

# Two Strikes, and You're Out of the Promised Land!

*Scripture Readings: Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-13; 22-29; 1 Corinthians 10:1-5*

*Text: Numbers 20:2-13*

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## Introduction

“Strike three, and you’re out!” yells a baseball or softball umpire as a batter swings at a ball and misses for the third time.

There is another “three strikes” law, but it is against criminals. In California, and in a few other states, there is a law nicknamed *Three Strikes and You're Out*, referring to a *de facto* life imprisonment after being convicted of three violent and serious felonies: e.g., murder, robbery of a residence in which a deadly or dangerous weapon is used, rape and other sex offenses.

Our text narrates an incident in the life of the people of Israel during their wilderness pilgrimage to the Promised Land that had serious consequences for their leader Moses. After the people grumbled about lack of water, God told Moses to speak to the rock at Massah and water will flow out of the rock. But instead of speaking to the rock, Moses struck it with his staff, not once, but twice.

Remember the first narrative about the people complaining about the lack of water in the wilderness? In Exodus 17, God told Moses to *strike* the rock, Moses obeyed God’s command, so water came out of the rock and the people’s thirst was satisfied. In this second incident, God commanded Moses to speak, *not strike*, the rock. So there’s that big difference between the two incidents.

The consequence of this action by Moses and Aaron was enormous. With two, not three, swings of his staff at the rock, Moses struck out of the Promised Land! God did not allow him and his brother Aaron to enter Canaan. This punishment seems to be very harsh and disproportional to the offense. Why would God punish Moses for one “minor” disobedience compared with his faithfulness to God all throughout the wilderness wanderings? For us, this may seem like a death sentence for jaywalking.

Moses struck out of God’s Promised Land with two swings of his staff at the rock.

In both of these water from the rock episodes, there are two significant lessons learned by Moses and the people of Israel. First, God is holy and glorious, and honoring his name and his word is paramount. Second, faith in God is evidenced by honoring and giving glory to God. Moses struck out, not only in literally striking the rock twice, but also in these two important lessons about God’s word.

This afternoon, we will dwell on the theme, “**TWO STRIKES, AND YOU’RE OUT OF THE PROMISED LAND**”

1. **Strike One: Self-Focus**
2. **Strike Two: Unbelief**
3. **Hope for Those Who Strike Out**

## Strike One: Self-Focus

Very early in Israel's march toward the Promised Land, they started grumbling about hardship, food, water, and even about Moses' leadership. To Moses, it must have been so frustrating to hear the same complaints over and over again. If you were Moses, wouldn't you be also tired and aggravated by these people, who are like little children pestering you with their tantrums?

But God did not lack in his providential care for them from the time they came out of Egypt. He protected them from Pharaoh's army by parting the Red Sea, and accompanied them in their journey with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He unfailingly provided food and water for them.

Early in Israel's journey towards the Promised Land, the people camped in the Mount Sinai area, in the wilderness of Sin (not the same as the wilderness of Zin in Numbers 20). In Exodus 17:1-7, the people complained that they had no water to drink, so the Lord commanded Moses to gather the people before a rock and strike the rock. In the sight of all Israel, Moses obeyed and God provided ample water for the people to satisfy their thirst.

But almost 40 years later, here in Numbers 20:2-13, as they were encamped at Kadesh-barnea, the people complained again that there was no water to drink. This time, God commanded Moses to gather the people in front of a rock and command the rock to give water. But in contrast to the first incident, Moses disobeyed God's word by striking the rock twice to make water flow from the rock.

Geological studies contribute to a possible explanation of why God commanded Moses to strike the rock in the Mount Sinai area, then to speak to the rock in the Kadesh-barnea area. Mount Sinai area's rocks are made out of granite—massive, heavy, hard and tough. Today, granite is used in building construction, and it is very popular as kitchen countertops because of its toughness as well as beauty.<sup>1</sup>

Why would God ask Moses to strike the rock before the people to get water out of granite rock? They all knew that even if the whole assembly struck the rock with all their might, no water will come out of it. It was only by God's mighty work that water came out of a granite rock at Massah.

Why did Moses strike the rock? The first obvious reason is because he was angry with the people. After he gathered all the congregation of Israel, Moses first gave his speech of rebuke, "Hear now, you rebels: shall we bring water for you out of this rock?" (v 10). In his anger, Moses himself judged the people. God did not ask him to rebuke and chastise them. He only commanded Moses to gather them and show them that he spoke to the rock.

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Beck, "Why Did Moses Strike Out"? *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003), 140.

We are not exempt from this. There are times when the best thing for us to do is to merely tell our family member or friend what the word of God says, and not to rebuke them. God's word will rebuke them. But because of our anger, especially as parents or friends, we react in anger and say some words that we should not have said and later are sorry that we did.

Pastors and elders at times fall into this anger. And some even voice their frustration in their preaching, lashing out at the congregation. It is good to chastise and rebuke a congregation for not being interested in evening services, Bible studies, prayer meetings and for not giving enough out of their abundance, but not out of frustration and anger. A rebuke has to be done to the glory and honor of God's name.

Moses was focused on himself. He was not only angry, calling the people "rebels," but he also took credit for bringing water from the rock. From his angry words, he says he and Aaron are able to bring water out of the rock.

We all sin when we focus on ourselves. When we're angry, our focus is on how another person has offended us. Then it becomes very hard to forgive and forget because our feelings are hurt. We start thinking of how to get even, and then we strike back in anger.

In our success, we also tend to take the credit for ourselves. We start thinking thoughts like Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, "*Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?*" (Dan 4:30). We become proud of our family, children, career, accomplishments, material possessions, and even our own wisdom. We even come to the conclusion that we alone deserve all the praises for and benefits from our success.

Many Christians even take credit, unknowingly, for their salvation. They say they were the ones who made the freewill decision to accept Christ. Their salvation depended on their own goodness and wisdom to choose God, obviously being better and wiser than the other guy who does not accept the salvation that Christ offers. This is tantamount to robbing God of his glory, much like Moses appropriating God's mighty work of bringing water out of the granite rock.

Not only did Moses take credit for God's glory, he also acted in disobedience because of unbelief just like the rest of the people.

## **Strike Two: Unbelief**

Why did Moses strike the rock twice? Geologists have a second and not too obvious possible answer.

The rocks in the area of the wilderness of Zin are commonly made of limestone, more commonly known as chalk.<sup>2</sup> Limestone is soluble in water so that rain and streams slowly

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<sup>2</sup> Beck, "Why Did Moses Strike Out"? 138, 140.

drain through cracks in the limestone. Over time, the cracks enlarge and fill with water. Later, the outer layer of limestone solidifies while water continues to build up behind it.

I have seen this in the mountains outside of Davao City where we tried rock climbing at one time. The rock face was made of pockmarked solid limestone. But we also saw that the rock was very porous because it was always wet due to the water behind the rock wall. It was also easily chipped away, thus was not an ideal wall to climb. Granite walls are the best rock climbing walls because they are dry and hard.

It was this kind of limestone rock that Moses faced in Numbers 20. He knew that no matter how much he yelled at the rock, no water will come out of it. Even if the whole congregation screamed at the top of their voices, water will not come out of limestone by itself!

But Moses also knew that limestone rock is weak and if he struck it at its weak points with his staff, not once but twice, the outer layer would break and there is surely plenty of water for the people to satisfy their thirst.

However, God did not want the people to see that it was Moses who produced the water by his own effort and knowledge. God wanted his mighty work to be displayed before the whole assembly.

When Moses struck the rock twice, it was solid evidence of his unbelief. He did not believe that God could make water flow out of the rock by a spoken word. If water did not come out of the rock, how would he then maintain the confidence of this unbelieving congregation in his leadership?

Another question frequently raised about this story is this: Was God's punishment of Moses commensurate with his sin? The answer given in our text is a resounding yes, because his sin was unbelief. In the previous chapters, we read that Israel's unbelief and rebellion cost them the Promised Land. Because they did not believe that God would give the land to them, God prevented them from entering it. Here, Moses was also found to be unbelieving and rebellious. It was only just and fair for God to mete out the same sentence to him as he did to the rest of the people of Israel. It was also a fulfillment of God's vow against all the first-generation Israeli adults to prevent them from entering their rest in the Promised Land.

This is why the chapter opens with a short summary of the death of Miriam and ends with an account of the death of Aaron. All the people, including the three leaders, were now excluded from Canaan.

At Massah, they tested the Lord. At Meribah, they quarreled against the Lord. And in both incidents, it was because of unbelief.

Is there hope for Moses and Israel after they struck out of the Promised Land? Is there hope for us as well who continually strike out in our selfishness and unbelief?

## **Hope for Those Who Strike Out**

God's reaction against Israel's unbelief and rebellion was always wrathful, but was followed by grace, mercy and forgiveness after Moses and Aaron interceded for them. In contrast, Moses was reacted only in anger without grace, mercy and forgiveness.

Thus they were not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Was there hope for them? Yes, there was, because those who honored God's glory and trusted in his word, as Caleb, Joshua and the second-generation Israelites did, were able to enjoy rest from their difficult wilderness pilgrimage after God fulfilled his promise to give them the land of Canaan.

Ultimately, faith in the covenant God who satisfied their thirst with water from the rock pointed forward 1,500 years later to Jesus and the Samaritan woman:

*"Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'" (John 4:13-15).*

Moses as Israel's mediator gave them water from the rock to satisfy their thirst. But Jesus gives us living water not to satisfy our parched and dry lips and mouth, but to give us eternal life.

In Exodus 17, God told Moses that he would stand before him on the rock at Sinai before Moses strikes the rock. Why did God stand before Moses and let Moses strike the rock, in effect striking God himself?

It is because God himself, not Moses, will provide the life-giving water that flowed from the rock. It is this incident and Jesus' own words that he is the living water that Paul uses as the background in 1 Corinthians 10:4, *"they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ."*

No, the physical rock at Massah did not follow them in their wilderness journeys, as some Jewish rabbis teach. It was their spiritual Rock, Christ himself, who followed them. God himself followed them, because he is their Rock, *"The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold"* (Psa 18:2).

*The Rock that Moses struck twice was Christ himself!* The living water that he gives us he can only give after he was struck. This is why Isaiah says, *"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted"* (Isa 53:4). In his last few hours of suffering, Jesus was stripped of his clothes, flogged, spat on, struck, and pierced with a sword. This was how he was stricken, smitten and afflicted by God in order that he may give us our eternal, spiritual drink.

Why did God command Moses to strike the Rock in the first incident, and then to preach to the Rock in the second? Perhaps it is also because the two narratives are also a type of the once-for-all suffering of Christ. He needed to be stricken only once, not twice.

God is also teaching us that there is a Mediator better and more complete than Moses. Moses could not give the people Living Water. Only God could. And Moses could not accompany God's people into the Promised Land. Only Christ could, by his provision of the Living Water of eternal life.

God did not allow Moses to give Israel rest in Canaan, so that the Exodus story may again point us to Christ. Who finally gave Israel rest in the Promised Land? It was a faithful Hebrew, *Joshua*, whose Greek name is *Jesus*, Yahweh who will save his people from sin (Matt 1:21). Jesus takes us to our rest in our promised land, the glorious heavenly city. In that place, we will never thirst, because Christ himself will be our River of Living Water (Rev 22:1-2).

## **Conclusion**

Dear friends, when you strike out because of your selfish pride and your unbelief, do not despair or lose hope.

You have a Mediator who is better than Moses. Christ is full of grace and mercy, and is perfectly patient and kind. To those of you who humble themselves before him, repent of your sin and trust in him, heed Jesus' call, *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" (John 7:37)*. Come to him in faith and repentance, and he will give you Living Water that will satisfy your thirst forever.

Christian, when you come to him hungry and thirsting for righteousness, he will surely nourish your souls forever and ever. *Amen.*