

It's now two years since the people escaped from Egypt and headed for the promised land. They have spent time learning about 'plan and order' because God showed Moses the way the people were to move with the cloud and fire. They have learned how to carry the tabernacle presence of God; they have put in place God's commands regarding which tribes do what roles and duties (rosters) and they go out each day and pick up the manna that falls overnight for food. But this kind of tedious monotony starts to wear thin and it's not long before murmuring and complaining started. They start looking back instead of forwards. They are tired of manna and want meat and fish. When Moses hears all the whinging, he gets frustrated and God becomes angry. Now Moses starts complaining to God, "What did I do to deserve this? Am I the mother of these children? There are better things I could be doing than this." Every leader has mouthed similar words from time to time. The story is found in Numbers 11. The people kept taking exit ramps from God's path; they seemed intent on turning back. The joy of the trip has gone. The book of Numbers explains why a normally simple journey across desert took 40 years. It was because time and time again, the people took exit ramps from God's path. We sometimes forget that in our Christian lives we have an adversary. His name is Satan; he is absolutely committed on you turning back or turning aside from God's pathway. He even puts up a sign for us – "Exit ramp 2 kms ahead".... get ready here is your opportunity – to do your own thing! God has not delivered what he promised you. It's time for you to take charge and make your own choices. After all, what has God done for you; he has gone AWOL on you.

The first two exit ramps: **Exit Ramp No 1** *I will live to feel better. Life is hard; I am entitled to find relief. Lie of entitlement.* **Exit Ramp No 2** *I live to satisfy my deepest needs the way I want to – And I want satisfaction now. I have deep unfulfilled thirsts that need to be met that God seems to ignore.* The Bible teaches that our deepest thirst is not money, or to have a rewarding career, it is not the adulation of people, or even companionship, or to live in a particular country, it is to know God....our Creator...in a relationship. To this end, He is committed to you and you should trust Him one day at a time. You see, you might not have faith for the week, or years ahead, but you have enough for tomorrow! Trust me, one day at a time, especially when you are in a desert place. God's word for today in the desert is to keep going, keep saying yes to me, and keep moving with me. I will make a stream in your desert place; I will grow you strong there, I will make you productive, give you the desires of your heart when you put me first in your life. But we don't, we take exit ramps because they look so good. Here is the third exit ramp – it's the story found in Numbers 12.

Let's read the story together. **Exit Ramp No 3** *I need to be respected, heard and honoured in the way I deserve.* Today's story concerns the criticism of Moses by Aaron and Miriam. It raises the whole area of speaking against those whom God has appointed to lead. There have been many in Christian leadership who have used this passage and others from King David's life. For instance, 'speak not against the Lord's anointed' to justify flagrant misuse of power and abuse of leadership. Pastors and leaders who insist on their church members obeying what they say as though they are God himself. That is not what the Bible teaches. But, having said that, there is a principle in the Bible which God established; that he stands

by those whom he puts into leadership. Your leaders are not perfect, but they are your leaders, and when God has placed them in leadership, those who oppose, or murmur, or criticise them do so at the risk of being dealt with by God. I do not think you can take any other message than this from this story. Here is the interesting thing; more pastors and leaders are leaving the church ministry than staying in it. It's a job nobody seems to want. Of the approximately 20 people who trained with me in ministry, there is only 2 of us still left in ministry leadership. It's not something people want to do because, in leadership, you are open to a cheap shot for any malcontent person. We cut the legs out from under someone doing God's work by pointing out their failings and weaknesses. It may not be done outwardly, but it can be just as effective when done subtly, and for some in the church, there is always an ample supply of things to murmur, criticise and complain about. You see, here is the thing about ministry leadership - we are not doing what we do for the plaudits of people, we teach what the Bible says, and sometimes the message is difficult to hear. Our authority is not what we think are good ideas. Our authority comes from the message we are speaking, its God's Word – not ours. When we move away from what God says, we place ourselves outside the umbrella of God's protection. Our accountability is ultimately to the one who calls. – The I am! But every leader from time to time will face criticism, and opposition from those whom he leads. Some of it may be justified, but certainly, some of it won't be because it comes from the hurting and broken people who are on the journey with us. We are also not above being tempted, or losing our way, or for that matter, taking an off-ramp. Like Moses, we complain, "God, why did you give me these people? Am I their mother?"

This message is just as applicable to leaders as it is to people. Don't turn back, don't turn aside – don't take an exit ramp – keep going, keep moving. Many people in leadership take off-ramps from the path of life, so this message is also an exhortation to people in leadership to stay the course and fulfil your ministry. Don't be led astray or seduced into some other back alley thinking that will meet your thirst and think God won't notice. Do you know what it is that is your greatest ally? It is your story. Your story is the most powerful tool against the common enemy of our souls, Satan. Your story that contains your mountain top experiences and the valleys of tragedy, despair and disappointment. Your story of God's goodness, drawing and pulling power in your life. Where do you think Moses went back to when tempted to give up – to the bush fire and the call of God – I am; I will be with you! I will speak more of this on a later occasion. In my life, I have a story, and if it wasn't for the nurturing, pulling power and correction of the Holy Spirit, I would not be here doing what I am today. My story and your story are our greatest ally, especially in tough times. Know yourself, know your story and know who has called you and do what it is he has called you to do. So Moses faces this criticism, and what does he do? He lets God deal with it. Now here is something interesting about this story; the presenting reason for Aaron and Miriam's complaint was partially justified because Moses had married an Ethiopian who was outside of the people, a woman who was a Cushite. But look at verse 2, the underlying motivation was jealousy. *"Has the Lord only spoken through Moses – hasn't he spoken through us too?"* God pulled Aaron and Miriam up for a meeting and in verses 6-8 he says to them, "I speak to people in dreams and visions, but I speak to Moses face to face." He

says, "I choose whom I choose and how I speak to them, so why are you not afraid to speak against those who I appoint?" then Miriam's skin turned white with leprosy. Immediately, Aaron realised what was going to happen and asked forgiveness and the leprosy stopped when Moses prayed. But Miriam had to stay outside the camp for seven days as a leper, an outcast. As Tai shared with us last week, leprosy excommunicated you from the people; you became an outsider and your only companionship was other lepers until your leprosy was healed. Some years ago, when I was in South Asia, I went to a leprosy clinic run by a church. It was a very moving experience as we had a meal with the lepers, saw their bandaged limbs and their scarred bodies. Thankfully, today there are good medicines for treatment. Many of these lepers had become believer's and they had started a church which I attended. I remember tears coming to my eyes when a leper served me communion with his disfigured limbs; just stumps where there should have been fingers. I could still see clearly that many of them had been ousted from their loved ones and families into this treatment compound and I thought one day; you will have full and complete healing. At the moment, God was healing the inside of their lives, but one day, they will have a new body.

The two people who should have been closest to Moses failed him; they were his sister and brother, one who had led the dance of triumph after crossing the Red Sea and the other a spokesperson (voice) whom God had given the ability to speak when he felt inadequate. Yes, it's true, those closest to us see us warts and all. They are the ones who see a leader's failings. But remember this, God calls us all to follow him despite our failings and our history that he has forgiven and forgotten. God stands by his leaders even when they fail as Moses and every other leader in the Bible did. So I want to say something today - when leaders fail or when circumstances result in a leader stepping down or away from their task, what should we do? We should probably ask the most difficult question of all – Lord, what was your best intention for that leader? How could they best flourish in leadership and ministry, and what could I do to help that? In my ministry, I have faced criticism and unjust threats. I have chosen to resign on one occasion rather than see a church split and divide. The cost to me was so significant that to this day it has left an ache inside me. But here is what happened – God opened up the way (in the wilderness) for me. My next assignment, unbeknown to me, was just a phone call and a week away, and during the next four years, I learned in a fresh way how to forgive those who wronged me. God worked some deep stuff inside me through something I felt I never deserved. There is much more to this story that I won't go into now, suffice to say – nothing is wasted in our lives, even those things that appear to be deep sorrows can become the place where the greatest shaping happens. Sometimes, God brings forth something very special and new from what looks like a train wreck. And church, listen to this – do not hold up what God wants to do by murmuring and complaining. Move past even when it might appear that something unjust has happened; you do not know what God intends to do that might have an even greater and better outcome.

**Hebrews 13:17 NLT** *Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.* Exit ramp 3 It's well

signposted, and it's a ramp that is well used by many. *I am not being respected enough, listened to, heard and valued; therefore, I will pull down and criticise what others are doing around me, especially leaders who are representing God and who don't seem to be hearing me.* This happens not just in the church; it also happens in the business world, and in the home where parents are trying their best to bring up children and teenagers. The challenge against leadership and authority is rampant in our world. What this story teaches us is that God has put in place leadership and authority and you mess with it at your peril. This story reminds us to respect and encourage the leaders God puts in place even when they don't do what you think they should do. Let God deal with your leaders. Find them doing something right and talk about that! Stand by them, encourage them, speak about the positive things you see them doing. If there are things that need sorting out, let God do it His way in His time.

I had another 5am wake up the other morning and this passage was on my mind and here's what I felt God nudged me to say; it was very clear and simple. **1. You cannot separate leadership and authority** they go together. But a leader's authority is not their skill at speaking nor their title or position; it is his or her adherence to leading by keeping to the pathway of biblical truth. I only have authority when I hold fast to the message and truth I teach. **2. Leadership is God's idea, not ours** – God puts people in places of leadership (yes, we have different systems of how this comes about) but once the process is settled, the principle of leadership kicks in that God stands by. If we mess with that, we do so at personal cost. **3. Mutual accountability is the NT principle of how leadership functions** – leaders are not free to be lone rangers insisting on followers' absolute obedience as if they were gods. Leaders submit to those to whom they are accountable. It is the same in marriage, and in ministry. I put my ministry under the oversight of the elders or the leadership board to whom I am mutually accountable. They, in turn, carry this authority to speak into my life, that's why in our church system here, elders are voted on for their integrity and wisdom. In our church, when our elders unite to make a call about leadership, we back them and move on and let God show the way forward. Intervention is to be done in the context of mutual accountability. **4. We are all leaders and all followers** – every one of you is a leader. You say, "I'm no leader!" Yes, you are, you are the leader of your own life. That's the first thing you are to lead. Then, when you prove faithful in that, God might increase your leadership. But we are also all followers; every leader is also a follower. Even Moses followed the I AM call of God. You don't become a good leader until you have learned to be a follower. Lead yourself first, then lead those whom God gives you to lead.

So there it is, Exit Ramp 3, will I go on or turn back? Will I trust and tremble, or will I resist and run? And here is the amazing thing, God doesn't chain you up! He says, "now choose me and live, or turn away and try to go it alone," you choose. Aaron and Miriam got caught up in the – "who is going to be heard, who is going to be the centre of attention" and God clearly said – I am! My presence is to be the centre, and nobody and nothing should take that place.

