

'It is God who leads';

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[0:00] As we continue to look at the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness.!

No you don't? Okay. Does anyone know what actually the letters stand for? Brianna? You don't know? You use it but you don't know? Okay. It stands for Global Positioning System.

Okay. And I'm pretty sure that even if you don't know what it stands for, you've been using it all your life. Okay. Particularly you young people for the last 15 or 20 years it's been around.

Whether it's in your car or on your device, I think it's the one thing that most people rely on to get from one place to another. Gone are the days actually. Some of you might remember this.

But gone are the days when you actually need to provide detailed instructions to get to a place.

Like, you know, turn left at this or that junction. And then take the second on the right.

[1:27] And my house is the third one on the left. No, actually it's not. We're in a unit compound. You have to go in and it's like the third door on the left.

Nowadays, you just give an address and voila. Right? GPS leads the way. So today, the question we're going to ask is, who will lead Israel, who will be Israel's GPS, as it were, from the wilderness to the promised land?

Now, if you've been following, scholars have calculated that in light of Miriam's death last week, which we saw and read, Israel is now in their 40th year of wandering.

So, as God has promised, they are about to enter the promised land after the 40 years of wandering. And we also discovered last week that Moses wasn't going to be the one leading them. Moses, the one God raised from the very start to deliver them from Egypt, and who has been guiding them and providing for them in the wilderness, will sadly not lead them in.

[2:36] And the reason is because, on the next slide, he did not trust God enough to honour him as holy in the sight of the Israelites before his people.

So, we can cross Moses out from the list. And today, as we look at our passage, there will be a few more options presented as to who might lead Israel into the promised land.

First, however, let's consider the nation of Edom, because Israel comes into contact with them.

Now, for those of you who are not familiar, Edom are actually descendants of Esau.

And Esau had a brother, Jacob. Jacob was the younger, he was the older. And they both had a father called Isaac, and Isaac had a father called Abraham.

And Abraham was the one in Genesis whom God promised to give them the land into which they are about to enter. Now, of the two, God chose Jacob, the younger brother, which is not normal because you normally give the inheritance to the older.

[3:46] But Jacob is to inherit the promise, while Esau, even though Esau was ordained by God not to receive the promise, Esau himself sold his birthright for a bowl of lentils.

It is the most expensive bowl of lentils ever. Now, Jacob also had another name called Israel, and he went on to become the father of the 12 tribes currently, as we've been following, wandering the desert.

Meanwhile, Esau's children have established themselves in the land just southeast of Canaan. So, on the map there, you'll see the sort of yellow shaded area.

Hopefully, you'll recognize that as the kind of Sinai Peninsula, where Saudi Arabia is today kind of thing. I think it's Saudi Arabia, yes. And the area shaded yellow is what belonged to Edom.

It's also a bit small, but there's a line that runs through that yellow area, and that's the King's Highway, which we'll get to shortly. And so, what's happened is that, having failed to enter the land directly from the south, they're in the area of Zin at the moment, they decide to explore a route, Israel that is, by coming in from the south, and so that means going through the territory of Edom.

[5:10] So, let's look at the Bible, where we pick up the action from verse 14. Moses sent messengers from Kadesh, which is in the desert of Zin, to the king of Edom, saying, This is what your brother Israel says.

You know all about all the hardships that have come on us. Our ancestors went down into Egypt and lived there many years. The Egyptians mistreated us and our ancestors, but when we cried out to the Lord, he heard our cry and sent an angel and brought us out of Egypt.

Now we are here at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. And so, you can see from the slide there that I've highlighted a few things which I think are significant. Firstly, I think it's the slide before actually, Moses reminds Edom of their relationship, that they are actually brothers.

And you know, as family, you know, we need to help each other, is what Moses is suggesting. But he's doing this rather sensitively because he doesn't want to pose a threat to Edom.

And so he says, look, on the next slide, we've suffered hardship, we've been mistreated, we've cried out to the Lord, and you know, we're not this belligerent army or mighty nation that's coming through.

[6:28] We're a poor nation, 12 tribes. We simply want to pass through. So he says, please let us pass through your country. We don't go through any field or vineyard or drink water from any well.

We will travel along the King's Highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory. Now, as I said, I think the King's Highway is a bit of an ancient M1 kind of thing.

It's sort of where many people would use as the route to travel, right? And it doesn't just travel through Edom, it goes through multiple countries.

So people have used this highway. It's not like, you know, only Edom are the people that use it. But Israel was different because they were quite a sizable nation.

There were a lot of them. And if you imagine, there are 12 tribes probably processing information. Remember, in the start of Numbers, they were ordered, flying their tribal flags with the ark in the middle.

[7:33] And so this could be easily misread as an army kind of going into battle. And so Moses wants to assure Edom that this is not the case. We simply want to pass through.

And we're just brothers anyway. We're not going to fight with families. And in case, Moses says, they're worried about how much resources will be taken, well, don't worry.

He says, we're not even going to stop. We're not going to pitch tent and drink from your wells or whatever. Just let us pass through. But of course, Edom, there was no trust, and so they were not satisfied with Moses' explanation.

And so verse 18, they say, you may not pass through here. If you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword. Now Israel thinks, oh, maybe Edom didn't quite hear us correctly.

Let's try again. Verse 19, we will go along the main road. And this time they say, if we, or our last stop, drink any of your water, we will pay for it. You know, it's a bit hard, maybe.

[8:34] perhaps you've probably walked your dog before, and you know, sometimes there's a bowl of water there and they just drink it. It's very hard to yank them away from the water, right? So if you imagine all the sheep walking up the highway and they see the patch of a lake there, and you know, they just rush for it.

It's going to be a bit hard to stop them drinking. So Moses said, look, if we, if they drink the water, that's fine. We will even pay for it. Right? So there's all sorts of assurances to try and placate Edom to let them through.

But Edom would have none of it. And so they say, you may not pass through. And for good measure, Edom then came out against them with a large and powerful army since Edom refuses to let them go through their territory.

Israel turned away from them. So the question then is, that we tried to start, started to ask at the start, but now we know, isn't it, that we can add Edom to the list.

So Moses is not going to lead them in, but neither are they going to get the help of family or friends to help them into the land. And if even brother Esau is not going to help, then you can be assured that no one, friend or foe, will be likely to help them either.

[9:58] And so we come to the third possibility, which will also be discounted. Because when they head away from Edom, they now start heading south and they arrive at a place called Mount Hor.

And we read from verse 23 that at Mount Hor, near the border of Edom, the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will not enter the land I give the Israelites because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

Get Aaron and his son Eleazar and take them up Mount Hor. Remove Aaron's garments and put them on his son Eleazar for Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will die there.

So God makes good on his promise from last week. Now, Aaron was actually, like Moses, an important person to Israel.

He was actually, we are told, in Exodus, Moses' mouthpiece in Egypt. Remember, Moses, you know, when he went to the burning bush and God said, go back into Egypt to free my people, he actually said to the Lord, I don't want to do this.

[11:12] I'm not a good speaker. God angry with him, but eventually he said, okay, Aaron, your brother, will be your mouthpiece. And so, it would seem that a lot of times, actually, the word comes to Moses, but actually, it was Aaron who did the speaking, at least initially in Egypt and then maybe even further on in the wilderness.

So, Aaron was an important person. He was like kind of a bit of a spokesperson that the people heard from and saw quite often. But secondly, Aaron was also, as the slide suggests, Israel's high priest.

He was the one appointed by God to come before him at the tabernacle to offer sacrifices.

Sacrifices which were needed in order for God to keep dwelling among them.

Because God was holy, they were sinful, and if Aaron did not do his job and bring the animal sacrifices as atonement for sin, the people would actually die.

But, although the role of the high priest is essential, Aaron, as an individual, was not indispensable. But God, in His gracious provision, didn't just allow Aaron to just drop dead, but, He ensured that just before He died, that there would be a proper succession.

[12:36] And that's why we read that Aaron's son, Eliezer, was present at the death of his father. Because this was literally a job handover at the death of Aaron.

Verse 27, Moses did as the Lord commanded. They went up to Mount Hoar in the sight of the whole community. Moses removed Aaron's garments. By the way, I think that's just the outer garments, not everything.

And put them on his son, Eliezer. And Aaron died there on the top of the mountain. So, for him, for Aaron, there was no golden handshake at retirement.

No chance to even live off his super. Finished his work, went to heaven. Not bad, I don't know. It feels like a good way to go.

But anyway, three people went up the hill, and only two came down. Moses and Eliezer came down from the mountain, and so the people saw three go up, and when they learned that Aaron had died and only two came back down, all the Israelites mourned for him 30 days.

[13:43] And so, we can add Aaron now to the list, can't we? Even though he played such a pivotal role, Israel is not going to be looking to him to be leading them into the land.

Now, I think you all know kind of, you might be going, yeah, Mark, this is also obvious. The title already suggests what the answer is, right? And yes, that's true.

The answer is that God is the one who will lead them, and God is the only one that will lead them. But I want to actually follow the flow of the narrative to show you that actually, this is what this passage confirms as well.

Because when we come to the final incident, Numbers chapter 21, 1 to 3, this is where God shows and proves that he is the one that will be able to lead Israel into the land.

And so, if you look on the slide or in your Bible, when the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Etherim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them.

[14:44] This is a sort of a really summarized kind of sentence as to what happened, but as you can see from what I've highlighted, there are a few details there that are worth picking up on.

And the first is that this was a Canaanite king. That is, he belongs to the tribes in the Promised Land to which God would expel in order for Israel to take possession of it.

So, in a way, you can think that this king actually is on borrowed time anyway. But what he's done is that he's initiated an unprovoked attack on Israel when Israel was not even in the land as yet.

We're also told that he lived in the Negev. And the word Negev just means south. And it means, it refers to the area south of the Promised Land.

So, a bit light, but it's that blue shaded area on the map. Now, we're not sure if Arad, the city, was actually south of the Promised Land and in the blue area, or it was actually just south at the southernmost point of the Promised Land.

[15 : 51] But either way, Israel themselves were not in the land. And so, the Canaanite king actually came to them on the road to Atherim.

And again, we're not sure whether Israel was heading towards the Promised Land and therefore was threatening them or actually heading south or away and therefore no threat to them. But this unnamed king springs a surprise attack and captures some of them.

And, it is the response of Israel that I think we need to take note of. because it is very, very interesting. And this is what we find. Israel made this vow to the Lord.

If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities. The Lord listened to Israel's plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns.

So, the place was named Oma. And friends, I want to suggest to you that this is a watershed moment for the people of Israel.

[16 : 54] That it is a sort of a turning point in their history. Not the only one, but a turning point that is significant. Now, I've seen, for example, Christians, and as they live their lives as Christians, that they too have turning points in their own life.

So, you know, when you become a Christian, there's a big turning point. But sometimes, further along the way, there are also decisive moments where you face a challenging situation and I've seen people then choose to actually step up in faith.

And then, from that point on, you go, wow, okay, the life that they kind of live, the decisions they make before and after that point is markedly different.

They suddenly have this quantum, not quantum, but great step jump in their discipleship. And you go, wow. And I think that this is one of those points for Israel.

You know, Israel will go on to make more mistakes next week in the very next verses. They make another mistake. But, this, I think, is the very first recorded instance where Israel as a nation steps out in faith for the very first time.

[18 : 12] Because it is the first time, I think, where in response to a problem, there are people being captured, Israel turns to God for help.

It's a small detail, but did you notice that there is no mention of Moses in this section? Now, I'm pretty sure that Moses was still the one with Aaron coming to the Lord with their request, but this initiative, I think, has come from the people themselves.

And not just some of the elders, or some of the leaders, or some of the community, but the whole nation because Israel asked the Lord. The other thing, too, of course, is that Israel didn't just cry out for help.

They made a vow to the Lord. That is, they're saying that they were willing to do their part. They said, Lord, if you help us, we will destroy the cities.

Right? And now, I think given that it's the 40th year, most of the people that were making this vow were actually not of the first generation, but of the second.

[19 : 27] Right? Most of the first would have died out by now. It's mainly the second generation that are about to go in to fight. And this is significant because they are the ones that are saying, we will.

If you give us the city, we will take it. And if you give us the land, we will take it. We will go in to destroy the city. So, this is really a good sign of visible faith from them.

They showed that they were willing for the first time to take hold of God's promises and respond in faith. And needless to say, the Lord listened to their plea and the answer comes back, of course, yes.

Because after all, this is what God promised them in the first place. So why would he not say yes to their request? And friends, that happens too when we pray.

When we ask God for what he has already promised in his word, the answer will always be yes. It makes sense, doesn't it? But, that is the secret, isn't it?

[20 : 39] You want to up your success rate in answered prayers? Pray according to God's will, revealed in his word. If you do that, your answer will always be yes.

It may not be exactly immediately, but God will always say yes to whatever he has already promised in his word. So I encourage you to read God's word and to respond as you read by asking what he has promised in prayer.

And then wait for the Lord to answer. But notice as well, lastly, from this passage, the name of the place. It is called homer, right?

Which in the language just means destroy. That's the same word that they use in the vow. If you help us, we will homer the city. We will destroy the cities. Now, I don't know how many of you have really good memories, but we have heard this name homer before.

Anyone know? Free dinner if you do? Okay, that's fine. Well, it was in Numbers chapter 14.

[21 : 46] Remember, the spies had gone and come back and ten of them had said, too hard. They had said, okay, we don't want to do it. And then God said, okay, for that reason, you get 40 years of wandering.

And then after that, they said, oh, sorry, God, okay, we'll go in, we'll go in. And Moses said, no, don't do it, God's no longer with you. And they went in anyway. Well, Numbers chapter 14 verse 45 says this, then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and attacked them and beat them down all the way to Homa.

So, this is a 40-year journey from Homa to Homa, right? In the first, the enemies destroyed the Israelites, drove them and beat them down.

in the second, it's the other way around. The Israelites destroyed the Canaanites. And throughout this whole time, I want us to notice as well the track record of Israel.

So, Numbers 14, remember, the rebellion led by the spies, that was a big fail, right? Next, Numbers 16, the rebellion by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, another fail.

[23 : 06] In fact, there were two fails there, because after that, they tried to rebel again. Then, last week, Numbers 20, remember what they did? The people quarreled with the Lord.

Another fail. And this time, even Moses failed, right? Because he didn't speak to the rock, but he struck it twice. But now, finally, after 40 years, by God's grace, Israel begins to step up and take hold of God's promise for them.

Now, it's better late than never, 40 years, hopefully we don't take 40 years to learn our lessons, but it's a step in the right direction, isn't it? And so, if you put all these incidents together, not just tonight's passage, but all the way back to Numbers 14, you will see that it is God who will lead his people into the promised land.

God alone is the one that they can trust to lead them into the land, to lead them in victory, to lead them in all things. And that's also something that we need to hear, isn't it?

Because all too often, we're easily tempted, isn't it, to rely on human people, leaders, whether it's people in our kind of workplace, the country, allies, people of influence.

[24 : 29] it's tempting to put our trust in others, when we know that actually they will let us down eventually, because they are just as weak and flawed as we are.

But it is only God who can be trusted to lead us. And friends, that's the same for us as a church too, right? Last week we looked at the fact that it's good to pray for good leadership, but let's not get carried away with that.

it's not the pastor, so please don't look to me, it's not your growth group leader, and for us as Anglicans, it's not even the right archbishop that will make the church grow.

Paul himself says in 1 Corinthians 3 5-8, what after all is Apollos, who is one of the leaders in the church there, what is Paul himself, only servants through whom we, you, came to believe, as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

I planted the seed, Apollos watered, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.

[25 : 43] God is ultimately the one who will lead his church, who will lead us into everlasting life. God alone is the one who will lead us into victory, which he has already done by sending his son Jesus to die on the cross.

the main enemies in our life, sin, death, the devil, has all been defeated already on the cross. God has fulfilled what he has promised.

So friends, let's not be anxious about uncertainty in life. I know that when there are changes in our life, we get, you know, a bit disturbed, whether it's in our church or with our work or uni, where we get a job after we finish studying, there's going to be a downturn, will we be changed?

The leaders of our company have changed, our bosses change. Leaders come and go, but it is God who will still be there to lead us until the end of our lives.

So please, let's look to God because he will lead us. And that's why Paul says in our second reading in Romans, which I know is a favorite passage for a lot of people.

[26:55] What then shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, he's already done that, then how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

The hard bid, my friends, for God was to give his son the most costly sacrifice. Everything else is cheap, and easy by comparison, who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen. It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

And so not only is God leading us, Jesus as well is leading us, interceding, who shall separate us from the love of Christ. Anything you can think of?

Shall trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, or anything else that you can think? As it is written, for your sake we face death all day long.

[28:06] We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. that is, provided we are in Christ, nothing will separate us from the love of God.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor the present, nor the future, any past, neither height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ.

It's no wonder, is it, that this is a well-loved passage by so many of us? Because it gives us that great assurance that God will lead us to the end, provided we are in Christ.

But friends, the second point is that faith isn't just about believing passively, right? When we know that God can be trusted to lead us, then we need to, like the Israelites, take hold of that promise and respond with faith.

Say like Israel, Lord, if you will lead us and deliver us, we will do our part. For them, it was to fight the enemy, but for us, it is we will do our part to live holy lives, to serve you, to battle with sin, to root out all impurity and unrighteousness in our life.

[29:32] Because God has already said, I will do it in your life. I have already done it in Christ Jesus. But it's not then that you just sit back passively and let it happen.

No, faith will respond by saying, I will take hold of that promise that you've given to me, and therefore strive to live the life that you've called me to.

Play my part. Both go hand in hand as a Christian, isn't it? Putting our faith in God alone, as the one who leads, and has secured the victory for us in Christ, and then taking hold of this gift as well, by doing whatever it takes to destroy sin in our lives.

Let's pray. Father, we know that we are conquerors through Christ, who loved us by dying for us.

You alone give us eternal life and will lead us through life, whatever the perils we face, until life's end. Father, help us to look to you alone, help us to look to your Son alone, and not to misplace our faith in humans, good or sincere though they may be, and at the same time, help us to take hold of our reward in Christ, and to strive to live with pure lives, and to root out all unrighteousness from it.

[31:02] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.