

The Sin of Moses *and* Aaron



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Numbers 20; 21; John 3:14, 15; James 4:4–15.*

Memory Text: “Get thee up into the top of Pisgah, and lift up thine eyes westward, and northward, and southward, and eastward, and behold it with thine eyes: for thou shalt not go over this Jordan” (*Deuteronomy 3:27*).

After years of wandering in the wilderness, Israel finally reached Kadesh-Barnea, on the southern border of the Promised Land. After all that they had gone through, all the hard lessons the Lord had sought to teach them, all the powerful judgments issued upon those who openly rebelled, one would have thought that these people, once and for all, finally would have been ready for the Lord to use them to their fullest potential. As we know, that wasn't quite how it happened.

This week we'll study what is a perennial theme all through the Bible: the mercy and grace of God in contrast to the faithlessness, sin, and ingratitude of His people. From Adam and Eve in Eden to the Laodicean church today (*Rev. 3:14–18*), again and again we see God's mercy and grace in dealing with those who more often than not failed to claim the promises of victory, faith, and holiness that He offers. At the same time, we can see His willingness to forgive those who stumble and fall, even those who should have known better, such as the great Moses himself, who, in a moment of weakness and impatience, lost sight of the God who had done so much for him. Thus, if even Moses can fall, what about the rest of us?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 28.*

When Giants Fall

When the water ceased to flow at Israel's encampment at Kadesh-Barnea, a grand opportunity presented itself for Israel to look to God for help. He always had provided for them in the past, so why should it be any different now? However, they quickly forgot the past and turned on Moses and Aaron with their old complaints.

Read Numbers 20:1–13. What did the Lord command Moses to do, and what did he do instead? Why do you think that this meek, faithful, and devoted servant of God showed such an uncharacteristic lack of faith and trust?

On one level, it's easy to understand Moses' frustration. First, he just had buried his sister and no doubt was feeling pain over that. And then to hear these people utter, basically, the same complaint that their forefathers had made years ago? Nevertheless, in the Lord's eyes, none of this excused his behavior.

“The water gushed forth in abundance to satisfy the host. But a great wrong had been done. Moses had spoken from irritated feeling. . . . When he took it upon himself to accuse them, he grieved the Spirit of God and wrought only harm to the people. His lack of patience and self-control was evident. Thus the people were given occasion to question whether his past course had been under the direction of God, and to excuse their own sins. Moses, as well as they, had offended God. His course, they said, had from the first been open to criticism and censure. They had now found the pretext which they desired for rejecting all the reproofs that God had sent them through His servant.”
—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 417.

Even the most faithful and diligent servants of the Lord need to be careful. What makes this sin even worse was that it was done by someone who had been given great privileges. Think of all that Moses had seen of God's power; think of all the incredible revelations of the Lord that he had, again and again, witnessed. And yet, even with all that, he allowed self to rise up and dominate? What a warning this should be for the rest of us.

Think of a time when you felt pushed over the edge and did something rash and sinful. How often did you wish you could have turned back the clock and undone the damage? What lessons have you learned from this incident that, ideally, could help prevent you from doing the same thing again?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Deuteronomy 3:27*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Examine the ups and downs of Israel and of Moses and Aaron as they learn the importance of unflagging trust in God.

Feel: Recognize how dependent we are on God's grace moment by moment.

Do: Demonstrate trust in God, regardless of the circumstances we face.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: The Rewards of Faith and the Tragedy of Unbelief

A Both Moses and God had been angered over Israel's lack of faith. What was so different this time, when Moses struck the rock that God should punish both Moses and Aaron with death rather than allow them to lead Israel into the Promised Land? What was the significance of allowing the congregation to see the passing of the ceremonial priestly garments to Eleazar before Aaron died?

B Though poisonous serpents were allowed to attack Israel because of the people's unbelief, they were provided with hope. What was the significance of the serpent on the pole? How did Jesus make use of this metaphor?

II. Feel: Constancy in God, Our Only Hope

A How important is it for leadership to demonstrate faith and obedience?

B When you focus on the serpent on the pole, what do you see, and what difference does it make in how you relate to troubles in your life?

III. Do: Trust and Obey

There are times to do battle, and there are times not to do battle. How do we know the difference?

► **Summary:** Our progress toward the Promised Land rests on unflagging trust and obedience, possible only through dependence, moment by moment, on God's grace.

Death of Aaron

Read Numbers 20:23–29. What points seem pertinent here in the depiction of the death of Aaron? What lessons can we take away from this for ourselves and whatever work we are doing for the Lord?

Chapter 20 opened with the death of Miriam and ended with the death of Aaron. It's clear that the older generation was passing on, and the new one was to take up where they had left off. We see the same thing in our church today. One generation goes, and a new one arises to pick up the mantle. The crucial question remains: How much will the new generation learn from the mistakes, as well as the successes, of the older one?

Notice the difference in the accounts of the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. Her death was mentioned in just one short verse. It's almost as if her death came suddenly and unexpectedly. What a contrast to Aaron's, which is clearly foretold.

Before Aaron's death, Aaron, Moses, and Aaron's son, Eleazar, go to the top of Mount Hor, where in the sight of the congregation Moses takes off his brother's priestly garments and puts them on his nephew, Eleazar, a powerful symbol of the transference of the role of one generation to another. Though Aaron was soon to be "gathered unto his people," the work of the high priest must go on. In other words, the work and mission of the church is greater than any one man or woman. If we choose, we can do our duty faithfully, but sooner or later we pass from the scene, and others pick up where we have left off.

It's hard to imagine just how emotional this incident must have been for everyone involved. Moses, knowing that soon his death surely would follow, strips his brother of the sacred garments and places them on his nephew, Aaron's son; Aaron, no doubt remorseful over some of his failures, knows that he is soon to die; and Eleazar, standing before his father, who will soon die, now bears the heavy responsibility of the high priest. Meanwhile, down below, the children of Israel watch the whole thing unfold.

If you were to die tomorrow, what legacy would you leave? What have you done for the Lord's work? How can you better use the little time that you, as do any of us (*James 4:13–15*), have left?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: In response to the pressures of life, we either will entrust our lives to God completely or impatiently take things into our own hands.

Just for Teachers: A comedian from the 1970s popularized the expression “The devil made me do it!” Nothing could be further from the truth. The devil may tempt, but the devil cannot coerce those who claim the power of God, which is made available to us through the sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

God, however, does not force us to depend on Him. That choice is our own. We cannot, therefore, blame circumstances, situations, or other people for the choices we make. God spoke to Moses, and he obeyed (however reluctantly), but when He spoke to Balaam, Balaam chose his own way. God spoke to Josiah, and he honored Him, but when He spoke to Jeroboam, Jeroboam rebelled. People respond to identical situations in different ways. How we respond to life’s pressures reveals our true character.

Group Activity:

Prop List: Large candle or other wax object, potter’s clay or Sculpee (a claylike product available in most craft stores and many department stores with craft departments), and an old waffle iron or griddle (often available at thrift stores if you don’t want to risk ruining yours).

Plug the appliance in beforehand so that it is hot at the time class starts. Ask the class what will happen if you put the wax on the hot appliance, demonstrating the activity. Next, ask what will happen to the clay product if you put it on the hot appliance. (You can simply ask what would happen if you put these items in an oven, but you’ll lose much of the sensory impact.) Obviously, one will harden, and the other will soften (melt). Stress that the circumstance is the same. Now make the spiritual application about how different responses to the same event will result in different consequences.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

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The Sin of Ingratitude

Because the nation of Edom (descendants of Esau) refused to let Israel pass through its borders, it was necessary to go around it. (*See Num. 20:14–21.*) The Edomites occupied the territory extending south from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah.

Read Numbers 21:1–5. What were the people’s complaints? Think about all that had happened to them and all that they had gone through. Could there have been some justification for their complaints?

However much they might have thought that they had reason to grumble, the Lord obviously didn’t agree. After all, every day of their travels they had been kept by a miracle of divine mercy. They had all the water they needed, even in a desert; they had bread from heaven to eat, angels’ food (*Ps. 78:25*); and they had peace and safety under the shadowy cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. There was not a feeble one in all their ranks. Their feet had not swelled on their long journeys, neither had their clothes “waxed . . . old” (*Deut. 8:3, 4; Ps. 105:37*). No doubt, they had their struggles, their problems, their fears, as we all do. But apparently, focusing only on those problems, they forgot the divine blessings that had been theirs for so long. Indeed, perhaps that might have been their problem: so used to God’s mercy, grace, and provision, they started to take it for granted. And once we take things for granted, it’s very easy to forget about them.

What are some things that you take for granted in your life? Why is that such a foolish thing to do?

The only cure for this is to day by day thank the Lord for what He has given us. This is why praise is so important. God doesn’t need our praise; we need to praise the Lord as much as we can, for this serves as a constant reminder to us of just how much we have to be thankful for to the Lord.

Write out your own psalm of praise. Put in it all things that you have to be thankful for. Imagine if you were to sing it every day. How could this help you from falling into the sin of ingratitude and the dangerous traps it can lead to?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED**I. When Giants Fall** (Review Num. 20:1–13; Pss. 78:40–56; 105:41; 106:32, 33 with the class.)

Moses and Aaron were confronted with yet another rebellious outburst by the Hebrew people following the death of their sister when they were no doubt spent emotionally. There is no doubt that their thirst was not imaginary but very real. Children were crying out, and parents' nerves were on edge. The complaining reached a fevered pitch, and Moses and Aaron must have thought, *How long do we have to put up with this?* After nearly forty years of wandering in the wilderness, at the ages of 120 and 123, having endured years of ingratitude and complaints, Moses and Aaron felt their patience pushed to the edge.

At first, it seemed that Moses and Aaron would prevail spiritually. Through the years they had cultivated a dependence on the Lord in prayer. Once more they approach God for the answer, and He speaks. He has not forgotten the needs of His people, and He will provide. Specific instructions are passed on to the brothers; but in the heat of the moment Moses lashes out at God's people, speaking as though he and Aaron (rather than God) were responsible for delivering the water. He strikes the rock rather than speaking to it.

Consider This: All leaders face challenges from their followers. How can you, as a leader, avoid the traps that ensnared Moses and Aaron in the wilderness?

II. The Death of Aaron (Review Num. 20:23–29, 33:38, Ps. 77:20 with the class.)

Four months have passed since the death of Aaron's older sister, Miriam. Having left Kadesh, the Israelites have traveled to Mount Hor, on the outskirts of Edomite territory. The days of wilderness wandering are about to end—a time of transition has arrived. Roles of leadership shouldered by Moses and Aaron are about to be transferred to Joshua and Eleazar, Aaron's eldest son. The next stage of God's work is ready to advance with fresh leaders. It is also a time of great sadness as the congregation bids farewell to those who have made many personal sacrifices to lead Israel thus far. No doubt, it is an anxious time, as well. As rebellious as the people have been at times, there is still a level of trust in the leaders that has developed; they now face the unknown without them.

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The Fiery Serpents

However much the people thought that they had valid things to complain about, it's clear the Lord wasn't sympathetic to their grievances. After all these years in the desert, all these years of seeing God working among them, what do they do but regurgitate the same old complaint about having been brought into the desert in order to be killed? No wonder the Lord wasn't sympathetic. What made their complaints even worse was that they just had experienced a victory over the Canaanites.

Read Numbers 21:5–9. How again do we see Moses in the role of intercessor? Why, especially now, did the people need an intercessor?

There are about 35 different species of snakes in Palestine. Some are extremely poisonous. The poisonous serpents that infested the wilderness were called “fiery serpents,” on account of the terrible effects produced by their sting. As the protecting hand of God was removed from Israel, great numbers of the people were attacked by these venomous creatures. In other words, it wasn't that God sent them upon the Israelites; rather, the Lord took His protection away from them, and they then suffered the consequences.

Read John 3:14, 15. How does Jesus relate the incident with the serpents to the plan of salvation? In what sense have we all been bitten by fiery serpents?

The existence of the bronze serpent on the pole wasn't enough to stop the bites from killing people. They had to look; they had to make the choice to obey and then receive the benefits of the provision made in their behalf. In the same way, the death of Jesus itself automatically doesn't bring salvation to the world. His death provided the means of salvation, but just as the people in the wilderness needed to look, we have to look to Jesus and believe in order to receive what He so freely and graciously offers.

How have you known in your own life the healing power of Christ, even now? What other hurts do you need to bring to Him for consolation, healing, and strength to move on despite what seems like insurmountable pain?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: What legacy will you leave with the next generation? When leaders change, how does remembering the True Leader (God) help?

III. The Sin of Ingratitude and the Fiery Serpents (Review Num. 20:14–21; 21:1–9; 2 Kings 18:4; Ps. 78:19, 20; John 3:14, 15; Heb. 12:1, 2 with the class.)

How ironic that another season of complaining follows a signature victory over the Canaanites. The Israelites might have seen this for what it was: the harbinger to the advancement of God’s kingdom among the pagan-held territories; instead of rejoicing, they complain. How shortsighted! Every little inconvenience became an occasion for grumbling. Forty years of God’s providential leading were mysteriously forgotten. Now a generation who can hardly remember Egypt (and their oppression) repeat the over-used refrain of their fathers: “Egypt was better!” Consequently God withdraws some of His protection, and snakes attack the Israelites in epidemic proportions. God tells Moses to make a bronze replica of a snake attached to a pole. When bitten, the Israelite might look to the snake, a symbol of God’s deliverance. By looking, they would be healed of the deadly venom. In time, Jesus would appropriate this as a symbol of His atonement for sin.

Consider This: Why was it important for Israel to look at the bronze snake? Why is it necessary for the believer to exercise faith by *looking* to Jesus?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Pressures on leaders are inevitable. If leaders allow the pressure to build up unchecked, sooner or later they will succumb to exhaustion, impatience, arrogance, and even anger. The leaders’ hope is that they will transfer that pressure to an Infinite One whose unlimited resources can handle the pressure.

Illustration: Take a large balloon (for example, a 12-inch oval) and blow into it a single breath. Now take a medium ballpoint pen and press the point against the barely inflated balloon. Obviously, it will not pop. Add another breath before pressing the point of the pen against the balloon again. It should not pop. Next, add several breaths until the outside of the balloon is tight. Now ask the class if they think you should punch

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Early Conquests

Nearly forty years earlier Israel attempted to attack the Canaanites in this same area and were beaten badly (*Num. 14:40–45*). That generation now had died during the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and a new one now was prepared to pick up where the older one had left off.

Read Numbers 21:10–33 and answer the following questions:

• **What promises did the Hebrews make to the pagan king Sihon? What was offered in those promises?**

• **Who attacked whom? *Vs. 23.***

• **What difference was there between how the Israelites responded to King Sihon and King Og?**

“These nations on the borders of Canaan would have been spared, had they not stood, in defiance of God’s word, to oppose the progress of Israel. . . . Although the Amorites were idolaters, whose life was justly forfeited by their great wickedness, God spared them four hundred years. . . . All His wonders in bringing Israel from Egypt were known to them. Sufficient evidence was given.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 434.

Note the difference in strategy in regard to the two kingdoms. No courteous request is made to pass peacefully through Og’s land. Rather, the Lord drew the king and his armies away from their cities that “were fenced with high walls, gates, and bars” (*Deut. 3:5*). Away from their defenses, Israel—under the guidance and promises of God through Moses—was able to defeat King Og and his Amorite army in the field.

The victory over Sihon and Og—the kings of the Amorites in Transjordan—was immortalized forever in song (*Pss. 135:10–12, 136:18–26*) and in the national memory (*Judg. 11:18–22*).

Forty years later the children of Israel finally were entering the Promised Land. Look at all the time wasted, all due to their own lack of faith and trust, despite all the evidence that they had of God’s leading. How much precious time are you wasting, not moving ahead on faith? How can you better learn to trust in God’s promises and then to act on those promises now instead of wasting time?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the balloon with your pen. Now “top off” the balloon with a few more breaths to make the balloon very susceptible to popping. Place the balloon close to a class member’s face and ask if he or she wouldn’t mind if you try to pop the balloon with the pen now. Release the balloon instead, and let it fly to a resting place.

Talking Points: What are some ways that leaders can transfer or release the pressure of leadership? What ways are unacceptable? What is the role of prayer? What is the role of reflection or spiritual retreat? What are potential outcomes for distributing responsibility? Why must the Christian leader avoid using this for the purpose of shifting blame? The bigger the balloon is blown up, the greater the opportunity for popping it. With this point in mind, how is humility (not blowing oneself up) an advantage when it comes to handling pressure?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Sometimes we needlessly place pressure on ourselves because of our own procrastination. How true this was for the Israelites! Because they did not place their complete faith in God, what should have been a 2-month adventure turned out to be a 40-year ordeal. How many of us can think of people who have bypassed the offer of salvation year after year, only to reap the sordid consequences of their refusal? How often, like ancient Israel, do these same people blame God for the problems they have brought upon themselves? How often have we, as believers, failed to share the gospel with those who are dying and need to know Jesus? How often have we used the flimsiest excuses to justify our own procrastination?

Activity: Read Hebrews 3:12–19 and 4:1–7 responsively as a class. If the class is fairly evenly divided between men and women, use those as the two groups, alternating verses. Note that the verses emphasize making a decision *today* and that they point to ancient Israel during the time of Moses as an example of those who did not.

Following the reading, distribute paper and pens and ask the class to make up two action lists. The first will list up to three personal spiritual decisions that the class member has put off but that they now are willing to make. The second list will contain the names of up to five persons whom the class member has put off witnessing to. The member now pledges to pray that the Holy Spirit will present him or her with an opportunity to share Christ with those five people, pledging to do so when the opportunity arises.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Smitten Rock,” pp. 411–421; “The Journey Around Edom,” pp. 422–432; “The Conquest of Bashan,” pp. 433–437, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“Nicodemus was being drawn to Christ. As the Saviour explained to him concerning the new birth, he longed to have this change wrought in himself. By what means could it be accomplished? Jesus answered the unspoken question: ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.’

“Here was ground with which Nicodemus was familiar. The symbol of the uplifted serpent made plain to him the Saviour’s mission. When the people of Israel were dying from the sting of the fiery serpents, God directed Moses to make a serpent of brass, and place it on high in the midst of the congregation. Then the word was sounded throughout the encampment that all who would look upon the serpent should live. The people well knew that in itself the serpent had no power to help them. It was a symbol of Christ. As the image made in the likeness of the destroying serpents was lifted up for their healing, so One made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ was to be their Redeemer. . . . Whether for the healing of their wounds or the pardon of their sins, they could do nothing for themselves but show their faith in the Gift of God. They were to look and live.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 174, 175.

Discussion Questions:

1 Think about the story of the fiery serpents. Talk about having to act on faith. That is, just by looking at the brazen serpent, the Israelites were promised to be spared what would otherwise have been a certain death. There was no natural explanation; their life depended upon a supernatural act on their behalf. How does that reflect the plan of salvation, as well? What should this tell us about just how helpless we are on our own, apart from God, for eternal life? How should this reality keep us humble?

2 In what ways might we, either as individuals or as a church, be making some of the same mistakes as the children of Israel made? Why is it always so hard to see our own spiritual weak points?

Summary: This segment of the book of Numbers focuses on the close of the 40 years of wandering. Grieving over the death of their sister Miriam, Moses and Aaron, in a state of anger, sin against the Lord. Later, the grumbling congregation, bitten by death-dealing snakes, found physical and spiritual healing by faith when they looked upon a bronze serpent the Lord commanded Moses to make and place before them. Following this humbling experience, the Lord enabled Israel to conquer the Amorites of Transjordan and to seize their territories.