

The Strike: Unveiling God's Holiness **Numbers 20:1-13 (ESV)**

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Starting today, we will begin a three week series called *Mission Opposition*. The mission being our commitment to God's glory; the opposition being Satan's hostility against it. God's mission is to glorify Himself, to reveal His greatness, showcase His "Wow!" It's the point of all creation, the meaning of life, the end towards which everything is driving: God's glory. It's a mission against which Satan stands utterly defiant. He despises God's glory and as the ruler of this world, he works to counter God's advances by inciting opposition.

Now God is not threatened by Satan's efforts nor surprised by his schemes. God is sovereign and all-powerful. The only way Satan makes a move at all, is by God's permission. His glory is not endangered by the devils' crafts, but that doesn't mean Satan won't stop fighting. Scripture teaches that this world has been handed over to the evil one to rule for a time. There are spiritual forces against which the people of God will struggle.

The Bible doesn't teach us that it's helpful or possible to analyze every event in our lives to discern Satan's involvement. But His Word definitely does acknowledge our enemy. He is an adversary whose strategy we learn from the beginning, is most often defined by subtlety. His tactics towards God's people are usually invisible. His very first opposition comes through the whispers of a cunning serpent. Disguise and deceive. Tempt and accuse. This is our opponent.

Mission Opposition sounds like military language, and not by mistake. Following God is described as a war; one filled with battles. It's opposition that God strangely allows. Why? Because in the mystery of divine wisdom, it is Satan's hostility against God's people—this opposition to the mission—that becomes the very means by which God secures His victory. The way by which God ensures mission success, is by permitting opposition to take place. It seems backwards, but God's chosen path to reveal the heights of His glory is by traveling through the depths of the valley.

For proof, we look to the very center of the Bible, where Jesus accomplishes His mission, glorifying God by the most supreme act of unimaginability: allowing His disciple to betray Him, and then humanity to shamefully execute Him upon a cross. There, Christ proved that the highway to God's glory leads first through the valley. So as God's followers, we enjoy times of peace, but we can be certain this life will include seasons of opposition. The point of this series is to prepare us for those seasons.

There are misinformed strains of Christianity that teach opposition is alien to following God. They teach that Christianity should make your life easier. But falling prey to such unbiblical thinking means seasons of opposition will leave us completely vulnerable to frustration, to weariness, and disillusionment. Satan wants to use opposition to make problems seem big and God seem small. It's spiritual warfare designed to nudge us towards pitfalls. It's these pitfalls

we'll try to avoid.

So I thought we'd take a look at three low points in history when biblical heroes faced campaigns of spiritual opposition. We'll study some of the valleys of the ministries of Moses, Elijah, and then the disciples. And I trust that by the end, we'll see how they connect, and be encouraged that in the midst of facing such huge challenges, it's the very problems they face that will unveil a much bigger God by far. Three seasons of opposition over the next three weeks. We'll look at *Mission Mutiny*, *Mission Fatigue*, and finally, *Mission Impossible*. Today, we'll begin with *Mission Mutiny*, looking at Numbers 20:1-13, in a section we'll call The Strike.

1 And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.

2 Now there was no water for the congregation. And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! 4 Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink." 6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them, 7 and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 8 "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." 9 And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" 11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock. 12 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them." 13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and through them he showed himself holy.

The hospital was closed. At least, it was supposed to be. It was a medical mutiny. The nation's doctors and nurses were on strike; refusing to treat anyone until they got more pay. Patients would have to survive on their own. When negotiations lagged on, change seemed unlikely. Day by day, cries for care went unanswered. When a pregnant woman in labor arrived at the hospital begging for help, a few physicians began to intercede. They snuck her into a side room for some discrete treatment. And suddenly, a team arrived with weapons drawn, to enforce the strike. They were determined to send a message no matter the cost. "The hospital is closed!"

Mutinies like this are not uncommon in our world. And they are not without their price. But human authorities are not infallible. Men make mistakes. They're infected by corruption, blinded to injustice. And so, despite their ethical complexity, and tragic casualties, strikes against

human authority remain unsurprising. Divine authority, on the other hand, is flawless. God never makes mistakes. He is perfectly just in His manner of rule. He is deserving of all honor and compliance. So one might assume respect for God's position would mark His people without exception. But the reality is exactly the opposite.

The stubborn rebellion is shocking! Israel stands on the border of the promised land. Behind them, years of experiencing of God's miracles. Under the leadership of Moses they'd heard God's promises, they'd seen Pharaoh defeated, they'd crossed a sea on dry ground. Moses had led them to God's very mountain. And yet here they stand, again defiant. Despite God's kindness in revealing Himself, their faith remains far too small. They are stuck in unbelief.

It's not hard to find examples in our world, of rebellion. Despite all that God says and does, people defy Him. The world is full of people to whom God seems so small He doesn't even exist. Their problems loom so large they're all they can talk about. Day after day the news is jammed with stories of big problems and no answers. Our neighbors reject God. But even more shocking is fellow Christians in church who are caught up in this kind of rebellion, complaining and grumbling and who are gossiping. They're consumed with problems of the church. They're neglecting their Bibles. They're hesitant to sing. They refuse to evangelize. They live like the world. Take a breath! Certainly God is aware of all that and cares. But could it be that all of this opposition is being used by Satan to lure us into a more subtle pitfall? Amidst all the opposition, have we realized the danger of self-righteousness?

Satan incites opposition, even mutiny, not merely for the sake of itself, but very often to expose our own pride. Satan loves to make the problems of rebellion so large that we lose sight of God's holiness. And in so doing, we drift from the mission of His glory and unknowingly replace it with our own. And the result is the zeal of anger not because God has been offended, but because we have. This is the pride of self-righteousness. This is what Satan would desire to oppose God's mission for our church to glorify Him: people filled with self-righteousness.

How do we escape it? How do we escape the kind of pride that drives us toward resentment, towards bitterness, towards anger? If self-righteousness comes when we see problems as big and God as small, then we must realign our perspective. We need a better view of God. The way to escape the pitfall of pride is to embrace the quality of humility. How do we do that? By beholding God's holiness. That's the topic that today's passage is about. Everyone in the text has lost perspective, so God gives them a better view. In Numbers 20 we see God's holiness insulted and undermined, but in the end, it lies fully unveiled. That's the point for today. God is holy. Would you say that with me? God is holy. He alone is God. And from this story, we'll draw out three ways that His holiness transforms us, how we behold His holiness. What does it look like to see God in the midst of these kinds of trials and opposition? How do we do it? There are three ways.

I. Look up with faith.

When the challenges of life loom large, we look up. We look beyond them to see God, believing in His holiness.

We look at this situation and it's hard to know when we think of ourselves, where our limit lies. How much mutiny can one endure? How much disrespect can we take? How many strikes against our authority before we are compelled to strike back? The language in verses 1-5 is tragically familiar. We'll call this section Strike One, but the story of Numbers has revealed that we're far beyond that. Israel has rejected God's rule over and over, and now we've come full circle. It's unbelievable the way that the sanctity of God's holiness is insulted with this nation's protest. We see their mutiny expressed by some predictable rebels. Can you imagine having to lead this group? Here's what drove Moses and Aaron to their breaking point. Satan is a master at raising opposition. He knows just how to tempt us into self-righteous anger. And he gives the most enticing excuses to justify pride. And here are two. Two excuses that we can see here that would lure us into the fallacy of self-righteousness.

Excuse #1: Tough Conditions (20:1-2)

We justify our pride by the excuse of our circumstances. And it's no surprise. Things can get tough. Just ask Moses. You want to see how tough these conditions are? Here's some elements that make them very tough. Four elements.

Element # 1: A Traumatic Location: "the wilderness of Zin...Kadesh." (20:1a)

1 And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh.

The wilderness. This is a traumatic location both physically and emotionally. Physically because it's a wilderness. It's described by one atlas as "rugged and forbidding, bare, hostile, stony, a moonscape." I've been to some portions of Israel, not to here, but it is not a picnic. It's pretty tough and traumatic, physically.

But this location is even more traumatic emotionally. Did you see where they are in verse 1? Kadesh. This is the very spot they were back in Numbers 13:26 when the spies brought back a bad report. Israel had been promised to go into this land and God would protect them. The spies were sent and they came back and they said, "No. The people are too big. God is too small." And because of that, they provoked a rebellion that got Israel punished to a 40 year time-out in the wilderness. And this was the place on the border where they were sentenced. Places have memories don't they? The spot where you got engaged. Maybe a restaurant where you broke up. The hospital room where a parent passed away. The courtroom that sentenced you to 40 years of wilderness prison. This location is traumatic physically and emotionally.

Element #2: Stressful Timing: "...in the first month..." (20:1b)

It took place in the first month. We take this to mean that it's the first month after the 40 years were completed. They spent 40 years of wandering and now they're in the first month. And if there's ever a time when you're on edge for someone getting you sent back into prison, it's right when you get out. The first month. It was a stressful timing.

Element # 3: A Painful Tragedy: "Miriam died there and was buried there." (20:1c)

1...And Miriam died there and was buried there.

Moses' older sister died. That has an effect upon a man. This is the sister who had watched him on the Nile when he was a baby. This is the sister who had been with his family, who had supported him, who had served alongside him in ministry. This was the sister who even at one point, rebelled against him and then was judged with leprosy. This was the sister that he cried to God to have mercy on because he loved her. And here, this is the place where she's buried. Kadesh. The word is repeated twice. There she died and there she was buried. Right there beneath the dirt they had stood on 40 years ago. They were just about to enter into the land except for some rebellion, and now they're back to square one, to the same point. But it's cost them 40 years and his sister's life. It's a bitter, painful tragedy. And before his grief is even allowed to settle, the assembly faces a dire crisis.

Element # 4: A Dire Crisis: "Now there was no water for the congregation" (20:2a)

2 Now there was no water for the congregation.

No water. That's the problem. Water is mentioned in over half the verses in the story. People don't have water and they mobilize. These were some tough conditions. There was a traumatic location, stressful timing, painful tragedy, a dire crisis. But that's not the only issue Moses is dealing with. Conditions are tough, but the company is worse.

Excuse # 2: Tough Company (20:3-5)

We excuse our self-righteousness because of tough company. We have difficult people in our lives, but Moses might have us beat here. Look at the company he faces. Here are four traits of his company that he has to endure. This is what makes them particularly tough.

Trait # 1: Chronic Complainers: "...they assembled...against Moses and against Aaron...and the people quarreled"(20:2b-3a)

2 And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. 3 And the people quarreled with Moses...

You can imagine with little kids when the mother is there and the father is there and the kids are fighting again. Again! Chronic complainers fighting with their leader.

Trait # 2: Melodramatic Cynics: "...would that we had perished...!" (20:3)

3 And the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord!"

They have the drama. "If only we had died! We wish we would have died with the rebels." They're dramatic and exaggerating. There's disgusting disrespect here.

Trait # 3: Exasperating Critics: “Why have you brought [us] into this wilderness, that we should die here...” (20:4)

4 Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness, that we should die here, both we and our cattle? 5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place?

They have the audacity to blame Moses for the punishment they incurred by doing what they’re doing right now. Have you ever been blamed for someone else’s problems? Moses has.

Trait # 4: Shameless Connoisseurs: “no...grain or figs or vines or pomegranates...” (20:5)

5 And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.”

These are people of cravings. Bread from heaven wasn’t enough; they wanted meat. And here, they want pomegranates. But why the grocery list? Numbers 13:23. The fruit they listed here are the very fruits the scouts had brought back from the land of Canaan forty years before. This was the border land. It wasn’t the promised land. But it was the place from which they had gone and tasted the fruits. And yet now, they complained about the lack of variety. They’re in the desert demanding pomegranates that lie within reach if they would only believe. Shameless!

Tough conditions and tough company. This is just the kind of opposition Satan would use to tempt our pride, to use it as an excuse to justify a little self-righteous anger. But the truth is that God’s holiness means He accepts no excuses for sin. No excuses! There’s no excuse for sin, no matter how big the problem, or tough the condition, or tough the company, or how fierce the opposition. There is no excuse for self-righteous pride. So how do we avoid falling into that pitfall? We look up with faith beyond our problems and behold the sanctity of God’s holiness. We have to look at God because if we really see what’s at stake and catch a glimpse of God, even conditions and company this tough would not entice us to strike out. Satan wants to take us to our breaking points to tempt us to justify our bitterness. He wants to give us excuses that he knows cannot stand up in court. No matter how holy the man, even the prized child of God, Job, once he began to question God, he was given a glimpse of God’s holiness and was told to look up. There are no excuses! This is how we escape the pitfall of self-righteousness. We embrace humility by looking up and seeing a holy God.

What is the source of our resentment, of our anger and bitterness? What makes us complain? What makes us yell? What makes us throw things? What makes us lash out or vent on social media to friends? Is it chronic pain? Frustrating relationships? The death of a family member? A bothersome spouse? Disobedient children? Different opinions and styles at church? Or just Christians who seem complacent or immature? Problems at work? A boss that micro-manages us? Or being overlooked? Or the family fight over where they go for Thanksgiving or Christmas? Are these types of things our breaking points? We use them as excuses for when we snap, to justify self-righteous anger.

The sobering reality of God’s holiness is that there is no excuse for the anger and fury of pride.

And this affects both sides of authority—employers and employees, parents and children, students and teachers. We have to beware making it hard for those in authority over us. And when we've been entrusted with positions of authority, we have to cultivate humility by looking at God. Self-righteousness is a delusion, consumed with here and now. It doesn't look up. It's consumed with excuses. God seems small and distant while the problems loom large. And the truth is, at the end of these verses, it's not Moses' holiness that has been insulted, but it's God's.

Now here's the amazing thing. No one has ever enjoyed a better excuse for pride and fury and self-righteousness and for taking justice into his own hands outside of God's will, than Jesus. He was perfect. He was God. And He was driven by the Spirit to be tempted for 40 days in the desert. He endured the rebellion of His entire nation. He was abandoned by His closest friends. He was taunted and insulted until His very last breath. All the opposition was coming, tempting, taunting Jesus to lash out against God's will, and He never reviled. He suffered every insult and never lost sight of the sanctity of God's holiness. And He entrusted Himself to God. Accomplishing the mission through the valley, He found glory. What we could never endure, He suffered willingly. And by doing so, He set us free.

So these are some of the excuses, the causes that lure us into the fallacy of self-righteousness. Now we look at the audacity of self-righteousness, how foolish it is in itself. The mutiny of God's people insulting His holiness is strike one. But now we look at strikes two and three, where God's holiness is undermined. How do we escape this kind of pride? Well first, we look up with faith.

II. Bow down in surrender.

We bow down in surrender when we've seen God and the certainty of His holiness. We bow down and surrender because there is no other option. There's no manipulation. There's no leveraging for position. There's just humble surrender.

It was a historic moment. A former U.S. president agreed to be interviewed by a British journalist. The interviews were part of an attempt by his staff to restore his reputation with the public by using television to reach an audience. They were promoting his image after years of having a public resignation due to scandal. So they had this interview. The journalist was thought to be soft and wouldn't be able to draw out much. But in Part 3 of these interviews, after building trust, the journalist was prodding this former president about the legality of some actions when it came to security. The president replied these infamous words. "...when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal." Whatever one's view of the president or of history, this phrase on its own, is very chilling. It hints at a human authority outside or even above the law, because they are the law; a human authority that is the exception to the rule. And when human power ascribes to this kind of thinking, danger follows close behind.

In verses 6-12, we see after the nation's protest, their leader's reaction. Moses reaches his breaking point. And in verse 12, this expressed mutiny will be addressed. We're going to look at two certainties that confront self-righteousness. They are two certainties that compel us to bow down and surrender.

Certainty # 1: Mercy (20:6-11)

There is no one with mercy like Yahweh. And Moses knows this. He's been up on the mountain seeing a glimpse of God's glory, proclaiming His mercy and lovingkindness. When God says mercy is coming, it happens. Period. It's because His holiness is at stake. So you can be sure that it is certain. Verses 6-11 move through a fourfold sequence that just showcases the certainty of God's mercy. So just follow along in the text, here.

Step 1: An Appeal: : "Moses and Aaron went...to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces...." (20:6)

In exhausted desperation, mercy is petitioned for by Moses and Aaron.

6 Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them,

They run to God reliant on Him, and appeal.

Step 2: An Offer: "you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink..." (20:7-9)

God makes a compassionate decision and mercy is purposed for the people.

7 and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 8 "Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water. So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle." 9 And Moses took the staff from before the Lord, as he commanded him.

God's response is compassion. He wants to give them water. The question is, why? I mean, after all this, why didn't God just smite them? After their insensitivity to Moses, and their continuous rebellion, why does He offer water? Well, God had made a promise. And here's one thought. The 40 years were up. It was time for them to prepare to enter the Promised Land. And for His own reasons, maybe God was choosing to prove Himself holy not by withholding water, but by providing it. It seems as though this may have been a turning point because He was doing something different here. This had happened back in Exodus 17. They needed water and He told Moses to take the staff, but then to strike the rock. Now, God wants to do something different, distinct. He says, take the staff, but don't strike it. He says, speak to the rock. This is supposed to be something unique, a fresh start, a work of God that is going to put His mercy on display, it seems. But that plan is undermined by a sudden outburst.

Step 3: An Outburst: "...Moses struck the rock with his staff twice..." (20:10-11a)

Moses presumes upon God's mercy for himself. You can almost hear Moses wondering why. And it's almost as if on the way over, their taunts ringing in his head, his mind racing after 40 years of putting up with this, he's looking at them and he sees over their shoulders the fresh dirt upon his sister's grave, and something snaps.

10 Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock, and he said to them, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" 11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.

Strike two. Strike three. Instead of speaking to the rock, he defies God and strikes it. Moses, the man who didn't defend himself even when his brother and sister mutinied against him. Moses, the man who God said was the meekest person on the face of the earth, who was faithful in all of God's house, with whom God spoke face to face. Moses lost his temper? Well this was the same Moses who in Exodus 32 found Israel worshiping a golden calf. And when he did, he threw the stone tablets written by the very finger of God. He broke them and then took the calf, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the people drink it. That's the kind of water Moses gives to rebels. The text said his anger burned hot. He was steaming. You see, Moses, it seemed, for all his weakness, he had a strong sense of justice, and perhaps at times, a touch of anger. It was this Moses who, so many years before in Exodus chapter 3, had seen an Egyptian beating one of his people, and after looking this way and that way, he struck him down and buried him in the sand. And I don't think it's by mistake that the same word by which he killed the man is the very same word by which he hits the rock. A strike!

After such an outburst, we're all wondering what will happen. Because up until now, Moses has actually been their mediator. He's interceded for the rebels. And now, he's joined them. His patience has worn to the point where he actually disobeys God's command. But God's mercy is a certainty. His holiness is at stake. He's decided to bring forth water, and so He does, through an outpouring.

Step 4: An Outpouring: "water came out abundantly" (20:11b)

11 And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice, and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their livestock.

At this verse, everyone has rebelled—even Moses—and yet, God brings forth water because nothing gets in the way of God's plan. He says mercy is a certainty. But second, we see the certainty of God's justice.

Certainty # 2: Justice (20:12)

His holiness demands not only that mercy is certain, but justice as well. Israel's biggest problem was not a lack of water, but a lack of surrender to God's holiness. So God will help them out. He makes two pronouncements that showcase the certainty of His justice.

Pronouncement # 1: The Charge—Unbelief "...you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy..." (20:12a)

This is a charge against Moses and Aaron. Their sin is serious and God charges them. They've usurped His mercy.

12 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."

What was their crime? Certainly it was grave. It's hard to know for sure, but I think there were several aspects involved. We can look at just three. First, they sinned internally. It was an issue of the heart. The overall charge God makes is unbelief. They failed to trust, to show, to demonstrate God as holy before Israel's eyes. This is the very unbelief Israel had committed time and again. This was the complaint God had against the people in Numbers 14:11.

Numbers 14:11 And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?"

And it's the charge that the book of Hebrews makes against them and solidifies why that generation couldn't go into the promised land.

Hebrews 3:19 So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

This is the charge against Moses and Aaron: not surrendering to the holy certainty of His mercy and justice.

Now we think that internal sins like unbelief are not that bad. But clearly, that's not how God sees them. Sin is worse than we think. And the fact that unbelief doesn't satisfy our sense of justice shows how comfortable we are with our sin, and how high God's standards are. We measure ourselves against men, not against God's standards. And this is clearly the case because Aaron's rebellion is not easy to see here. There was an internal sense. His excuse must have been best. "I didn't do anything." Only that was often his problem, wasn't it? It was kind of his excuse back with the golden calf. Sometimes our silence doesn't excuse us, but condemns us. While Moses struggled with anger, it seems Aaron might have struggled with the fear of man. Aaron does not intercede and he is joined together with Moses. God is aware of his unbelief and charges him. They're both charged. In verse 24, they are said to have rebelled against God's command.

Numbers 20:24 "Let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

Numbers 27:14 because you rebelled against my word in the wilderness of Zin when the congregation quarreled, failing to uphold me as holy at the waters before their eyes." (These are the waters of Meribah of Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin.)

Unbelief is contagious from the people to the leaders, and even among the leaders. Unbelief is internal sin of the heart.

Second, it seems that Moses also sinned verbally with his lips. Instead of talking to the rock, he yells at the people. "Listen up, you rebels!" It's almost like when a mom sends her child to go

and get their sibling for dinner. She tells the little girl, “Go and tell your younger brother it’s time to eat.” And when the girl reaches her sibling she adds a few lines of her own. “Mom says come to dinner right now, or you’re not going to get any.” {Congregational Laughter!} Just adding a little bit of flavor, you know. Assuming a bit more authority than was given. This aspect of this sin seems confirmed in Psalm 106:32-33. Talking about this story, the Psalmist says

Psalm 106:32–33 They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses on their account, for they made his spirit bitter, and he spoke rashly with his lips.

There’s a convicting verse when it comes to parenting, isn’t it? They made his spirit bitter and he spoke rashly with his lips. He lost his temper. He gave them a piece of his mind. It’s the idea that Moses reminds them of when he talks later in Deuteronomy 1:37 and in 4:21.

Deuteronomy 1:37 Even with me the LORD was angry on your account and said, ‘You also shall not go in there.

“Yahweh was angry with me because of you.” There’s a sense where Moses knows, “you made my heart bitter.” Moses is accountable for what he said, but there’s a brokenness there. The sin wasn’t merely of the heart and the lips. His anger and bitterness gave way to the fury of sin physically with his hands. He directly disobeys. He strikes the rock with the rod not once, but twice. In all this, Moses took what was supposed to be an example of mercy, a means to call God’s people to trust Yahweh, and instead he turns it into a display of anger. The problem is that he portrayed God like a man. But the certainty of God’s holiness and justice must be enforced. So they’re charged with unbelief. The sin is serious and their sentence is severe.

Pronouncement # 2: The Consequence—Exclusion: “...you shall not bring this assembly in the land...” (20:12b)

12 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.”

Ouch! Their rebellion essentially earns them a death sentence. They’re not able to lead God’s people into the promised land they’ve so desperately awaited. They’re punished in unbelief And we almost want to ask why. Why punish Moses, the man who was God’s friend, who spoke face to face, so severely? Well, one preacher puts it that we might ask this question maybe because we expect God to show Moses a little bit of favoritism. And if we’re honest with ourselves, we would hope that God might show a little favoritism to us. When men seem big and their crimes seem small, it is because God is not seen as holy. And in this chapter, which some call “the shadow of death,” it has Miriam dying in the beginning, and in the end, Aaron dying in front of all the people. Three men go up in verses 27 and 29, and two come down. Aaron is gone. God proves Himself holy. No one is above the law. No one is irreplaceable. No one has earned a position with God beyond question. There’s no one that we can rely on except God Himself. There are no exceptions to God’s Word!

With unrighteous motives, Israel demands mercy. With self-righteous motives, Moses demands

justice. In the end, what happens? God wins! He shows Himself holy, unlike men. And the abundant water proves the holy certainty of His mercy. And the punishment of Moses proves the holy certainty of His justice. God makes no exceptions! Self-righteousness begins to think that our positions or who we are grants us exceptions. And we have to behold God's holiness and recognize the truth. There is no exception.

So what hope do we have? What kind of hope do we have before a God like this? Now there's no room for self-righteousness, is there? We've already begun to feel the effects of this medicine. The holiness of God is cleansing us of our pride. The answer is to bow down in surrender before God. We don't undermine His justice. We don't undermine His mercy towards others like the Pharisees. And we don't undermine His justice towards us. We find safety by moving toward God. How do we do that? Where is the place where both the certainty of mercy and the certainty of justice is found? The only place that is safe, where they meet in perfect harmony, is at the cross. God is holy! He's not like a man. He doesn't conform His ways to ours. His promise of mercy is not the absence of holy judgment, but is the provision of salvation in the midst of it. His justice is never questioned. It's certain! And His mercy is not questioned. It's certain! Your hope is not that God will fail to judge or forget. He is holy. He will judge. Your hope is that He will provide a mediator in the midst of the judgment and prove Himself holy. And by doing so, He will receive glory in the valley. Beholding that holiness is how we avoid self-righteousness. There's one last way. If we look up and bow down, third,

III. Make way with reverence.

We make way with reverence when we see God's holiness and we realize it's been insulted and undermined. But it is now unveiled. And we make way before Him in reverence. We see the sanctity of God's holiness insulted, the certainty undermined, now the supremacy unveiled. In verse 13 with the summary, there are two simple realities that expose self-righteousness to be absurd.

Reality # 1: The Futility of Mutiny (20:13a)

Man is small and God's holiness shows us that.

13 These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, ...

And it was pointless. There's only one winner to that battle.

Reality # 2: The Superiority of Divinity (20:13b)

Man is small and God is big. This is what His holiness teaches us.

13...and through them he showed himself holy.

We often think that we and God are a good team. But the best team is really God plus no one. The point is that God suffers no equal to His person. No equal! He has no equals. And these are realities to which self-righteousness is blind. It forgets. But when we see God for who He is and

that He has no equals, we make way with reverence. And we see that this spiritual war, this opposition is at work in our lives. In every place of authority and submission, we see it. It's real. Paul helps us see this in 1 Corinthians 10. In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul is talking about this. He says

1 Corinthians 10:1–14 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

He's talking to a church that is struggling with conflict. What was going on here was very spiritual. There was the reality of what was happening, but Paul is saying there are important spiritual realities happening in the midst of our conflict and opposition. Important things are at stake. This is the cure to self-righteousness: the holiness of God. Spiritual things are happening when we're not even thinking about it. In your home, in your family, at your work place. You think, "Well this is just a hard thing that's making me mad." This is spiritual opposition and we need to behold God's holiness. Numbers 20 moves us to reverence as we see the fall of Aaron at the end of the chapter. It is Aaron's death that reminds us of the only place we can find hope. Because when Aaron dies, we're reminded of Hebrews 7.

Hebrews 7:23–28 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

These mediators, these priests just kept dying, and so we had to have more. But Jesus holds His priesthood permanently. The people's mediators had failed. Moses and Aaron had finally failed. Moses had appealed to God's mercy in the past, but now he fails. Who will intercede for them? And we see the One who intercedes, who mediates perfectly forever, always. He died, but yet He lives. This is Jesus, who offered up Himself.

June 14, 1905. A Russian battleship is on edge. Their merciless captain rules his vessel with an iron fist. But news of a recent revolution at home incites the crew, the men, with a spirit of rebellion. An oppressive captain and an unruly crew. It's a recipe for mutiny. And that's actually what does it. A recipe. The ship chef cooks up some borscht stew. The sailors discover the meat he's using is filled with maggots. A doctor tries to downplay the danger, but the crew's disgust is unyielding. They send a man to appeal to the captain about the rotten soup. Their leader, who is vexed beyond limit, shoots the man to death. The outraged crew revolts. They seize control of the ship. They throw the captain overboard. And before he can drown, they grab guns, take aim, and fire.

Their mutiny was almost predictable. A leader mercilessly snapped and killed their friend. And so, they defied his authority. But cosmic mutiny is not so simple. We've all rebelled against God. We're all implicated, but God did nothing to deserve it. All He's been is righteous and loving and good. And yet, here we stand in defiance. Such treason deserves death. But God is not like a man. He didn't snap. He is not the abusive authority who murders the rebels. He's the kind of God who in mercy, does the opposite. He sends His own Son to be murdered by the rebels. And in His justice, He willingly suffers their complete punishment so that in the end, they could be saved and behold the wonder of His holiness. Human mutiny never throws God's ship off course. His mission for glory cannot be stopped by Satan's opposition. As big as our problems are, they unveil a God of holiness that is far, far bigger. And there is no one like Him. He alone is God!

Now if you're feeling sorry for Moses, this is not the last time in this series we'll enjoy his company. But before we see him again, we'll travel forward in time to another season of opposition in 1 Kings chapter 19, where a prophet named Elijah suffers from mission fatigue, next week, in *A Second Wind*.