

'A Warning for God's Leaders'

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Date: 26 July 2026

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[0:00] And that's the last chance. Let's look at some of our own Australian leaders, the latest news poll. Most popular.

Anyway, none of them have anything to do, you know, they can't compare without Moses, can they? So you've all been rather kind to Moses, which is great. But many of you will know, of course, particularly if you've been a leader yourself, that leadership is not easy, is it?

And what makes it harder is if your success is judged by the acceptance of those you lead. And so today we find ourselves, and, you know, I know you've rated him before chapter 20, so, you know, you might want to change your mind at the end of today.

But we find Moses, and perhaps Aaron to some extent, we find their leadership being put under the microscope yet again. But first, let's look into the first verse of our passage to see the situation that confronted Moses.

For we are told the burdens of leadership that he carried. That's the first point. So, in verse 1, In the first month, the whole Israelite community arrived at the desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh.

[1:38] There, Miriam died and was buried. Now, there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. And so, I think the first challenge that Moses faced at that time was actually the death of his sister, Miriam.

If you remember, she was actually the one that watched over him as he was a baby, left on the banks of the Nile after he was born, and actually had facilitated his rescue and then being cared for in the palace by Pharaoh's daughter.

And so, really, here he was grieving her death, and yet the people were now coming to him, confronting him with the problem of not having water.

I think you can presume that with the pillar of cloud and fire, it was the Lord that led them there to this particular location in the desert. And so, they're rightly looking to God's leaders, Moses and Aaron, to now provide for them.

But it's one thing for them to look to Aaron and Moses to provide. It's actually another thing to oppose them, to threaten them, to demand from them, even though I suspect they were doing it out of fear of dying of thirst.

[2:57] And so, in verse 3, we're told that they quarreled with Moses and said, If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord.

And so, yet again, we hear the same sort of grumbles. They're always preferring to die somewhere else rather than here. Why did you bring the Lord's community into this wilderness that we and our livestock should die here?

Why did you bring us out of Egypt to this terrible place? And again, you know, always dreaming about Egypt like it was paradise, while complaining about life in the desert, you know.

There is no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And worse still, there is no water to drink. And really, from all these comments, they have not learned, have they?

That actually, it has not dawned on them that the only reason they are in the desert and not in Canaan is because of their rebellion in the first place, of their grumbling against God.

[4:03] And so, you might expect God to strike them, as He's done in the last few chapters, strike them down in judgment. But actually, He doesn't. Now, as for Moses and Aaron, I think they are again feeling how overwhelming the burden of leadership is.

And so, they rightly turned to God for help. Verse 6. Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell face down. And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. And so, Moses and Aaron have done the right thing. They've come to the Lord. And as you follow along on the outline, God, I think, shows them two ways in which He provides for their leadership.

And the first is that God provides His presence and His Word. And so, as you see on the slide, as they fall face down in dependence on Him, the Lord appears to them.

The glory of the Lord appeared to them. But alongside His presence, God also provides His Word, that He speaks. And both of these things very often appear together.

[5:13] When God is present, He speaks. And we know that God is present when we hear His Word. And so, the Lord said to Moses, Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together.

Speak to that rock before their eyes, and it will pour out its water. We will bring water out of the rock for the community, so they and their livestock can drink. And so, God, in speaking, reveals that He will provide for their needs.

He's showing to Moses that He will shepherd His people. He will care for them, and thereby enable Moses and Aaron to lead them on his behalf. Now, He gives Moses a few very specific instructions. Firstly, to take the staff, which some have taken to be Aaron's staff. You know, the one that was left at the altar after it's budded, and with almonds and all that.

But then, in the presence of the assembly, He is to speak to that rock before their eyes. Now, it's not clear which rock is being referred to here, but by the very fact that God says, that rock, it's probably quite obvious which one it was.

[6:31] Perhaps it's the one that stood out at the place, the biggest one. We don't know. But Aaron and Moses knew, and the people knew.

Now, this event here is actually very similar to another incident earlier on in Exodus 17. And so, it's worth comparing, because there is one distinct difference between the two, which actually then explains the significance of what we're looking at here.

Now, the other incident is in Exodus 17, as I said. And that occurs, or that occurred, in the desert of Sin. Not Zin, but Sin.

Z versus S, right? Different letter in the spelling, one. But actually, hundreds of miles apart in the desert. So, on the next slide, you'll be able to see, I hope you can recognize, that's the map of the Middle East.

The Sinai Peninsula is where they're at. And the desert of Zin is in the northeast corner. Right? Stop, right? And the desert of Sin is near Mount Sinai, which is down in the southwest corner.

[7:45] Now, desert of Sin doesn't mean there's a lot of sin there. It's just a table. I don't know. Desert of Sin doesn't mean there's a lot of sin there either. I don't know what that is. But, if you look at the two accounts, it is very similar in what happens.

So, firstly, we find the people quarreling with Moses as there was no water to drink. All right? You can make out those verses, if you want to check it out later. And then, with instructions, Moses is taught on both occasions to gather a group of people.

In Exodus, it's the elders. Here in Numbers, it's the assembly. Probably a big group. But then we get to the differences, right? The instruction in Exodus 17, verse 5 and 6 is to take in your hand the staff which you struck, the nail, and strike the rock, and water will come out of it for people to drink. And as you may have seen in that table, Moses did do as God instructed. As for Numbers, the instruction was, yes, take the staff, same, but then it is to speak to that rock before their eyes, and it will pour out its water.

And so, in both occasions, whichever the staff was, they were to bring it to the rock, I think as a symbol of God's authority. But in Numbers, Moses was to speak to the rock and not use the staff to strike it.

[9:19] So, let's see what Moses does in verse 9. Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence. So, good, because it says, just as he commanded, God commanded him.

And in verse 10, he and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock. Again, tick. That was what God said. But then, Moses goes, a walk.

He hears from the script. Because he says, listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock? So, instead of speaking to the rock, he speaks to the people.

And more than speaks, he scolds the people. Right? And instead of speaking to the rock, next slide, Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. The water gushed out and the community and their livestock drank.

So, the big difference is that he did not speak, but he struck, which was not God's instruction. Now, I really do empathize with Moses, I have to say.

[10:23] Because, you know, this is not the first time that the people have been ungrateful. Right? I wonder, over those years, how many thank you cards were written for Moses to thank him for his faithful leadership.

Did he get any year-end bonuses for his hard work? Has Moses ever left them without food and water? And, you know, have they not just seen him and Aaron bury their sister?

So, you know, there are a lot of mitigating factors to explain this momentary lapse, you think, from Moses. Because, because Moses has done everything else right up to this point.

Right? So far? I mean, 91% approval rating? You guys agree. And, you know, maybe he misheard the instruction. You know, sometimes you've done something before and you assume it's going to be the same, right?

God had said in Exodus 17, strike the rock, so he's going, yeah, okay, take the stuff, gather the people, strike the rock. Oh, okay. Oh, no, speak instead. Oh.

[11:39] And, you know, the water still came out. So, how bad can it be? Right? So, here's another question, which no slide or poll. But given that Moses slipped up on one detail, what grade should he have received?

Like, what grade would you give him if you're marking his assignment? Okay, not a perfect score, right? Definitely not 100%. Maybe also, nah, not a high HD.

Nah, that's out of the question. Distinction? Anyone? But, surely, surely a pass, right? One mistake and you fail?

Well, verse 12, God's assessment is unfortunately not the same. Because the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.

And, you know, this is, you know, if I were Moses, this would be a big blow, you know? Yes, God has still provided water for the people, but this would have come as a big failure for Moses in God's eyes.

[12:59] And so, it's at this point that I think we really need to hone in and just try and work out what really went wrong. And, therefore, is God's punishment or judgment against Moses justified?

Now, first, let's consider what we can observe purely, what we can discover purely from what we observe from Moses' actions and words. Like, just what did he do?

Because it's clear, isn't it, that, firstly, he did lose patience with the people. He called them rebels, which kind of gives it away. But so, to the question, must we bring you water out of this rock?

You know, it's like, I think it really shows that Moses has had it with them. He's lost it. He's now seeing this people as an ungrateful bunch, a burden.

And while it's not conclusive, I think the fact that he struck the rock, and I think it's indicative that he struck it twice, it indicates that he was doing it out of frustration and anger instead of speaking calmly to the rock.

[14:11] Now, the second failure, of course, was that he clearly disobeyed the Lord's instructions. And, you know, if I were him, speaking to the rock kind of looks a bit silly, an inanimate object that you're speaking to, striking makes more sense, I think.

But, again, what Moses did clearly violated God's instruction, because he had said, take the rock and take the staff and speak to the rock. And this is not what Moses did, even though God did then provide water from the rock.

And, I don't know about you, but given the poor attitude of the people so far, I kind of think that, you know, initially, you might think, this is overly harsh on Moses, right?

Sure, he may not have followed the instructions strictly, but, you know, as I've been saying, all these circumstances would surely have made this excusable. And so, I do have a lot of sympathy for Moses, but, unfortunately, the Lord's assessment is not that he has forgiven, not forgiven, but overlooked Moses' disobedience.

And, as we read then, the consequences for Moses and Aaron is drastic, isn't it? They are barred from entering the land. Or, more than that, they're not, you know, they themselves don't even go in, but responsibly, that he's been given all these years to bring the people from Egypt into the land of Canaan.

[15:44] He's not going to be able to bring them in. He's not going to be able to do what he's been raised up to do all those years ago. And, bear in mind, this 40 years in the desert is really not Moses' fault at all, right?

Moses and Aaron were the only ones, apart from Joshua and Caleb, who pleaded to the people not to rebel against the Lord. And it's only because the people refused to listen to him, to them, that they have been wondering.

And Moses himself has had to be leading them all these years. It's not fair, is it? Right? To then, on this cusp of going into this very thing that they've been looking forward to, to be deprived of that very blessing.

And so I think it's really hard to swallow. Have you ever worked on something for 40 years? Well, you're not 40 yet, so maybe you can't. But, all your life, only to be told sorry, because of this one thing you've done, you're not going to get it?

But, you know, we need to, it sounds like I'm criticizing God, I'm not. I'm just making you appreciate that what actually is the significance of what's going on.

[17:07] Because, God then says in verse 12, what really went wrong. And it's that phrase there in the highlight, that's the key sentence. Because God says, you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites.

And that is the key. And that is what we need to try and understand in order to appreciate why God is right to do this. Now, this sentiment or this thought is also echoed in verse 13 because there we read, these were the waters of Meribah where the Israelites quarreled with the Lord and where he was proved holy among them.

Right? In both cases, the idea here is that Moses and Aaron dishonored the Lord and did not prove him to be holy by their actions.

So you see, it's not just that Moses was impatient or that he disobeyed even though that was bad. And by the way, Aaron's also responsible because I think he allowed Moses to do it.

He should have stopped Moses. But for God, what Moses did displayed a lack of trust in him. You did not trust in me enough is what the Lord said.

[18:20] Which then dishonored the Lord before his people. Moses didn't trust God enough to honor him as holy. And that's not because he didn't trust God to provide the water, I don't think, because he did strike the rock.

And he'd seen God provide in Exodus 17. So I don't think it's about that. Instead, I believe what Moses failed to trust God in was his way of handling the people's grumbling.

He had taken disciplining God's people into his own hands to do it his way instead of God's way. To deal with them out of frustration.

So when he said to the people, must we bring you water, he's talking about must Aaron and I bring you water. And that showed that he'd assumed the burden of providing for the people when that was God's to carry.

And that included the burden of disciplining God's people. Now, don't get me wrong, we'll see shortly that God is not pleased with the people either.

[19:32] But at this point in their journey, God considered that what was more important was to show his people that he would feed and water them.

He was more concerned to show himself to be a faithful shepherd who will care for his own. And that's why I think there was no instruction to rebuke them even though they probably didn't do the right thing.

And so when Moses disobeyed, he dishonoured God by portraying him to be impatient and uncaring. Moses forgot that as God's mouthpiece, what he did and what he said reflects who God is.

And what he did and said at this point failed to portray God as holy. that here was a God who said to his people that he is gracious and slow to anger, that he is abounding in love and faithfulness, showing love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

Now, the other thing, of course, was that as God's representative, God could not allow his representative to ignore his word with impunity.

[20:55] right? Because if Moses could get away with ignoring God's word, what kind of message does it send to the people when Moses then bring God's word to them?

Because they will say, oh, well, if Moses can ignore that, then, well, we can as well. And if Moses can get away with it, well, God should let us get away with it. But no, it's too important for that to happen, isn't it?

And so, when we look beneath the surface, we see the true significance of what Moses has done. And then we understand why God's punishment, I think, is justified.

Now, in case you're worried for Moses, he didn't make it into the promised land, but he did appear with Jesus at the transfiguration. Okay? So, he made it to heaven.

Okay? So, if you're worried for him, don't worry. He's there. Now, God's leaders, as we see here, are held to a higher bar, right?

[21 : 56] Why? Because they model God's character and heart in what they say and do. God's leaders are not just parroting God's message, right?

But they're modeling who he is as well when they do. Now, as I said, it's not that God was pleased by the people, because in verse 13 it says that the place was called Meribah, right?

which means quarreling. And in both Exodus 17 and here, it was called Meribah. And notice in verse 13 that the people were not just quarreling with Moses and Aaron, but they were quarreling with the Lord.

And that makes sense, because if Moses is God's representative to them, then when the people oppose Moses, they are opposing God as well. And so even though God has chosen to let this incident pass on this occasion and not punish them, this is a mark against them.

And we have a record that God is not pleased. He was not pleased by what they did. Now, I'm not saying any of this and sort of passing judgment on Moses as if I could do any better, right?

[23 : 12] I, you know, I empathize deeply with Moses as I said, and as I reflected even this week, I've seen how often I do the same. I do bring God's character into dishonor by the way I lead.

When I lose patience and I'm not caring to people, when I lead in a way that suits me, rather than think about, ah, if I did it like that, how would it impact the Lord's name?

All these are examples, really, of doing the same as Moses, isn't it? Now, all of this is in stark contrast to the Lord Jesus Himself, right? We know that. Because Jesus shepherds His flock exactly how His Father does.

He brings His Father glory all the time because of His actions and words. They reveal God's character. So, in John's Gospel, chapter 12, verse 49 and 50, Jesus says, I did not speak on my own, but the Father has sent me, commanded me to say all that I've spoken.

I know that His command leads to eternal life. So, whatever I say is just what the Father has taught me to say. And that is exactly the opposite of what Moses just did, right?

[24 : 25] Moses failed to do and say exactly what the Lord told him to say and do. But for Jesus, when Jesus speaks, we can be very confident that what we are hearing are the Father's words as well.

that is the very words that God's Spirit will use to, as He said, lead us to eternal life, provided we obey. And by the way, this eternal life, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman in John chapter 4, is like streams of living water.

And so, Jesus' words is water that is even more essential than the water that came out from the rock. And Jesus never lost patience with His people, even though all of us are rebellious, but instead He laid down His life for all of us on the cross, didn't He?

Taking on the burdens of our sins so that we might live. And so, brothers and sisters, whenever we are called to lead people in the church, and for some of us that may be when you have children next time, be in your homes as well, but for now, it might be leading kids church or HTY or growth group. When we do that, we're actually called to be like Jesus, our great shepherd. And that means not just leading them, but leading them in the right way, in the way that will portray God for who He is, portray God's character.

[26 : 04] Now, Peter himself, we all know, was a difficult sheep to Jesus. But he would write later in 1 Peter 5, which was read by Peter, he says to the elders in the church, to elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's suffering who will also share in the glory to be revealed.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them not because you must, but because you're willing. As God wants you to be, not pursuing dishonest gain for your own benefit, but eager to serve, not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples of the flock.

Now, of course, for many of us, before we become leaders, we are first members of the flock, aren't we? And we, too, have to do the same, in a sense, because collectively, the church is also a witness to the world.

And so Peter writes in another passage earlier, chapter 1, verse 14, verse 16, As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance, but just as He, that is God, who has called you is holy, so be holy in all that you do, for it is written, Be holy because I am holy. And so if church members rightly look to their leaders to learn what God is like, who Jesus is, the world looks to us as a church, to see what God is like.

[27 : 38] And we know that because whenever the church stuffs up, they would give that as the reason. How can I be a Christian when Christians do this?

You know, if people in the church are like that, then how can I worship a God because that's the God they worship? God is a collectively, universal over time, but also even us locally, we've probably let God down from time to time, haven't we?

And so when that happens, we need to repent. We need to keep coming back to God to ask that He change us so that what we do and what we say truly honors Him.

But of course, we can thank Him for Jesus because when we look to Jesus, we know God for who He truly is. He is indeed the perfect example.

And it is with His help that we can, with our lives, honor the Lord as holy. And so as a final word, because I know some of you are already leaders, and some of you aspire to lead God's people, well, today's passage is a warning to us not to be too cocky, right?

[28 : 56] Because if Moses, the most humble man on earth, fell short, then it will be only too easy for those of us who are over confident and proud to do the same.

But, on the other side, if some of us are hesitant because, oh, I better not be a leader because then I'll fail, well, I think we need to be encouraged that we have Jesus as our perfect shepherd.

He will lead us. And so, if we keep looking to Him, then we will know how to lead as well in a way that honors the Lord as holy. Because the fact of the matter is the church needs good leaders because if it doesn't have good leaders, it will only have bad leaders.

Alright? So, we don't have a choice. We need leaders in the church. So, let's have good leaders.

Let's pray for good leaders rather than be poor leaders. But good leaders are those who know that Jesus is their good shepherd.

And then they will humbly look to Him, step up, and pray and ask God to use them to bring others or keep other sheep in the flock.

[30 : 06] Let's pray that God will do that. Let's do that. Father, thank You for giving us Jesus, our good and great shepherd, who does and says exactly what You do and say, so that we may truly know You.

And we do know You because of Him. Help us to follow His perfect example, and with our lives honour You as holy. Someone who is both a God of justice and mercy, who is full of grace and truth, who is both loving and holy.

Help us to be the same to others. In the name of Jesus, our good shepherd, we pray. Amen.