

For the Journey - Provision

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[0 : 0 0] The first reading is from Numbers chapter 20 and we'll read the whole thing and that can be found on page 153 on the church Bibles. Numbers chapter 20 and we'll start at verse 1.

The death of Miriam. And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month and the people stayed at Kadesh.

And Miriam died there and was buried there. Now there was no water for the congregation and they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people quarreled with Moses and said, would that we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord.

Why have you brought the assembly of the Lord into this wilderness that we should die here, both we and our cattle? And why have you made us come up out of Egypt to bring us to this evil place? It is no place for grain or figs or vines or pomegranates and there is no water to drink. Then Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly to the entrance of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces.

[1 : 1 6] And the glory of the Lord appeared to them. And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, take the staff and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron, your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.

So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle. And Moses took the staff from before the Lord as he commanded him.

Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock. And he said to them, here now, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff twice.

And water came out abundantly and the congregation drank and their livestock. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not believe in me to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them. These are the waters of Meribah where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord. And through them he showed himself holy. Moses sent messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom.

[2 : 2 6] Thus says your brother Israel, you know all the hardship that we have met, how our fathers went down to Egypt and we lived in Egypt for a long time. And the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and our fathers.

And when we cried to the Lord, he heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt. And here we are in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your territory. Please let us pass through your land.

We will not pass through field or vineyard or drink water from a well. We will go along the king's highway. We will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left until we have passed through your territory.

But Edom said to him, you shall not pass through lest I come out with a sword against you. And the people of Israel said to him, we will go up by the highway. And if we drink of your water, I am my livestock, then I will pay for it.

Let me only pass through on foot, nothing more. But he said, you shall not pass through. And Edom came out against them with a large army and with a strong force. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory.

[3 : 3 1] So Israel turned away from him. And they journeyed from Kadesh. And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor on the border of the land of Edom, let Aaron be gathered to this people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

Take Aaron and Eleazar, his son, and bring them up to Mount Hor. And strip Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar, his son. And Aaron shall be gathered to his people and shall die there. Moses did as the Lord commanded. And they went up to Mount Hor in the sight of all the congregation. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eleazar, his son. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. Then Moses and Eleazar came down from the mountain. And when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days.

So the reading is taken from Hebrews chapter 4, beginning at verse 14. The reading is taken from Hebrews chapter 5, beginning at verse 14.

[4 : 57] The reading is taken from Hebrews chapter 5, beginning at verse 14. The reading is taken from Hebrews chapter 5, beginning at verse 14. Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God.

Let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.

He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

Because of this, he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins, just as he does for those of the people.

[6 : 07] And no one takes this honour for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, You are my son.

Today I have begotten you. As he says also in another place, You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest, after the order of Melchizedek.

Thanks for reading.

Please, would you turn back to our first reading from Numbers chapter 20. Numbers chapter 20, on page 153.

[7 : 40] And then let me pray for us. Let's pray. Earlier in Hebrews 4, we read, For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that this is no dead book that we come to this morning, but we come to hear your words, the voice of the living God.

And we pray that by your spirit, you would indeed be at work in us as we hear your words. And please help us to take it to heart.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, we return to the book of Numbers this morning, having had a break from it over the last couple of months or so.

And so I want to begin by reminding us of two things in Numbers, two things about the book, which hopefully will help us to kind of re-immersing ourselves in it over the next few weeks or so as we finish the book.

[9 : 01] Firstly, Numbers is about a journey. Numbers is about a journey. The book begins at Mount Sinai, the place where God has taken his people after he had rescued them from Egypt.

You'll remember how they had been in slavery, they had been rescued, how under the leadership of Moses, they had been brought to Mount Sinai where God had declared them to be his people.

During the next 40 years, they wander through the wilderness desert and Numbers finishes with God's people on the very edge of the promised land.

Now that, of course, that journey means that actually the book of Numbers is written for us because if we know Jesus, we are on a similar journey.

We've been rescued from slavery, slavery to sin by the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. We belong to God as his people.

[10:02] And the life that we now live, the Christian life, is the journey, if you like, through the wilderness of this world to our final destination, the promised land, a new creation, heaven itself.

In other words, Numbers couldn't be more relevant for us despite the fact that it was written over 3,000 years ago, despite the fact that so much of the book is very unfamiliar to us.

It is written for precisely the journey which you and I are on if we belong to Jesus. It's the Bible equivalent of the SatNav app that we need to get us to our destination.

So firstly, Numbers is about a journey. Secondly, Numbers is about, well, Numbers. Numbers is about Numbers. Because there are two censuses which divide the whole book in half.

In chapter 1, there's a census of all the Israelites who were part of that first generation who had been rescued from Egypt. But that, of course, was the generation that we saw a few weeks ago then refused to enter the promised land.

[11:19] They rebelled against God. And in response, God said they would wander in the wilderness, in the desert, for 40 years until they had all died. But then after those 40 years, there is a second census that comes in Numbers, chapter 26.

And that census is of the second generation, the next generation, who were born subsequent to leaving Egypt. Now, Numbers is the story of these two generations.

The first that failed to enter the land, the second that then went on to enter the promised land. It means, therefore, that Numbers is not only written for us because we're on the same journey they were on.

Numbers is also written as a warning to us. In the Old Testament, the writer of Psalm 95 looks back to that first generation and warns his listeners today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts as at Meribah.

Meribah, the very place where we're looking at today in Numbers, chapter 20. And in the book of Hebrews, the writer picks up Psalm 95 and repeats the warning for his hearers.

[12:35] And he adds, for we share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence to the end.

Rachel and I went to France for a night a couple of weeks ago. It's a fairly spur-of-the-moment thing. But my grandfather was evacuated from Dunkirk at the beginning of the Second World War and I've always wanted to go and suddenly there was an opportunity to go.

Like any trip, of course, there were kind of a whole variety of things which we had to get into place at fairly short notice if we were to reach our destination. So our passports, make sure we had those, a ferry ticket, we needed to be clear on the location of the hotel, the route we were going to take, and so on.

And of course, there were plenty of false steps we could have taken along the way which actually would have meant that we failed to get to our destination. Well, Numbers is written to help us hold on to Jesus and to reach our destination, to reach the new creation.

Now, let me ask, is that not what we all want if we belong to Jesus? More than anything else, to hold fast to him either until he returns or until we die, whichever of those two things comes first.

[13:59] And if you're here this morning and you're looking in on the Christian faith, then I hope in a sense that's what you long for as well. In moments of clarity, isn't that really the most important thing in life for ourselves and for those we love?

And Numbers 20 helps us to hold on to Jesus by warning us that if we turn away from him, there really is no hope. There is nowhere else to go.

Well, you'll see on the outline there are three headings. Firstly, A Rebellious People verses 1 to 5. We watched the film Atonement last week. Jemima is studying the book for A-level English, so we thought we would cheat by watching the film.

If you know the plot, you'll know it's a really bleak, dark story. If you're feeling sad and you want to be cheered up, don't watch this film.

It is a bleak, dark story. The main character is a precocious 13-year-old called Bryony. She is jealous of her older sister and her lover, and a split-second decision to tell a lie incriminates him, which leads him in due time to death, to his death in war-torn France in the Second World War.

[15:26] Her sister then dies in the Blitz, and Bryony, now in her early to mid-twenties, faces a life which is wracked by guilt and shame.

A bleak film. And the more I've thought about this over the last couple of weeks or so, Numbers chapter 20 really is one of the bleakest chapters in the whole Bible.

It starts with the death of Miriam, Aaron's sister, verse 1. And the people of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there.

The chapter starts with Miriam's death. The chapter finishes with Aaron's death, verse 28. And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments and put them on Eliezer his son, and Aaron died there on the top of the mountain.

Then Moses and Eliezer came down from the mountain, and when all the congregation saw that Aaron had perished, all the house of Israel wept for Aaron for 30 days. It's a reminder, of course, that death hangs over this whole first generation as they continue to wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

[16:49] And verse 1 is bleak for another reason. I wonder if the name Kadesh rings any bells. It's the place of rebellion where, back in Numbers 13, spies had been sent to spy out the promised land.

They came back reporting how wonderful the promised land was, a place full of milk and honey and the Lord's wonderful provision. Kadesh was the place where people rebelled, where they said, no, we will not go up.

We refuse to enter. Indeed, if we've been following this series in Numbers, then the complaints that people make in verses 2 to 5, I mean, they are just depressingly familiar.

So have a look at verse 2. The presenting issue, there's no water. And the fact there's no water then in their response reveals what's in their hearts. I mean, it's the way we are wired as well, isn't it?

So often with us, it's exactly the same thing. The way we respond to events reveals precisely what is going on in our hearts. By way of response, they say, verse 3, we wish we were already dead.

[18:01] In verse 4, to the Lord, why have you brought us into this wilderness place that we should die? What are they saying about God? God isn't good.

His purposes are not good. His purposes for us are death rather than life. Verse 5 is also depressingly familiar. Why did you bring us out of Egypt?

Life was so much better in Egypt than it is now. God's promises, they failed. This place you brought us to, this isn't a place full of grain and figs and vines.

We don't even have water. God has failed to deliver on his promises. It is depressingly familiar. It echoes all their previous complaints about the Lord and about the leadership of Moses and Aaron. I guess it begs the question, have they learned anything? Have they learned anything from their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, in the desert?

[19:09] They don't seem to have changed. They're as rebellious as ever. It is indeed a bleak, dark chapter. And yet, of course, it's not just them.

It describes what each one of us is, by nature, like. I wonder if some of us can see ourselves in what they say.

One of the myths of our culture is that humanity is essentially good. In any of course, one glance at our world and our lives, the evidence points in exactly the opposite direction.

The evidence of society, so many intractable problems, the evidence of the classroom or the workplace, arguments falling out with each other, naked ambition, the evidence of our own families, the evidence of our own hearts.

How quick we are to doubt God's goodness and kindness when life simply doesn't go the way that we would like it to go, or to grumble and doubt his goodness in the circumstances of life that come our way.

[20:24] Perhaps even at times looking over our shoulder friends or family members who don't know Jesus and in a sense at one level envying them, doubting God's promises for the future.

Now I may I say that if you recognize yourself in this and it is so often I think on reflection where I am in my own life, then that is a spiritually healthy thing because it means that we are looking at reality.

We are seeing ourselves as we really are. And as we'll see later, it is one of the keys to delighting in God's great goodness and kindness.

And may I also say to those who are more thick-skinned, if we are blind to our sin, if we persist in thinking that we are essentially good people, although we might concede that we occasionally get things wrong, then we'll never delight in God's grace.

And the risk, therefore, is that over time we'll simply drift away from Jesus, a rebellious people. Secondly, rebellious leaders, rebellious leaders.

[21 : 50] Now have a look at verse 13 and the place where all this took place. These are the waters of Meribah where the people of Israel quarreled with the Lord and through them he showed himself holy.

Meribah, the same nickname that was used at the place back in Exodus 17 when God's people previously grumbled where there was no water and the Lord similarly provided water from a rock. An incident in fact very similar, very, very similar to this one, except there's one key difference. In Exodus 17 it was the people who grumbled.

In Numbers 20 yes the people are grumbling and rebel but Moses and Aaron joined them. Now if you have dozed off this is the point where you need to come back and engage because it would be a terrible thing to leave this morning thinking that God is in some way unjust, unfair, and unkind. So in verse 6 Moses and Aaron enter the tent of meeting before the Lord and in verse 8 the Lord speaks. Verse 8 take the staff and assemble the congregation you and Aaron, your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.

[23 : 16] So you shall bring water out of the rock for them and give drink to the congregation and their cattle. And Moses took the staff from before the Lord as he commanded them. And wonderfully the Lord provides an abundance of provision for them.

And if you're simply thinking kind of water from a tap then think much, much bigger than that. You know, there are hundreds of thousands of them and all their cattle. Think of a kind of torrents of water.

And yet this is the very incident that also means that Moses and Aaron will not be allowed to enter the promised lands. Flick over the page, verses 23 and 24, it's precisely what the Lord calls rebellion.

Verse 23 And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor on the border of the land of Eden, let Aaron be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land that I have given to the people of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

So we need to ask the question, don't we, what is it that they have done that is so very, very serious? Well, notice, will you first, how they seem to exalt themselves in verse 10.

[24 : 37] As they say, here now, you rebels, shall we, we, bring water for you out of this rock. And yet, we all know, they're not the ones who provide the water, it's the Lord who will provide the water.

So they seem to be exalting themselves and kind of putting themselves in the Lord's place. But then in verse 11, they disobey God's word. In verse 8, they've been told to speak to the rock, but instead they strike the rock and they do so twice.

In verse 12, it's described, noted as unbelief. Ultimately, of course, disobedience is always unbelief. It's always a function of unbelief. It's doubting God's word. It's doubting what God says is good.

Verse 12, And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel. Therefore, you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.

Remember how the rock was a symbol of God as the source of their needs, of the source of the water, as the provider of what it is they need.

[25 : 49] And therefore, Moses and Aaron have committed, if you like, a public sin by publicly disrespecting the Lord. In short, they have become just like the people.

Forty years earlier, the people rebelled. God's judgment on them, they won't enter the promised lands. This is the point where Moses and Aaron rebel, and God's judgment on them, also, they won't enter the promised land.

Indeed, the verdict of the rest of the Old Testament shows how serious this is. I put Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 51 there on the outline, where the Lord describes this whole incident as breaking faith.

He says, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel, at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the people of Israel.

So where have we got to in the numbers story? Well, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, the leaders of God's people. Aaron, you'll remember, the priest, the one who offers sacrifice for sin.

[27 : 11] Moses, the one who is the prophet through whom God speaks. God speaks to Moses. Moses speaks to the people. None of them will enter the promised land.

Where, then, does that leave the people? Well, our third point, it leads to a dead end. Because that is precisely what happens in verses 14 to 21.

In verse 14, Moses sends messengers to the king of Edom, the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother. He says, you know, everything that's happened to us, how we ended up in Egypt, how the Lord rescued us.

And now, verse 17, please will you let us pass through your land. We're not going to eat your crops, we're not going to drink your water, we're just going to stick to the motorway, but it's the quickest way to get to our destination.

But permission is refused. They ask a second time, and again, permission is refused. In other words, they've reached a dead end.

[28 : 11] They'll have to continue to wander in the desert until the full 40 years of wandering has finished and come to an end.

Now, one of the reasons why the film Atonement is so bleak is because there is no answer to the question of guilt, and the film really ends at a point which is a dead end.

As the precocious 13-year-old Briony grows up, she tries to atone for her wrongdoing. She tries to change the past by writing a novel which is based on those events of the past earlier in her life to make everything good again, to make everything everyone live happily ever after in a way in which they didn't in reality.

And yet, of course, because they didn't in reality, by the end of the film, we see Briony, an old lady, having just published this book, being interviewed. And we're told she has a degenerative condition, which means that she is dying, and it is a miserable, bleak, dark scene on which the film ends.

Well, as I said, Numbers chapter 20 is one of the darkest, most depressing chapters in the Bible. It begins with death, it ends with death, and in the middle there is rebellion.

[29 : 49] And yet, the more I thought about it, the more I'm persuaded it is bleak for a purpose.

Think for a moment of a night sky, not a kind of London night sky where all you can see is a sort of orange glow, but think of a night sky in the countryside, in the middle of the countryside, where it is completely pitch black, and the stars shine with an extraordinary penetrating brightness, and you see this whole kind of canopy of stars in their brilliance, like diamonds, amazing.

It's not, of course, that they shine more brightly, they're not brighter in the countryside, they're the same intensity, it's just that in the countryside the backdrop of darkness, means you can see their brightness and intensity.

And wonderfully, the book of Numbers as a whole doesn't end with bleakness. Instead, over the next couple of weeks, we're going to see God's amazing, undeserved grace. We're going to see his provision for sinful men and women.

We're going to see his resolute determination that he will bless his people. He is committed to blessing his people, despite the odds.

And it will be all the more sweet to hear that because of the dark backdrop of today's chapter. Now, I began this sermon by saying that Numbers 20 helps us to hold on to Jesus by warning us that if we turn away from him, there really is nowhere else to turn.

[31 : 31] There is no hope. For all of us here this morning, whether we call ourselves Christians or whether we're simply looking on the Christian faith, it is a dose of reality.

But I really want to send us into the week with hope. Because actually, if we do belong to Jesus, then we have a better leader and we have better promises.

Firstly, we have a better leader. in that reading which we had earlier from Hebrews. And as I said before, I think the book of Hebrews is in many ways a commentary on the whole of the book of Numbers.

The writer of the Hebrews contrasts Aaron as priest and Jesus as priest. Jesus who was tempted to sin in every way as we are, yet was without sin.

Jesus who, unlike Aaron, didn't have to make sacrifices for his own sin. Jesus who, in his death on the cross, offered a once-for-all time sacrifice for sin, a perfect sacrifice, such that those who know him and have put their trust in him receive the forgiveness of sins and peace with God, both in this

world and the next.

[32 : 56] A better leader. One, therefore, who, unlike Moses and unlike Aaron, can lead us to our final destination, the new creation.

But secondly, a better provision. And please will you turn on to John's Gospel, chapter 7. John, chapter 7.

It's page 1077. In my version of the church Bible, it won't be exactly 1077 in all of them, but that's a kind of rough ballpark figure. John, chapter 7, verses 37 to 39.

Here is the Lord Jesus. He is with his disciples in Jerusalem as the Jewish people celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, which was the time when they look back to the time of numbers, when they look back to remember how they wandered in the desert for those 40 years, and then eventually how the Lord took them into the promised land, when they also remembered as they wandered in the desert the Lord's provision of water from the rock.

So when you look at John 7, verses 37 to 39. 39.

[34 : 48] glorified. Must have been a remarkable moment. In Numbers chapter 20, God provided his people with water for their journey to the promised land.

And yet, as we will see next week, their hearts were unchanged. Jesus' provision is so much greater. He gives us his spirit.

He gives us his spirit in abundance. Like rivers of living water, he's given us new hearts. to enable us to hold fast to him, to keep us going, trusting in him until the new creation.

Indeed, by his spirit, we have his presence every day, every moment of every day, regardless of all the ups and downs that come our way.

We have the presence of the risen Jesus by his spirit today, tomorrow, this week, in every situation.

It's no wonder, is it, the writer of the Hebrews tells us we must pay much closer attention to what we've heard about Jesus, lest we drift away from him.

[36 : 01] Because if we turn from him, then there really is no hope, neither in this world, nor the next. let me lead us in prayer.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this bleak chapter in numbers, this dark chapter full of death and rebellion.

We know you have recorded it for us, for our good, for our spiritual good and our welfare. We pray that you would help us to see our natural sinful hearts as they really are.

Help us to grasp the bleakness of our own human condition and human nature, that we might be those who rejoice in the Lord Jesus, the one who is indeed the perfect leader, who has provided for us everything we need, that we might rejoice in him.

And we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.