

Two strikes and out!

From Sinai to Canaan

Study 5

Warmup



What is the most boring thing you have ever done? If you were given the task of wasting someone's time, what would you do? If you were given the task of wasting someone's life, what would you do?

Introduction

Following the tragic reconnaissance mission to Canaan (Study 4, Numbers 13 & 14), the Israelites were condemned to wander in the desert for several decades. Poignantly, little is recorded of this time. Asaph in Psalm 78:32,33 expresses the tragedy this way: "In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe. So he ended their days in futility."

By the time the first verse begins in Numbers 20, some thirty-eight years have passed since the story of the spies, (that is, nearly 40 years in total,) and the Israelites have come full circle to again camp at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran (cf Numbers 13:1).

They are now ready and poised to advance northward into the Promised Land. Having buried behind them their previous mistakes, and with the scent of 'milk and honey' in the air, what could possibly go wrong?

Read Numbers 20:1-13

¹ In the first month the whole Israelite community arrived at the Desert of Zin, and they stayed at Kadesh. There Miriam died and was buried. ² Now there was no water for the community, and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. ³ They quarrelled with Moses and said, "If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! ⁴ Why did you bring the Lord's community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? ⁵ Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!"

⁶ Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the Lord appeared to them. ⁷ The Lord said to Moses, ⁸ "Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the

rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink." ⁹ So Moses took the staff from the Lord 's presence, just as he commanded him. ¹⁰ 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?" ¹¹ Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock



twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. ¹² But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them." ¹³ These were the waters of Meribah, where the Israelites quarrelled with the Lord and where he showed himself holy among them.

First Impressions

Record some of your own first impressions about the passage you have just read.

Commentary

It is helpful to know that there are two occasions in the Exodus journey where Moses is commanded to draw water from the rock. The first is recorded in Exodus 17:1-7, at a place called Rephidim, just weeks after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea; that is,

early in the first year of the Exodus. The second is recorded in Numbers 20, at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran, near the end of the 40 years of wandering. On the first occasion, Moses is instructed to strike the rock with his staff. On the second, he is clearly told to simply speak to the rock (Numbers 20:8).

Question 1

Do you feel sorry for Moses? What things do we need to remember here, lest we think that God is being overly-strict and unfair?

Comment: That Moses is at fault here is confirmed in Psalm 106:32,33 in these words: "By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord, and trouble came to Moses because of them; for they rebelled against the Spirit of God, and rash words came from Moses' lips."



Question 2

Consider these important (but hard) verses from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 10:

¹ For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.

These verses speak about the real privileges that the Israelites had, but squandered because of their persistent idolatry and sin; and Paul draws from their example to warn the Corinthians about their complacency in eating food in the houses of idols (1 Corinthians 8 & 9).

In saying that Christ was present among the Israelites, and that Christ was really the provider of the water they drank in the desert, how does this add to Moses' sin in striking the rock in anger?

Question 3

Why did the water still flow from the rock, even though Moses had disobeyed and dishonoured God? (See 2 Timothy 2:11-13)

Question 4

When this tragic incident happened, Moses was 120 years old, and knew that the 40 years of desert wandering were nearly at their end. (Deuteronomy 34:7 reminds us that, even at the age of 120, Moses was still healthy and still had his wits.) What might senior saints learn from this, especially as they near the end of their days?

Question 5

The Book of Deuteronomy provides further commentary on this sin of Moses and Aaron (Deuteronomy 32:48-52), and explains why Moses will not lead the people into the Promised Land. (The denial of privilege remained in place, even though Moses pleaded for God to relax the punishment. See Deuteronomy 3:23-28.) What might junior saints learn from this, especially as they set out on their life of discipleship?

Question 6

It is remarkable that Moses, who writes the first five books, includes this terrible and humiliating incident about his own sin. What does this say about his humility and repentance? What might all Christians learn from this?

Conclusion

Try to commit to memory this highly relevant verse from 1 Corinthians 10, that reflects on these mistakes made by God's people during the Exodus, but expresses the good hope that Christians are not helpless to repeat them:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Cor 10:13).