

Two Strikes Too Many

Numbers 20

Introduction

We learn from psychologists that there are several stages of anger. The reason I think the psychologists are right is because I have experienced all of them.

The first stage of anger is irritation, which is otherwise defined as uneasiness.

The second stage is indignation, which involves an emotional reaction. Someone says something to you or darts in front of you and you react to that on the inside.

If stage two is not dealt with, the anger grows to the third stage, which is wrath. Wrath needs some method of expression; some type of verbalization. It is during this stage that we usually let people know we are angry, rather than at level one when we are simply irritated.

The final stage is fury, which is an act of revenge; a violent outburst. Fury is an expression that is so violent that the person is not even conscious of the act. This is the type of act that you read about in the newspapers. It is an act in which someone might defend themselves on the basis of temporary insanity. They were so emotional and so enraged during this act of violence that they were not even thinking about what they were doing.

It is interesting, as we have been studying the life of Moses, that Moses was a man given to all of the steps of anger. I appreciate that God, in His record of scripture, does not give just the good things about Moses, so we can admire this great man of faith, but also gives the acts of Moses that need forgiveness and allow us to see ourselves in him.

Patterns of an Angry Life

Past expressions of anger

Now let us take a brief survey of the life of Moses and his acts of fury, or emotional violence that vent themselves in many different ways.

Exodus 2:11-15

The first act of fury by Moses is in Exodus, chapter 2. Look at verses 11 and 12.

Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

You may have had the benefit of studying the first chapters of Exodus with us and know the violence that was taking place against the Israelites. They were being forced to labor with bitter labor.

Moses, when he was forty years of age, went out to view the labors of his brethren. He had already made the decision that he would follow them and abandon Egypt. A lot of emotion had built up inside this man, as he thought of departing Egypt and leaving with the Israelites.

He went out and saw exactly what was happening to the Israelites. He saw the beatings; the scourgings; the inhumanities leveled against his brethren. He became so angry that when he saw no one looking, he struck down an Egyptian and took his life, and then, buried him in a shallow, sandy grave. This was an act of violence; an act of rage.

Exodus 11:8

Now, turn to Exodus, chapter 11, verse 8, which is the next act of violence by Moses.

All these your servants will come down to me and bow themselves before me, saying, "Go out, you and all the people who follow you," and after that I will go out. . . .

Moses, in this passage, was telling Pharaoh to let his people go. This was just prior to the last plague.

You may remember that Pharaoh had gone back on his word time and time again. Moses was now going to him and he really should not have acted this way, but he did. Look at the last part of verse 8.

. . . *And he went out from Pharaoh in hot anger.*

This may seem a little inconsistent since Moses had already been told, as recorded in an earlier chapter, that Pharaoh would not listen. Pharaoh was going to keep the Israelite people until God showed His mighty hand. So Moses already knew Pharaoh was going to say, “No,” yet, Moses was evidently, very caught up in the moment.

I think if we could talk to Moses today and have even five minutes to listen to him, we would find him to be a very emotional man. I think he would be very “short fused,” like a keg of dynamite waiting to be lit and go off.

So Moses went out of Pharaoh’s presence, as the Bible says, “in righteous indignation” – no, it says,

. . . *in hot anger.*

Exodus 32:15-19

Turn to Exodus, chapter 32, as Moses came down from the mountain after having received the Law from God. Moses acted with fury in the situation that followed. Look at verses 15 through 18.

Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. The tablets were God’s work, and the writing was God’s writing engraved on the tablets. Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, “There is a sound of war in the camp.” But he said, “It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; but the sound of singing I hear.”

Moses was carrying the tablets that God wrote with His own finger, as it were, and he heard the people. You may remember that they were dancing before a golden calf that they had made. Look at verse 19 for Moses’ reaction.

It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses’ anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

Every time I read this, in different lights or different contexts, I always think, “Go get them, Moses. Smash those things.”

There are probably some spiritual applications in the fact that Moses smashed the Law when the people of Israel had broken the Law.

The only problem with this thinking is that God never commended Moses for breaking the Law. He never patted him on the back and said, “That’s right. I would have done the very same thing.”

There is, in fact, a subtle implication that it was wrong, when, in a later chapter, Moses was told to come back up the mountain and write the Law with his own hand. God said, “You come up here and I’ll dictate it to you. You write it out with your own hand.”

Perhaps that is an implication that Moses should never have allowed his anger to get so far out of control that he would smash the tablets at the foot of the mountain.

Present example of anger

Now we have been studying the book of Numbers and this brings us to a passage in that book today. We are going to look at an illustration of Moses’ continued biography of anger.

Numbers 20

The Israelites, in the beginning of Numbers, chapter 20, are up to their old antics – they are complaining once again. God performs miracles and they receive the miracles, and then, they complain. This time, they are out of water. These Israelites sound a lot like Americans, by the way. Look at verses 7 through 10a. Note that God tells Moses to “speak” to the rock.

and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.” So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, . . .”

So far, all is well. However, we are going to read a few verses in which Moses' anger reaches the final stage and he will disobey God.

In fact, I want to give several things about this that the Bible, in effect, will never commend. I used to think that God was rather cruel to Moses. I thought, "So he hit the rock – let him go into the promised land. He's been leading these grumbling people around for forty years."

Yet today, I hope to explain all that was involved, so you will understand why it was not tolerable in Moses' life and why it is not tolerable in ours.

Moses' anger is, in reality . . .

Let me give several things that, in reality, Moses' anger is.

An act of pride

1. First, Moses' act of anger is, in reality, an act of pride.

Look at what Moses says in verse 10b of Numbers, chapter 20. He is sort of preaching. Note the use of the word "we".

. . . Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?

Wait a second! Where is the focus of attention now? Is it on God, whose miraculous power will give the people water to drink? Absolutely not. Moses, in his *hot* anger, said, "Do I have to help you out again? Must I give you water to drink?"

Think about this for a moment. In this situation, who has become the supplier of water? Look at the verse again.

. . . Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?

This was an incredible statement of pride. In an act of anger, Moses forgot that he was simply a tool. Now *he* is the one who has the finger of power and *he* will bring forth water for the people. His anger is, in reality, great pride.

An act of rebellion

2. Secondly, Moses' anger is really an act of rebellion.

Look at verse 11. Notice what Moses does to the rock.

Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank.

In other words, Moses lines up, in his Mickey Mantle stage, and swings two times with the rod, striking it in his anger.

Moses is undoubtedly carried away; he is hot with anger. I have often wondered why God allowed water to come out of the rock. That seems to be justification for striking the rock. Yet, after studying the Israelites for over a year now, it is obvious to me that God, even though His leaders will fail, will still supply His people with what they need.

If I were preaching to a group of preachers right now, I would stop at this point and preach an entire sermon on this thought. I will not do that today, but let me mention one point for your benefit. When God's leaders, or those who are supposed to provide refreshing; such as, pastors and Bible teachers, violate their responsibility to serve God and, from His command, to serve the people, I believe He will still feed His people. He will find another way; He will find another person.

God loves His people and will act in grace, even when leaders act in pride. So the Israelites received water to drink.

An act of independence

3. Thirdly, Moses' anger is an act of independence.

This is crucial in understanding why God would not allow Moses into the promised land. Look at verse 12a.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me . . ."

Where did that come from?

"Because you have not believed Me . . ."

Moses, in acting independently of God's revelation, is acting in unbelief. The same is true of us anytime we act independently of God. If I know that God tells me to live a certain way or to do a certain thing or to speak in a certain manner and I rebel, I am acting independently of God and am, in effect, saying, "God, I do not believe Your way is best. I believe my way is best. So, I will strike the rock if I want to strike the rock. So, I will blow my

top if I want to blow my top. So, I will live this way if I wish to live this way.”

Do you see that acts of independence are literally, acts of unbelief that God’s way is best; that His revelation is best?

I think it is interesting that this chapter of Numbers begins and ends by telling us that Moses’ sister and brother died. Do you know how you and I act when we are angry and we get cornered? What is the first thing we do? We justify it. We say, “Well, if you only knew the situation. If you only knew the setting. If you only knew the circumstances and the way I was feeling. Blah, blah, blah . . .”

It is interesting that Moses is surrounded by grief and we would think, at that time, he would be justified to disbelieve God and act independently of Him. However, it is not justified, not even then.

An act of disrespect

4. Fourthly, Moses’ anger is an act of disrespect.

Look at verse 12. Do not miss this.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.”

Think of it in this way, when a politician in our country does something scandalous, what do the people think of the politician? Not much. What do the people think of this country? Less. Why? Because he represents you and me; he represents our country. When a preacher falls, people think poorly of him. Do you know what else they think? They think poorly of God.

God is, in effect, saying, “You represented Me before the people and because you acted in disbelief and independently of My revelation; because you acted on your own, in anger, My respect in front of the people has gone downhill. You did not treat Me with holiness before them.”

Ladies and gentlemen, the next time you are tempted to blow your top, remember you represent God. The person upon whom you vent your anger is not only going to think less of you, but if they know you are a believer, they are going to think less of God.

Principles Learned From an Angry Life

Let me tie this up with three principles of application.

Anger toward others reveals anger toward God

1. Number one, anger toward others reveals anger toward God.

I think this pulls the mask off our own anger. We are, in reality, angry that God dealt us this hand. We act in a manner of, “If you get in my way, you’re going to get five cents worth.”

The problem is our attitude toward God. In the situation, we think, “Why didn’t God take it away? Why didn’t He clear it up? Why did He bring it along in the first place?” Because of the person, we think, “Why do I have to work next to them? Why do they have to live next door?”

What are we, in reality, saying? Are we saying that the situation or the person is the problem? No, God brought them into our lives. We are, in effect, angry with God.

Anger before others diminishes God’s glory

2. Secondly, anger before others diminishes God’s glory. This is especially true of public anger because they know you represent God.

I, about a year ago, was in Atlanta with my family and mother-in-law. While there, I went down the street to a small golf course to play a few holes. Since I was by myself, I was grouped with two other fellows. I always enjoy this situation. I do not do a lot of talking because I am there to play, but if the Lord gives an opportunity to witness, I will take it. Typically, I will wait four or five holes to let the others reveal their own colors, so to speak.

So I was playing with these two guys and almost immediately, at the first tee, they were cussing and swapping stories. I was playing about ten feet back, while they were swapping stories all the way down that fairway. About the sixth hole, these two guys, who were good friends, looked at me and said, “Hey, what do you do for a living?”

I said, “I’m a minister.”

“Oh no!”

Both of the guys nearly fainted! One of them said, “Why didn’t you tell us that before we ever teed off the first?”

I just sort of grinned.

The bad thing about that situation was that for the rest of the game, every time I made a bad shot, which was often, they would look at me and watch me. I could not ram my golf stick back in the bag, kick the dirt, and think, “Oh my goodness, what a dumb shot.”

No, I had to act like this was wonderful! *Now* it was different; *now* they knew that I was a believer; *now* they knew I represented God. So *now* if I blew my top, do you know who would get the blame? God.

Minister or not, if you are a believer and people know that, if you lose your temper, guess who gets the blame? God.

Anger, though forgiven, can bear lasting consequences

3. Thirdly, anger, although forgiven, can bear lasting consequences.

This is the painful part because if you read through the scriptures on Moses’ life, you discover that he prayed three times, “God, please let me into the promised land.” Three times he prayed, “God, I’m sorry. Please let me into the promised land.”

God said, three times, “No.”

Now let me say this, although we will not go into it further today, your anger may be irretrievable. If you lose your temper with someone at work, you may never have enough credibility ever again to go back and share Christ with them. If your neighbors see you slam out of the house and yell at your spouse and kids, you can forget it – it has a lasting consequence. Remember, we represent Jesus Christ. If they cannot see a difference in us, the credibility of our testimony is absolutely worthless. When are they going to see the credibility? When everything is wonderful? No. They see it when we are in the scenario where the average person would blow their fuse. That is when our credibility goes sky high.

Imagine, like Moses, being handicapped by a temper. We need to view it that way. The first place we begin in solving a problem is to stop ignoring it and, for heaven’s sake, stop excusing it. Do not say, “It’s my Irish blood.” Do not say, “That’s just the way I’m made.”

I have news for you, the Spirit of God wants to remake you and remake me. We know that if we allow the Spirit of God to invade our lives, the fruit of that invasion is self-control, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness. May our lives be marked by grace, not anger; by self-control, not a short fuse.