

## FAILURES AND FAITHFULNESS: MOSES

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It's hard not to feel bad for Moses in this story. For years, everything he's done has been focused on the task of bringing the people of Israel out of slavery and into the promised land. Years ago, at the burning bush, the Lord called him to this work, and while he was reluctant at first, he eventually yielded to the Lord's will. And once he yielded, he was all in. He did hard things. Again and again, he confronted Pharaoh saying 'let my people go!' He steered through the ten plagues enduring Pharaoh's anger and threats. On that terrible night when the angel of death visited all the firstborn of the land, he got everyone in Israel to paint the doorframes of their homes so the angel would pass them by. He led the people out of Egypt and guided them through the Red Sea. He went before the presence of God on Mount Sinai for the people and brought back the tablets of the law. He built the tabernacle according to God's specifications and taught the people to observe the feasts and fasts and festivals. He got them up morning after morning to follow the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire through the desert, enduring all their complaints and rebellion along the way. "Why don't we have bread!? Why don't we have water?! Who made you the boss of us anyway!?" Through all this heat and the dust and conflict, Moses' eyes, his heart, his mind have been focused on the promised land, getting to the promised land, getting to those green pastures where he can lie down and see all his hard work come to fruition.

This man has worked so hard to build something, and in this story, in one impulsive moment, in one moment of zeal, in one moment of anger he fails and he loses the hope of ever tasting the milk and honey of the promised land.

Which is how failure is sometimes, right? That's exactly what failure looks like. You spend a whole life building a business, and you make one bad decision and the business crashes. You spend your whole life raising your child and loving them, but then in one moment of frustration and anger you say something to them that wounds them and your relationship is never the same. How long does it take to build a relationship, a friendship, how long does it take to establish trust? Years and years and years. How long does it take to break these things? It takes an instant. You can bring the whole thing down with the bite of an apple or with a couple of whacks of a rock.

We know this. We know how quickly and easily the peace of life can be shattered. We know from hearing stories like the one we just read. We know it from seeing the similar things happen in the lives of people around us.

It's easy to see how Moses' failure is a tragedy. What's harder to see is exactly why he failed. The surface of the failure is pretty easy to see: Moses failed because he didn't do what God told him to do: God told him to speak to the rock, but he struck the rock instead. He disobeyed.

While it's important to see that surface disobedience, if we really want to let this story help us, we have to go under the surface and ask the question; why did Moses disobey? It's what's in your heart that leads to your sins says Jesus (Matthew 12:34). When Moses disobeys is it just a simple mistake, or is there something darker in his heart that leads to this failure? Because, let's be honest, it's not immediately obvious why hitting the rock as opposed to speaking to it should occasion such a severe punishment from God. On the surface who cares whether you hit or speak? It doesn't seem like a big deal, unless, just below the surface there are more serious things going on.

And I think there are. Two things to be precise and I would like to look at both of them. I admit that the inner motivations, the heart of Moses' failure is not immediately obvious in the passage, but if we look carefully, I think there are clues to what's going on.

Notice how Moses describes the miracle he's about to perform. Who does he give credit to? "Listen, you rebels!" he growls, "must we bring you water out of this rock!" Notice the pronoun there. Must WE bring water out of this rock? Who's bringing the water. Who gets the credit for the miracle? Moses and Aaron.

That 'we' may be a tiny two-letter pronoun, but in using it Moses is subtly bringing glory to his name instead of to God's. Moses has developed a look at me attitude. It's as if he's saying, "hey you rebels! do I have to save you again!? You're lucky I'm around to bail you out! Hey you rebels! Where does your help come from? Your help is in the name of Moses and Aaron who brought you out of the land of Egypt out of the house of bondage." And it's not just the pronoun change that puts himself at the center, it's the way he makes a

production out of the miracle. God said, talk to the rock. Simple and straightforward. Moses turns it into a moment of theater. The rebuke of the people, the raising of the arms, the dramatic striking of the rock. All this brings attention to himself. All this suggests a look at me attitude. Something has shifted in his heart.

Why the shift? It's hard to know for sure. It could be because Moses has been working so hard for so long that he's starting to think that it's his skill and effort that's making this happen. Any of us who've been working really hard at something for a long time are prone to this shift. Maybe you're a business person who's spent a lifetime building up a successful business. Maybe you are a minister whose spent years working hard to lead your church. Maybe you're a parent who's worked really hard to raise your children to be godly and productive, or maybe you're just a diligent human who's worked really hard at being disciplined and decent person. It's really easy to make a subtle shift in your mind, from gratitude and thanksgiving, to self-congratulations and pride. One minute Moses' hard work is an offering of gratitude and obedience; the next moment he's thumping his chest. It's a short trip from thank you Lord to look at me! But the difference between those two mindsets is night and day.

When things are going well, the look at me mindset can make you feel like a hero. It can put a little bounce in your step. But when you fail, and you will, that look at me mindset can become an unbearable burden. Look at me isn't the voice of pride any more, it's the voice of despair and shame. Now you can't have anyone bear to look at you at all because your failure is such a humiliation. When things are going well, 'look at me' feels pretty great, but over time 'Look at me' will become an unbearable burden, it will crush your spirit.

Here is the truth: if your children are healthy and successful, that's not first of all about you. That's a gift of God. If your business is successful and growing, that's not about you; that's a gift of God. If you have a great reputation with lots of friends, that's not first of all about you. That's a gift of God.

So Moses fails. He falls from magnifying God's name to look at me. His heart is a mess of pride and anger when he strikes the rock. He's in a bad Spiritual place.

And yet, the water flows. Moses fails badly, and yet the water flows. Moses is full of anger and self-pity and yet the water flows. If this isn't a picture of God's faithfulness in our lives, I don't know what is.

The truth is no one in Israel looks particularly good at this moment. Moses is angry and self-centered. The people are grumbling. No one is standing up and saying, don't be afraid we will make it to the promised land. There's not much faith, and yet the water flows. We fail. God is faithful. And the way God is faithful here reminds me of a couple of things.

The first is something about leaders. The people who lead us in our life, teachers, pastors, parents, are broken vessels of God's grace. They will fail. When they fail they should be held accountable for that failure. But because this is about God's power and not ours, their failure cannot stop the water of life from flowing. Ravi Zacharias was a really popular Christian speaker and apologist. It turns out he committed sexual sin, abusive sexual sin, with multiple women. That sin must have a full reckoning, but even that sin can't stop God's water from flowing. If you felt the Spirit move you after a Ravi Zacharias talk when you were in college. If something he said in a YouTube video helped you hold onto your faith, you don't have to doubt the goodness of that water you received, because God is the one bringing the water and he can work with broken leaders. If you grew up in a dysfunctional church led by dysfunctional people, but that church was still the place where you first heard the stories of Jesus and first felt the stirrings of his love, that doesn't mean you need to doubt the truth of those stories or the testimony of those feelings, Because God is the one bringing the water and he can work with broken leaders. Or maybe a parent who hurt you or let you down in some way was also the one who first taught you about Jesus and first prayed with you. You don't need to question the purity of the water because God is the one bringing the water and he doesn't bring it from the person; he brings it from the rock. The water is from the rock.

If you were making a character list of the people in this story you would think that the characters are Moses, Aaron, the people and the Lord. But that's one character short. You would have forgotten the rock. The rock?! How can it be a character? Well, ask the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians Paul says this: "The people who went through the desert all ate the same spiritual food and they all drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." Chapter 10:4. You can look it up.

It sounds strange but Paul is building on a Jewish tradition which said that in addition to being with the Israelites in the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, God was present to the Israelites in the rock. God was in the rock providing the water of life. Paul takes that belief a little further and says, that rock is Jesus. Jesus was in that rock.

It makes sense when you think about it, because what happens to the rock is what happened to Jesus. Jesus came to this earth as living water for the thirsty people. “Believe in me and I will give you living water to drink,” he said. But the people didn’t believe, and they rejected the rock, they denied him, they betrayed him, they beat him, they struck the rock. And yet, even though that rock was rejected and stricken, He poured forth living water for the very people who had despised and rejected him. When Moses, full of anger and disobedience, struck the rock in the desert he pointed to the humiliation and crucifixion of Christ in a way he could not possibly have foreseen.

At the beginning of this sermon we talked about how Moses failure is an example of how it only takes one moment of passion or anger to destroy a lifetimes worth of faithful work. It makes us anxious to think of that. But now I must add to that statement: Our life is not built on a lifetime of faithful work. Our life is not built on the quicksand of your failures; our life is built on the rock. The rock of ages, who has been cleft for us so that his faithfulness will overcome our failure.

So one of the heart issues underneath Moses’ disobedience is his pride, his look at me mindset. The other issue might be his anger. Moses is clearly angry at these people. “Listen you rebels!” He lets them have it! Those ungrateful whiners! He’s sick of their complaining. He’s sick of their attitude. You get the distinct impression that when he whacks the rock with the staff, he’s acting out what he’d like to do to the people. He’d like to give them a whack or two!

But is his anger with them really justified? Often the grumbling of Israel is snarky and small. Often their grumbling is unjustified, but here their need is real. They are in the middle of a desert and they have no water! If we were in that position, we would be throwing up desperate prayers too. We’d be going to our leaders saying, “What are we supposed to do.”

Is God annoyed with them for crying out? No. I would say it’s a response of compassion. He hears their cries and responds with mercy. “Moses, my people need water, so go to the rock and speak to it.” It seems like God answers the people out of compassion, out of love.

Is that where Moses is coming from? No Moses speaks out of frustration. His words to the people, “you rebels” suggests a bitterness that is hardening into contempt. So God speaks out of compassion. Moses speaks out of bitterness.

If that’s what’s happening here, if Moses has bitterness and contempt in his heart, that’s a serious matter. Because when a leader loses love for the people he or she is leading, it’s not going to work. It is a terrible thing when a pastor loses their love for a congregation, when a teacher loses her love for her students, when a business owner or manager loses affection for her employees, when a citizen loses her love for his fellow citizens, when church members lose their love for their fellow church members. This turn towards bitterness and contempt may seem like a small thing but it strikes at the heart of the Spirit God wants among his people. Love of God and love of neighbor.

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