

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(January 8, 2017)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Lessons Learned in the Wilderness

(Studies in Exodus and Numbers)

Toward a Fantastic Failure!!

(Numbers 14:11-45)

Study #4

Introduction: Those who don't learn from the past...

On Monday, I cashed in a Christmas gift from my son, Ben.

His gift to me was a training session with an experienced weightlifting coach. This expert would more than earn his pay by coaching me through a set of exercises that I do regularly, check my form, and make corrections.

It turns out that I was making a few errors in the way I was doing these exercises. During the coaching session, he repeatedly stopped me in the middle of, say, a squat, or a press, to correct this or that form fault. He didn't scold. He corrected. Even patiently.

In the days since that session, I've been working on the changes he wanted me to make in exercises I've been doing for years. I'm trying hard to not repeat past mistakes.

When the National Transportation Safety Board investigates a terrible accident, it's not so much to affix blame or to slap wrists. It is to avoid a repeat. They look carefully at plane, train, and auto wrecks so that next time, the accident won't happen. They don't want to see repeat failures.

When Coach Popovich looks at film with the Spurs players on the day after a game, he points out mistakes - sometimes, I hear, not so kindly - so that those same mistakes won't be made in the next game.

So much of life is about learning from the past. And learning from the past - especially from past mistakes - is an essential for a life well-lived. And it's essential for all of us, because we all make mistakes.

Then, there are mistakes and there are MISTAKES.

I mentioned my exercise form faults. Well, I'm way more concerned about lots of other kinds of errors than those.¹

I'm more concerned about the lack of love I show to some of the most important people in my life. I'm more concerned to become less selfish with my time, my money, my stuff.

You can probably think of mistakes you'd like to stop repeating - biting your fingernails, not cleaning up messes - and MISTAKES that need to be gone.

You want to put away ugly ways of speaking and to always honor God with your words. You want to put porn away for good. You want to have unimpeachable integrity and be bold for Jesus. You want to love and to serve well.

Today, we are going to see how we can move past past mistakes into a different, better life with Jesus.

While the last several Sundays have been all about Christmas and New Years, this morning we are picking back up where we left off in early December.

We are out to discover life lessons the Jews learned in the wilderness of the Sinai desert, some thirty-five hundred years ago.

¹ I mean, keeping a vertical bar path over the mid-foot on a squat is important, right? :-)

The stories are mostly found in the Old Testament book of Numbers, and, honestly, we don't find much in the way of successes to imitate. We are instructed by their failures.

Today we are going to leverage one of their most impressive failures in a way that, by God's grace, will lead to our own failure-to-success story.

First, to review.

Review...

The Jews had been rescued from four hundred years of Egyptian slavery when God parted the Red Sea for them. They walked across a dry sea bed, and at the end of that great deliverance they found themselves on the eastern side of the Red Sea, their enemies vanquished.

They marched straight to Mount Sinai where God gave them the Mosaic Law and called them His own people. He supplied them with water in the desert and *manna* for daily food.

He then led them right to the border of the land of promise (Canaan) and told them that the land was theirs for the taking. He commanded them, "*Take the land!*"

However, after a unanimous report that the land was truly wonderful, ten of the twelve spies who had been sent to inspect the land said, "*No, thanks*" to God's gracious offer.

They said, "*The people who live in Canaan are big and mean. The tribes there are scary. We can't do it. We'd be better off back in Egypt. In fact, [Numbers 14:3] Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!*"

At a place called Kadesh-barnea the people accepted the report of these ten that taking the land was **MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE** and despaired of ever entering the land God said He would give them.

And then, when the two dissenting spies - Joshua and Caleb - urged the people to obey God and take the land despite the challenges, the people picked up rocks to stone those them to death.

And that is where we enter the story this morning. At exactly the moment of rebellion, God showed up.

[10b] Then the glory of the Lord appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel.

The people had rejected God's glory. They had disobeyed - and to disobey is to ignore God's glory.

When His glory is rejected and ignored, God reserves the right to move heaven and earth to put things right.

The Glory of the Lord Before All Nations (vv. 11-21)

The Moses Plan (vv. 11-12)

A nation that didn't deserve what God was offering (v. 11)

[11] The Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?"

God has put up with a lot of His people's grumbles and their minor-league rebellions. This is different.

Refusing to take the good land He was giving them and threatening to kill those who wanted to obey Him is a rebellion different in kind, not just in degree.

This rebellion prompted God to consider a Plan B.

A new nation to work with (v. 12)

[12] "I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you (i.e., Moses) into a nation greater and mightier than they."

God is talking with Moses about simply doing away with the Jews and raising up a new nation. Moses would be the head. Moses would become the new Abraham.

Justice would have been served if God had done this. People who rebel against God don't deserve His blessings. They don't deserve to live, much less prosper.

But, there was a compelling reason for God to NOT take this course of action, and Moses presented that reason to the Lord.

His main argument is: *"Think of what the Egyptians will say about You. What will the nations think of You?"*²

The Egyptian Argument (vv. 13-19)

Do not destroy, O Lord (vv. 13-17)

[13] But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it..."

Moses pointed out that IF God destroyed the people, it would reflect terribly on Him.

See, the nations of Canaan, by this time, have heard about how God delivered the Jews from Egypt with the ten plagues and the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea.

These nations also knew that God's pillar of cloud and fire led the Jews to the border of the Promised Land.

But if He NOW did away with His people, ***[15]...then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, [16] "Because the Lord could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness."***

² Notice Moses' personal disinterestedness as he speaks to God. He would have become the source of the new nation, but he was more concerned that God be glorified than that he, personally, be exalted.

The surrounding nations would see God's action as *weakness* ("He couldn't sustain them") or *faithlessness* ("He abandoned His people") or even *meanness* ("He never loved them, anyway").

If God abandons His people, then His name and His reputation - His *glory* - among the nations would be tarnished.

So, while God was offering a tremendous blessing to him, personally; and while destroying the Jews would have left Moses alone to become the head of a new nation; and while Moses would have been blessed with power and prestige - he begged God to NOT do this thing.

Instead, he asked God to do something that would actually magnify His glory.

Pardon, O Lord (v. 17-19)

[17] But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, [18] 'The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' [19] Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now."³

Above all, Moses wanted people to see how glorious God is. So, He prayed that God would show His glory in the most spectacular way possible - by lavishing love and forgiveness on an unworthy people.⁴

³ The scene we are witnessing here is like one recorded at Exodus 32. There, God also spoke about His willingness to destroy the nation and make a new nation out of Moses. The precipitating event on that occasion had been the people's idolatry at the foot of Mount Sinai when they made and worshipped a golden calf. Both there and here, the peoples' high-handed sin prompted God's wrath. And, both there and here, Moses interceded for the people, asking that God would not bring on them the ruin they so richly deserved - and both times, he asked for God's sake.

⁴ Those words ***[19] "pardon...just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now"*** bring to mind all the gracious things God had done for Israel ever since He had brought them out of Egypt.

Moses wanted God to forgive Israel because nothing - not even the parting of the Red Sea - shows off His glory as dramatically as His amazing grace.⁵

The Glorious Forgiveness Resolution (vv. 20-21)

[20] So the Lord said, "I have pardoned them according to your word; [21] but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord."

This morning, I have wanted to highlight the priority of God's glory. We see His glory in the grace He extended to rebels.

When you received His grace for the very first time, when you saw the beauty of the cross of Jesus and believed that His sacrifice there paid the penalty for your sin, you glorified God. He was glorified and honored as you were forgiven for every sin you ever committed or ever will commit.

God is glorified by the grace He showers on you every day. His grace magnifies His glory today as it did in the Sinai wilderness.

He forgave Israel their sin. He did not destroy or even disinherit them. He won't raise up a new nation from Moses.

⁵ The Lord Jesus showed this very thing at several points in His own ministry, fifteen hundred years later. One of the most provocative scenes from the Gospels shows some men bringing a lame friend to Jesus to be healed. They couldn't get to Jesus through the front door, so they hauled him on his pallet up to the roof, tore out an opening and lowered him on ropes at the Lord's feet. Jesus immediately realized this man's needs - healing and forgiveness. But, which did Jesus consider His primary need? Forgiveness. So, He told the man, "***My son, your sins are forgiven.***" But, then, when the onlookers asked Him to prove that He had done the invisible work of bestowing forgiveness, Jesus said, "***Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Yours sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Arise, and take up your pallet and walk'?*** But in order that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins (He said to the paralytic) ***I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home.***" (Mark 2:1-12) The point of the incident is to show that Jesus' power is more spectacularly seen in the little phrase, "***My son, your sins are forgiven***" than in the words, "***Rise, take up your pallet and walk.***"

We need to know how glorious God is and we need to see here how committed God is that others see His glory.

This is crucial. But it's not the main thing I want us to see this morning as we consider lessons the Lord can teach us from Israel's experiences in the wilderness.

Before we see the main thing, though, we'll notice something else, next.

The Discipline of the Lord Toward His People (vv. 22-38)

When God says, "OK. Your will be done" (vv. 22-25)

To this point, God's people have grumbled against Him several times. They have told Him that they would rather die in the wilderness than move on toward Canaan. They didn't want His will for them, which was to take the land of Canaan.

Here, God finally told them, "*Fine. Your will - not Mine - be done.*"

God decreed that the grumbly generation who saw the Red Sea part, received manna, drank water from a rock AND STILL REBELLED would never enter the land of promise.

He did promise that the two faithful spies, Caleb and Joshua, would enter the land (vv. 24, 30, 38). But He sent the remainder of the nation packing, south from Kadesh-barnea into the Sinai wilderness.

And what follows is a grim description of what the next forty years would hold for the Jewish people. In short, there are going to be a lot of funerals.

Forty Years of Funerals (vv. 26-35)

God told Moses to tell the people, ***[28] Say to them, 'As I live,' says the Lord, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you; [29] your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.***

[30] Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you...[32]...your corpses will fall in this wilderness. [33] Your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they will suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness.

It is a slow-death sentence. Every man and woman in the nation over twenty years of age will die in the wilderness without ever setting foot in the land of Canaan. The only exceptions are Joshua and Caleb.

They will follow the pillar of fire and cloud for forty years, one year for every day the spies spent in the land of Canaan. (v. 34)⁶

It is a harsh discipline. And yet, even in the discipline, there is mercy. Notice that God:

- ...didn't destroy the nation;
- ...did allow the children of the rebels to enter the land;⁷
- ...did allow Joshua and Caleb to enter the land;
- ...did allow the rebellious generation forty years to repent;
- ...did provide manna for the entire forty years; and
- ...did lead them by the pillar of cloud and fire.

So, there is mercy even in the discipline. Still, the punishment is severe.

Up until the rebellion of Kadesh-barnea, the people had known nothing but God's salvation, His cooperation, His help, His provision, His patience.

⁶ Does that mean that every single one of the people over twenty years of age agreed with the ten faithless spies? Maybe - probably not. The vast majority of the crowd of Israelites probably was just going where they were pointed. But, they suffered the same fate as those who actively rebelled. The "innocent bystanders" were disciplined along with the guilty. This displays a sad fact of life - the innocent suffer for the misdeeds of the guilty.

⁷ Ironically, in their murmuring, the adults had accused the Lord of making their children "***a prey in the wilderness***" (v. 31). In this chastisement God reminded them of their words, and promised that these children would inherit the land. The best protection these parents could have given their children would have been to follow the Lord into danger. Good advice for any parent.

Now, they learn something else about God.

Experiencing the Lord's Opposition (vv. 34, 36-37)

All the people will die of natural causes (v. 34)

[34]...YOU SHALL KNOW MY OPPOSITION (emphasis added).⁸

Some will die of old age. Others will die of disease or accidents. But all will die and all will be buried in the desert.

These will die of natural causes. The ten faithless spies will not die of natural causes.

The ten faithless spies will die by God's hand (vv. 36-37)

[36] As for the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land and who returned and made all the congregation grumble against Him by bringing out a bad report concerning the land, [37] even those men who brought out the very bad report of the land died by a plague before the Lord."⁹

Those ten faithless spies were struck down by an undeniable act of judgment by God.

By handling them so severely, God was not promising that every rebellion would be dealt with as publicly as this one was. He was showing, though, just how serious a matter it is to refuse to take the Word of God seriously.

⁸ Listen to the warning from the apostle Paul, recorded in 1 Corinthians 10 of the New Testament, taken from the event that occurred at Kadesh-barnea. Paul listed there some of the sins of Israel in the wilderness: they craved evil things; they committed idolatry; they acted immorally; they tested the Lord; they grumbled. Because of their sin, they were "***laid low in the wilderness.***" The point? As sin had grave consequences for Israel, so for Christians.

⁹ The remarkable deaths of these notorious sinners serve as a warning. (See 2 Peter 2:5-6) These ten spies had, by their slanderous report, turned the entire congregation of Israel against the Lord. Ring-leaders in sin can expect stricter judgment - either in this life, or (how terrible.) in the one to come.

In this case, the Word of God had been, ***“Enter the land.”*** They said ***“No!”***, disobeyed, and paid an astronomically high price.

This morning, in addition to showing the importance of God’s glory, I have wanted to highlight the sober message of God’s discipline.

He expects the obedience of His people. When we disobey, He is willing to bring about astonishingly severe consequences to get our attention and to bring us to repentance.

It is important that we know about God’s discipline. Knowing that He disciplines us when we stray serves as a great warning against misbehavior. It moves us to holiness and love and generosity.

But this is not the main thing I have wanted us to see this morning as we consider lessons the Lord can teach us from Israel’s experiences in the wilderness.

What follows is.

My “take” is that if the people had repented - even as late as when Joshua and Caleb urged them to obey God (v. 9) - they would have been allowed to enter the land of Canaan.

However, when they refused to listen to the two spies and instead prepared to stone them to death, there was no turning back God’s judgment.

God commanded, *“Case closed. Head back to the wilderness, away from Canaan.”*

And here is the most curious part of this whole incident - and what I want us all to take away from our time in God’s Word today.

The people heard God’s disciplining words and they heard His command. They were appropriately sobered - at first.

The Spurning of the Lord by His Failing Followers (vv. 39-45)

On Second Thought, the Land Does Look Good... (vv. 39-40)

Mourning (v. 39)

[39] When Moses spoke these words to all the sons of Israel, the people mourned greatly.¹⁰

It is good to mourn at moments like these. When we have sinned and we have suffered for our sin, it is good to grieve, to weep.

So, this is encouraging. What happens next is not.

Unrepentant (v. 40)

[40] In the morning, however, they rose up early and went up to the ridge of the hill country, saying, “Here we are; we have indeed sinned, but we will go up to the place which the Lord has promised.”

NOW they think that the land is worth taking. NOW they plan to enter the land of promise.

Tell me. Does this sound like faith? Does this sound like they are finally following the Lord? They’re not.

Now the landscape has changed. Now the word from God is not, *“Take the land!”* NOW, God’s word is, *“Back to the desert!”*

This is going to sound funny, but now, for the Jews (from Numbers 14:25 forward) faithful obedience meant walking away from the Promised Land.

In deciding NOW to *“Take the land”* they are showing that they are just as rebellious as they had been when they first said, *“NO!”*

¹⁰ I wonder if the peoples’ response is somewhere in the mind of the author of Hebrews when, speaking of Esau, he says, that he ***[12:17] found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.***

Moses watched them put on their battle armor and saw the handwriting on the wall. He warned them against doing what they were obviously about to do.

I Wouldn't If I Were You... (vv. 41-43)

[41] But Moses said, "Why then are you transgressing the commandment of the Lord, when it will not succeed? [42] Do not go up, or you will be struck down before your enemies, for the Lord is not among you. [43] For the Amalekites and the Canaanites will be there in front of you, and you will fall by the sword, inasmuch as you have turned back from following the Lord. And the Lord will not be with you."

Back when God sent the twelve spies into the land of Canaan, He was looking for a faithful response to His Word. He wanted them to do what He called them to do. There, what He wanted them to do was to take the land.

On this day, now that He has declared a forty years-long discipline, He wants the same thing from them: obedience to what He called them to do - which is to walk away from the land.

They haven't learned a thing. They are going to repeat the same mistake they made at the beginning.

They are trading in the old sins of unbelief and cowardice for the new, improved, sins of presumption and arrogant self-confidence. The results are predictable.

Heedless of the Word of the Lord (again) (vv. 44-45)

[44] But they went up heedlessly to the ridge of the hill country; neither the ark of the covenant of the Lord nor Moses left the camp.

They cared nothing for the presence of God. They valued entering Canaan because it looked good.

After all they had suffered for not taking the Word of the Lord seriously, they are going to suffer again because they still don't take the Word of the Lord seriously.¹¹

Their attempt to find "LIFE" and success apart from God met with a perfect defeat.

[45] Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down, and struck them and beat them down as far as Hormah.

Conclusion:

The philosopher George Santayana is credited with the saying, *"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."*

The Jews couldn't/didn't/refused to remember and failed where they had already failed before. Today, you and I can learn from their mistakes and be freed from the fate of repeating.

As we wrap up, I'm going to suggest three ways every one of us here today can learn to not repeat mistakes.

First, we can listen to someone who will point us to a better way.

Former Washington Wizards power forward, Etan Thomas tells this story about playing against Tim Duncan when he was an NBA rookie.

¹¹ But, hadn't they just been "*mourning*" (v. 39)? Hadn't we seen them broken over their disobedience? Hadn't they repented? Well, yes, they had mourned. But we shouldn't confuse their mourning with genuine repentance. They mourned over lost opportunities to enter the good land, not over how their sin had offended a holy God. Their mourning had not served to turn their hearts to obedience to God. True repentance always has that effect, though. Their mourning only served to strengthen their resolve for independent living.

"We were playing the Spurs and I got the ball near the basket. I pivoted to the middle for my jump hook and he blocked it. So, as we were running down the court, Tim says, *"That was a good move but you've got to get more into my body so you can either draw the foul or I can't block it."* I didn't know if he was kidding or what.

"A few plays later I did what he said. He couldn't block my shot. This time, on the way back down the court, Tim told me, *"Much better."*¹²

When someone who has "been there, done that" offers advice, wisdom says to take it.

If you're looking to be free from a particular pattern of mistakes and from sins that have bound you, find someone who has "been there, done that", who has found the freedom you seek, and ask them to help you.

For instance, if your struggle is an addictive behavior, maybe a chemical addiction, drugs or alcohol - seek out someone who models sobriety.

The Bible repeatedly tells us that there is great strength to be found in the counsel of the wise. Avail yourself of that strength.

A second way to not repeat mistakes is to seriously reflect on the damage done by the mistakes you have made.

I hold Gordon MacDonald in high esteem.

MacDonald had been a pastor for a good while when I began serving as a pastor. In the early years, I learned a lot from his teaching and counsel. Then, MacDonald failed. He suffered a mid-life moral failure.

Because of his sin, he lost his position as a leader of a large Christian organization, he lost his reputation, and he lost the respect of his wife and children and friends.

But Gordon MacDonald's failure was not the end of his story.

Following his season of sin, he began an exhaustive look at his internal life. He asked God to search his heart and reveal to him what had happened that took him from spiritual health to such wreckage.

Along the way, he refused to blame anybody else. He offered no excuses. He saw himself as the prodigal and pointed the accusing finger only at himself. He took full responsibility for his immoral choices.

Today, Gordon MacDonald is a better man than he was before his failure. God has remade him from the inside out.

He will tell you that he walks with a limp now. But he is a restored man, and he lives, writes, and speaks from a very deep place of brokenness.

In my opinion, his best book - and one of the best books I've ever read - is [Rebuilding Your Broken World](#). When I open that book, it is clear that he wrote that book for me. In my own ways, I am, like MacDonald, a broken mess, being rebuilt by God's amazing grace.

Since nearly every life is broken in some way, he probably wrote the book for you, too.¹³

If you are looking for freedom from moral pitfalls you can't seem to avoid, or if you need God to put your broken life back together. I highly recommend the MacDonald way. Reflect on the damage your sin has done (and read [Rebuilding Your Broken World](#)).

So, seek and accept wise counsel. Do the hard work of taking a reflective, inside look.

¹² Most every professional athlete has a voracious appetite for feedback from others as to how to improve. Imagine how STUPID it would have been for me, for instance, to have ignored the advice of my coach on my exercise regimen.

¹³ MacDonald's primary message is that nearly every life is broken in some way. He writes that Moses, for example, "amounts to little that means anything to God until his world has been broken and rebuilt."

And third, to learn from past mistakes and to avoid repeating them, own this truth:
 GOD'S WORD TO YOU IS ALWAYS THE BEST WORD FOR YOU.

When God told the Jews at Kadesh-barnea, "*Back to the desert with you!*" yes, He was punishing/disciplining them for their sin. But He was doing something else.

He was sending them out for further training.

Their rebellion proved that they weren't ready to take the land. There were things they needed to learn. And they learned those things over the next forty years.

During those years, they learned to depend on God's *leading*. Every move they made, from campsite to campsite, was taken when and only when the pillar of cloud and fire moved.

During those years, they learned to depend on God's *provision* by eating manna every day.

In the desert, they learned that obedience to God *protects*. Every victory they won in Canaan under Joshua came because of these lessons they learned in the wilderness.

What probably seemed like the worst thing God could have said to them - "*Go back to the desert*" - was clearly the best thing He could have said to them. It was exactly what they needed.

I wonder if many of us could name a command or two from God that we relegate to the trash because we believe that it isn't all that good for us.

Are there commands you find in Scripture that you think are bad for you?

The command may involve your intimate life. It may involve how you relate to those who oppose you. It might speak to your financial life, to generosity, to integrity, to the need to forgive someone.

The last thing I'll say this morning about learning from the past and not repeating the same old mistakes over and over again is that what God says to you is the best thing for you.