

## FROM BELIEVER TO REBEL

Weylan Deaver

Having been mercifully delivered from Egyptian slavery, Israel hurriedly followed up with complaining at Rephidim for lack of water (Exodus 17:1-7). God instructed Moses to take his staff and strike the rock at Horeb, from which water would then flow. Moses obeyed. God sent water. Moses named the place "Massah" and "Meribah" after the people's quarreling with and testing of the Lord.

Flash forward forty years. Israel has yet to enter Canaan, but the wilderness wandering is nearing its end. They are back at Kadesh (where the ten spies had given their negative report so many years ago). With a chance to make a better showing than their predecessors, the new generation of Israelites, instead, shows themselves cut from the same cantakerous cloth as their forebears (Numbers 20:1-13). They complain for lack of water. God instructs Moses to take the staff, but, this time, speak to the rock, after which water would flow. Instead of talking to the rock, Moses talks to the people and then strikes the rock. Twice. God still sends water, but accuses Moses of both disbelief (v. 12) and rebellion (v. 24).

The two scenarios, separated by four decades, were nearly identical, with Moses at the center of each. The people had not changed, but the directions God gave Moses had. If some of us do not think it matters much, maybe we should ask Moses. Consider three significant truths.

**First, the same act can be obedience one time, but rebellion the next.** When Moses struck the rock in Exodus 17:6, he was obedient. When Moses struck the rock in Numbers 20:11 he was rebellious. Incredible? Not if we are duly impressed that God means what he says. After all, God is not obligated, once having provided water, to provide it again in exactly the same way.

**Second, historic divine precedent does not necessarily establish present divine approval.** Think of it. When God accused Moses of rebellion at Kadesh, Moses could have replied, "Lord, I simply followed the instructions you gave me last time around." Moses could claim divine precedent for his actions at Kadesh. After all, God had told him at Rephidim to strike the rock. But past instruction from God is not normative if it differs with present instruction from God. In his lifetime, regarding what to do about a rock, Moses received differing instructions from God. How much more, then, should we appreciate the difference that obtains between the Old Testament and the New Testament?

**Third, God tested Israel and Moses, and God will test us.** "And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not" (Deuteronomy 8:2, ESV). Part of the reason for divine instruction is to weed out those who refuse to keep it.

Consider a growing trend among some churches of Christ to use instrumental music during worship. No precedent can be found in the worship of the church during the first century. But, how many times is an appeal made to the Old Testament in an effort to establish divine precedent for musical instruments in New Testament worship (e.g. Psalm 150)? According to the rationale, we are supposed to think that, if God had it back then, then surely he would not object to having it today.

Yet, that is precisely where we can learn a lesson from Moses. Remember, the same act can be obedience one time, but rebellion the next. God told Israel he tested them to see whether or not they would actually keep his commandments. And remember, historic divine precedent does not necessarily establish present divine approval. The Old Testament has many elements which, were they brought into the church's worship, would be sinful. If these are not legitimate lessons taught by what Moses did, then, pray tell, what can we possibly learn from the accounts (don't forget Romans 15:4)?

Moses followed a God-given precedent at Kadesh when he struck the rock. The problem was, the old precedent from Rephidim (strike the rock) had been superseded by new instruction at Kadesh (speak to the rock). Failure to comply with the new made Moses--on that occasion--an unbelieving rebel. Question: What does it make Christians who refuse to abide solely by New Testament instruction? While the gospel of Christ does not tell us to worship by playing on any manmade musical instruments, it does tell us to speak to each other in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). Ponder that point. When he failed to simply speak to the rock, Moses was in rebellion. Perhaps many in Moses' day would have considered it a non-issue whether Moses struck or spoke to a rock. Doubtless many today consider a piano in worship a non-issue. But the tenor of Scripture indicates otherwise. Nor is the Bible shy of reminding that "our God is a consuming fire," into whose hands "it is a fearful thing to fall" (Hebrews 12:29; 10:31).