

Doomed to Repeat | January 24, 2021

Week 4 | Numbers 13-14 | "Nostalgia and Inertia"

At the beginning of the year, we kicked-off a brand-new series called "Doomed to Repeat." The entire premise of this series is to teach you principles that'll help you avoid repeating the same mistakes over and over again. To show how to do this, we started in Joshua 1, where God tells the Israelites that they need only trust and obey Scripture's commands.

Then, two weeks ago, we moved backward in the narrative from the Promise Land to Moses's death. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses reiterates their need to trust and obey God. Still, he also encouraged them to repent if they failed in their duty to God.

After that, during last week's message, we dissected another speech given by Moses. As you'll remember from our text in Deut. 8, the Israelites had just finished the forty-year wanderings in the desert, and it was high time for a review of what had just occurred. In this speech, Moses wanted to sum up the two fundamental principles that the generation before them had lacked: humility and hindsight. He told them if they were to avoid repeating their parent's and grandparents' mistakes, they needed to squash any pride in their heart, and they needed to remind themselves of what God had done for them.

Today, at this juncture in the series, it occurs to me that one of the biggest roadblocks to change is that people, quite frankly, do not want to change. In the physics world, this is called "inertia," which describes the tendency of matter to do nothing or to remain unchanged. In the 16th century, Sir Isaac Newton called this the first law of motion. He explained that a body at rest will stay at rest unless an outside force acts upon it. The point is that whether it's the matter in the universe or human beings, whatever state or speed we're in at the moment is always going to be the most appealing state to continue in. Anyone who's ever struggled to get out of a warm bed on a cold wintery morning knows how alluring inertia and Newton's first law of motion can be.

But the resistance to change doesn't just apply to early morning wake up calls. All of life can seem to be a constant struggle against change. If given a choice between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the human race will choose the familiar every single time. This is because selecting a known past—even an unpleasant one—is far more appealing than the prospect of an unknown future. We even have a saying for this sort of thing: better the devil you know than the devil you don't. By and large, people like their "comfort zones" even if their "comfort zone" is, by every objective metric, unhealthy. Fear of the unknown is still a massive hurdle to overcome

even when you know that to remain unchanged means nothing but heartache. You can talk to people till you're blue in the face, but if they have no desire to change, they won't.

As a species, our gut reaction to anything that challenges the status quo is almost always negative (e.g., my beardless face). As such, we love the past because it is familiar; it doesn't change. So, we often find ourselves yearning for a time gone by (e.g., that person who still lives in High School). We begin to wish for "simpler times" when the world wasn't so chaotic, even though we know that no such time ever existed. This desire for the predictable is called "nostalgia." According to Merriam-Webster, nostalgia is defined as "an excessively sentimental yearning for the return of some past period or irrecoverable condition." Entire movie franchises have been built on nostalgia simply because Hollywood knows that selling the "familiar" is a far more lucrative business venture than selling the "unfamiliar." For instance, some of the highest-grossing movies of all time were nothing more than reboots (cf. new Star Wars trilogy, Andy Serkis' Planet of the Apes, '17 and '19 Jumanji, all the live-action Disney movies: Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin, Jungle Book, Lion King). Why make something new when you can rebrand the old and make a ton of money?

Yet nostalgia may break the box office, but it is, without a doubt, the archenemy of progress. Those who are doomed to repeat their mistakes are likely living in the past and not adapting to the changing world around them. God cannot do something new with us if we are more in love with our history than with Him. God will not do something new with us if we do not want to change. And, as we'll see today, the marriage between nostalgia and inertia in a person's heart has been the downfall of many.

A quick sidebar before diving into today's passage: In the spirit of transparency, I must admit, despite what my rather lengthy introduction may suggest, I do not have a lot to say today. But we do, however, have a lot of reading to do. This is because today's passage does such a great job explaining the perils of nostalgia, inertia, and living in the past. Therefore, it is far better for us to simply read the passage with little to no commentary from me and just let the bible speak for itself.

READ: Numbers 13:1-3 (ESV)

13 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel. From each tribe of their fathers you shall send a man, everyone a chief among them." ³ So Moses sent them from the wilderness of Paran, according to the command of the Lord, all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.

From there, we get a list of the names of those spies. There were 12 in all.

READ: Numbers 13:17-20 (ESV)

¹⁷ Moses sent them to spy out the land of Canaan and said to them, “Go up into the Negeb and go up into the hill country, ¹⁸and see what the land is, and whether the people who dwell in it are strong or weak, whether they are few or many, ¹⁹and whether the land that they dwell in is good or bad, and whether the cities that they dwell in are camps or strongholds, ²⁰and whether the land is rich or poor, and whether there are trees in it or not. Be of good courage and bring some of the fruit of the land.” Now the time was the season of the first ripe grapes.

We’re then given some geographical marker of where they went.

READ: Numbers 13:25-33 (ESV)

²⁵ At the end of forty days they returned from spying out the land. ²⁶ And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the people of Israel in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh. They brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷ And they told him, “We came to the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸ However, the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there. ²⁹ The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb. The Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites dwell in the hill country. And the Canaanites dwell by the sea, and along the Jordan.”

³⁰ But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.” ³¹ Then the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are.” ³² So they brought to the people of Israel a bad report of the land that they had spied out, saying, “The land, through which we have gone to spy it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people that we saw in it are of great height. ³³ And there we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak, who come from the Nephilim), and we seemed to ourselves like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them.”

READ: Numbers 14:1-12 (ESV)

14 Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night.² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this

wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

⁵ Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before all the assembly of the congregation of the people of Israel. ⁶ And Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had spied out the land, tore their clothes⁷ and said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceedingly good land. ⁸ If the Lord delights in us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us, a land that flows with milk and honey. ⁹ Only do not rebel against the Lord. And do not fear the people of the land, for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them, and the Lord is with us; do not fear them.” ¹⁰ Then all the congregation said to stone them with stones. But the glory of the Lord appeared at the tent of meeting to all the people of Israel.

¹¹ And the Lord said to Moses, “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them? ¹² I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they.”

Then there's this back and forth between Moses and God. God wants to destroy Israel, but Moses intercedes on their behalf. So, God doesn't destroy the Israelites but settles on a punishment: a forty-year exile. However, God had something else in mind for the spies who brought the evil report. He would exact judgment upon them immediately.

READ: Numbers 14:36-45 (ESV)

³⁶ And the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land, who returned and made all the congregation grumble against him by bringing up a bad report about the land—³⁷ the men who brought up a bad report of the land—died by plague before the Lord. ³⁸ Of those men who went to spy out the land, only Joshua the son of Nun and Caleb the son of Jephunneh remained alive.

³⁹ When Moses told these words to all the people of Israel, the people mourned greatly. ⁴⁰ And they rose early in the morning and went up to the heights of the hill country, saying, “Here we are. We will go up to the place that the Lord has promised, for we have sinned.” ⁴¹ But Moses said, “Why now are you transgressing the command of the Lord, when that will not succeed? ⁴² Do not go up, for the Lord is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. ⁴³ For there the Amalekites and the

Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following the Lord, the Lord will not be with you.”⁴⁴ But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses departed out of the camp.⁴⁵ Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah.

So, to sum up briefly what we read.

12 spies went to scope out the promised land. Joshua and Caleb acknowledged the difficulties that lay ahead but ultimately trusted that God would deliver them. The other 10 spies weren't so optimistic. They preached gloom, despair, and destruction: just as the promised land had great riches, so too did it have great enemies. The people of Israel were swayed by these faithless spies and began to weep. What's truly remarkable here is that Joshua and Caleb persisted in their faith in the face of significant opposition. They chose faith over fear.

All of a sudden, God appears and wants to destroy the children of Israel, but then Moses intercedes on their behalf. God does not eliminate all the Israelites, but he does punish them. He condemns the Jews to walk the desert for forty years as punishment. Only until everyone over the age of twenty is dead will God allow them a second chance at entering the promised land.

Seeing the prospect of a forty-year exile, the Israelites respond with repentance. But, as we saw, it was not true repentance, was it? If it was, they would've headed straight toward the desert to begin their wanderings as God had commanded. Instead, they once again disobeyed God and entered the promised land anyway. They thought that since they had repented, God would be okay with them. Even though he had given them a direct command that they promptly disobeyed. Their repentance was mere lip-service and not a sincere change. And those who decided to engage in battle anyway paid dearly for their mistakes with their lives.

Now, there's a ton we could unpack in this passage. We could talk about Joshua and Caleb's faithfulness. We could speak of God's anger with his people and how Moses interceded on their behalf. We could talk about how God allowed the majority of Israel to live, though in exile, but how he immediately struck down the ten evil spies. We could even talk about how the people's repentance was insincere and how they paid for their lack of sincerity with their lives.

But no. I do not want to talk about any of those things. Instead, I want to get to the root of the problem. I want to talk about something which sparked this chain reaction of bad outcomes.

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Living in the past prevents us from seeing the blessings in the future.

READ: Numbers 14:1-4 (ESV)

¹ Then all the congregation raised a loud cry, and the people wept that night.² And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³ Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” ⁴ And they said to one another, “Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt.”

Victory is often stolen away by the hands of some familiar vice. And only when you hate your sin more than you love will you ever claim victory over it. A new life cannot be achieved if we are unwilling to give up our past and resistant to change. In fact, you will repeat the mistakes of your past if you look with more fondness on your past than the future God has for you. As I said at the beginning of this message, nostalgia is the enemy of progress. Yet, when nostalgia is also married together with inertia, the results don't just impede progress; they are catastrophic. Suppose you are still looking back, wishing for “simpler times,” content on mediocrity, happy to say as you are. In that case, you will never move forward into better times God has for you.

READ: Philippians 3:13-21 (KJV)

¹³ Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

¹⁴ I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ Let us therefore, as many as be perfect [mature], be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. ¹⁶ Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.

¹⁷ Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. ¹⁸ (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: ¹⁹ Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

²⁰ For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ: ²¹ Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

If we are continually looking to our past lives, we are not looking to the life that Christ is making for us. Jesus himself said in Luke 9:62 that, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.”

SO, WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Living in the past prevents us from seeing the blessings in the future.

Don't let the past kill your future.

Video Description

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Yet nostalgia may break the box office, but it is, without a doubt, the archenemy of progress. Those who are doomed to repeat their mistakes over and over again are likely living in the past and not adapting to the changing world around them. God cannot do something new with us if we are more in love with our history than with Him. God will not do something new with us if we do not want to change. And, as we'll see today, the result of a marriage between nostalgia and inertia in a person's heart is catastrophic.

Pastor's manuscript can be found here:

“Message in a Minute” Video Description