

Fighting the Battle of Anger
Numbers 20:2-13
February 8, 2015

Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!" Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. The Lord said to Moses, "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as he commanded him. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them.

In today's Old Testament reading, we learn why Moses never entered the Promised Land. If I asked you why Moses didn't make it into the Promised Land, you might say, "Because he struck the rock instead of just speaking to it." That's the answer you hear most often, but that's not the right answer. The reason Moses was barred from the Promised Land is that he lost his temper. He let his anger get the best of him. Today we are going to look at how a Christian controls his or her anger.

Before we begin, we must distinguish between the two types of anger. The first type is righteous anger. Righteous anger doesn't mean we have a reason to be angry. We always have a reason for being angry, however, usually the reason isn't a good one.

Righteous anger is anger over some valid injustice. Righteous anger is anger over something that would anger God. Abortion, people dying of starvation while others are fat and happy, children being taught that evolution is how we came to be, the promotion of homosexual values, these are valid reasons for righteous anger. But, righteous anger is not our concern.

Today we are going to look at unrighteous anger, destructive anger, human anger. Anger that stems from our feeling offended, or slighted, or wronged – anger that can be and must be controlled.

Anger by itself is not a bad emotion. Anger is our emotional alarm system that tells us we are feeling hostility. But, when anger takes control, we can do some pretty nasty and terrible things. Christians are not exempt from occasional outbursts of temper. But it's

not right. Since we can slip up, we are going to look at the story of Moses to find some powerful lessons on how to control our anger.

Anger is as contagious as the common cold. Proverbs tells us: *An angry man stirs up dissension* (Prov 29:22 NIV). The text says that the community of Israel was angry and assembled to confront Moses and Aaron. The people had been feeding off of each others anger and frustration until they reached a boiling point. They came to blame Moses and Aaron for the lack of the things they felt they deserved.

If you are an anger-prone person, you know that being confronted like this is a ripe opportunity for an all-out shouting match. When angry people come head to head with anger-prone people, things tend to escalate.

Put yourself in Moses' shoes. What would you do? If you don't restrain your own anger, you will be pulled in by other people's emotions. Scripture tells us: *Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires* (James 1:19-20 NIV).

That's good advice. That's just what Moses did. Remember, Moses had enough of a temper that he killed an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite. However, instead of responding in anger, Moses listened patiently to the people. He didn't answer their accusations. He didn't try to defend his actions. He was probably boiling inside, but he restrained himself.

Instead of letting the crowd goad him into a free-for-all, Moses chose the high ground and the more difficult response. Our reading says: *Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them* (Num 20:6 NIV).

Moses took a good tongue lashing from the people, he felt their anger and resentment, then he took the most logical choice of action – he took the problem to God. Moses could have met their anger with his own, but that wouldn't have solved the problem. In fact, that kind of response always makes matters worse.

When people are angry at us and criticize us, the only sensible thing to do is to retreat to the presence of the Lord – get away from the source of agitation – take some time to settle down and cool off. Paul told young Timothy: *I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing* (1 Tim 2:8 NIV).

It was in prayer, in seeking the present of the Lord, that Moses received the answer he needed in order to deal with the people. God will always answer the prayer of one of his children, who is crying out for help. If you chose the route that Moses took, God will provide the answer you need.

However, you must be attentive to what God has to say. Your answer may come from Scripture. It may come from a friend or acquaintance. It may come from that still, small voice in your soul. But, God will supply the answer.

Up to this point in the story, Moses was doing everything right. He didn't respond in anger and he took his problem to the Lord. Now comes the part where Moses was supposed to do what God told him to do. Moses took his staff – that was good. He assembled the people – that was good, too. However, from that point, things began to break down.

God told Moses to speak to the rock – but Moses spoke to the people. What Moses said to the people only increased his sin: *Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?* (Num 20:10 NIV). Moses actually insinuates that he and Aaron would be responsible for making water come from the rock.

Moses complicates his sin in verse 11: *Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff* (Num 20:11 NIV). No where in God's instructions was there anything about striking the rock. That was the way God brought water from a rock once before, but that was not what God wanted this time.

Moses obeyed God's commands only so far as it suited him. Instead of sticking to God's plan, Moses tried to mix what God wanted done and what he wanted to do. There is no room in God's plan for our partial obedience. Partial obedience is a sin and it's dangerous.

Moses struck the rock because his temper got the better of him. He let his anger supersede God's command. He sinned. Moses made the mistake Paul warns against in his letter to the Ephesians: *In your anger do not sin* (Eph 4:26 NIV). Our unrighteous anger will always conflict with following God's commands.

It's important for us to realize that our unrighteous angry behavior is always harmful. We might try to convince ourselves that our angry behavior is no big deal, but God disagrees. There are always consequences to our unrighteous anger. Proverbs says: *A hot-tempered man must pay the penalty* (Prov 19:19 NIV).

Moses and Aaron learned the hard way that God never makes an empty threat. God tells them: *Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them* (Num 20:12 NIV). In short, Moses didn't trust God to bring water out of the rock with only a word, so Moses did things his own way.

Some might argue that God was being a bit picky, but God sees anything less than full obedience to be rebellion. If we move forward to verse 24 we hear God tell Moses: *Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites, because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah* (Num 20:24 NIV).

As Christians, how we handle our anger affects non-believers' opinion of our God. People will form opinions about God based on how we behave when we are angry. We must be very careful how we conduct ourselves because others are watching.

Perhaps some of you are currently engaged in a battle to contain your anger. Maybe some of you are dealing with people who are angry with you. If you are at a crossroads and you aren't sure what to do, do what Moses did before he sinned. Take yourself away from the hostile environment and take yourself into the presence of the Lord. Take your case to the Lord in prayer.

Then, wait patiently for the Lord's answer. Search Scripture. Pray. Remain open to what God has to say to you.

When you feel God's answer to your situation, don't do what Moses did. Don't accept part of God's answer and reject the rest. Don't try to mix your ideas with God's foolproof plan.

If we trust God completely, if we allow his Holy Spirit to be the ruling force in our lives, we can take control of our anger. We will be able to conduct ourselves in such a way as to gain the attention and respect of the unbelieving world. And, that is the kind of witness God that wants from his people.