

The Embattled Leader

When the best response is facedown

BY GAVIN ANTHONY

WHEN SOMEONE STAMPS ON YOUR TOES, it always hurts. I used to think that perhaps the more it happened, the more I would get used to it, and grow a tough skin. That was an illusion. It's difficult to have someone stamp on your toes without at least a small tear coming to the corner of your eye. Many times there's a lot more being choked back.

Numbers 11-20 describe six occasions on which the Israelites opposed and grumbled against their leader—again and again—and how Moses responded. Interestingly, when Moses is opposed, he reacts the same way every time—except for the notable time when he completely lost it, but that's another story!

Let's consider those six occasions, observe how Moses reacted, and discover what we can learn from them.

Conflict 1: *The people complain that their leader is making life difficult for them (Num. 11:1-3).*

"Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp" (verse 1).*

What did Moses say then? "Yes, you rebels, you deserve what God is doing to you! You should stop your complaining

because it is getting really hard to hear this all the time." No. "When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the fire died down" (verse 2).

I want my enemies to perish in God's hands. However, there was something bold growing within Moses that caused him to begin to pray for God's justice to be halted. Moses evidently didn't want these rebellious people to get what God thought they deserved.

Conflict 2: *The jealousy of relatives irritates their egos so much that they begin to make wild criticisms (Numbers 12).*

This time the problems are closer to home—criticism from Moses' own siblings. "Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't he also spoken through us?'" (verse 1). It's one thing to receive criticism from people you hardly know, but hearing it from those closest to you is much harder.

After God rebuked the siblings, "the cloud lifted from above the Tent, [and] there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow" (verse 10). Did Moses thank God for His justice? No. "So Moses cried out to the Lord, 'O God, please heal her!'" (verse 13). And God did.

Evidently Moses' compassion for the weaknesses of sinful

people was a greater drive than his desire to see them punished.

Conflict 3: *The people are so angry they want to get rid of their leader (Numbers 13–14).*

The group of spies came back with their report that the Promised Land wasn't what they thought it would be. "All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron. . . . And they said to each other, "'We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt'" (Num. 14:2-4).

This time Moses doesn't wait for God to say or do anything. He knows what is about to happen. "Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there" (verse 5). As Moses is facedown in front of this murderous crowd, God promises Moses for the second time, "I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they" (verse 12).

Can you imagine Moses with his face in the dirt thinking, *Yes, Lord, how can such a group of people possibly be deserving of Your blessings? Do what You did at the time of Noah. Let's start again.* Would you be thinking something different?

Moses was. In an astonishing plea, Moses reminded God that He is a merciful God, "slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion" (verse 18).

What was Moses thinking? Doesn't he remember that the people don't want his leadership anymore?

Conflict 4: *The assistant leaders gang up against their leader (Numbers 16).*

Moses had just experienced jealousy from his closest family; now he experienced it from his inner leadership circle. Along with Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On, 250 well-known community leaders rise up against Moses (see verse 3).

What do you do when your family conspires against you? Or your whole church board gangs up together? What do you do when your closest supporters

coordinate themselves to replace you?

I'm not sure there is an answer to this exactly. When it happens, it can be so emotionally overwhelming that any solution seems inadequate. But we know what Moses did. "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown" (verse 4).

Even in the middle of this mess, Moses is still thinking about mercy. Yet God in His righteous justice declared, "'Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once.' But Moses and Aaron fell facedown and cried out, 'O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?'" (verses 20-22).

Moses evidently didn't want these rebellious people to get what God thought they deserved.

Conflict 5: *The people blame their leader for the bad things that are happening.*

You may have thought that God's judgments against Korah and the rebellious leaders would have had a sobering effect on the people, causing them to reconsider their ways. Unfortunately, no. "The next day the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 'You have killed the Lord's people,' they said" (verse 41).

God's justice is again announced, "Get away from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once" (verse 45). Yet again Moses falls facedown between God's justice and the people. Moses commands Aaron to run into the middle of the assembly and begin making atonement for them all, for he knew a

plague from God had begun.

What a scene. As God's judgments began, Moses and Aaron were rushing to their knees, rushing to be in the middle of wicked people, so that some might be saved. What were they thinking? Couldn't they hear what the people were saying about them?

Conflict 6: *No matter what their leader does, or how much he has done for them, the people still complain (Numbers 20).*

Just as the Israelites are about to enter the Promised Land, God decides to test them. The cloud stops in a place with no water. "They quarreled with Moses and said, 'If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord!'" (verse 3).

The moment the people finished complaining, Moses and Aaron again fell facedown before the Lord. But Moses was angry. After receiving instructions from God, Moses shouts at them, "Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?" (verse 10). And rather than talk to the rock, as God had said, Moses hit it twice. Grace pours drink out for the people. But because Moses lost his cool and disobeyed God, he is barred from the Promised Land.

It's a complex picture. A leader pleading facedown before the Lord, wanting to do the right thing, but finally being overcome by his own emotions. It's a high standard that God expects, and a tough lesson for leaders to learn. Yet in spite of himself, it was because of Moses' intercession that water flowed to quench the thirst of a rebellious nation.

What Can We Learn From Moses?

1. When people oppose our leadership for God, the power and perspective to cope are found only when we are "facedown."

When those we are trying to lead rebel against us, how tempting it is to fall into despair, and to give up and find another job where people will truly appreciate us. But leaving our God-given task is what Satan would like us to do. The ability to cope with opposi-

tion does not normally come from avoiding the people we lead. Nor is the solution found in some psychological trick. The ability to cope is a supernatural empowerment that is found only when we are earnestly at prayer before our Lord.

When standing up, we may be tempted to agree with God's justice, or even to call for it. But when we are facedown, we somehow gain a different way of thinking. When we are facedown, we are open to a power from above that gives us new energy and a fresh perspective to lead people for another day.

2. When people oppose our leadership for God, we need to learn to value mercy and grace over justice.

What makes someone plead for mercy for those who are persecuting them? What makes someone who is suffering in front of their most vile enemies cry out, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34)? What makes a person plead for mercy rather than justice,

even at the very moment they are being hurt by their enemies?

I am not sure I understand it myself, but I am convinced that the ability to be ambassadors of grace and mercy is found only where Moses found it: *face-down before the Lord*. The Israelites deserved God's judgments, and if He had destroyed them all, the universe would not have thought that God had compromised His holy and righteous character. But Moses' eyes were not looking for justice. As long as he remained facedown, all Moses could see was grace and mercy.

I still find Moses' actions rather shocking to my natural inclinations. When coming into conflict with others, I crave justice. I don't want people to be unnecessarily punished, but I want God to give them what they deserve. Perhaps my desire for justice is actually only revenge, dressed up in pious language.

What About Us?

We could summarize Moses' exam-

ple in the following way: when people oppose your leadership for God, fall to your knees quickly, and pray that those who oppose you may receive grace and mercy. And prayer that lays hold of a strength out of ourselves is prayer that is done like that of Moses—facedown.

Has God given you people to influence for Him? Don't worry when conflicts arise. Put your confidence in God. Go into His presence and plead for fresh power, and for eyes filled to the brim with mercy. And He will lift you up—and those you lead.

*All Scripture texts are taken from the New International Version of the Holy Scriptures.

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