**HEADING FOR THE PROMISED LAND - EXIT RAMP 7 - Numbers 20**

Numbers chapter 20 has three separate stories; a story about a rock, then a route, and lastly a rest by two key players in the wilderness wanderings - Miriam and Aaron. Each of these has something to say to us about the final exit ramp on the journey. But before we look at Exit Ramp 7, I want to remind you of something. Most times where there is an exit ramp there is also an on-ramp. That’s except for Gillies Avenue exit from the southern motorway!  Most of these messages I’ve spoken about off-ramps or exit ramps, but aren’t you glad there are on-ramps also?  On ramps of repentance, where we turn back to God 180 degrees and go the other way. On-ramps of forgiveness, where we find it in our heart to forgive even 70x7 times because we realise that unforgiveness hurts us more than the other person. On ramps of salvation, where we exchange our broken lives and God begins to restore us more and more into His likeness or image. Every time we take an on-ramp we join God’s pathway to life! And we turn our lives toward that destination over the horizon. Remember your head and your heart are both needed for this journey, your heart decides your destination and your head decides your daily choices to get there.

**Exit Ramp 7** **“The journey to life is too long and God is too unreliable to turn up - I need to find a shorter route.”**Do you have a life motto? What would it be?  A motto is a one-line sentence that best sums you up. Are you familiar with the phrase "If it’s going to be then it's up to me! That is the life motto of someone who has taken off-ramp No 7.  They have given up trusting God to direct their lives, they have decided to back themselves as capable of navigating through life. God is relegated to some lesser place because his ways are too unpredictable, and he is too scary and unreliable. And guess what, it is the life motto of many people. This is the final exit ramp. And it’s found in the 20th chapter of Numbers.

1. **THE ROCK - A LACK OF SUPPLY (v1-13)**

Years in the desert wandering in the wilderness has taken its toll. Again, the people complain to Moses that they have been bought out into the wilderness to die, where there is no water, food, or fruit.  Firstly, I want to speak about **Leadership Fault.** How easy it is to turn on our leaders when things do not go the way we want them to. We hold them personally responsible as though they purposely led us into difficulty. It is human nature to try and find someone to blame. Moses however, is different, he is stretched like never before, goes back to God, and is instructed with a plan which will provide water. But now the story changes to **Leadership Failure**. Because the toll of the desert is wearing Moses down too, and in his anger, he strikes the rock and declares to the rebellious people – “are you expecting us to fix this problem”!? In doing so he brings dishonour to God, clearly he is not able to bring water from a rock in the desert. But in his frustration, even the humblest man on earth cracks and forfeits the privilege of leading the people into the land. At first glance I could see no connection between God's holiness and how Moses had disrespected God's character before the people. But then I saw it, Moses was pulled back into the people’s sin and complaint by reacting to their constant complaining and opposition of his leadership, and from deep within him this rage surfaced. It was a costly failure by a great man.

**Leaders fail when:**

1. *We place unrealistic expectations upon them; they are human too.*
2. *Compounding events become too heavy to bear.*
3. *They do not follow specifically what God says to do and follow the popular course of action that will please people.*

Exit ramp Number 7 – this journey is taking too long, the leadership is failing, God is scary, absent, and unreliable – it's going to be it up to me!

1. **THE ROUTE – A SHUT DOOR (v14-21)**

Moses led them through the territory of the Edommites. The king of Edom refused them permission to travel through, even though they gave him an undertaking that they would stay on the main road through his land. They would not take any of his food and even pay for what water they used. He further threatened them – try to come through my land and I will destroy you.

Many times in my life I have really struggled with following God's ways. When having walked with him through all kinds of life experiences I then find my way blocked. And I’m tempted to go; did I miss a turn back there somewhere? Why does it have to be so hard? Why is this journey so long? And sometimes I find myself thinking out a better route, or a different way, or taking an off ramp just for some peace.  Instead of being opposed, threatened, and blocked. Some examples of this:

* Papua New Guinea truck driver, aged 19, I stay and learn how to become a disciple
* Door closing in UK in 1989 leads to new start in NZ with Internal Needs – 10 years
* Door closing in Real Estate in 2006 leads to opening of ministry door
* Door closing in a painful way in a church in 2011 leads to opening
* Door closing in 2019…nothing and then one opening here….

When God shuts the door, it is an answer! There are three options Yes, No, and not Now.  Paul was prevented from going to some places; Acts 16.7 - 8 “*The Holy Spirit prevented us from going to Mysia…so I headed for the seaport of Troas.* Open doors are causes for great celebration and we often speak of God's answers to prayer, but what about closed doors? What about when we find ourselves blocked or restricted by something or someone? But like in this story, a shut door means that God has something different for us.

Most times we would not dislodge ourselves from where we are.  And God seems to do this in our lives. He allows events to take place which causes us to modify our plans, this was certainly true of Paul in Acts 16. Because for some reason the mission’s team was unable to go into Mysia they head off to Troas and Macedonia from where the gospel was *launched into Europe*!  All because of a blockage that looked like a closed door, but really it was an open door in another direction. God had other plans that were greater.

*FOUR things to pray when a closed door happens:*

1. Is what I am trying to do **contrary to God's revealed will**? For example, is there some clear teaching or direction already in place?
2. Is there an ‘**open door’** **in another direction?**  A closed door ahead of me that might be an indication of God's clear purpose.
3. Is there a **‘bigger picture’** **of what God is calling me to do** that I am not seeing at present? So that any smaller choices or options can be held up against that? Am I truly soft to do what God is saying or just stubborn to continue with what I’m doing?
4. Is this closed door **‘more me than God?’** I am stubbornly pushing through with my own agenda. *The call to Macedonia did not come until Paul chose not to pursue going to Mysia*. Acts 16.10

At the moment I’m reading a wonderful book that speaks about ‘your story’ and in one chapter of this book, it makes the point that we can more easily discover God's purpose and will when we understand and examine our story retrospectively. We are shaped and made for a purpose. Every part of our story is used to help us discover the best fit scenario. The most painful experiences we have, where things have not worked out, can be the turning point in us discovering what we are to do in the future, and where we might best be used by God.

But sometimes when we are not fully on our game a closed door can tip us over the edge. And we go…. God, I need to take this exit ramp No 7…. I need to find a way around this. If it’s going to be, it's up to me! Do not take that exit, instead ask God to show you what He is trying to shape inside you, which will make you better able to serve him in the future.

1. **A REST – THE LOSS OF SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU (V22-29)**

At Mount Hor, Moses is told to go with Eleazar (Aarons son) up the mountain where the son would take over the priestly garments worn by his father, Aaron was to die there. The people mourned for thirty days for Aaron. While other stories portray Moses and Aaron as a kind of twosome leadership team from the stories, I think you can sense that the people seemed to have great affection for Aaron. He was their priestly leader and his passing reminded them of their own humanity and that they too would soon face their maker. Verse 1 of this chapter tells in just a sentence that Miriam (Moses' sister) died at Meribah where the water came from the rock. With just the swish of a pen, a life is over. Someone who had danced with joy at the Exodus from Egypt then turned sour towards her brother, for which she shared the ignominy of leprosy.  Suddenly she disappears from the story and we hear no more of her.

The loss of someone passing in our lives is an experience not uncommon to most of us. But once again it is a time when we think and ask about bigger life questions, especially when events surrounding their death may have been difficult to understand. Why God did you allow this?  What could possibly be good about this? And it’s a time when we might also be tempted to take an exit ramp because, in our view, God failed to supply why our loss should take place. What good is there believing in a God when he does not heal cancer, or halt the car from hitting my child on their bicycle, or gives me a child with a disability, or any other number of times when we are tempted to shout in futility at what appears to be a pointless loss. Exit Ramp 7 looks like the place to go because if it’s going to be, it's up to me! You see I have decided how God should act and what he should do and frankly he has not lived up to my expectations, and neither has these leaders who say they know His ways and speak for him.

Yes, it’s hard to stay believing that God speaks through frail people called leaders, especially when passages like this show them as being very human. But guess what, he seems to want to do it this way and in doing so he reminds all of us, leaders included, that our feet are of clay and our need to do exactly as He says even when it appears to go against public opinion. In these situations, the essence of good godly leadership is truly tested.

So in light of this, what is the most important quality you should be seeking in a leader or a new pastor? Is it proven experience, or competency, maybe a wide range of skills – no its trustworthiness that when the chips are down they will be there making the hard calls, even when circumstances and popular opinion appear to go in a different direction. In the short time I have been with you, it’s my view that you have an eldership here who are trustworthy and are there for the health of our Church. You can trust them. They are not perfect, but then neither was Moses - perhaps the greatest leader of all time, even though he found the going tough. What he needed on more than one occasion was people to stand with him and trust that his heart was set on the right destination, despite the terrain or where he led them.

Three stories; the first is the **rock** - it is a lack of supply, and when God doesn’t give me what I need I decide its time I took control. The second is a blocked **route** or a shut door, ’You shall not pass through my territory shouts the king of Edom!' - well then God I will just have to find another route. When all along, a shut door is an answer, and God is speaking clearly, you just have not heard Him yet. And lastly the loss of a loved one and the harsh truth that everyone of us here this morning has a date with eternal **rest.**  Sometimes when we do not fully understand why or when we are tempted to take Exit Ramp 7 – if it's going to be, it's up to me! Only after some time in the wilderness do they realise they better find an on ramp fast and keep their eyes on the real destination.