

'Repeating Past Mistakes'

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[0 : 0 0] Well, some years ago I saw this church sign that said, God does not make mistakes. It's one of those slow release jokes. You've got to realise that the word mistakes is misspelt.

You get that? Okay, maybe it's just my dad's sense of humour. I quite like that one. But people do make mistakes, and I wonder, well, that's okay, isn't it? As long as we learn from those mistakes rather than repeating those same mistakes.

But today, sadly, we'll see that's not the case with Israel and her leaders. For today, we're resuming our series in numbers from last year, and we'll see them repeat the same mistakes.

Now, just as an aside, I've had a few people express surprise that we're pausing our series in Mark and returning to the Old Testament. But just a reminder that this is our normal routine for the last 10 years, I think, where we look at a gospel at the beginning of the year.

Right up to Easter. This year we went three weeks over because we had that three-week miniseries in the middle. And then we return to the Old Testament, and usually one of the first five books of the Bible called the Pentateuch.

[1 : 1 0] And so we've done Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and now we're partway through numbers. And this is because the Bible itself tells us that everything that was written in the past, like in the Old Testament, was written to teach us.

And so it's good and right that we return and learn what it has to teach us. And today, it's to learn from their repeated mistakes.

But admittedly, it has been a year since we started numbers. And so let me recap the story so far. You might remember that God worked through Moses to rescue Israel from the country of Egypt. Well done. And then they... I should have had some lollies to hear. Anyway. And then he led them to a mountain called Mount Sinai. Yep, well done. Along the way, were they happy or did they grumble?

Grumbled. Grumbled. Yep, that's right. They got to Sinai State for about a year, receiving the laws like the Ten Commandments and making curtains and poles for the tabernacle, which would have taken a while in the wilderness.

[2 : 1 8] And then receiving the sacrificial system with all the laws and the priesthood in Leviticus. And then they headed off to their promised land. That's right. As we saw in Numbers last year.

But when we got there, we also saw they got to a place called Kadesh, which is in our reading is Gen, which is just south of the promised land. They sent spies to look at the land for 40 days and found it was rich with food, including massive grapes.

A single cluster of grapes that took two of them to carry it on a pole between them. And so it would have looked something like this. Can you imagine how much coals would charge for grapes like this today with all the food prices going up?

But along with grapes were pomegranates and figs and so on. But of course, the spies also said there were giants in the land. And so Israel refused to enter the land.

And the real reason was because they did not believe. So in the middle of that verse from Numbers 14, God said, How long will they refuse to believe in me despite everything they've seen from me?

[3 : 2 6] And so the sad consequence was that that first generation, all the adults of fighting age, which was 20 years old or more, except for Caleb and Joshua, who did believe, that first generation would die outside the land.

They would end up wandering the wilderness 40 years. One year for each of the 40 days they explored the land. Of course, the next day they go, Oh no, we've sinned.

And now we are ready to go up to the land the Lord has promised. And they try and do it without God. But of course, that's to disobey God yet again. And so the armies from the Canaanites come

out against them.

Well, today, the 40 years are almost over. And they're back at Kadesh for round two. But they're also back to repeating their past mistakes, like grumbling or quarreling again.

So at point one, and we'll pick it up at verse two. Now, there was no water for the community and the people gathered in opposition to Moses and Aaron. They quarreled with Moses and said, If only we had died when our brothers all fell dead before the Lord.

[4 : 41] 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 or grapevines or pomegranates.

And there is no water to drink. Israel faced another hardship. And the primary one here is no water. That's what we're told at the beginning of verse one and the end of verse five.

And so they quarrel against Moses and Aaron. Now, before we kind of point the finger at them, we need to acknowledge that often when we face hardship, our first response is to grumble too, isn't it? You know, those petrol prices, those interest rates, our health issues. We humans are great grumblers, aren't we? Now, it's okay, I must say, to lament our situation as the psalmists do, but to throw a toddler tantrum like Israel do?

I mean, they say, we wish we were dead. Is it really that bad? It's a bit of an overreaction, isn't it? And it's certainly not okay to grumble against God, which Israel effectively do by grumbling or quarreling with God's appointed leaders.

[5 : 57] In fact, in verse 13, it says plainly that they quarreled with the Lord. And this is repeating their past mistake, because this is exactly what they did 40 years earlier in the same situation.

And so I've given you a map as a handout. Hopefully you receive that in your bulletin because it's way too small on the screen. And it shows how they leave Egypt. And in the middle of the map almost, there's an upside-down triangle that's called the land of Sinai.

And at the bottom is Mount Sinai. If you head towards the bottom of that upside-down triangle is a place called Rephidim. And we're told back in Exodus 17 that they camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink.

Exactly the same situation back in Exodus 17. And exactly the same response. So they quarreled with Moses. You see, they're doing exactly the same thing again here in Numbers as they did back in Exodus.

But only here in Numbers they've forgotten two things. First, they've forgotten that their situation is actually of their own making. Notice how in verse 5 of our passage, they mention the figs, the massive grapevines and pomegranates.

[7 : 23] They're very fruit. They could have been enjoying right now if they had actually believed in God and entered the land 40 years ago.

No, they're in this situation because they did not believe in God, but disobeyed. It was of their own making. And I wonder if we sometimes forget that too. You know, from borrowing more than we can afford and then grumbling we have no money, or to refusing to forgive others and grumbling that we have broken relationships in our lives, or to not spending time reading the Bible and in prayer, and then grumbling that God feels distant.

Well, Israel have forgotten their situation is actually of their own making. But second, they've forgotten God's past provision. Before, when they had no water at Rephidim, back in Exodus 17, God told Moses to strike the rock and water would come out.

And it did. But they called that place Massa, which means testing, because Israel tested God back then, and Meribah, which means quarreling, because they quarreled with God back then.

But here, 40 years later, they're repeating the same mistake, and they're not remembering God's past provision back in Exodus, where God provided in the exact same situation.

[8 : 47] And so instead of praying for God's provision, they repeat their past mistake of quarreling. And so in verse 13 of our chapter, this place is also called Meribah.

Can you, there we go, hear the waters of Meribah, where they quarreled with the Lord. I wonder how many Meribahs there are around the world. Lots of places where people grumble against God. And so by way of application then, when we face hardship in life, whether it's of our own making or not, we're to remember God's past provision to us.

And rather than grumble against him, we are to pray to him, that he'll provide for what we need, not what we want, but what we need to keep going.

We're not to repeat their past mistake of quarreling, but learn from it by praying. For God is gracious and kind.

[9 : 48] Yes, he probably won't remove our hardship, but he will help us through our hardship. And he'll meet our needs.

Maybe not in a way that we want or expect, but always in a way that helps us to keep trusting in him. Well, that's what he now does for Israel.

But this time there is disbelief again, and not from the people, but from their leaders. A point to verse six to eight. Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the tent of meeting and fell face down and the glory of the Lord appeared to them.

The Lord said to Moses, take the staff and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together, 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.

Now, I think this is a great act of grace from God, isn't it? I mean, if you were looking after a group of people or kids or whoever it is, and they were grumbling and whinging against you for no reason after all you've done for them, would you then give them exactly what they wanted without rebuking them?

[11 : 05] I wouldn't. I'd be going to stop your whinging. I wouldn't hit them, no, no. Stop your whinging, right? And then I might, you know, give them something. But God doesn't do that. He doesn't rebuke them.

He doesn't punish them. He provides for them, even though they don't deserve it. It's a great act of grace. But also notice Moses is to take his staff then, which was kept in God's presence, so a sign of God's power, and then simply speak to the rock this time, and it will pour out water.

Now, rocks don't normally pour out water, do they? And certainly not by speaking to them. And so this would have really shown Israel again that God has the power to provide for them, to save them from thirst in this situation.

In other words, he's providing a means to help them keep trusting him, trust that he is God alone, that he has power to help, to save, to provide.

And so verse 9, it seems like Moses takes the staff and obeys, but then things go pear-shaped in verse 10. He and Aaron gathered the assembly together in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?

[12 : 25] Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank. Did Moses and Aaron fully obey?

Nope. Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses strikes the rock twice. Now maybe he was so used to hitting rocks from earlier, back in Exodus 17, that it was just a reflex action.

But twice? And that was 40 years ago. You know, had he really been practicing hitting rocks every day? Of course not. It was not a reflex action.

It was disobedience, plain and simple. But the real reason for disobeying was because of distrust or disbelief. That's what God says in 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 Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them.

[13 : 29] They disobeyed because they disbelieved. That's what it means not to trust. It means not to believe, not to have faith. They're all the same thing. And God says they did not trust or believe in him enough to simply speak to the rock.

And so they disobey by striking the rock instead. In other words, disbelief leads to disobedience. I mean, if you don't believe God's word to you, then you won't obey God's word, will you?

And that's our choice. But disbelief comes with consequences. Which for Moses and Aaron was that they would no longer lead the community into the land. In other words, they would die outside the land.

Just like the first generation of Israel. In fact, back in Numbers 14, God uses the exact same Hebrew phrase for the people who did not believe in him, as he does for Moses and Aaron, who did not believe in him.

And so just as that first generation did not believe and would miss out on the land, so now Aaron and Moses, who did not believe, would also miss out on the land.

[14 : 42] Now, that may sound a bit harsh to us. After all, putting up with these people for 40 years would have been a big effort. I mean, even kids leave home before 40 years, don't they?

Though sometimes they do come back, admittedly. Plus, Moses and Aaron had done so well for so long, hadn't they? And so why such judgment? Well, two reasons.

First, they were the leaders. And God will judge leaders more strictly because their actions impact many, don't they? But second and more significantly, their disbelief in God not only leads to disobedience, but also dishonor.

Notice in verse 12 again, you did not trust or believe in me enough to honor me as holy. How? Israel was Israel's only saviour and judge.

You see, the word holy means set apart, and it can mean set apart in purity, which is often how we think about it, or it can mean set apart for a particular purpose, or it can even mean set apart as unique, the only, and that's what God means here.

[15 : 59] He is holy. He is the only true God. Israel's only true set apart saviour and judge. Yet in verse 10, Moses and Aaron start acting like Israel's judges.

They call them you rebels. And that is true. They are rebels. But if God had effectively decided to pardon them by graciously giving them water to drink without punishing them, then who are Moses and Aaron to now judge them?

You see, they're acting as Israel's judge when God alone is holy. He's set apart as the only judge. And more than that, they also act as Israel's saviour by saying in verse 10, must we bring water from the rock?

And then striking the rock twice as if to show that they're helping provide water for Israel too. You see, if Moses had just spoken to the rock, it would have been even more obvious to the people that it's only God who saves.

It would have honoured God as Israel's holy, one and only saviour. But he says, we, and then acts like Israel's saviours too. Now, you might not think that's so serious, but to put it into our context, it would be like me doing communion and saying, this bread represents my body.

[17 : 33] Take and eat in remembrance that your vicar is your saviour too. Now, some vicars might think they're the people's saviours, but we are not, are we? Jesus is the only saviour.

God has made him holy, set apart Jesus as the only saviour and judge. And so by way of application then, do we honour Jesus as that, as the only judge and saviour?

Firstly, in terms of the only judge, how? Well, by not holding grudges, for example, against one another whom God has pardoned. Just like Moses and Aaron held a grudge against the people when God had effectively pardoned them.

You see, when we refuse to forgive others whom God has forgiven in Christ, we're acting as though we are their judge, as though they answer to us. But Jesus is their judge, not us.

And if he has forgiven them, then who are we not to? And so we dishonour Jesus as the holy or set apart judge by continuing to hold grudges against those whom he has pardoned.

[18 : 43] And also by continuing to condemn ourselves for some sin, he has forgiven. Yes, we're to learn from our mistakes and from our sins, and sometimes we still have to suffer the consequences of them, even after we are forgiven.

But if God has forgiven us, then we're not to keep condemning ourselves as though we are our own judge. No, we can actually enjoy that forgiveness with thankfulness.

But Jesus alone has been set apart to be our judge and our saviour. And so do we honour him as that too? By doing all we can to point people to him and no other.

I still sometimes hear Christians say, oh, I think all religions lead to God. But that's not to honour Jesus as the holy, the set apart, the one and only saviour, is it?

Plus, it's illogical, actually. I mean, did Buddha die for our sins and rise again? Did Muhammad, did Krishna? Of course not. Only Jesus did.

[19 : 55] But this also means we're not to try and be other people's saviours either. I've also seen some Christians put all this pressure on themselves to save their loved ones.

Or some churches focus on, you know, fancy music or fun youth group activities or they water down the gospel or to try and save others because they think it all depends on them.

Yes, we should do all we can to seek to save others. But we are not their saviours. Only Jesus is.

And so we need to keep praying for them, yes, and we're to seek to the true gospel about him.

And keep doing all we can to point people to him and leave the rest up to God. The point is we're to learn from the past mistakes of Moses and Aaron and not disbelieve nor dishonour Jesus as the holy set-apart saviour and judge.

Well, after being told Moses won't bring this community into the land, what does he do next? Well, he tries to bring the community into the land. But it doesn't work for God has said disbelief means death outside the land, which is point three.

[21 : 04] We're going to have to do this more briefly. So just verse 14, Moses sent messages from Kadesh to the king of Edom saying, this is what your brother Israel says.

Basically, let us pass through your land and we'll go up the king's highway to our promised land.

Now, again, to help you, I've given you another map which looks a bit like this.

It's on the other side and hopefully on the left you can see Kadesh Barnea or Kadesh. They're kind of known as both on the left-hand side and in a moment they'll head to Mount Hor which is just northeast of Kadesh but they're still in the wilderness of Zin.

Now, as you can see, the land of Canaan which is the promised land is directly above them, north. And that's the way they were going to enter last time but because it didn't work last time it seems like Moses decides to go east, to the right towards Edom and to pass through part of Edom and then up the king's highway around Moab and then up above the Dead Sea ready to cross the river Jordan and face Jericho.

And he figures he can go through Edom because Edom and Israel are like brothers. That's what he said in verse 14. After all, these nations came from brothers, didn't they?

[22 : 29] Edom came from Esau and Israel came from Jacob. But, after this request, Edom replies in verse 18, you may not pass through here.

If you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword. It's not a very brotherly reaction, is it?

And later, Edom will do much worse to Israel for which God will hold them accountable.

But, here's the thing. Who told Moses to go that way in the first place? Back in verse 6, when Israel grumbled, Moses and Aaron rightly went to God to the tent of meeting, didn't they?

And in the next chapter in chapter 21 verse 2, Israel will go to God. But, here, Moses doesn't go to God, does he? He just sends messengers and decides to go through Edom.

And even when Edom says no in verse 18, Moses doesn't go back to God and go, what do we do?

No, he tries again and he sends more messengers in verse 19 and pleads with them to let them pass through.

[23 : 36] But, they decline and send, in verse 20, an army out to meet Israel. And so, here, Moses seems to repeat Israel's past mistake 40 years earlier.

Remember Israel? When they first came to the promised land, they didn't believe God and so they were told they had to wander the desert for 40 years, they weren't allowed to enter. And do you remember what they tried to do? Oh no, we've sinned, let's go up and try and enter it now.

Well, Moses disbelieved God, he's told he's not allowed to lead the people into the land. What does he do now? He tries to lead the people into the land. It's repeating past mistakes. And the point, really though, is that disbelief sadly leads to death outside the land.

That's what God has told Moses. Whether it's for Israel's people or Israel's leaders. And that's how the chapter ends, with Aaron dying. Because both of you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah.

In fact, this chapter begins and ends with death, did you realize? Verse 1, Miriam died and was buried.

[24 : 46] Miriam, who was the leader of the women, dies. And then verse 28 and 29, Aaron, who was Israel's high priest, dies. Death bookends this chapter to make the point that whether a part of the people or leaders of the people, disbelief really does lead to death sadly outside the land.

And yet we still see God's grace. Not just in providing water to grumbling people, but providing another high priest for the people. So God graciously provides Aaron's son, Eliezer, to replace him. Of course for us, God has graciously provided his own son, Jesus, to replace both Moses and Aaron, hasn't he? And Jesus is a better Moses.

But Jesus never disobeys his father, but is obedient even to death on a cross. And Jesus is a better Aaron. For while Aaron died, Jesus rode and always lives as our high priest to intercede for us so that we can come to God in prayer when we face hardship and ask for provision, for help.

And Jesus even gives us better water to drink. For he gives us living water, a spring of water welling up to eternal life as we read in John's Gospel.

[26 : 10] Eternal life with God now spiritually and eternal life with God later physically in the true promised land. You see, much of the Old Testament are like illustrations of something greater in the

New Testament, like the promised land.

the promised land in the Old Testament is an illustration of the true promised land of the new creation. You know Revelation 21, then I saw a new heavens and a new earth where there'll be no more tears or mourning or crying or pain.

And I take it since Moses repented, he will be in the true promised land with us too. But on the flip side, death outside the promised land in the Old Testament is also an illustration for something far worse in the New Testament, that place that none of us like to name.

You know that one? Hell? And so it's even more important we don't repeat the past mistakes of disbelieving, isn't it? And that's really the big application, the one we heard in our second reading from Hebrews.

It says, see, we see that they were not able to enter the land because of their unbelief, their disbelief. And so the writer says, see to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you, none of us has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God, but rather encourage each other daily, as long as it's called today, so that we might keep believing in Jesus.

[27 : 42] Because verse 14, we have come to share in Christ, enjoy the true promised land, if we hold our original conviction, our original faith firmly to the very end.

And so will you keep believing in Jesus? Will you keep encouraging each other to believe in Jesus? Not just by meeting together, but by praying for one another.

And if you see someone missing whom you know, calling them up, checking in, seeing how they're going, encouraging each other. For disbelief leads to death outside the land, and so we're to keep believing, keep trusting in Jesus, and encouraging each other to do the same to the very end.

Let's pray we would. Our gracious Father, we thank you that everything that was written in the past was written to teach us. And so this morning we thank you for this lesson, to not repeat the past mistakes of Israel and her leaders, but to learn from them.

By praying to you rather than grumbling against you when we face hardship, by honouring Jesus as our set-apart saviour and judge, and by continuing to believe in him and encouraging each other to do the same at the very end.

[29 : 02] We ask all this in his name. Amen.