

Leaders' Accountability to God

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Numbers

Moses' moment of greatest failure came amidst opposition to his leadership. The people of Israel were complaining about food and water. Moses and Aaron decided to bring the complaint to the Lord. God told them to take their staff, and in the people's presence command a rock to yield water.

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and your brother Aaron, and command the rock before their eyes to yield its water. Thus you shall bring water out of the rock for them; thus you shall provide drink for the congregation and their livestock.” (Numbers 20:7-8)

Moses did as the Lord instructed but added two flourishes of his own. First, he rebuked the people, saying, “Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” (Numbers 20:10). Then Moses struck the rock twice with his staff. Water poured out in abundance, but the Lord was displeased with Moses' actions.

God's punishment was harsh. “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Numbers 20:12).

Moses and Aaron, like all the people who had earlier rebelled against God, were not permitted to enter the Promised Land.

Scholars argue about the exact action Moses was punished for. But the text names the underlying offense, “You did not trust in me” (Numbers 20:12). Moses’ leadership faltered in the crucial moment when he stopped trusting God and started acting on his own impulses.

Honoring God in leadership—as all Christian leaders in every sphere must attempt to do—is a terrifying responsibility. Whether we lead a business, a classroom, a relief organization, or a household, we must be careful not to mistake our authority for God’s. What can we do to keep ourselves in obedience to God? Meeting regularly with an accountability (or “peer”) group, praying daily about the tasks of leadership, keeping a weekly Sabbath to rest in God’s presence, and seeking others’ perspective on God’s guidance are methods some leaders employ.

Even so, the task of leading firmly while remaining wholly dependent on God is beyond human capability. The Bible calls Moses, “very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Numbers 12:3). If the most humble man on earth could fail in this way, so can we.

By God's grace, even failures with disastrous consequences do not separate us from the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises. Moses did not enter the Promised Land, yet the New Testament declares him "faithful in all God's house" (Hebrews 3:2). Regardless of our past failure, we can all have confidence in our redemption through Christ.