

Anger Unchecked

My dear brothers, take note of this: 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)

Moses controlled his anger most of the time. But on a few occasions, he gave leash to his anger resulting in disastrous consequences. If Moses had had the benefit of James' words, maybe things would have gone differently. Our lesson will focus on the antithesis of James' words. Moses wasn't always slow to speak and slow to anger, but when he did lose his temper, the ramifications were severe. Anger was his weakest character trait, one the enemy of God would turn against him.

Murderous rage

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. ¹² Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. Exodus 2:11-12

Imagine the fury within Moses that would drive him to commit this act of murder. He was consumed by rage and anger at the treatment of the Israelites at the hand of the Egyptians. His actions prove that his anger went beyond righteous indignation. Righteous indignation or anger can propel us to act in justice, but never in a way contrary to the will of God. When we cross the will of God, our anger is completely our own and has nothing to do with indignation on God's part.

Controlling anger has nothing to do with education. Moses possessed the greatest education available in his time. Acts 7:22 tells us that "*Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.*" All the education in the world does not prevent you from losing control of your anger.

The book of Acts continues with retelling this story: "*And on seeing one of them being unjustly treated, he defended the oppressed man and avenged him by striking down the Egyptian and slaying [him].*" (Acts 7:24, Amplified Bible) Moses' motive was vengeance. He took it upon himself to judge the situation and mete out judgment. He decided that the Egyptian should die for the way he was treating the Israelite. This has nothing to do with

God's judgment. At this point in Moses' life he doesn't even truly know the God of Israel, much less God's way of dealing with mankind. This is all Moses, and it is Moses out of control. We see in this first incident that Moses not only doesn't have control, he thinks *he* is the one in control, not God.

Unwarranted Rage

We catch another glimpse of Moses' fury in the scene where Moses confronts Pharaoh just before the 10th plague. Yahweh had warned Moses that he would harden Pharaoh's heart:

But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, ⁴ he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. Ex 7:3-4 (NIV)

Prior to almost every plague, up to the tenth plague God would warn Moses, that Pharaoh's heart would be hard. Moses should have expected Pharaoh to be obdurate every time, and Moses usually handled Pharaoh's obduracy accordingly. But for some reason, before the last plague, Moses loses his cool.



Exodus 11:1-8

Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh. (v.8)

Moses isn't just angry. The Hebrew word “*ap*” is one that carries a very descriptive meaning. Moses flies into a state of rage and fury. His face is “contorted with wrath”, his “nostrils flaring with rapid impassioned breathing”¹, his whole “countenance reflects fury”. A parallel use of the same Hebrew word ‘*ap*’, appears in Proverbs 14:17 with an even stronger emphasis: “*He who foams up quickly and flies into a passion will deal foolishly, and a man of wicked plots and plans is hated.*” (Amplified Bible, bolded emphasis mine.) “*Wicked plots*” can also be read “*evil devices*”; the accuracy of this translation is supported by the parallelism of the phrase “a man of evil devices.” Clearly ‘*ap*’ must mean something evil in God's sight.² The man who loses his temper is prone to wicked plots, for example, murdering an Egyptian overseer, as Moses did.

¹ —Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

² Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words

Clearly Moses has trouble managing his anger. Fortunately in this passage with Pharaoh, Moses walks away before he gives full rein to his wrath. But he can't walk away quietly upon giving Yahweh's message, he has to add one of his own: *"All these officials of yours will come to me, bowing down before me and saying, 'Go, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will leave." Then Moses, hot with anger, left Pharaoh.*"(NIV) Notice to whom the officials will bow down, not to Yahweh, but Moses.

Destructive Rage

When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. ²⁰ And he took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it. Ex 32:19-20

These tablets were the *"two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. They were inscribed on both sides, front and back. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets."* (v. 15-16). Moses carried the precious stone tablets of the Law carved by Yahweh's own hand, and in a moment of rage (again the Hebrew *'ap*) he threw them down and broke them at the foot of the mountain. In his *fury* he destroyed the golden idol – righteous anger, and even in a biblical method. But he also had the Israelites consume the evil their hands had created. Destroying the idol was one thing, but in anger and rage he punished Israel by making them drink the remaining ashes and gold dust of the idol. Yes, Yahweh used that punishment to further defile the materials used to glorify an idol, materials that were destined for his tabernacle. The materials used for the idol had been desecrated in that use and were no longer suitable for building Yahweh's sacred dwelling place. But Yahweh did not instruct Moses to do this. Yahweh also did not condone the breaking of the tablets in a fit of rage. Yahweh instructs Moses to prepare two more tablets and to bring them up to the Mountain where he will write the laws upon them again. Moses had to replace what he had destroyed. Yahweh's chosen leader still had not learned to control himself, and had not learned to submit his fury to God's control either.

Defiant rage

Our next passage takes place long after the incident with the tablets. Moses and the Israelites had been wandering the desert for nearly 40 years. They had been at the very threshold of the Promise Land and in their insubordination Yahweh denied them entrance and resigned them to wander the wilderness until that rebellious generation had died. (This story is recounted in Numbers 14.)

"Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. ³¹ As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy

the land you have rejected. ³² But you--your bodies will fall in this desert. ³³ Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert. ³⁴ For forty years--one year for each of the forty days you explored the land--you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you." Num 14:30-34 (NIV)

In those 40 years Moses has had to put up with the grumbling, whining, and occasionally the outright defiance of the Israelites he was leading, and even open rebellion of some of the Levites (See Numbers 16). This constant barrage of disrespect, insubordination, questioning of authority, and whining must have taken its toll against Moses' self-control and was likely bubbling below the surface.

Next we'll turn to Numbers Chapter 20. The first thing we read is that Miriam, Moses' sister has died. Moses is seeing members of his own family, his friends, and not to mention most of the original generation of Israelites who witnessed the Exodus die and be buried in the desert wilderness, just as Yahweh had proclaimed. But now it is time for Moses' own sister to be buried. This must have worn on Moses' nerves. Likely, his very last nerve, judging by subsequent events.



Numbers 20:1-13

While Moses was burying his sister, Israel was grumbling. There was no water to be had in the area. So what did Israel do? They rebelled against Moses and Aaron. Verse 2 tells us *"the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron."* And then they quarreled with Moses. They condemned him bitterly and harshly for leading them into the desert to die. Conveniently they had forgotten their own rebellion had caused them to wander the wasteland, not Moses. Moses is standing before the same enemy once again. The spirit of distrust, disobedience, grumbling, disunity, rebellion had entered the camp and riled Israel against him yet again. Not to make too many justifications for Moses, but the man was old! He was 80 when he left Egypt, it has been nearly 40 years wandering the desert with, what Yahweh himself calls "stiff-necked" people, who take every opportunity to pit themselves against Moses.

Let's look at the Hebrew words translated "stiff-necked". In Hebrew two words are brought together in an idiom, or descriptive term, that we translate as "stiff-necked". First we have *qāsheh*³, meaning "severely churlish, cruel, grievous, hard [-hearted], impudent, obstinate, rough (-ly), sore, sorrowful, stiff ([-necked]), stubborn." And then we have "*ōrep*"⁴, which means "back or neck". We have the visual picture of a person or people

³ Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary

⁴ Ibid

who are impudently and unbending, “having their back up”, and not yielding to the direction of their leader, much like a stubborn donkey. But these people are worse than a donkey which is an obstinate creature. These people are churlish, grievous, hard-hearted, and rebellious. They are ready to turn on Moses and to displace him. They want to remove him from his God-appointed position as their leader.

You can imagine Moses is tired, beyond annoyed, grieving, and here comes the same old enemy rising within. The enemy infiltrates the camp and pits the Israelites against him, and the enemy takes advantage and riles up Moses’ personal enemy, a spirit of rage.

Moses and Aaron go seek the presence and counsel of the Lord. And the Presence of the Lord meets with them. But you can imagine the Moses is only half listening while at the same time seething with anger. Then Yahweh tells Moses what to do. Take the staff, speak to the rock and water will come out. Simple instructions. But Moses doesn’t do what he’s told. He’s too filled with anger to be filled with obedience. He does not submit his anger to the will of the God.

*“So Moses took the staff from the LORD's presence, just as he commanded him.
10 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?"
11 Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.” (Numbers 20: 9-11)*

Not content with the way Yahweh is handling the situation, Moses has to add his two cents! In anger he addresses the assembly calling them rebels and telling them that they are again in a state of rebellion against God, but also against him. Then Moses says, “*must we bring you water out of this rock?*” (v.10) Who is taking credit for the water springing forth from the rock? Moses isn’t giving that credit to God; he is appropriating it for himself. In his anger and fury Moses supplants Yahweh’s authority. He takes it upon himself to verbally discipline the assembly. He further disobeys Yahweh’s command to speak to the rock, by striking it twice. The Hebrew word translated “strike” means “smite, slay, kill, beat, slaughter, wound, give stripes as with a whip, punish.”⁵ You can imagine the intensity of Moses’ fury by the way he lashes out at the rock with the Aaron’s staff. Yahweh, in his mercy despite Israel’s rebellion and Moses’ rage, still provides water. But that is not the end of the scene. Yahweh has a few words for Moses and Aaron:

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." (v. 12, NIV)

⁵ Ibid

Time and again Yahweh had tolerated Moses' outbursts of rage and fury. Through nearly 120 years Yahweh molded Moses into the man he had become. But this one area Moses would not let Yahweh deal with. Moses submitted to Yahweh in every other aspect of his life, but this was one area that he didn't give over to God to change and control. Had he, Yahweh would surely have transformed Moses' rage and fury into a usable righteous indignation. Moses never learned to submit his anger to the authority of Yahweh. Moses had to speak and act out his fury in his own way which was outright disobedience to Yahweh's will. This time Moses had gone too far. In his rage he put himself a head of Yahweh. He deemed Yahweh's actions not sufficient. Moses decided he could do things better. These stiff-necked people needed a lesson in self-control and obedience. Ironically, Moses is the one who will learn this lesson, but at an extremely dear price. He would not enter into the Promise Land, someone else would take his place. Moses' act of disobedience stemmed from unbelief. Not unbelief in the Presence or existence of Yahweh, but unbelief in Yahweh's right to sovereignty in that moment. Yahweh declared in Moses' disobedience and unbelief he failed to trust Yahweh *"enough to honor [him] as holy in the sight of the Israelites (v.12)."*

Moses' willful disobedience cast a shadow on the glory of God, and took glory for himself. Moses' actions would encourage the people to forget that Yahweh is holy, sovereign, that Israel subject to him and Yahweh is faithful to provide for his nation. In that moment of white-hot rage Moses revealed that he didn't believe Yahweh's way was sufficient, and he believed that his way was better. F.B. Meyer, in his commentary on Moses, wrote this of the twin sins of disobedience and unbelief:

It is a solemn question for all of us whether we are sufficiently accurate in our obedience. It is a repeated burden of those sad chapters of Hebrews, which tell the story of the wilderness wanderings – the cemetery chapters of the New Testament – that 'they [the Israelites] could not enter in because of unbelief.' But throughout the verses the margin suggests the alternative reading of 'disobedience'; they could not enter in because of 'disobedience', because you see, disobedience and unbelief are the two sides of the same coin – a coin of the devil's mint. They who disobey do not believe; and they who do not believe disobey⁶ (Brackets mine).

Moses, in that instant didn't believe Yahweh's sovereign wisdom sufficient, so he disobeyed. Yahweh had to deal strictly with Moses' sin because Moses was elevated to a

⁶ Meyer, F.B. Moses: The Servant of God, 1953, pg. 42.

Note: Charles Swindoll's Book, *Moses: A man of Selfless Dedication* was invaluable in forming this lesson.

unique position between God and man. Moses was the shepherd appointed by Yahweh to lead, protect, and teach his flock in all things. He was to be an example of righteousness before the people of Israel. But by his example Israel was learning that anger was an excuse for disobedience. It was time for some very tough discipline.

In Hebrews 3:18-19 we read: *"And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."* Moses would join the ranks of those who did not believe and therefore would not enter into the Promise Land.

Moses was repentant. Moses was forgiven. Moses maintained a close relationship with Yahweh up until the end of his life. Moses continued to lead the people of Israel through the wilderness right up until they were preparing to enter the Promise Land. But the consequences of his disobedience still remained. Yahweh permitted Moses to see the Promise Land. Moses saw that Yahweh would be faithful to accomplish what had been started in Egypt by delivering Israel to the Promise Land. Moses' successor would be Joshua, who had served him from his youth, and Moses took pleasure in Joshua's appointment. The Israelites would be well lead, defended and shepherded when Moses was gone. But Yahweh did not relent. Yahweh took Moses off by himself to see the Land just before Moses was gathered unto the Lord by Yahweh's own hand.

Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the LORD showed him the whole land--from Gilead to Dan, ² all of Naphtali, the territory of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, ³ the Negev and the whole region from the Valley of Jericho, the City of Palms, as far as Zoar. ⁴ Then the LORD said to him, "This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.' I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it."

⁵ And Moses the servant of the LORD died there in Moab, as the LORD had said. ⁶ He buried him in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no one knows where his grave is. ⁷ Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not weak nor his strength gone. (Deuteronomy 34:1-7)