

OBEEDIENCE IN THE WILDERNESS

By Jamie Buckingham

In the Sinai desert, God demonstrated that he demands absolute obedience by His leaders and will not share it with any man. In this excerpt from his latest book, this noted author shares a lesson he learned in the desolation of the Israelites' wilderness—a lesson that applies today.

Left: During the flash floods in the desert, water rushes through narrow wadis such as this one in the Sinai Desert. Photo by Jamie Buckingham.

Few desert experiences are as welcome—or as terrifying—as rain. Especially is this true in the high mountain regions of the Sinai. Average rainfall in the southern Sinai is less than three inches per year. There are no rivers, no lakes, no forests, no meadows—just bare rock, boulders and sand, with only a few plants adapted to these harsh conditions. Rain rarely falls, but when it does, it is torrential. In fact, the desert may go for years without any rain, then have it all fall at one time.

My first encounter with rain in the Sinai was an awesome experience. Our small group had made camp early in a narrow part of Wadi Nasb. It was an ideal place to spend the night. The almost sheer granite walls of the canyon extended upward from the soft white sand of the wadi floor. The narrow, twisting pass provided a sense of ultimate privacy as we unloaded our sleeping gear from the truck and set up the butane tanks so we could heat water for our evening meal.

All day long we had noticed a rare

buildup of clouds to the southwest, over the St. Catherine range near Mt. Sinai. The clouds were miles away, however, and we did not expect it would rain on us during the night—although there was a strong possibility it had been raining in the high mountains.

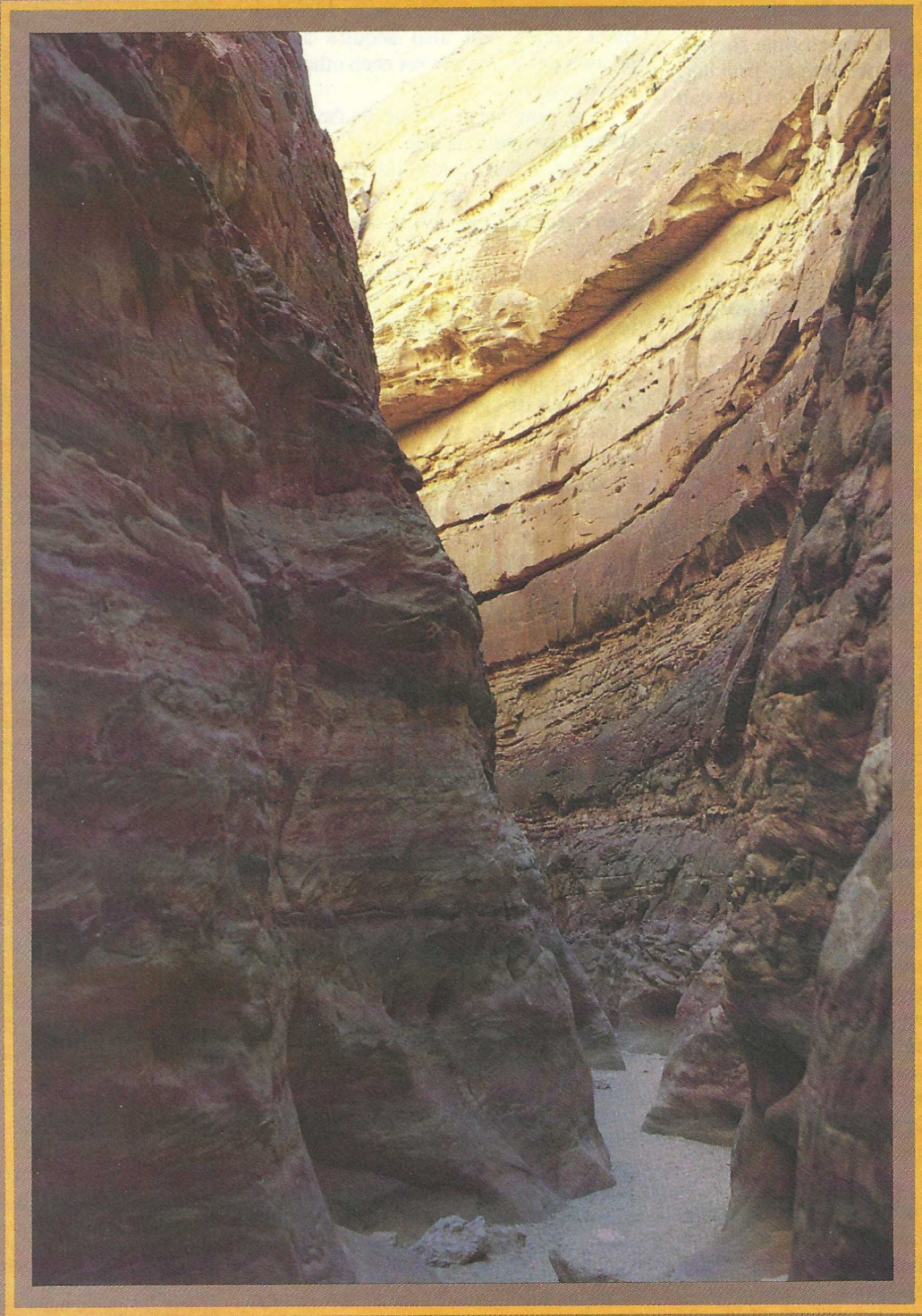
I had gone up the wadi several hundred yards to find an “alone place” to spread my sleeping bag for the night when I noticed the sand under my feet was moist. I had been in this area a number of times and knew there were no springs. Why then this moisture, when overhead it was clear?

Instead of unrolling my sleeping bag, I returned to the truck and told our guide what I had discovered.

“It’s time to move to higher ground,” he said. “This wadi may be getting ready to fill up with water.”

We quickly called the men together, reloaded the truck and headed back down the wadi. By the time we reached a wider place where we could pull the truck onto a high plateau, the water was already

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beginning to flow down this ancient waterway. The rain in the high mountains, although miles from where we were, had cascaded off the sides of the granite mountains in great sheets. Like waterfalls, it had flooded the narrow wadis. Growing in size, the raging river was surging toward the sea through the waterways that empty in this region near Dahab. This has happened for centuries, causing a huge alluvial plain that fans out from the coast into the Gulf of Aqaba.

From our new high perch we watched the wadi, where only minutes before we had been spreading our sleeping bags, become a raging, torrential river. The muddy water came pouring out of the mouth of the wadi in an awesome eruption. Within minutes it was no longer a trickling stream, but a mighty cataract almost 12 feet deep, sweeping along everything that lay in its path. Trees were uprooted and huge boulders tumbled

sand. The next morning, after the sun was up and the desert exposed to the heat and wind, the ground was once again parched and dry. We continued our way up Wadi Nasb to our destination.

During these occasional flash floods an extraordinary event may take place. As the wall of water rages through the wadis, sometimes as deep as 30 feet, it exerts great force on the walls of the canyons. At the places where igneous and sedimentary rocks come together in the sides of the mountains, the water occasionally hollows out great fissures inside the mountains. These hollow mountains become literal reservoirs, holding sometimes thousands of gallons, forced into them by the floods.

After the flood has passed, the water begins to seep from its mountain reservoir. Calcium deposits quickly form around the opening, sealing off the water in the rock. When the winter snows melt, this moisture percolates into the ground

crimson. There was no vegetation, no skin to cover this skeleton of the countryside. The people walked silently as their leader marched through the narrow canyons and around steep bends where minute by minute the scenery changed before their eyes, forbidding and breathtaking.

To each of the Israelites the mountains had a different meaning. To some they looked like the work of a master mason, to others like a host of bowed and petrified giants. Still others felt they were looking at a battlefield abandoned by giants who had been hurling great stones at each other. Whatever the feeling, each one sensed he was entering an area that was sacred, holy, set apart.

Before them, in the distant southeast, they could catch glimpses of the sun reflecting off the towering peak of Mt. Sinai. To get there, they would have to go through Watia Pass, a deep cleft in a peculiar wall-like body of granite that looked like the work of a sword-wielding giant who had slashed the landscape in frustrated anger. Beyond the pass the landscape changed, the mountains becoming even wilder, higher and more barren. How could they survive? Where, here in these high, desolate mountains, could they find water?

Therefore, despite feelings of awe, the grumbling began once again. "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, 'Give us water to drink'" (Ex. 17:1,2 NIV).

Moses rebuked the people, saying they were doubting God's ability to take care of them. But thirst drives people into panic. As they murmured at the springs of Marah, so they did at Rephidim. "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Ex. 17:3 NIV).

Exasperated, Moses cried out to God for help. Then, deep in his spirit, he remembered this place. The presence of the dikes, the mixture of sandstone and granite—surely there would be a water reservoir behind one of these rock walls.

Moving ahead of the people with some of the older tribal leaders, he walked slowly up the wadi, gently tapping the rock walls with his staff. Suddenly there was a soft spot. Commanding the people to fetch their water containers, he drew back his staff and with a mighty blow smashed his heavy rod into the calcium deposit on the side of the mountain.

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along as wood chips in the current. I sat watching, amazed.

The year before a similar flood had swept down out of the high mountains toward the south, roaring through the wadis and erupting at Sharm el Sheikh, filling the hotel up to the second floor with water and sand before emptying into the Red Sea. That particular flood had swept away two Bedouin villages, killing three children. On another occasion, just a few months prior, a similar flashflood had poured out of the Negev Desert near Ein Gedi, washing away the main highway from Jericho to Eilat and sweeping a pickup truck with three teenagers into the Dead Sea, where all perished.

Sitting on my rocky perch high above the raging torrent, I gave thanks we had not been caught in that narrow wadi at night, resting in our sleeping bags when the water from the high mountains surged through. Then we waited for the water to go down, which took about an hour, and then made our way to another area where we spent the night on dry

and replenishes these reservoirs. Sometimes this water will be absorbed into the ground and reappear farther down the wadi as a spring. At other times it remains trapped in the rock.

I have watched a Bedouin shepherd, in an action called a *t'mile*, take his heavy staff and, by striking the rock at exactly the right point, break loose the blockage, allowing the water to gush forth. It was this action Moses took when faced with another water emergency.

Continuing their trek inland toward the high mountains, the Israelites noticed how the scenery began to change. The burning sand gave way to massive granite mountains. These were crossed by numerous dikes, flows of magma that had forced their way up along fissures in the rocks from earlier volcanic action. The colors changed, too, from gray and yellow sand to the mixture of rock displays in various shades of red, pink, black and purple, crossed by the dikes with streaks of dark green, black and

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Instantly it broke, and water gushed forth.

It was really not necessary, for just a mile or so beyond that place lay the richest, lushest oasis in the Sinai. Moses could have commanded the people to stop their murmuring, put them in a forced march, and reached the oasis in Wadi Feiran within the hour. But God wanted to reveal His miraculous power through Moses. Even though the *t'mile* was something Moses had done before at different places in the Sinai, this was a new occurrence for the Israelites. The people were on the verge of losing respect for their leader. Even though God could have directed Moses to keep moving to the natural springs just ahead, He chose instead to let Moses get the glory in the eyes of the people by striking the rock.

It would be another 40 years before Moses was faced with a similar challenge. It happened in the vicinity of Kadesh-Barnea about the time the wilderness wanderings were over. Preparation was almost complete for them to move northward to possess the land.

As he had done years before near Rephidim, Moses approached the Lord. "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" (Num. 20:8 NIV).

But a subtle change had taken place in Moses over the years. Earlier in his life he had been a man who listened keenly and adjusted immediately. He had been a man of daring, venturesome faith. But Moses had grown old. His ways were set. He no longer welcomed change but resisted it by fleeing to the safe harbor of tradition. He was like Tevye in Sholem Aleichem's *Fiddler on the Roof*. "How do we keep our balance?" the old Jew asked. "I can tell you in one word: tradition.... Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof."

Moses was no longer willing to dance to God's tune. The roof was too steep. The danger of falling too great. He had slipped into a trap man wilderness pilgrims mire in—the trap of tradition. He failed to remember how many tombstones dotted the desert with the epitaph *We've Never Done It This Way Before*.

True, there is protection in tradition. It eliminates unnecessary risk; it prevents our making the same mistake twice. Tradition takes the fiddler from the roof and places him on solid ground—perhaps even locks him in the basement of the

church. But there is a vast difference between learning from history and becoming a slave to dead tradition. There is safety in tradition, but it often keeps one from hearing the voice of God. Equally tragic, tradition may bind the one who does hear that voice.

Moses was no longer a new wineskin. He had become old. His wineskin was dry and cracked. His spirit, although still faithful to God, had lost its elasticity. He no longer had the willingness to expand. It was easier to do it as he had done it in the past—successfully, I may add—than to venture out and attempt something new, even though God had commanded it.

Thus, instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded, Moses reverted to a time-tested procedure. He struck the rock in a *t'mile* as he had done so many years before at Rephidim. Not only that, but he struck it with bitterness and arrogance. "Listen, you rebels," he

Moses to front stage. He wanted the people to hear him, to respect him, to follow him. But this was a new generation. These young men and women were learning there was more to being under authority than following a powerful, knowledgeable, Charismatic leader who knew how to get water out of a rock. They were learning to hear the voice of God for themselves. And that is always done best by following the example of their leader—a leader who had just proved himself unable.

It is a sad commentary on many of us. We begin so well and finish so poorly—not because we sin but because we get careless, because we lose that fine edge of faith, because we find it easier to drive in the ruts than to strike out over new territory.

Moses was like the Jewish driver of our desert vehicle who refused to leave the ruts in one of the wide wadis. I had asked him to pull out of the ruts made by

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shouted, "must we bring you water out of this rock?" (Num. 20:10 NIV).

Water came forth, of course. Humanistic knowledge, too, produces results. But even though Moses brought forth water, he did it in his own strength. Many years later, as the Jews were rebuilding the Temple under Zerubbabel, God again spoke of this single aspect of His character: He demands absolute obedience by leaders and He will not share the glory with any man. The work of the Lord must not be done by human cunning or strength. "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zech. 4:6).

Therefore, even though Moses got results—and the people were pleased—another truth was evident: *God is not as interested in ends as He is in means*. In fact, how we do a thing seems more important to God than whether we succeed. The means are not only more important than the end; the means are an end themselves. It was a truth Jesus also taught: God does not require men to succeed, He just requires them to be faithful.

Earlier, at Rephidim, God had pushed

a previous truck many months before so we could explore an abandoned turquoise mine.

"Too dangerous," he grunted. He then went on to explain how the Egyptians had placed explosive landmines in this particular wadi during the Six-Day War. They had then fled, but before the Israelis could clear the mines, a flashflood had roared through the wadi, scattering the mines for miles down the old riverbed. The only safe place to drive was in the ruts. In fact, the driver told me, just a few months before an Israeli colonel had been killed when his jeep ran over one of those old landmines and it exploded.

I understood his point. But staying in the ruts would mean we could never explore the unknown. "Just walk lightly," he said, slouching down in his seat and pulling his cap over his eyes for a nap. "I'll be waiting here—if you get back."

We did get back, our pockets full of bright green and aqua turquoise nuggets. The driver examined our treasures, then reminded us it was "Tradition!" that had kept the Jews alive all these centuries.

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“But,” he chuckled, “we don’t have any turquoise either.”

Ruts are safe and comfortable. But the primary lesson of the wilderness is to bring us to the place where we can hear God and walk in His ways—even when He says to get out of the ruts.

Moses had lost his willingness to change. It was a sad day, for that meant he was disqualified to lead the young Israelites into Canaan. But the nation of Israel needed a leader who could obey orders. At the *Yam Suph*, Moses held out his rod and the wind blew back the water. But soon, in just a few months, this new generation would be approaching another watery barrier. The Jordan would be at flood stage. And instead of placing a man at the edge of the water, God had a deeper intention for this emerging nation. God wanted them to exhibit faith. They were to march into the water as it swirled around their feet. Only then would the water recede—not at the voice of a leader, but at the faith of men of God marching forward into a new world. If Moses could not obey God at the rock at Kadesh-Barnea, what would he do at the Jordan? Or, even more critical, how would he respond to the illogical instructions at the siege of Jericho? The wilderness lessons are stark.

What worked yesterday is not sufficient for today.

God’s Word yesterday must be adjusted by God’s Word today.

To be tyrannized by the past is the worst of all tyrannies.

The rut of tradition is but one step removed from a grave in the wilderness.

God’s Word to His pilgrims is fresh every morning. It is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Even though it may run counter to our traditions, or seem foolish at times, the man who trusts in Him will never be embarrassed or defeated.

“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him” (Ps. 32:8-10 NIV). 