

# THE LESSON OF MOSES AT MERIBAH

The sons of Jacob and their tribes were greatly blessed by the Pharaoh of Egypt, during the time of Joseph, but they were later enslaved bitterly during the reigns of ensuing Pharaohs. At last, after several centuries, God heeded their plea for mercy and selected Moses to lead them out of slavery to the Promised Land.

**Exodus 3:7–8a** *Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, <sup>8a</sup>and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey."* [NRSV]

The Lord prepared the Israelis for the long journey by inspiring their faith with stunning demonstrations of His power, as He afflicted the Egyptians with many extraordinary plagues: land invasions by frogs, then by lice, then by flies and locusts; the river Nile's waters turning into blood; then again pestilence and sores for beasts and for humans, followed by three days of total darkness. Finally, the most devastating plague of all: the death of the firstborn of all the Egyptian families.

This was followed by another great demonstration: the parting of the Red Sea, which allowed their safe crossing, while immediately drowning the pursuing Egyptians:

**Exodus 14:27–28** *Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. <sup>28</sup>The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen — the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.* [NIV]

What the Lord expected from His people, as He explained to Moses, was faith: the trust that He is God, the only God; the faith that allows people to separate themselves from the world and from their own selves to consecrate themselves to Him and Him alone.

**Leviticus 20:7** *Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy; for I am the Lord your God.* [NRSV]

Many centuries later, Jesus, the Son of Man, bore witness to the importance of faith:

**Luke 18:8b** ..... *"But when the Son of Man returns, how many will he find on the earth who have faith?"* [NLT]

Thus — having prepared the children of Israel by building up their faith — the Lord continued to nourish their faith during the journey to the Promised Land through the wilderness:

**Acts 7:36** *He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.* [NIV]

Indeed, faith does grow by *wonders and signs*, and at times, also through testing and trials — as the Apostle Peter taught the churches:

**1 Peter 1:6–7** *In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;* [NASB]

Famously, God tested the faith of Abraham,

**Hebrews 11:17** *By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son.* [KJV]

Abraham passed the test for all generations to learn:

**James 2:23** *And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God.* [KJV]

And the Lord did test the faith of Moses and of the Israelis in the journey through the wilderness: shortly after leaving Egypt, they lacked water, became thirsty and began to rebel against Moses, who was leading them, as the Lord was directing him.

**Numbers 20:2–5** *There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup>The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! <sup>4</sup>Why then have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? <sup>5</sup>Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink."* [NASB]

The people lost faith in the Lord: faced with a hardship, they no longer believed in His power and in His unending provisions. The strife became so virulent that — in desperation — not daring to deal with them:

**Exodus 17:4** ..... *Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me.* [KJV]

Hearing Moses cry,

**Numbers 20:7–11** ..... *the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, <sup>8</sup>Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou*

shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink. <sup>9</sup>And Moses took the rod from before the Lord, as he commanded him. <sup>10</sup>And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? <sup>11</sup>And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their beasts also. [KJV]

Thus far, it may appear that, in time of great difficulty, Moses and Aaron turned in earnest to the Lord asking for guidance and that the Lord graciously showed His mercy and succored His children.

However, perhaps to our surprise, God was not pleased; He found serious fault, not only with the people, but also with Moses and Aaron: for their lack of faith and He punished them.

**Numbers 20:12** *But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them."* [NRSV]

This may be surprising, because Moses and Aaron had prayed and asked for guidance.

Indeed God did not find fault with their prayer; rather the Lord explained to them that He expected His ministers, Moses and Aaron, to stand up — they themselves — in the middle of the assembly and declare His Holiness: that is, His being above all, the Sovereign God, Who does not tolerate lack of belief and trust in His almighty power and mercy.

The Lord could not rely on the words and witness of Moses, but had to "show His holiness" by Himself directly.

**Numbers 20:13** *These are the waters of Meribah, where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord, and by which he showed his holiness.* [NRSV]

The fault of Moses and Aaron was so serious that God denied them the privilege and honor of entering into the Promised Land.

All through his life, Moses remembered this event and so did the Lord.

In fact, when shortly before his death, Moses delivered his "Song of Blessing" to the assembly of Israel,

**Deuteronomy 32:48–51** *That same day the Lord said to Moses, <sup>49</sup>"Go to Moab, to the mountains east of the river, and climb Mount Nebo, which is across from Jericho. Look out across the land of Canaan, the land I am giving to the people of Israel as their own special possession. <sup>50</sup>Then you will die there on the mountain. You will join your ancestors, just as Aaron, your brother, died on Mount Hor and joined his ancestors. <sup>51</sup>For both of you betrayed me with the Israelites at the waters of Meribah at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. You failed to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel there.* [NLT]

God reminded Moses of how he and Aaron had betrayed Him, when they did not uphold Him and demonstrate His holiness to the people, so that He had to intervene directly.

This is an important lesson for what the Lord expects of me, one of His people, who

**1 Peter 2:9** *..... are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light;* [KJV]

The lesson is that, at any time of difficulty or strife or uncertainty, when my faith or the faith of my assembly is tried and threatened, the most important action — before any request is made — is to uphold the holiness of the Lord, so that all may recognize His power and mercy, so that His name be hallowed and so that His will be done: no one may despair, for all should know that He is a Holy, Living God — before any mercy is granted or even requested in prayer.

And when we do pray, as Jesus taught us:

**Luke 11:2a** *Jesus said, "This is how you should pray: 'Father, may your name be kept holy. ....'"* [NLT]

Proclaiming the Father's holiness is not a liturgical procedure, rather it is the very first thing, the top priority for us, who

**Revelation 1:6** *..... He has made [us] to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father — to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.* [NASB]