



On your marks

The life story of Moses dominates the early books of the Bible. He was such an important leader and his obedience to God lays the foundation for the formation of the People of God, from the great escape out of Egypt to the arrival at the borders of the Promised Land. However, Moses himself never set foot in Canaan. Special as he was, he was also flawed - like us all - and on his wilderness journey his impatience and anger did once get the better of him. What can we learn from what happened to him? The following idea unpacks the story of when it all went wrong for Moses at Meribah.

Get set

You will need:

- paper, plastic tube, jug, bowl, water
- pens
- ice cubes

You can find the story in Numbers 20:1-13. (NB: a similar but different story is recorded in Exodus 17:1-7.) There is a retelling of this story in The Barnabas Children's Bible (story 66) and My Storytime Bible (p. 42).

Go!

Opening up the story

It's so easy to let negative attitudes rub off on us even when we try very hard to rise above them. After two years in the desert, this happened to Moses. He was surrounded by criticism and complaints, and eventually he snapped.

Talk with your group about the sort of things that push them over the top.

- What makes them lose their temper?
- What makes them impatient?
- What are their breaking points?

Also, discuss ways of coping with anger and frustration.

- Does anyone have any useful tips about keeping calm and staying cool under pressure? (Be honest as a leader about your own failings in these areas.)

Telling the story

This wasn't the first time the people of Israel had complained to Moses about water shortage, or the first time Moses had faced criticism – see Exodus 16 and 17. But despite the miracle provision of food and water in the past, the same moans surfaced again and again.

Tell the story and its background using the following outline, encouraging the group to contribute moans and cheers appropriately:

- Moses brought the people out of Egypt to freedom - **cheers!**
- Moses led them through the dusty, dry desert - **moans!**
- Moses asked God for food and drink for everyone and God answered his prayers - **cheers!**
- Moses kept on going through the desert heat - **moans!**
- Moses brings them to Mount Sinai, as promised - **cheers!**
- Moses goes missing for 40 days - **moans!**
- Moses brings back the ten commandments - **cheers!**
- Moses brings them to the Promised Land - **cheers!**
- But most spies say that the people are too strong to defeat - **moans!**
- Moses takes them through many dangers - **cheers!**
- But the people still want to go back to Egypt - **moans!**
- Moses helps them to worship God properly - **cheers!**
- Moses takes ages sorting out all their disputes - **moans!**
- Moses gets help - **cheers!**
- And now, after two more years, the people complain again because there's not enough water - **moans!**
- Moses loses his temper and gets the water they need but not by following God's instructions. He angrily smashes the rock with his stick instead - **shock!**

God is sad that Moses has joined the moaners. Now, not just the people but Moses too will never get to the Promised Land.

Talking about the story

- I wonder what finally pushed Moses over the edge so that he did things his way and not God's.

(NB: Research the story further to discover that Moses' sister had just died and that the people who were complaining were wishing they had been swallowed up in an earthquake like Korah and the others who had rebelled recently – Numbers 16.)

- Was God being fair to Moses? Surely he had done only one thing wrong?
- Why else do you think God decided not to let Moses go into the Promised Land?
- God did let Moses see the Promised Land before he died. Read Deuteronomy 34:1-6.
- Now Moses shares the same fate as the people – he would die before setting foot in Canaan.
- The people's complaining and Moses' anger are often talked about in the Bible as a warning to encourage us to keep faith on our journey – see Psalm 95:8-11 and Hebrews 3:7-13.
- Moses accepted what God said. Perhaps it takes a great man to face defeat as well as success.



I wonder what he said to Aaron his brother, just after the events of this story.

Playing with the story

The place where this all happened is called Meribah, which means 'complaining' in Hebrew. Create a blockage in a plastic tube by writing the following phrases on to pieces of paper and then screwing them up and stuffing them down the tube:

It's not fair that...

If only...

Things were better when...

Didn't I tell you that...?

I knew it!

You never listen...

We should never have done that...

With the pieces of paper stuffed in the tube, now try pouring water through it into a bowl. It will only come through in drips and drabs, if at all. The flow is broken. God's love for us is similarly blocked when complaining takes over believing.

Now, remembering and naming some of the good things that God has done, remove the paper, piece by piece, to allow the water to flow freely into the bowl.

Reflecting on the story

Place some ice cubes into a bowl.

- How can you get at the water that is inside the block of ice?

You could try and break up the ice violently, just as Moses broke the rock with his stick. Or you could try to wait patiently for the ice to melt and collect up the liquid that way. Or...?

- Which is more like God's way in this story?
- What might this story be telling us about how God usually works in our lives?

Even the great Moses still had lots to learn on his journey, just like each one of us. Read together Hebrews 3:12-13, which offers practical advice for Christians based on this story. Turn this into prayer.