



Change the Future by Owning the Past

September 12, 2010	Scripture: Deuteronomy 2: 14	Series: Take Two: The Power of a Fresh Start (2/12)	By: Colin Smith
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Thirty-eight years passed from the time we left Kadesh Barnea until we crossed the Zered Valley. By then, that entire generation of fighting men had perished from the camp, as the LORD had sworn to them. (Deuteronomy 2:14)

The book of Deuteronomy begins with a flashback: God's people are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land, and Moses says, "Let me remind you how we got here..." Moses goes back 40 years: "The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain...'" (1:6), and he tells the story of how the people rebelled against God.

The people of God refused to trust Him and, instead of entering the Promised Land, they wandered in the desert for 40 years. "In that time, all the men who had been of fighting age had died" (2:14). Let's assume that the fighting age was 18. If everyone over the age of 18 is dead after 40 years, then nobody over age 58 is alive.

Think about what that means:

Everyone over age 18 at the time of the Exodus had already died

After 40 years, the 18-year-olds were now 58 years old, and they would be the oldest people in the camp. All the adults who came out of Egypt in the Exodus died in the desert. None of them entered the Promised Land.

Children under age 18 at the time of the Exodus are now 40-58 years old

Imagine a nation where the oldest folks in the community were just 58 years old! They were just children when God came down at Sinai. Just children when their parents had turned back from Canaan.

40 years ago was 1970. Do you have vivid memories from 1970? Those who were now in their 40's and 50's, probably had only vague memories of the events surrounding the Exodus.

The vast majority of the people under the age of 40

These folks were all born in the desert. This was a young nation with no one over 60 years of age, except Moses, Caleb and Joshua. Since Moses was over 100, the next oldest guy would have been 58 years old—talk about a massive generation gap,

I want to make sure that we've got this, so let me ask you: Are you under age 40? You would have been born in the desert. That means you weren't even a twinkle in your parents eye when they decided that it would be too dangerous to go into the land of Canaan.

Are you between the ages of 40 and 58 years old? I'm in this group. Forty years ago, I was twelve years old. We would have been there at Mount Sinai, but we would have been very young. When our parents decided not to go into Canaan, we did not get a vote. Now we are the nations' geriatrics!

Those of you who are over 58, be very thankful that you were not in the generation that came out of Egypt, because you wouldn't be alive! Thank God for His gift of life to you.

So, when Moses says, "The Lord our God said to us at Horeb, 'You have stayed long enough at this mountain'" (1:6). He is talking about something that happened 40 years ago, when most of the people weren't even born and many of the rest were too young to remember.

Look at what Moses says next, and see if you notice something strange: "*You* were unwilling to go up... *You* rebelled against the Lord... *You* grumbled in your tents and said 'The Lord hates us...' *You* did not trust in the Lord your God" (1:26-27, 32).

Why is Moses saying this to them? If I had been there, I would have wanted to raise my hand, "Excuse me, Moses. Why are you saying this to us? I was only 12 when these things happened, and most of the rest of us weren't even born yet. It was our parents who did these things, not us! How can you say 'we' refused to go up? Why are you saying that 'we' grumbled? It wasn't us who did these things. It was our parents!"

Why is Moses saying this? Is he blaming the children for the sins of the parents? No! He is teaching the children to learn from their parents. Moses is making it plain: What was in your parents is also in you. You will face the same temptations, the same struggles they did. What defeated them, you must overcome—in your time and in your life.

That's why I have called today's message "*Change the Future by Owning the Past.*" What is the past that they (and we) must own? What is it that is in these people and their parents, by nature, that they must overcome?

Six Impulses That Are in You by Nature

1. By nature, I rebel against God

"You were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God." Deuteronomy 1:26

What this means is that our corruption, the effect of sin in us, goes deeper than a few sins and mistakes. By nature, I resent God, and I resist His authority over my life. By nature, I want to assert my independence from God. I want to be my own savior and my own lord.

2. By nature, I treat God with contempt

“You grumbled in your tents and said, ‘The Lord hates us: so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites and destroy us.’” Deuteronomy 1:27

The deliverance from Egypt was an extraordinary miracle of God’s grace. And these people are treating God’s grace with contempt.

Sin makes them so twisted that they see God’s miraculous deliverance as God plotting against them. This is me—by nature! By nature, we hold back praise for God’s goodness, and blame Him whenever we experience evil. By nature, we say, “Here I am in a desert, and it’s all God’s fault.” By nature, I insult God, and treat the goodness of God with contempt.

3. By nature, I blame others

“Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, ‘The people are stronger and taller than we are.’” Deuteronomy 1:28

When the spies came back, from Canaan, ten of them said that it would be too difficult to conquer the land. Here the people blame the spies. It’s all their fault.

By nature, I blame others for all my problems. What’s wrong is always somebody else’s fault. By nature, I detect the speck of dust in the eye of others, while I cannot see the plank of wood in my own.

4. By nature, I resist the truth

“[Moses] said to [the people], ‘Do not be terrified; do not be afraid of them. The Lord your God who is going before you will fight for you as he did for you in Egypt... and in the desert.’” Deuteronomy 1:29-31

Moses is pleading with the people here. They are full of fear, so, speaking as a prophet, Moses pours the Word of God into their lives. But it makes no difference.

These folks hear the Word of God, but it slides off them like water off a duck’s back. It doesn’t go *in*. It makes no difference, “In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God” (1:32). I am always seeing God at work, but I never perceive it.

5. By nature, I refuse to believe

“You did not trust in the Lord your God, who went ahead of you.” Deuteronomy 1:32

By nature, I am suspicious of God, and I hold back from full devotion to Him. By nature, I do not trust Him. God was beside these people in the pillar of cloud and the fire, and yet still they would not trust him. They refused to believe (Numbers 14:11).

None of us is neutral when it comes to this matter of faith. By nature, I am antagonistic towards God, and so are you. By nature, we are unwilling to believe (John 5:40).

6. By nature, I am under the wrath of God

“When the Lord heard what you said, He was angry and solemnly swore: ‘Not a man of this evil generation will see the good land I swore to your forefathers.’”

Deuteronomy 1:34

By nature, I am alienated from God, and justly under His wrath. There is a heaven but, by nature, it’s not for me or for you. By nature, I have no basis on which to enter the land of promise that is full of good things.

Moses is saying, “All that was in your parents. But don’t think it stopped with them. All of this is also in you.” It makes you want to weep, doesn’t it? This is the human condition. By nature, this is my condition. This is your condition. This is who we are, and it crosses all economic and social barriers. This is what sin has done to us. This is what we need saving from.

Can you see yourself here? Maybe you are saying right now, “Yes I see it. I see that I have totally messed up. I see that I have rebelled against God.

I see that I have treated God with contempt. I see that I have blamed others for what’s wrong in my life. I see that I have resisted the truth. I see that I have refused to believe. And I see that I am under the wrath of God. So, what hope is there for me?”

If everything that kept your parents out of Canaan is also in you, what hope is there of you ever getting into the Promised Land? Let me tell you what won’t help you, and then let’s look at what will.

Turning Over a New Leaf

When the people realized they had messed up in their rebellion and unbelief, they decided to try and put it right. They were sure that they could fix their own problems. They were sure that there was nothing they had done, that they couldn’t undo.

The people of God decided that they would go up to Canaan after all, “but God said to them, ‘Don’t go up, because I will not be with you. You will be defeated by your enemies’” (1:42). But they went up anyway, and they were completely defeated.

Turning over a new leaf doesn’t change you. Becoming religious won’t alter what’s in you. Trying harder won’t work. It’s never the answer. All that happens when you turn over a new leaf is that what’s in you gets written on the new page.

So what hope is there for these people? What hope is there for us? Where can we find the power for a fresh start? Please turn forward to Deuteronomy 5, and you will see something wonderfully strange: “Moses summoned all Israel and said... ‘The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb’” (5:2).

I think I would be saying, “Moses, here you go again. I know you are over 100 years old, and when you get over 100 years old, you can’t remember much. But most of us weren’t even born yet at Mount Horeb, and the rest of us were just little children!”

Moses says, “Now you listen to what I am saying... I know most of you weren’t born when God came down at Sinai but I’m telling you, God made a covenant with us at Horeb! “It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today” (5:3). You see what he is saying: God made a covenant. He made it before you were born, and it is for you.

I’m here today to say, from the heart and from the Bible—God made a covenant of grace before you were born, and it is for you. The covenant is that He will redeem sinners like us for Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. This covenant was not written on tablets of stone. It is sealed in the blood of Jesus Christ.

I want you to stand with me today, not at the foot of Mount Sinai with all these Israelites, but at another mountain called Calvary. There’s a man hanging on a cross and He is the Son of God. His body is being torn. His blood is being poured out. And He says, “My body is given for you. Through the shedding of this blood, I am sealing a new covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of your sins.”

Two great events that shape your life happened before you were born: What’s in you, by nature, goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. What can be in you by grace goes all the way back to the cross of Jesus Christ. And we change the future by owning the past.

Owning what is mine by nature is what the Bible calls “repentance”

I need to own what is in my nature. I need to be clear about what I am up against in living the Christian life, “Lord, by nature I’m a rebel who treats your kindness with contempt, blames others, resists your Word, refuses to believe and deserves to be under Your righteous judgment.”

As long as you are trying to tell yourself what a great and good person you are, you will never make progress in the Christian life. Owning what is in you, by nature, is where repentance begins and how it continues.

Owning what is mine by grace is what the Bible calls “faith”

You need to own what is yours by grace. You need to know who you are in Christ. You need to be clear about what this Savior has for you in living the Christian life.

Faith looks at all that the grace of God has done: God has made a covenant for you, He has sent His Son to redeem you and He gives His Spirit to empower you, and says, "This is mine!" Repentance begins when I own what is mine by nature. Faith begins when I own what is mine by grace.

The Drama of this Moment

A new generation stands on the verge of Jordan. Which way will they go? Will they follow what is in them by nature? Or will they receive what is theirs by grace?

What about you? Will you follow the impulse to hear God's Word or will you follow the impulse of unbelief that is in you? Will you spend your life praising God or will you treat Him with contempt? Will you own what is in you, by nature, or will you spend your life blaming others and end up under the wrath of God?

I know that as soon as the preacher uses the words "repentance" and "faith," its natural for many of us to say, "he's talking about what unbelievers need to do to become Christians." That's true, but there's more to it than that.

Repentance and faith are not only what unbelievers do to become Christians. Repentance and faith are what believers do to live as Christians. Otherwise, all you have is a decision that leaves you fundamentally unchanged.

God calls us to *a life of* repentance and faith. That is, a life in which we are to sustain an ongoing struggle against what is *in us* by nature, by laying hold of what Christ has *for us* by grace.

If you are to live this Christian life, you need to be realistic about what is in you by nature. By nature, I am a rebel who treats God's kindness with contempt, blames others for my problems, resists God's Word and refuses to believe. All of that is in me. So, every day I have a fight on my hands.

If I am to live this Christian life, I need lay hold of all that Christ is for me. The Son of God loves me. He gave Himself for me. He reigns in heaven, and nothing happens to me unless it comes through His loving hand first.

I do not understand all that He does, allows or brings into my life. Nor do I expect to, because He is God in heaven and He sees the events of this world from eternity, and I am only a man on the earth in a little capsule of time. But I know that I can trust Him. I know that He is for me even in my darkest hour.

I know that I am forgiven. I am not under His wrath. I live in His mercy and I am never alone, because He walks beside me. By grace I have come to love Him, and to trust Him, and I count Him worthy of the supreme devotion and sacrifice of my life. That's faith.

It is possible to be a Christian atheist: A person who believes in God, but lives and acts as if He did not exist. You say you trust Him, but you don't actually trust Him in anything that is happening in your life.

The folks who came out of Egypt received God's promises, experienced His provision, and carried His name. But they lived, thought and acted in unbelief. It is one thing to profess faith—to say you believe. It's another to speak and act and live with faith.

Last week, I had the joy of sharing an evening with a small group of pastors. There was someone from Moody, a couple of pastors from the city, and a few others. We had gathered to meet privately with an archbishop from Africa.

We spoke together about the challenges of ministry in America, the cultural tide that is against us, the shallowness of faith in so many churches. We heard about the pressures that our brothers and sisters are facing in Africa.

Lon Allison, who is the director of the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, was there. After a while, he said, "You guys are depressing me. You seem to have forgotten that Jesus rose from the dead..." Then he launched into speaking about what the risen Christ is able to do for His people: How He had never failed his church, and never will.

It takes courage to say to a bunch of pastors, "You seem to have forgotten that Jesus Christ rose from the dead." But when he did, the whole conversation was lifted

My prayer is that even now God would breathe faith into your soul, that you would see that in all your battles and in all your struggles, this Christ is for you. That you would embrace Him with faith in all you are facing today. That you would say, "If God is for me, who can be against me?"

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