couple his own "touches." *"I'll chew those rebels out!" "I'll HIT*

that rock.” “Aaron and I know how to get water from a rock, we’ve been here before!”

- God didn’t need or want Moses’ help, just his trust and obedience.
- Truth: God doesn’t need or want our help, just our trust and obedience.
- Moses was not only guilty of lack of trust in God’s plan; he actually disobeyed in a bigger way. He failed to uphold God “*as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel.*”⁴ What does that mean?

Wiersbe writes, *“The main reason... God judged Moses and kept him out of the Promised Land was this: he exalted himself and failed to glorify God. In calling the people “rebels” and in saying, “Must we [Aaron and I] fetch you water out of this rock?” (v. 10) Moses was not giving God the glory due His Name. It was an evidence of pride and unbelief (v. 12). Moses’ strongest point was his meekness (12:3), yet this was where he failed... Unless we glorify God in all that we do, God will deal with us and we will miss the blessing He has planned for us.”*ⁱⁱ

- Leaders must be held to a higher standard and God’s leaders dare not try to steal God’s glory by taking credit for what God has done.
- God didn’t destroy Moses (death or loss of Heaven) but He did remove the reward of leading the people into the Promised Land after forty hard years.
- When God’s leaders don’t follow God’s instructions and then take credit for God’s work, He just may remove His hand of blessing on their ministry.
- Moses appealed the verdict asking God to reconsider (Deut. 3:23) but God said no. He did let Moses climb Mount Pisgah and look into the land.
- **Was God too harsh with this punishment? Why would it have been wrong for God to overlook Moses’ disobedience because Moses was basically a good guy and his behavior doesn’t seem that extreme?**

Author and pastor Trevin Wax says he used to be bothered by God’s punishment of Moses, and then he was “bothered that he was

bothered.” As he studied the text closer he realized that Moses wasn’t lashing out at the people, he was actually lashing out “at God.” He writes, *“All our sins come down to this: we don’t trust that God is for us. We don’t depend on him as our rock. We stand in judgment over others. We get frustrated and impatient. We resent God’s grace toward others. We think that God doesn’t love us or want the best for us. Trace the sin of disobedience backward and you’ll arrive at the sin of faithlessness.*

But even here—even though Moses was sinful, and the people were undeserving—God still gave them water. And he still allowed Moses the chance to look out over the Promised Land before he died. Even in judgment, God shows mercy.”ⁱⁱⁱ

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- I used to feel sorry for Moses (I still feel kind of bad for Uzzah about the ark) but I’m over it. When I read verse twelve of this chapter it’s obvious that God had no other choice than to hold Moses accountable.
- For one thing, Moses was the leader and model for the people. As we said leaders are held to a higher standard.
- Though Moses was the meekest man around (Numbers 12:3) he let his frustration and exhaustion with his circumstances turn into a lack of trust, a failure to obey God, and the pride of taking credit for God’s work.
- If that could happen to God’s man Moses, this is a warning for us.
- We can’t really say we follow the commands of scripture unless we strive to follow them fully. It’s wrong to pray for God’s guidance then refuse to follow it or add a few extra “touches” of our own.
- God doesn’t need or want our help, just our trust and obedience.
- What if we mess up or hear God wrong? Moses wasn’t punished for misunderstanding; he was punished for disobeying what he DID understand. More importantly, Moses didn’t lose his salvation but he did miss out on a very big blessing. If we’ve trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord our salvation is secure, but willful disobedience will lead to heartbreak and a loss of blessings in this life and rewards in Heaven.

- When the crisis comes (and they always do) the question is whether we will fall on our face before our Heavenly Father and obey His guidance or do it our way and try to take the credit?

ⁱ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Nu 20:12). Wheaton, IL:

ⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Nu 20:1–13). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/bother-god-barred-moses-promised-land/>