

A fresh start

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[0 : 00] Well, let me pray one more time, and let's ask God for his help. May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

And once again, I pray that your word will not return to you empty, but achieve its purpose. All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Now, I wonder if you still remember how you felt on May 10, 2018.

In case you've forgotten, that was the day after Malaysia's 14th general election was held. And for the first time in history, the coalition of the then opposition parties known as Pakatan Harapan won power after 60 years of Barisan national rule.

Now, for many Malaysians, euphoria was the order of the day. They were happy. They were excited. They were ready for a fresh start. Many of us, I think it's safe to say, were tired of the politics of corruption and were eager for many of the wrongs said to be committed by the previous regime to be put right.

And we cheered when Tun Mahathir at his first press conference said, we are not seeking revenge. We just want to restore the rule of law.

[1 : 28] Malaysians were ready for a new Malaysia, a renewed leadership, even if it was led by a 93-year-old man who has been there before. Well, fast forward 15 months, and I think it's safe to say that euphoria has faded away.

Instead, it's turned to dismay, as we read in the newspapers about sex scandals or controversial Indian preachers or unilateral appointments and so on.

We feel disappointed in our leaders, and we begin to search for another candidate who can tick all the right boxes. Someone who's trustworthy.

Someone who keeps his promises. Someone with the wisdom and competence to take care of the rakyat and meet their real needs.

But the truth is, we can't seem to find the right leader. For even the best human leaders eventually, over time, reveal their own flaws and weaknesses.

[2 : 33] Think of Martin Luther, the great German reformer who stood against the abuses of the Catholic Church and who recovered great gospel truths in his day, but who was also prone to making anti-Semitic comments, that is, racist remarks about Jewish people.

Or in the modern day, think of Steve Jobs, the brilliant CEO of Apple, who created all these magical products that many of you hold in your hands, but who for many years refused to acknowledge his own daughter, born out of wedlock, and who kept telling everyone, that's not my kid, even after the DNA test proved otherwise.

Even our best leaders disappoint us. Or if so, who then should command our confidence? Who should we trust?

Not just for our political leadership, but with our very lives. Well, that's the question to keep in mind as we turn to our passage today. And what we're going to do today is to explore Numbers 20 to 21 through the lens of the three main characters involved.

That's Israel, Moses, and God himself. I will study the qualities of each of these characters, see what they have to teach us about ourselves, and in the end, work out who should command our confidence, and perhaps more importantly, why.

[4 : 07] But let's begin by noticing where we are in this book. In chapter 20, we are given a couple of geographical markers. In verse 1, we're told that Israel has now arrived at the desert of Mount Zin.

Sorry, the desert of Zin, not Mount Zin. But they are staying at Kadesh. And then down in verse 22, we're told that they go on to Mount Hor. Now, these markers are helpful because they tell us not

just the where, but also the when.

Don't need to turn there now, but in Numbers 33 verses 46 to 48, it's clarified for us that by the time Israel arrived at Kadesh and then go on to Mount Hor, it's been more or less 40 years since they left Egypt.

Now you might remember the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was not meant to take that long. If you've been with us since the beginning of this series, you would remember that back in chapters 13 to 14, they had actually already arrived at the edge of the Promised Land.

But do you remember what happened? They saw the giants. They grumbled. And they rebelled, telling God he was a sadistic prankster who had brought them to the Promised Land to get murdered.

[5 : 35] And they asked to go back to Egypt. Indeed, they wanted to stone Moses and elect a new leader who would fulfill their wishes. They said, God, you're not good.

You're not strong. We don't want you or the leader you've appointed. That's Israelite democracy for you. And so God said to them, because you have spoken against me, you, the Exodus generation, won't ever step foot in the Promised Land.

Israel will make it there, that's my promise, but it will be your children, not you, who will make it in.

You will have to wander first in the wilderness for 40 years and die there.

And so we discover that's what happens. As you know, they stay in the desert and in fact, they stage a few more rebellions against God. That's what we've been seeing in the last few weeks.

But now, here in Numbers 20, it seems like things might begin to change. For a start, as we've just noted, 40 years have passed.

[6 : 50] For another, in 20 verse 1, we hear of the death of Miriam. Now, do you remember who Miriam is? She's Moses' sister.

And back in chapter 12, she was one of the old leaders who had gone against God and challenged Moses. But now she passes on.

And at the end of chapter 20, we discover that Aaron, who was Miriam's co-conspirator against Moses in chapter 12, passes on as well.

And so the old God, the old generation of leaders, are starting to pass on. Well, it looks like we're right for a fresh start.

But is that what we're going to get? After all, we have the same main characters, Israel, Moses, and God. So will we be getting a fresh start, or will we have the same old story?

[7 : 53] Can they command our confidence? Well, let's have a look at each character in turn. So here's character number one.

Israel. Israel. Look at them. At last, could there be reason for optimism? After all, they've had 40 years to ponder on their past mistakes.

40 years of watching God in action. 40 years to learn and to grow and to mature. But surely in that time, they've engaged in self-reflection and undergone some self-development and begun to fulfill their potential.

Well, let's watch as they face their first test, 20 verse 2. Now, there was no water for the community. Now, this sounds familiar to some of you, then well done.

You know your Bible history well. You see? The same problem arose the very first year Israel came out of Egypt.

[9 : 05] Back in Exodus 17, the people were in a different desert, the wilderness of sin. Yes, that's the name of the place. And they too had no water to drink.

And on that occasion, what did the people do? I think you can guess even if you've not heard the story before. Yes, they grumbled.

They accused God and Moses of leading them to die. And now, roughly 40 years later, we're back to the same scenario.

There's no water. We even have the same people. Moses is still in charge. The only thing that's really changed is the place. It's almost like retaking a test that you failed previously with the same basic questions being asked.

You just changed the exam center. Well, surely Israel will ace it this time. Verse 2 again. Now, there was no water for the community and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron.

[10 : 16] They quarreled with Moses and said, if only we had died when our brothers failed dead before the Lord. Why did you bring the Lord's community into this wilderness that we and our

livestock should die here?

Why did you bring us out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink.

Oh dear. It's almost like they can't change their default setting. The switch is permanently stuck on whine, whine, whine.

Complain, complain, complain. Grumble, grumble, grumble. That's the thing about grumbling, isn't it? Once you start, it's hard to stop. Now, to be perfectly clear, their issue was certainly a valid one. A lack of water is serious business. If you live in Sri Aman or Selangal this week, you know that full well. In our urban settings, we already find our lives seriously disrupted should the Kuching water board tell us that there will be no water available for 24 hours on Saks and Shots a day.

[11 : 32] What more? In the hot and dry desert, with the sun beating down on you, your farm animals weakening, and your children not looking much better.

It was certainly an issue to be brought to the Lord. But they didn't bring it to the Lord, not really. Rather, they quarreled with Moses.

And listening to them is like a broken record. Why did you bring us out of Egypt to this terrible place? Forty years on, still the same old song.

And you've been hearing this song over the past two months. Why? Why? Why have they forgotten that Egypt was that terrible place? Why have they forgotten the joy they felt at escaping their terrible slave masters?

Because forty years on, they still have the same kind of hearts. Thankless hearts. And accompanying thankless hearts are impatient spirits.

[12 : 45] You see, in chapter 21, they grumble again. Different occasion, but they grumble. In chapter 20, verses 14 to 21, which we heard read, you notice that Israel tried to seek passage through Edom along the king's highway, a well-known trade route, but they were denied.

And so, in chapter 21, verse 4, they have to travel from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea to go around Edom. Basically, they are trying a longer alternative route to get to the promised land. But as a result, 21, verse 4 again, the people grew impatient along the way. You see, they wanted the blessing immediately without the inconvenience of the long journey.

And so, verse 5, they spoke against God and against Moses and said, Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread, there is no water, and we detest this miserable food.

And where you have thankless hearts and impatient spirits, well, blame-shifting is not far away. The well-regarded commentator Gordon Wenham says that the word miserable in verse 5 can also be translated worthless.

[14 : 13] If so, that's an astonishing thing to say. Because God has been providing them manna. and this so-called worthless food was keeping them alive.

They were cursing the very thing God was using to sustain them. And so, they blamed God. And not only that, they blamed others.

Come back with me to chapter 20, verse 4. Why did you, Moses, bring the Lord's community into this wilderness that we and our livestock should die here?

Now, that's an interesting way of putting it, since they were the ones who refused to enter the promised land. They were the ones who saw the grapevines and the pomegranates of the promised land, but they rejected it.

But now that they're back in the wilderness, they say it's all Moses' and Aaron's fault. To them, it was the fault of the leaders, even though they were the ones who refused to enter.

[15 : 19] And then notice verse 3, how they identified Korah and his fallen rebels as our brothers. They wish they had died along with them back in chapter 16 and 17.

They're not even thankful that they're alive in the first place. All they can think of is who to blame. Just like Adam and Eve back in Eden, who didn't thank God for the abundance of the garden, but focused on their lack of access to this one fruit, and ended up blaming God and one another. Just as Satan wanted. See, in the end, it really doesn't matter which generation we come from. It doesn't matter what self-improvement program we embark on.

The issue always comes back to our hearts. And that's why we should never try to depend on ourselves. Because our hearts are too messy.

To rest our confidence in ourselves is foolhardy. As it's sometimes said, you could take Israel out of Egypt, but you can't take Egypt out of Israel.

[16:45] That's the big takeaway. But I want us also to see a side lesson here for all of us. Could we also be infected with thankless hearts?

Think back to the moment when you first truly understood the gospel. As you realise that Jesus has set you free from sin and death, I'm sure you are filled with great joy and thankfulness.

But what happens if we let that sense of thankfulness become diluted? Well, we start doing things for God out of grudging duty rather than grateful delight.

And where gratitude ceases, grumbling takes over. I do so much for the church, why doesn't God bless me more? I pick up that girl week after week, why doesn't God honour my good deed?

Or perhaps it works in this way. Perhaps some in Israel grumbled because they saw their position as an entitlement. Where are the chosen people? We deserve to be redeemed.

[17:58] We deserve to be treated well. And so when we're not treated in the right way, we begin to complain. Perhaps some of us have the wonderful privilege of a wonderful Christian heritage.

Perhaps our grandparents and parents are Christians. We've belonged to this church since day one. But we begin to see this as an entitlement, not as a gift.

And once gratitude ceases, grumbling takes over. God, why do you bring all these funny and difficult people to my church?

And where grumbling exists, well, blame shifting is not far away. God, see, now that you brought all these difficult people to this church, well, it's their fault that things have gone this way.

Well, we've forgotten that we're rebels saved by grace, and everything God has given to us is a gift. And where gratitude ceases, grumbling takes over.

[19:09] And Satan is delighted when that happens. So understand this. A grumbling heart can never be a thankful heart.

And a thankful heart will never be a grumbling heart. Indeed, Romans 1, verse 21 tells us that thankless hearts is what leads people further and further away from God.

You have to choose. And that's certainly an area for self-examination. And could we sometimes be so thankless that we end up cursing the very means that God uses to bless us?

So we might say, Bible, Bible, Bible again. Why focus so much on the Bible? Why in September we got these talks again? It's worthless food. Well, that's the opposite of Peter who said to Jesus, Lord, to whom else shall we go?

You alone have the words of eternal life. We despise what God has given to us to sustain us. Well, that's an area for self-examination.

[20:25] God was clear as this. Israel, and by extension ourselves, are certainly not where we should place our confidence in.

Forty years in the wilderness didn't change their default setting. If we do put our trust in ourselves, we're going to find it a very disappointing experience indeed.

I guarantee you that. So what about our next candidate? Let's look at our second main character, Moses. Moses.

Now, the Israelites clearly don't have what it takes, but maybe this particular Israelite does. After all, he's God's appointed instrument. And it is through him that God responds to the Israelites' complaint in chapter 20.

Just look at verse 7. The Lord said to Moses, Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together.

[21:30] 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 that they and their livestock can drink.

So God tells Moses, here's my instructions. Number one, take the staff. Number two, gather the assembly together. Number three, speak to the rock.

And then what will happen? Water will come pouring out. God did it back in Exodus 17, and he's going to do it again. So, verse 8, Moses takes the staff from the Lord's presence, as commanded. Then, verse 10, he gathers the assembly together, as commanded. So far, so good. But now, we have a deviation.

Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses speaks to the people. Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?

[22 : 38] You can probably hear the frustration in his voice. And then, he strikes the rock twice, rather than speak to it. And sure enough, water comes gushing out.

But not all is well. Look at verse 12. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.

Moses didn't do exactly what God told him to do, and now he reaps what he sows. Just like the other Israelites, he will no longer have the privilege of stepping foot into the promised land. He will die in the wilderness. So what did he get so wrong? After all, it seems like he just got a little frustrated, but that's understandable.

These Israelites can really get on your nerves. But you see, Moses isn't just anyone. He's God's spokesman.

[23 : 47] He's God's representative. And what did God want to do to Israel here? He wanted to bless them. They complained about water, but God chose not to complain about their complaints.

Instead, in his grace, he's ready to bring water out of the rock for them. But although God didn't complain, about their complaints, Moses did.

In Psalm 106, verse 33, where the psalmist looks back at these events, he says that rash words came from Moses' lips.

And that's an accurate description. Why? Well, imagine if our prime minister wanted to convey a message to the prime minister of Singapore, and through our ambassador say, thank you.

But when the ambassador relays the message to the Singaporean PM, he says instead, thanks for nothing. Now, what has happened?

[24 : 59] He has made our prime minister look bad. He has twisted the intention of our prime minister. He has misrepresented the message of our prime minister, and his rash words have an impact.

And with his rash words here, Moses misrepresents God. God wants to show his grace here, but Moses makes him look harsh instead.

God wants to show his patience, but Moses makes him look impatient. And actually, God wants to show his holiness.

Look at verse 12 again. God says to Moses and Aaron, you did not honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites.

Now, we might be puzzled. Wait, didn't Moses rebuke the Israelites? Didn't he uphold God's holiness? Well, no.

[26 : 04] Because here, God wants to show his holy through his grace. You see, too often we think of holiness and grace as opposites.

But to declare God is holy is simply to say God is set apart. He's one of a kind. He's absolutely like no other being in this universe.

And here, God wants to highlight one dimension of his holiness, one dimension of how he is like no other, by the way he graciously responds to the Israelites.

He wants to show his holy grace through Moses as he forgives rebellious sinners like ourselves. But Moses fails.

And the reason Moses fails is because not only has he misrepresented God, he's forgotten he's not God. Look again at his words in verse 10.

[27 : 10] Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock? Must we? It's almost as if Moses thinks he's the one ultimately responsible for bringing out the water.

He's forgotten that he's in need of the same holy grace of God as well and that he's but God's mere instrument. And as a result of his rash words and his rash thinking, he engages in rash actions.

He strikes the rock in anger or at least in frustration. God and in doing so, he shows he has not really trusted God enough as verse 12 says.

He doesn't like the way that God has chosen to do things. Now back in Exodus chapter 17, God had indeed asked him to strike the rock in that episode.

But not here. God has chosen to do things a different way. But Moses was careless and simply assumed he knew best.

[28 : 18] And so he strikes the rock in disobedience to God. And so all this shows that Moses can't have our full confidence either.

Again, that's the big takeaway. But again, there's a smaller lesson to be learned here as well. You see, we represent God as well.

perhaps we are parents. And so we represent God to our children. They're watching us. And like it or not, since we call ourselves Christian, that means their understanding of God will be partially shaped by the way we act.

So are we acting in ways that reveal God's holy grace? Are we acting in ways that show that we value his word? or are we just scrolling on Facebook right now?

Perhaps we're in a leadership role at church, a Sunday school teacher, a home fellowship group or youth leader, and elder. And we all have our frustrations.

[29 : 33] I know I certainly have mine. And the truth is, sometimes I let my frustrations overwhelm me. I fail to show grace to those under me, or to those who are younger in the faith than me.

And I fail to show what God is truly like to you. If you experience me doing that to you, please forgive me. But it's important, isn't it, especially for those of us who've been disciples of Jesus for a while, to be patient if the progress of those who are younger in the faith is slower than we like? After all, we treat someone who is five and who is 15 differently. We need to give them time to mature. And all of us as Christians represent God in some way.

And so let's make sure not to presume that we know better than God and not follow his instructions closely. And let's not be offended by God's outrageous grace, but be willing to offer it even to those we think undeserving.

For that's what we are. We are undeserving recipients of God's grace as well as his representatives. But clearly, Moses shows that even our best leaders don't command our ultimate confidence.

[31 : 03] Indeed, no human leader can. Not Moses or David and Solomon after him. Not Martin Luther or Billy Graham. Not prominent Malaysian leaders like Bishop Huayong or Pastor Chiu Wangqi or our president Justin Wan.

So who can? Well, that takes us to our third main character. God himself. God himself. Now, throughout Numbers 20 to 21, it sure seems like Israel is unchanging.

That's quite depressing, isn't it? But the good news is, God too is unchanging. He's tender, he's kind, he's trustworthy, he's patient.

And I think the overarching picture we get of God throughout these two chapters is that he provides. God is the provider. Notice, first of all, that he provides for the Israelites' needs.

We've noticed already how the people complain, but God doesn't just throw up his hands and yell at them to shut up. Indeed, even after Moses doesn't follow his instructions, in his grace, he still provides the water.

[32 : 23] Indeed, he cares about us down to the smallest detail. Just look at verse 8 again of chapter 20. He tells Moses, you will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink.

Even the animals have not been forgotten. You see, God knows about all the needs we have, including the practical ones. And he wants to meet our needs.

God called Israel his son. And in Christ, he calls us his son and daughters. And he loves his children. He loves them enough to know even the trivial details like how many strands of hair on our head we have.

And he knows every detail about your lives. He knows about the deadlines, the exams, the bank accounts, the sleepless nights, whether induced by babies or bosses.

He knows about the aging parent, the chronic pain, the future plans. And he gives what he knows we need. Not what we think we need, but what he knows we need.

[33 : 45] And here's the thing, he provides even when we've responded in ungodly ways. He gives even when we don't deserve it. And he shows why it's just so wrong to have thankless hearts.

A God like this, how can we not be grateful? Second of all, he provides a renewal of leadership. In Numbers chapter 20 verses 22 to 29, which we didn't have a chance to read this morning, we learn of the death of Aaron, who was Israel's high priest.

But it was also at the same time the ascension of Eliezer. Just look at verses 25 and 26. Call Aaron and his son Eliezer and take them up Mount Hall.

Remove Aaron's garments and put them on his son Eliezer, for Aaron will be gathered to his people. He will die there. Back in Numbers 3 verse 32, Eliezer was already appointed as the leader

of the Levites.

And then two weeks ago, in chapter 19, he was the guy called to slaughter the cow. So God was already preparing him. And as those clothes are transferred from Aaron to Eliezer, we see that God was ensuring that the next generation of leaders are stepping up.

[35 : 13] After all, if no high priests, Israel can't function. And as far as I can tell, Eliezer exercised a faithful, if unassuming ministry throughout his life.

I can't find any negative mention of him in the Bible. And that reminds us that God will not abandon his church. He will raise up faithful leaders from somewhere.

Now, that doesn't mean we can just sit back and assume that God will just drop them into our lap. But it reassures me that even though sometimes I worry where the next generation of leaders for the Malaysian church will come from, because so few people are entering full-time ministry, so few people are equipped, but God knows.

Even this week, someone I know dropped me a line to ask me for advice on choosing a good theological college for the future. This guy is currently doing a pastoral internship, and something I certainly didn't foresee him doing a few years ago.

And God willing, he will provide a new generation of leaders for KEC. Again, that doesn't mean we do nothing. We have to do the hard work of discipling and equipping and praying.

[36 : 35] But as we strive to remain faithful, God provides a renewal of leadership. Third of all, he provides a solution for judgment.

In Numbers 21, after the people grumble again, judgment comes. You see that in verse 6, in the form of venomous snakes.

Now, this is told matter-of-factly. I think by this stage, God doesn't need to justify himself. It's quite plain that his judgment is fair. But I want you to notice something different.

Look at 21, verse 7. The people came to Moses and said, we sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you.

Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us. So Moses prayed for the people. For the very first time in the book of Numbers, we hear from the very lips of the people themselves an acknowledgement of sin.

[37 : 43] We sense a spirit of humility as they turn to God via Moses. They repent. Well, this seems like a real turning point.

For from here on, the book of Numbers will no longer concentrate so much on Israel's rebellions. Well, here, finally, is hope of a fresh start.

But of course, simply having a spirit of humility and saying sorry isn't enough to rescue them from God's judgment. God still has to provide a solution.

And he does. As in verse 8, he says to Moses, make a snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.

So there's the correspondence between the judgment and the solution. Judgment came in the form of a snake bite and salvation came by looking at the snake pole.

[38 : 42] They just had to look and then they left. And many centuries later, Jesus used this exact event to explain what he's all about.

In John chapter 3 verses 14 to 15 on the screen, he explains to Nicodemus, the great religious teacher, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

And then one chapter later, in John chapter 4, he says that he is the well of living water. As he is lifted up, he provides the waters of eternal life and of satisfying life.

You see, Numbers 21 is telling us what lies at the core of Christianity. To be a Christian is to acknowledge your utter moral failure and to throw yourself on the mercy of the only truly good man who ever lived.

Did you know that? If that is not what lies at the heart of your Christianity, Christianity, I am afraid you have not yet understood what being Christian is truly all about.

[40 : 06] It is to look to Jesus, not to yourself. It is to say my confidence is in Christ alone, to save me from God's judgment.

And not only that, but when our confidence is in Christ alone, he says we will never thirst spiritually again. So where are you looking? Who are you trusting?

Who commands your confidence? Fourthly, and finally, God provides foretaste of victory.

Now what happens for the remainder of Numbers chapter 21? is a record of Israel marching relentlessly onto the promised land as God gives them victory after victory over their various enemies.

What we're seeing here is God assuring Israel that he will keep his promise. He will give them the final victory which will see them reside in the land of milk and honey.

[41 : 16] And so he clearly helps them make progress. And I think God does that with us as well. This is not about victory in the sense of overcoming our circumstances so that we will get economic prosperity.

It's not about that at all. We've seen all throughout Numbers that the greatest enemy of God's people is their own hearts, not their circumstances.

But we can be reassured that as we keep living by faith in Christ, we can expect to make progress. It's not about gloom and doom and defeat all the time.

We will have the final victory when we're finally there in the promised new creation. But I think even here and now, we can sometimes experience four tastes of victory even as we battle with sin. And there will be joy. Twice in the second half of Numbers 21, the people break into song or at least poetry. these are songs of declaration and celebration of what God has done.

[42 : 27] And why not? For indeed, we have discovered that we do have someone whom we can place our entire confidence in. Someone whom we can entrust our lives to God, the provider.

And when we know that, we will sing. Even while we are still in the wilderness as the Israelites were, we can sing.

I do think that a church that never sings is a sign of ill health. But of course, we don't sing just for the sake of singing, but we sing because there are reasons to rejoice.

We have a God who never lets us down. We have the well of living water. We know Jesus who was lifted up on the cross like that snake on a snake pole.

And so as we close, my friends, let's put our hope in the right place. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

[43 : 38] Let's pray.