

Through the Desert with a Bunch of Flaky Whiners A Bible Study and Word of Encouragement Based on the Experiences of Moses

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Introduction

There are great moments in youth ministry. Moments that exemplify the reasons you got into youth ministry, moments for which you pray and prepare, moments where God rewards you with unconditional love, overwhelming joy, and inexpressible thanksgiving. Those moments exist, and I pray that God continually renews and rewards you with those moments often.

Yet, those are not the only moments we experience as youth workers. There are moments of utter frustration and inadequacy, of great difficulty and complexity, and of complete disappointment and failure. Moments that are so awful words cannot come close to describing the pain which your heart and stomach are suffering. Those moments happen, too, and Satan uses them well against us in our service to God.

This study takes a look at Moses and many of his moments in ministry. Every time I read the story of the Israelites, I think, “Poor Moses, having to go through the desert with a bunch of flaky whiners.” Serve even a short time in youth ministry, and you could swear you know exactly how Moses must have felt. Though youth ministry is filled with great moments, it can also make you feel as if you are walking aimlessly, consumed with thirst and desperation, as you lead a bunch of flaky whiners through a never-ending desert.

I pray that this study encourages you as you continue in ministry, that you gain some new insights from God as you study this section of Scripture, and that you always remember that God will sustain you for the purpose for which He has called you.

Structure

Most of this study is designed for personal devotion for you the youth worker. However, it could easily be adapted for a small group. It is broken into sections to make it manageable, but can be divided in whatever way you so choose. I have included a large Scriptural context for each section so you can do a more in-depth study if you wish. Section 5 is intended for a large group study, and so it could be used for a youth Bible study or even for a multi-staff Bible study. The Into Scripture parts for Sections 4 and 5 are left open for your own meditation.

Sections

- Section 1 - The Context and the Calling
- Section 2 - The Complaining Journey
- Section 3 - The Burdens of Leadership
- Section 4 - Words From Moses
- Section 5 - A Flaky Whiner (Group study)

Section 1 - The Context and the Calling

Exodus 1-12

With Prayer...

Consider your context: the challenging circumstances your youth face, the spiritual and physical situation of your church, the condition of the world in which we live, and your place amidst all of them.

Into Scripture...

Exodus 1:12-14, 20-22; 2:23-25

The Israelites, God's chosen people, are in an awful circumstance. They are oppressed with forced labor, their Egyptian conquerors dread them, and they are worked ruthlessly. Despite their difficulties and their oppression, they increase in number as God continues to bless them. Their continued growth strikes fear into Pharaoh who takes an extreme measure to control them; he orders every boy born to be killed. In the midst of their slavery, they call out to God, and upon hearing their cries, He becomes concerned about them.

Exodus 3:4, 7-10

Out of His compassion for His people, God comes down to rescue them and fulfill His promise to them. Calling Moses by name, God sends Moses to bring His people out of Egypt, out of their suffering, out of their awful circumstance.

Exodus 3:11-14; 4:1-5, 10-17, 29-31

Despite being called by name and despite answering God's call, Moses questions God. Moses repeatedly doubts himself, his abilities, and God's plan. God responds with promise, equips Moses with signs, and firmly commands with instructions. After following God's instructions, the Israelites believe and worship.

For Consideration...

Our world is a broken, sinful place where pain and difficulty are a daily aspect of life. Youth are in a particularly tough circumstance in this world; they face awful situations while, all too often, they are ill-equipped to cope, much less thrive. It is the definition of adolescence. Like the Israelites, our youth need help, and only God can deliver them from their bondage.

What circumstances are your youth facing?

Do they know and trust that God is their Deliverer?

Do they have confidence in you? As their friend? As their leader?

God did not abandon His people in the Old Testament, and He has not abandoned them today. His heart is still filled with love and compassion for every person, and He desires to give them what is best for them. His will is that we live for His purpose, being His people, being His hands and feet in this broken and hurting world.

When and where have you experienced God's presence and deliverance?

How can you help your youth see God's sovereignty and love in their lives?

The extraordinary life of an ordinary guy is a very suitable description of the story of Moses. Moses' life is not extraordinary as a result of his talents, skills, or merit. This ordinary guy's life is extraordinary because he followed God's calling and because he lived his life in service to God. You, also, have been called by God. Like Moses, you will question and doubt your calling, your abilities, and God's plan. Feelings of inadequacy have long plagued God's chosen servants. Take notes from Moses. God will take care of the details; you need only to follow His instructions.

Do you live in response to His calling and salvation?

Where do you question, doubt, or fear?

Into Scripture...

Exodus 5:19-6:12

Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh as commanded by God, and in return, Pharaoh is even harder on the Israelites. The Israelite leaders accuse Moses and Aaron, angry with them for making their lives more burdensome. Moses then complains out of frustration to God. God responds to Moses by explaining His purpose and by promising His mighty deliverance of the Israelites. Yet, the discouraged and enslaved Israelites do not listen, and Moses continues to question.

For Consideration...

Before ever leaving Egypt, Moses faced criticism, doubt, and resistance from those he has been called to lead. Before he got to lead the Israelites anywhere, Moses was overcome with frustration, insecurity, and dissatisfaction. Satan can do the same in your ministry. It will be a challenge before you even start, yet do not lose heart. Continually, seek God's will; He will not abandon you. God has called you to an extraordinary life, a life of ministry to His people!

How do you respond to frustration, criticism, and insecurity?

What affirms your calling, renews your dedication, and sustains your energy?

With Prayer...

Talk to God about your calling, about His plan for you, and about your fears and insecurities. Confess and listen. Ask and receive. Thank Him and be moved to action.

Section 2 - The Complaining Journey

Exodus 13-17, 32-33

With Prayer...

Have an honest conversation with God about your frustrations, about challenges you face, and about hardships within youth ministry. Ask Him for guidance, correction, and encouragement.

Into Scripture...

Last time we looked at the context of the Israelites and the calling of Moses. In chapters 7-12, God works in the plagues and in the Passover. Here in chapter 13 the exodus out of Egypt actually begins, and now we take a look at the Israelites' complaining journey.

Exodus 13:17-18, 21-22; 14:3-4, 10-18, 29-31

Pharaoh lets the people go, and God leads them out of Egypt. Yet, He does not lead them as they would expect; He does not go the shortest way. He leads them His way; He has a purposeful plan. He never leaves His place in front of them, leading the people with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. As part of His plan, He hardens Pharaoh's heart so that Pharaoh will come after them. Pharaoh and his massive army chase after the Israelites, God parts the seas, wiping out all the Egyptians, and the Israelites put their trust in God and in His servant Moses.

Exodus 15:22-26

As Moses is leading God's people through the desert, trouble arises. They cannot find water, and when they finally do, it is bitter and cannot be consumed. They grumble against Moses, who in turn cries out to God. God sweetens the water, and He makes a decree that if they listen to Him, He will take care of them. God not only tests them, but also reminds them that it is He who heals and provides for them.

Exodus 16:1-12

As the desert journey continues, the Israelites complain to Moses again. They consider their situation so bad, they would rather have died in Egypt before suffering to death in the desert. Yet, the Israelites' cry does not go unheard; God provides manna and quail for them to eat. However, He does give specific instruction regarding His provisions in order to test them.

Exodus 17:1-7

Again thirst overwhelms the Israelite community as they are traversing the desert, and they begin to quarrel with Moses (yet again), questioning his leadership and God's plan. Moses in desperate frustration calls on God, and out of a rock, God provides water for the Israelites. (See Numbers 20:1-13 for a greater perspective of the story.)

For Consideration...

As with Moses and the Israelites, God has a plan for you and for your youth. His plan may not be the path of least resistance, and it probably won't be the shortest distance either. Yet, His plan will have a purpose and will be to accomplish His will. Often, God even uses hardships and obstacles to strengthen us and to show us our dependence upon His power and sovereignty.

Where do you feel God leading you and your youth? For what purpose is He at work in your life?

What hardships or obstacles has God used to achieve His plan in your life? Which ones could He be using now?

Through the passages from chapters 15-17, we see the frustration and division that can arise in a religious community due to hardship. The Israelites not only fought with their leader, but I would guess they fought amongst themselves. Not only was Moses' relationship with his people strained during these quarrels, but so was his relationship with God.

How do you react to conflict? What times of quarrel have you experienced in life? What was the result?

What ways can you help to prevent quarreling and division, especially among your youth?

Despite their forgetful memories and their ungrateful complaining, God continually provided for the Israelites. He used each situation to show His love, His will, and His power as their God. Yet, they continually questioned His presence and provision for them (17:7). We, as Christians, still ask those questions today. Your youth will also question God when they face times of trial, trouble, and temptation. Fortunately, as with Moses, God provides His guidance and power on which you can completely rely so that you can lead your youth through these times of uncertain faith and irregular trust.

When do you forget God's provision? What hinders you from being steadfast in faith and in trust?

How can you set an example for your youth in regards to trusting in and being thankful to God?

Into Scripture...

In chapters 19-31, God gives the Israelites the Ten Commandments, instructions for the Tabernacle, and other regulations and precepts by which to live. (Though it is not the easiest reading, I certainly recommend you read it.) We pick back up on the complaining journey of the Israelites with chapter 32.

Exodus 32:7-14

While Moses is on Mount Sinai with God receiving His instructions, the Israelites along with Aaron cast an idol for themselves—a golden calf. God sends Moses down to rebuke these corrupted, stiff-necked people because He is angry. He tells Moses that He will destroy them, but Moses intercedes for the people, reminding God of His plan and His promise. God does relent from destroying them, Moses does rebuke Aaron and the Israelites for their idolatry, and the people endure the punishment God gives them for their sin.

Exodus 33:12-23

In honest conversation with God, Moses asks God to teach him so he can know and follow God better. God promises Moses His presence and rest because He knows and is pleased with Moses. Then, without showing His face, God passes by Moses to reveal His presence.

For Consideration...

It is difficult to imagine the anger that Moses must have had with his people when they committed idolatry. It is even more difficult to grasp how disappointed he must have been with Aaron, his partner and fellow leader. Yet, it is seemingly incomprehensible to grasp that Moses would intercede against God's wrath for the Israelites in the midst of his own personal anger at them. Yet, as a leader of God's people, there is great value for you in this story. God's Law holds us to the standard of His perfection; as sinful people, we fall short every day. Your youth will fall short, and your anger, disappointment, and personal offence will increase to surprising levels. Yet, God is not a god of just wrath and vengeance; He is God of love, mercy, and grace, and you are His servant, called to be like Him.

When have you experienced a similar situation? How do you balance Law (God's perfect will and commandments) and Gospel (God's grace and mercy) with your youth?

Moses had to be exhausted, emotionally and spiritually drained, and to the point of burn out. After so many challenges, so much quarrelling, and so long in a desert leading a bunch of flaky whiners, Moses went to God. In chapter 33, Moses' earnest conversation with God reveals his broken, longing heart. God promised Moses rest and His presence, and He fulfilled that promise for Moses. God promises you the same. God has heard your cry and hears it still. When you feel exhausted, drained, and burned, God will give you rest and strengthen you. It is why He gave you Jesus; He is your Savior. It is why He has given you the Holy Spirit; He is your Counselor.

With Prayer...

Go to God, cry out to Him, rely upon His love and provision. Just as God answered the thirsty cries of the Israelites with water from a rock, God gave you Jesus to be your Rock. He has, He does, and He will answer your prayer.

Section 3 - The Burdens of Leadership

Exodus 18; Numbers 11-14, 27

With Prayer...

Consider your burdens from ministry. Place your cares on God's shoulders, asking Him to prepare you for His word and His will.

Into Scripture...

Exodus 18:8-11, 14-26

Jethro visits Moses, excited to hear about God's deliverance and blessings. While he was visiting, he observes Moses serving as a judge and leader of the people. Jethro is concerned that the Israelites' problems and burdens belong to Moses alone. He advises Moses to share his responsibility with other capable leaders so that his burden would not be so great, and Moses follows his counsel. (See Deuteronomy 1:9-18 for a greater perspective.)

Numbers 11:1-6, 10-17

The Israelites complain about their hardships, and when God hears this, His anger grows and fire from Him burns. Moses intercedes for them in prayer, and God relents. Then they complain about the manna, longing for the food that they used to have in Egypt. After all the complaining, Moses finally breaks. He is troubled, and so he asks God, "Why?" He is burdened by them, and he tells God he cannot handle it. God then gives His Spirit to seventy elders to bear the burden with Moses.

Numbers 12:1-9

Aaron and Miriam talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife and because they are jealous of God's speaking through him. Despite the fact that Moses is a humble servant of God and despite the fact they are fellow leaders with him, they speak against him. God hears them, confronts and rebukes them, and is angry with them.

Numbers 13:30 - 14:4, 10

When it comes time to explore Canaan, the land God has promised them, men are sent to observe and come back with a report. Caleb speaks up, claiming with confidence that they should take the land. The other men doubt and disagree so they spread negative reports about the land. The Israelite community is greatly disturbed and grumbles against Moses and Aaron, yet again, doubting God's plan. Some even talk about revolting, choosing another leader to lead them back to Egypt, and stoning Joshua, Caleb, Moses, and Aaron. (See Deuteronomy 1:26-33 for a greater perspective.)

Numbers 27:12-23

God leads Moses up a mountain so that he can see the promised land which he would not be allowed to enter. Moses asks God to appoint a man to replace him as shepherd of God's people. God instructs Moses to commission Joshua to be the new leader of the Israelites.

For Consideration...

One burden that happens often in youth ministry is that one has too much responsibility, too many burdens to carry. We see in Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 that God does not desire us to be lone rangers in ministry; we should not do it all by ourselves. The burden—emotional, physical, and spiritual—will become too great, and we will face desperation and burn out. This is especially true for youth ministry

where those you are leading face really tough situations and where they often resist you and God. The story of Moses shows us that sharing ministry is a good thing.

Where could you share more responsibility with others?

What hinders you from sharing your ministry with other people?

Dissent and division will be present in almost any ministry team at some point, and they are burdens of leadership. We are sinful human beings, and we gossip, harbor unkind thoughts, and feed our pride. Moses knew what it felt like to have people question, disagree, and mistrust him. Though I pray this is not the case for you, it may very well occur, and probably more than once. It is important as God's servants that we strive to follow His commandments, that we act with integrity and humility, and that we learn to rebuke and lead in love.

Where have you experienced dissent and division? What role did you play to create it? To resolve it?

Numbers 27 records the consequences of Moses' disobedience; hopefully, such consequences do not apply to you at this moment. Though your current ministry position may not be ending, our ministry terms do end. Whether it be another call, a change in responsibilities, or some other reason, a burden of leadership is that inevitably our leadership does end. Moses teaches us a valuable lesson in this story. Did you notice? It is not recorded that Moses caused division and trouble. Neither did he feel sorry for himself, nor did he rebel against God. Instead, he prayed to God for the Israelites, and he passed the torch on to God's next chosen servant. He left with grace and humility.

If it comes time for you to leave a ministry, will you entrust your life and the lives of those you lead to God's will?

With Prayer...

Leave your burdens on God's shoulders. Seek His help in your ministry of servant leadership.

Section 4 - Words From Moses

Deuteronomy

With Prayer...

Reflect upon your life and your ministry. Thank God for all that He has given you, for all that He has taught you, and for all that He has planned for you.

Into Scripture...

Deuteronomy 4:32-39

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Deuteronomy 31:6, 8

For Consideration...

After taking a look at the story of Moses and the Israelites, we have learned much about ministry and how very difficult it can be. We can see how very applicable Scripture is still today, especially when considering the parallels between the exodus and youth ministry. Finally, Moses leaves us with some very encouraging words, reminding us of God's sovereignty, of His love for and choosing of us, of His will and calling for us, and of His presence with us.

I pray you are humbled and honored that God, being such, has called you. I pray you are encouraged and strengthened by His Word and by His Spirit. I pray you continue to follow His will for your life, that you may give glory to His name through your work in His kingdom. Remember, God sustained Moses through the desert with a bunch of flaky whiners, and He sustains you too!

With Prayer...

Go. Follow His will. Lead His people with a servant's heart.

Section 5 - A Flaky Whiner

With Prayer...

Honestly confess to God where you are in your walk with Him, where you are struggling, and where you are failing. Ask Him for His help.

Into Scripture...

Exodus 14:10-14

Exodus 16:1-7

Exodus 17:1-7

Deuteronomy 1:26-33

For Consideration...

The Israelites certainly could complain. They strayed from and disobeyed God constantly. They forgot His deliverance, His sustenance, and His promises. It is easy for us to think, “Wow! The Israelites were awful. God should have just abandoned them. They certainly did not deserve His love.” We may even be arrogant enough to say, “Thankfully, we are not like them. God certainly hasn’t had to lead us around in the desert for forty years!”

How arrogant and critical we are! As the cliché states, “Look at the pot calling the kettle black.” We stray from God daily. Daily, we forget His provisions, His salvation, and His love for us. We follow our own paths, rather than God’s, and we look to idols in which to put our trust. We do not deserve His love, and we never will be able to merit it. Worse yet, we often consider ourselves better than those flaky, whining Israelites, who were so ungrateful and disobedient. We do not even realize that we are the flaky whiners, straying from God and following our own will instead of His!

When and where do you stray from God’s path to follow your own?

In what ways can you live in response to His provision, salvation, and love?

Into Scripture...

Deuteronomy 4:32-40

Deuteronomy 7:6-9

Isaiah 43:1-3

For Consideration...

God gives us Scripture and His ever-present Holy Spirit to show us His greatness, to fully convince our hearts of His power and of His love for us. Just as He gave awesome signs to the Israelites so they would trust in and follow Him, God works in your life also so that you might know and live to glorify Him. God wants good things for you; He has a plan for your life. He has called you to be His holy child, set aside for His special purpose. He has chosen you despite the fact that you are sinful and unworthy. He has chosen you because He loves you, and He wants to be your God, no matter what it costs Him. In fact, He paid the highest price for you. He died on the cross and rose again—for you! He has redeemed you from Satan, sin, and death through Jesus Christ. His will is that you live in response to His calling, in response to His salvation, and in response to His love.

Do you live your life in response to God's choosing and redemption of you?

With Prayer...

Humbly ask for His forgiveness and for His strength and guidance. Consider ways in which you can better strive to walk according to His lead. Know with confidence that He is your God, that He loves you, and that He will not forsake you.