

Episode 233

Shea Houdmann

We've been doing a series on the difficult passages of the Bible, and we're going to be continuing that today. Today, we're actually covering two different passages, but both related to Moses, and it amazes me that year after year, month after month, when I look at the most popular articles on Got Questions, these two, for whatever reason, are almost always somewhere near the top. I mean, not number one or number two, but definitely in the top 100. And when you discuss them, you may wonder why, and especially with the first one, I've never quite understood. Some of it has to do with a lot of people Google this, and our article has a really good position that that can drive a lot of the traffic, but there seems to be a lot of people asking these two questions, specifically about Moses. So Jeff and Kevin are joining me to help us to make sense of these difficult passages, one of them a little weirder than the other, but both of them thought-provoking in terms of what's actually going on and what can we learn and apply from it.

Shea Houdmann

So the first one is in Exodus chapter 4, and I'll go ahead and read verses 24 to 26, speaking of Moses. At the lodging place on the way, the Lord met him and sought to put him to death. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it and said, surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me. So he, referring to the Lord, let him alone. And then what she said, a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. So what seems to be going on in this passage, Moses was on the way back to Egypt to deliver his rites as God had commanded him. Along the way, the Lord suddenly was going to kill Moses, and it doesn't actually say specifically why. At first, Zipporah, Moses' wife, responds by circumcising their son and then taking the foreskin and touching it to Moses' feet and referring to him as a bridegroom of blood. And that says the Lord left him alone.

Shea Houdmann

So Jeff, help us out with this. What's actually going on in the passage? What sense can we make of it, and how can we apply it, and how does it fit with what else is going on in Exodus?

Jeff Laird

As far as application, I don't want anybody to get any ideas. So just calm down for a half a second and we'll figure this out. I think this is one of those, I really do believe that this is probably a passage where something is getting a little bit lost in translation. Not in the sense that we're not actually getting a

sense of what happened, but I think there's something about it that we may just not be fully grasping some symbolism or some implication in there because there's just something going on that doesn't translate well from the culture and the language to here, and that's possible. There's times where you can't translate jokes, for example, from one language to another all the time because they don't always work, because there's an interplay between what's going on and the words being used. So I think we know the physical things that were happening, but I think there may just be something in there that's just hard for us to really get or to grasp because of that.

Jeff Laird

But the situation that Moses was in before this was he was being given these signs that God was telling him to take to Egypt to show Pharaoh. And he makes a comment where he says that you're going to tell Pharaoh to let Israel go because Israel is my, meaning God's firstborn son. And if you don't let Israel go, I will kill your firstborn son. In other words, this is a threat being made to the Egyptian Pharaoh. And immediately after that we have, it said the Lord met him and sought to put him to death as a reference to Moses. So it could be that the seriousness of what was going on was meant to be compared to what was being threatened against Pharaoh.

Jeff Laird

But we know that Moses is now being sent to do something really important. He's supposed to represent God in front of this very powerful ruler and powerful leader. And he's going to do that in a way of saying this God, the God of Israel, expects people to actually do things the way he says. And apparently Moses had not been fully following the covenant that was given to Abraham. Because you have the discussion about his wife circumcising one of Moses' sons. And that being the thing that made the difference. So it seems like what was going on was that one of the sons that Moses had was not circumcised or was not circumcised correctly. And that was the thing that was being corrected. So how Zipporah knew that that was the issue or that that was the reason for it, it doesn't say. We don't know. But after fixing that, that seems to be the thing that made the difference.

Jeff Laird

And the other issue that we're going to talk about today regarded to Moses actually has some interesting parallels to this. This idea that Moses is being put in a position where his example really matters. It really makes a difference. And God is going to hold him to extremely, extremely high standards.

Jeff Laird

So the question of exactly what's going on and exactly what it means, that's that's tough. But people have offered some interesting ideas. One is that in Egypt, in ancient Egypt, they did at times circumcise. But circumcision in Egypt was different. It was not exactly the same physical process, excuse me, process. And the results were not always the same. So one suggestion is that Moses and or his son were circumcised, but they were not circumcised according to the Jewish Israeli understanding of what that was supposed to be. And that was the thing that the Lord was getting at.

Jeff Laird

Some people have also suggested that there was something else at play that's not being mentioned specifically. When we talked about Noah, we brought up that idea that in a book that tends to be very direct about the things people do, the description of Noah and Ham and Canaan and all that was a little vague. And the question is, maybe that's just for the sake of propriety. Not sure. It may be the same thing here, that there's just something else that's not being put in there. But the important part of it is that something was going on that Moses was not doing. And that was tied to the circumcision of at least one of his sons.

Jeff Laird

So congratulations to Zipporah for figuring that out and having the guts to do that. I don't know how she convinced the son to go along with it, but I'm sure when mom's got a knife, you'll listen to just about anything she's going to say.

Jeff Laird

The bridegroom of blood concept is another thing that's difficult sometimes to wrap our minds around. It may, again, have something to do with the idea of circumcision, marriage rituals, that this was a second time where this was experienced. The Bible sometimes uses feet as a euphemism for genitals. So some people suggest that Moses had potentially this Egyptian type of circumcision and he was not willing to change that. So Zipporah circumcised one of the boys and touched what was removed to Moses's area, with the idea being that it was sort of like a symbolic transfer of, we're still participating in what God wants and we're still doing it. That sounds a little far out there, but I'm not going to say it's impossible. So it's such a short little statement and they're just a couple of verses and a couple strange things.

Jeff Laird

But I think the more important part of it for us to take away is that Moses somehow somewhere was not cooperating with what God wanted and God took it seriously enough to make him sick or do something that threatened his life. And it had to be fixed before he was able to go and do what God wanted him to do.

Kevin Stone

Jeff, when I read through that passage, I kind of get the impression that Zipporah did not want to do this, but she was kind of forced into this position. Is that your take as well?

Jeff Larid

You can kind of see it coming across that way. She does seem a little maybe bitter about the issue. One of the comments that people have made is that perhaps Moses didn't circumcise one of the boys because that was not Zipporah's custom and that was not what she wanted. So perhaps she was resistant to that in the first place. But again, because it's so short and it's so brief, it's hard to know. But you certainly give her credit for doing something when the moment came, she did it. And that's pretty hardcore. I wouldn't mess with her.

Shea Houdmann

I look at this passage and Jeff is explaining there's something going on here. I mean, the fact that no introduction to this at all, it didn't say anywhere that Moses hadn't circumcised his sons or anything that that affects. So how in the world would Zipporah have known? So the assumption is that, OK, Moses knew that he was supposed to circumcise his son and he hadn't done so. So in essence, he was disobeying God's command against the very part that made a male part of the Abrahamic Covenant. So here's Moses about to go to Egypt, be used of God to rescue the Israelites from slavery, give them the law. Moses, the lawgiver, referred to as the law of Moses. And yet Moses was not obeying basically the only, there's more, but the only specific law, you already circumcised your sons given to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and following. So if Moses, who was supposed to lead the Israelites, wasn't obeying the Lord in a very important command, the covenant initiating command, that would seem to be what's going on.

Shea Houdmann

I also have heard the Zipporah was resistant because the Midianites potentially weren't into circumcision. So was Moses listening to Zipporah rather than to the Lord? But that's not specific what the passage says. It's possible, but whatever the case, even when Moses was about to die, it was Zipporah who stepped in and actually did the act that solved the problem. So it's a fascinating question. But I think the key point is Moses was to be the lawgiver, and yet he was not obeying a crucially important command. Kevin, is that kind of the sense you make of this passage, the core meaning of what's going on here?

Kevin Stone

Yes, I think so. If you're going to stand up and teach the people of God God's word, and in Moses' case, to be the actual spokesman for God, you're going to have to practice what you preach. And circumcision was part of the Abrahamic covenant. It was going to be codified at Sinai and made part of the Mosaic covenant as well. So Moses, if the issue truly was that he had not circumcised his son or had done it improperly, then that needed to be corrected. You can't stand up there and be a hypocrite like that.

Kevin Stone

James 3, in verse 1, says that not many of us should be teachers because we are going to have to give an account for that. We will be judged more strictly, James says. And I think that's the case for Moses, definitely, that he was being judged more strictly because of his position. But he is called to do as a prophet of God.

Shea Houdmann

I think that very much makes sense. And it's an excellent segue into the second passage we're talking about, as Jeff alluded to. I think the core message of both of these is that God holds leaders to a stricter account. Watch out. God is giving you a leadership position. You are to obey God's word, God's laws, especially closely, to set an example. And a failure in that sense has more severe consequences.

Shea Houdmann

So the second passage, the second very, very common question, it comes from Numbers chapter 20. I'll go ahead and read verses 8 and following. So this is after the exodus. Moses and the Israelites are traveling through the Promised Land. They're actually getting fairly close to the point where they could enter Israel. And the Israelites, as throughout Exodus and Leviticus and Numbers, are grumbling. They get sort of complaining about something. And not that, hey, not having water and not having food, I would complain, too. So let's not give the Israelites too hard a time. But the Israelites grumbling was a common occurrence.

Shea Houdmann

So they arrive at this point. There's no water. God tells Moses in Numbers 20, verse 8, take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron, your brother, and tell the rock before your 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. So Moses took the staff from before the Lord as he commanded him. Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock and said to them, Here now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock? 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.

And then verse 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.

Shea Houdmann

So here, the gist of the passage, the Lord tells Moses to speak to the rock for water to come out of it. Moses instead strikes the rock twice. God still performs a miracle and water comes out. It is interesting that earlier there's an earlier passage where the Lord actually instructed Moses to strike a rock and water came out in this passage. It is speak to the rock, but Moses struck it. And I think Moses words, shall we bring water out of this rock for you is important here.

Shea Houdmann

So, Kevin, what's in your study of this passage? What are some of the key points? What's the what's the key lesson here? Ultimately, the question we're asked is, why was Moses not allowed to enter the promised land here? Moses rescued Israel through Egypt, of course, through the power of the Lord, led them in the Exodus, led them through years of wilderness wandering. And he makes one mistake. The Lord says, that's it. You can't enter the promised land. So how devastating must that have been for Moses? So why was the punishment for Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it so severe in this passage?

Kevin Stone

Yeah, how is this fair? Right. That's what we wonder. After all that Moses had done, after all Moses had been through his faithfulness to the Lord through all of those years, he is in the very end not allowed to get into the promised land. And does this punishment fit the crime? I mean, how is how is this fair? Well, we know that God is holy. We know that God is good. We know that he is just and that all that he all he decides is right and proper. So we can start there. When this incident is reiterated in Deuteronomy chapter 32, it says that Moses broke faith with God. There was there was a lot going on here more than just simple disobedience.

Kevin Stone

Disobedience was was part of it. Moses disobeyed a direct command of God. The command was to speak to the rock and it would bring forth the water. He instead, in anger, struck the rock twice. And that was a violation of what God had said. So it was it was disobedience. But we also see shades of pride in this act and then also a misrepresentation of the ministry of Christ. And that's a big deal, as Moses was to be showing the people God's character. And when we get to the New Testament, we see it very clearly that

Moses was kind of foreshadowing a lot of what Jesus did in his ministry and then his death.

Kevin Stone

So, in fact, New Testament talks about Christ being the rock. And we have the the rock that followed them was Christ, the life-giving rock, the living water that came from this rock was a picture of Christ. And so in Exodus, when when God this was Exodus chapter 17, when God told Moses to strike the rock, that was a picture of Jesus being smitten for us and the water of salvation flowing forth from him. Then later, the instruction to to Moses in Numbers 20 was to speak to the rock. Why? Because Jesus suffered once. Jesus died once. And he once that sacrifice was made, he was never having to suffer again. And so now we speak to Christ, we pray. And that is that is the picture, I think, that God was trying to to make. And Moses, Moses blew that up. Moses ruined the picture. It was Moses struck the rock twice instead of striking it once and then speaking to the rock. And so there was an analogy that God was trying to set forward. And Moses messed that up in his anger.

Kevin Stone

There's also just, you know, besides the disobedience, there is also pride, it looks like in Numbers 20, as Moses and Aaron are there and they say, must we bring forth water from this rock for you, you rebels? And the New Living Translation has Moses shouting this. He shouts, you rebels, must we do this for you again? You complainers, you grumblers, how long are we going to have to put up with you? Are we going to have to do this miracle again? And then, you know, he strikes the rock. Well, it really kind of sounds like Moses is phrasing it in such a way that it sounds like Moses is the one who is who is doing this and does not give the recognition to God that the power comes from God. It is God who gives the water and all of the rest. It is for these reasons that Moses is barred from the promised land. God wanted Moses to glorify him through these actions. And in this instance, Moses failed to glorify him. Moses failed to give credit where credit was due. Moses messed up the analogy. And there were some there were some severe consequences to this action of Moses.

Jeff Laird

It is comforting to remember that the the analogies that we see in the Old Testament have to be understood carefully. And sometimes we make the mistake of looking at the promised land as the analogy for heaven. And it really isn't in Exodus. Salvation is the coming out of Egypt. The Book of Hebrews does a good job of sort of explaining this idea. And it brings up some of this incident in this case. And what Moses lost in this circumstance was not some parallel to salvation. This was not God looking at Moses and saying, oh,

you messed up. So now I am I am taking away your eternal heaven and so on and so forth.

Jeff Laird

What he's doing is he's saying you're going to miss out on something that you could have accomplished or should have been able to do because of disobedience. You're going to lose what the Book of Hebrews is talking about. Rest, you know, you're not going to get there. You're not going to accomplish the thing that you were set out for. And that sounds like a harsh thing. But, you know, God calls different people to different things and different purposes. And that's what Moses was called for. You know, his life was to do that, to get Israel to that particular point in that particular place in time. And, you know, he wasn't being denied salvation because of what happened. He was just being denied the end to which he supposedly was working for.

Kevin Stone

Psalm 106 also relates the history of Israel, and it goes through this incident as well in verses 32 and 33. Psalm 106 says this by the waters of Meribah, they angered the Lord and trouble came to Moses because of them and they rebelled against the Spirit of God and rash words came from Moses' lips. So the people provoked Moses to do and to say something that was ill advised, something rash, something sinful. Scripture says that Moses was the meekest man on earth. So here we have the meekest man on earth, but their complaints and their grumblings were so irritating and he became so exasperated that he spoke sinfully in anger. He spoke.

Kevin Stone

And James 1 and verse 20 reminds us that human anger does not produce the righteousness of God. You cannot get to God's righteousness through human anger. And this is what Moses was guilty of as he stood on that rock and he stood by that rock and he hit that rock. He did so in anger. He did not glorify God before the people. He reacted in human anger and irritability and petulance and he did something he should not have done.

Kevin Stone

And this was written down for our admonition, all things in the Old Testament written there for our benefit, for our learning. And I think one of the things we learned from this is that when other people are sinning, we have the responsibility to not sin. We cannot react in such a way that is sinful ourselves. We're not held accountable for other people's sin, but we will have to answer for the choices we make in response to other people's sin. Sometimes we have our own sin to deal with. So when we're being provoked, what do we do? Do we put a bridle on our tongues? Do we

exercise self-control or do we give in to impatience and irritability? Do we let loose and suffer the consequences? Moses let loose and he suffered the consequences, which are rather severe because of the position that he had been entrusted with there in leading the nation of Israel.

Kevin Stone

And I just want to point out too that even though Moses disobeyed and even though this sin was committed, God still provided the water. God still, in his goodness, in spite of Moses' sin, in spite of the people's grumbling and complaining, he did give them that life-sustaining water.

Jeff Laird

And that provision also comes up in the idea that Moses is being held up as a leader. When we read the book of Joshua, when the people are actually entering into the promised land, we find out that almost right away they have trouble following what God wants them to do. And the book of Judges explains a lot of the consequences that came behind that. So you can see a sense of God not necessarily telling Moses because of this one instance. Up until this point, everything was great, but this one instance may have been more of a symptom of God telling Moses, you have reached the end of your rope. You've gotten as far as you can get in this mortal body and this mortal mindset with these people.

Jeff Laird

And it's possible that the concern there is that if Moses does go into the promised land with the people, that he's going to get frustrated and he's going to do something like that again. And it's going to continue to erode the people's sense of who God is and what he's supposed to be. So you understand Luke 12:48 talks about the idea that when somebody's given a lot, a lot is expected of them. And there are times where God's going to make those examples. When we talked about Ananias and Sapphira in Acts chapter 5, there was something similar. God is setting something up. He does not want certain things to be shown or to be seen or to be done that conflict with that message. So it's entirely possible that this was not literally something where God just snapped and said, oh, everything was perfect and now you did this one thing and I'm furious. But that this was the thing that God could say, see, this is the kind of thing. You can't do that. You shouldn't do that. And this is the reason why this sort of thing is the reason why you're not going to be the one who's going to lead the people into the promised land. God was going to pass that to Joshua.

Kevin Stone

Right.

Shea Houdmann

I love the connections both of you have made, whether it's to James chapter 3 and Kevin even asked, the leader has to control his tongue. Here's an example of Moses not controlling his tongue and Jeff about how leaders are held to a greater standard. And even very early on talking about how even in this passage, there's likely more going on here than the passage tells us. There's four verses. Obviously, there's lots of things. If you don't know what Moses' heart was before and after this, we don't know all the different details, but the fact that in at least two other places in Scripture, it specifically mentions this incident as a big deal. So Kevin read one of the Psalms and also mentioned earlier Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 51, where it says, referring to the Lord speaking to Moses, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel, at the waters of Meribah, Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

Shea Houdmann

So this is not just a matter of Moses striking the rock instead of speaking to it. It is Moses' heart was wrong. Moses was doing the wrong thing for the wrong reasons, with the wrong attitude. Moses was not showing the Lord as holy in front of the people of Israel. Moses was taking credit for bringing forth the water, even though clearly this is a miracle of God. So there's a lot that's going on in this passage. Does it still seem like, come on God, couldn't you have shown grace and mercy, allow Moses to be the one to lead the people? Of course God could have, but your God is, whether the reasoning is God knew that Moses would make further mistakes in the promised land, of course that's possible, but don't speculate too much, but God had his reasons, and God is always just. God is righteous in his judgments, and so the punishment that God gave Moses here is severe.

Shea Houdmann

But then you look through the rest of Numbers and in Deuteronomy, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't remember Moses ever asking God to change his mind. I remember a passage where Moses is saying, Lord, please, please can you just let me go into the promised land? Now maybe there is one, but Moses seems to have accepted his punishment, and then Moses ends up dying on Mount Nebo, but the Lord does give him the ability to see the promised land. He said, you go up on this mountaintop, and you will see the land that I'm going to lead his rights into. So God does give him that grace there at the end.

Shea Houdmann

And again, not in any sense are we comparing what happened to us versus Moses, but a year ago, almost a year ago to the day, we were on a plane

leaving for a tour of Jordan and Israel, and right when the violence broke out on October 7th, and so we ended up spending the whole time in Jordan, but we got to go to what they think was Mount Nebo, and we got to see the land of Israel. So in a small sense, hopefully not due to judgment on our part, but we had the Moses experience here, and we can see the promise that we can see Israel, but we weren't able to enter it. So in a small sense, we're able to empathize with the pain that Moses was experiencing.

Shea Houdmann

But overall, answer to whether it's Exodus 4, Numbers 20, Moses was God's appointed leader. Moses was to set the standard. Moses was to be obeying God's command, set an example, and not just obeying, but obeying with the right attitude. In both of these incidents, Moses failed in an epic sense, and therefore God was going to take his life in the first one, showed him mercy there. God punished him by not allowing him to enter the promised land and did not revoke that punishment.

Shea Houdmann

So this is to learn, I guess, James chapter 3, those whom God calls us to teach, those whom God calls us to lead, he holds us to a higher standard. We need to remember that. We also need to remember and trust in God's judgment that we may not understand everything going on in these passages, but remembering above all that God is just, and his righteous judgment is always good and right and holy.

Shea Houdmann

So hopefully our conversation today about Exodus chapter 4 and why was God going to kill Moses and Numbers chapter 20, why was Moses not allowed to enter the promised land, hope you understand the passages a little bit better. I know studying it afresh for me was helpful, just good reminders of what God expects of us in God's holiness and to not take those things lightly. Kevin and Jeff, thank you for joining me. Always enjoy our conversations. Got questions? The Bible has answers, and we'll help you find them.