

# BATTLING BIG ME

## Embrace the Value of Conflict

**Texts: Numbers 20:1-13; Mark 8:34-35; Romans 12:2; James 4:1**

If you are just joining us this morning, we are in a series of reflections on how God works to design our lives, so that we can not only fulfill our potential but be of use to his purposes in the world. In Week One of our study, we looked at how God uses the big blue backdrop of CULTURE to equip us and set a context for his further work in and through us. Last week, Andy Crouch helped us see how God also shapes us through the gift of CALLING, as God draws our little stories up into the great story of his work to restore his image and true flourishing to this Creation. Today, we're going to think about the role that CONFLICT plays as one of God's best tools for designing our lives. And to begin that study we're going to read from God's Word... [Read Num 20:1-13]

### A Character Problem

When we meet him in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Numbers, the man we know as Moses is having a tough day. It has been years now since Moses was that sweet little Jewish baby that Pharaoh's daughter drew out of the blue waters of the river Nile and raised as her own. Moses has now become a rather amazing man.

Exodus 2:2 gives us a hint that Moses had been blessed from the get-go with natural good looks. The Bible says, furthermore, that **"Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action"** (Acts 7:22). The Jewish historian, Josephus, adds that by the time he reached his young adulthood, Moses, had become a skilled general who led the armies of Egypt to a stunning victory in a war against Ethiopia.

In other words, Moses has it all. He's handsome, well-educated, eloquent, and brave. By the time he's forty years old, he has fortune, fame, and a record of heroic military achievement. God had used Moses' CULTURE to equip him for extraordinary influence. God was starting to CALL Moses to let his story become part of the much larger story of God's plan for the freedom and flourishing of Israel. But before Moses can fulfill his full potential, he is going to have to CONFRONT in himself a major character problem – as, perhaps, some of us need to do too.

The Bible says that **"one day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew..."** (Exo 2:11). Now, remember that Moses had the kind of public stature to order the Egyptian to stop and he'd

almost certainly have backed off. Moses had the strength and military skill to force the Egyptian to back off, if his word wasn't enough. Moses had the political and legal connections to help drive change in the treatment of workers. But Moses' rage at the injustice he was seeing simply got the best of him. **"Looking this way and that and seeing no one [watching], he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand"** (Exo 2:12). When his act was discovered, Moses fled the country. He would spend the next 40 years herding sheep in the wilderness of Midian instead of fixing injustices at home. How many more slaves do you suppose got beaten and worse during those 40 years?

It's not just here that this anger management problem shows up. In Exodus 32, Moses is now out in the wilderness leading the Israelites. God calls him to a mountain summit and gives him Ten Commandments to guide the life of Israel. But while he's away, the Israelites hold the equivalent of a massive idolatrous keg party. The Bible says, **"When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his ANGER burned and he threw the tablets out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf the people had made and burned it in the fire; then he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it"** (Exo 32:19-20).

Wow. That's a bit beyond kicking the cat, isn't it? It's like Dad finds the kids playing video games on Thanksgiving when they were supposed to be setting the table. So Dad takes the beautiful turkey Mom prepared to feed the family and he smashes it on the floor in front of them. Then he grinds up the Xbox in the garbage disposal and forces the kids to eat it, with cranberry sauce. It's sort of like that, but bigger.

Then there's the story from Numbers 20 – our lesson for today. The Israelites are traveling through the Desert of Zin (Num 20:1a). They can't find a rest stop that has beverages. The kids in the car are cranky and complaining. They're acting like they never wanted to go on this trip in the first place (Num 20:3-5a). Moses asks God for help and God instructs Moses to gather the people around the staff that represents God's power. Just **"SPEAK to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water"** (Num 20:8), God says. In this way, the people will know that I the Lord are with them. By now, however, Moses is caught up in one of those "Do I have to do everything?!" rages. **"He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, must WE bring you water out of this rock?'"** (Num 20:10) And then, he doesn't just speak to the stone as God had said. Instead, **"Moses raised his arm and STRUCK the rock TWICE with his staff"** (Num 20:11). Can you picture this?

### **The Voice of the Big Me**

Even if we can identify a bit with Moses here, there's no way to perfume these episodes. They are examples of excessive, out-of-control, ultimately unhelpful behavior. God makes very clear that HE doesn't approve of it. In response to this self-focused petulance and outright disobedience, God tells Moses that he will not get to go to the Promised Land (Num 20:12). The bottom line is that Moses has lots of great qualities that advance God's purposes. His wrath isn't one of them. It comes from that place deep within Moses – and perhaps all of us – that one author calls "The Big Me."

In his marvelous book, *THE ROAD TO CHARACTER*, David Brooks asserts that on the journey to becoming people of beautiful character and transforming influence, the most significant battle you and I face is with our inflated selves. All of us are tempted to want a life that is all about ME – my will and way, my comforts and choices, my tastes and temperament, my position and power. This isn't new, of course. It goes back to the Garden of Eden, where the Serpent tells Adam and Eve that they SHOULD be as God.

But once that kind of pride takes hold, then passions like anger, lust, gluttony, envy, greed, or sloth get rationalized and magnified in a person's life. Even generally credible people like Moses, can be given to fits of prideful passion or compulsivity that are ruinous to them and others. You've probably encountered parents, bosses, pastors, celebrities, even presidential candidates, that were gifted in all kinds of ways but had these character flaws so insidious or glaring that you wondered: How do they not see it? Why do they not change that?

There was a once-thriving moral tradition, says Brooks, that encouraged people to do battle with an inflated or unexamined sense of self. From childhood on, people were taught "to be more skeptical of their desires, more aware of their own weaknesses, more intent on combatting the flaws in their own natures and turning weakness into strength." In the last 60 years, however, "we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to the culture of what you might call the Big Me."

Listen to the refrains from the latest Disney-Pixar movies, says Brooks: "Be true to yourself above all else. Trust your intuitions." Pay attention to the typical commencement speeches: "Follow your passion. Don't accept limits. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great." In her phenomenal best-seller, *EAT PRAY LOVE*, Elizabeth Gilbert tells us that God manifests himself through "my own voice from within my own self.... God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are." This is the Selfie culture. It's the one where people get trophies for coming in seventh place and feel comfortable broadcasting on social media their trips to the grocery store.

As Brooks rightly observes, this "emphasis on self-actualization and self-esteem" is not all bad. For example, it "gave millions of women a language to articulate

and cultivate self-assertion, strength, and identity." But the emphasis went too far. It eventually deadened many of us to that Ancient and Benevolent Voice that says: **"Adam, where are you?"** (Gen 3:9). What's really going on with you? Assess your behaviors. Question your motivations. Become more ruthlessly self-aware and considerate of others, because HUMILITY is the beginning of real wisdom. Jesus said: **"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves... For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it."** (Mark 8:34-35). I will give them a better self.

### **Engaging the Battle**

In his book, ON BEING A REAL PERSON, Harry Emerson Fosdick puts it this way: "The beginning of worth-while living is the confrontation with ourselves." That's not a comfortable idea, but it is a true one. One of the most impressive things about the story of Moses is how humble Moses was by the end of his journey -- how familiar he was with his besetting sins and eager for the grace of God in dealing with them. Study the life of King David or the Apostle Paul and you'll see the same pattern. These people confronted the Big Me in themselves. As they grew in self-awareness and humility, they grew in greatness as instruments of God.

So here are a few practical ideas for engaging the battle with your Big Me. First of all: Determine what success looks like for you. You're living in a world that tells you that success is defined by fame, fortune, good-looks, and getting your way. Do you buy that? Because the Bible says that success is defined by becoming a person of Christ-like character – a person refined and revealed by suffering, remarkably humble, whose greatest influence came through his willing to sacrifice and serve for the sake of love. Choose the goal for your life: More of Me or More of Him.

Secondly, take a page out of the recovery movement. Make a fearless moral inventory of your life. One of the biggest values Moses gained from wandering through the wilderness for so many years was the time it gave him to really get to know himself – the good, the bad, the ugly. In your worship materials today, we've given you a two-sided resource that may be helpful to you in this regard. It's on our website along with this message too. On one side, we've printed an excerpt from what David Brooks calls, The Humility Code. Read it today. Ask yourself: How much does this correspond to the way I live? What do I need to do differently so that this description describes me? As Saint Paul said: **"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"** (Romans 12:2).

Thirdly: Invite others to speak truth into your life that you may not easily see on your own. On the opposite side of the insert we've given you, you'll find a

guide to practicing what is called "THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN." It's an ancient spiritual discipline by which Christians have invited God to show them where he has been active and what he has been trying to say to them in recent hours. Practice that discipline some time this week. Ask God: "Lord, what's the truth you want to speak into my life? What do I need to see about myself? Where has pride, anger, lust, gluttony, envy, greed, sloth, or some other besetting sin shown up in a Bigger Me than you want to see?" Or ask a family member, friend, or workmate: "Where am I tripping myself up or injuring others? Can you help me improve my character?"

Finally: Seize your next conflict with others as an opportunity to become more like Jesus and less like the old you. The Apostle James once asked: **"What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?"** (James 4:1).

I think back to a conflict I had with my wife, Amy, some time ago. I was heading outside to barbecue a cut of salmon and Amy warned me to be careful to keep an eye on the fish because I often burned it. I was really miffed. It struck right at the heart of my need to be competent at crucial manly tasks like barbecuing. "I'm NOT going to burn it," I snapped back. A few minutes later I went back out to check on the fish. The barbecue was an inferno. A grease fire had clearly started below the grill.

I brought the charcoaled fish inside and Amy sighed. "You burned the fish." She said it very calmly, but I flooded with defensive anger. She clearly could not see that this was NOT my fault. I came back at her and she came back at me. And the whole interaction got ugly. I stormed out, and then went back at it again, each time trying to refine my argument, and justify myself, and point out how wrong she was to criticize me.

And then Amy said, quietly: "Dan, what is it about you that finds it so hard to simply admit that you made a mistake?" And in a nanosecond I went from being 100% certain that she was in the wrong, to being 100% sure that I was. In a flash of insight, I could see it – not just in this instance but in so many other areas of my life -- I just HAD to be seen as competent and unflinching, worthy of the praises of others. But that wasn't true or even what God and others required. It was simply the writhing of the Big Me.

What are the conflicts that are typical in your life? Could the Great Designer be trying to use those to help you confront those sinful, distorted parts of yourself that God wants to chisel or prune away. You see, God has a simple vision for your life and mine. He wants to shape in us the character of Jesus, the very image we are designed to be.

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Martin R. De Haan, "Moses: His Anger and What It Cost Him," RBC Ministries  
David Brooks, The Road to Character, p. 5