

The Major Obstacle

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

From Egypt to Canaan, God tested Israel to see if they would trust Him for provision and protection. At the same time, Israel tested Yahweh with their obstinate unbelief expressed in complaining and disobedience. One would expect that rebellion would be judged and punished, but God was gracious and longsuffering because of His faithfulness to His promise and purpose. The divine goal of the Exodus is stated in 15:17: “You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.”

In light of the many difficulties and trials on the path from Egypt to the Promised Land, Mount Sinai was the major obstacle. This fact is seen by comparing the events before and after Israel’s year-long stay at the mountain. Before Sinai, Israel murmured, but was never punished; after Sinai the people’s failures were judged very harshly. For example, no sooner did Israel leave Sinai than the people began to complain and the Lord heard it. His “anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp” (Numbers 11:1). Pre-Sinai Sabbath violators were merely admonished; the post-Sinai Sabbath violator was put to death (Number 15:32-36). This change demands that we take a deeper look.

The test at Meribah (Exodus 17:1-7) is particularly revealing. The people found themselves in a desperate condition in a place they came to “according to the commandment of the LORD.” There was no water for them to drink. Their complaints escalated to point that Moses feared for his life (v. 4). In response to Moses’ prayers, the Lord told him to stand before the rock at Horeb. The Lord would come down and stand before them on the rock. Moses was to take his rod and strike the rock. In effect, the Lord ordered Moses to strike Him in a typical prophetic fashion. The Lord would bear the punishment His people deserved. When Moses obeyed, the Lord provided water from the smitten rock.

After Sinai, the people returned to Meribah and were again without water (Numbers 20:1-13). This time, God commanded Moses to merely speak to the rock. However, an angry Moses struck the rock twice with his staff. Although God provided abundant water to meet the need, Moses’ disobedience was judged severely. Moses and Aaron were exiled from the Promised Land. In this incident Moses was the substitute for the people; another prophetic hint that Israel’s disobedience to the Sinai covenant would result in their future exile from Canaan.

Beware lest we miss the important lessons of holiness in these events. Everything Israel experienced prepared for God’s greater purpose. Sinai’s holiness prepares for Mount Zion’s grace and a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:18-24). Even in the awfulness of the fiery judgments, previews of grace abound. The rock in Horeb points to Calvary and the smitten Savior bearing the wrath of God for an undeserving people in order that they might have the water of life (1 Corinthians 10:4).