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Lesson 11
Miriam and Aaron Attack Moses
Numbers 12:1-16

Fighting among the family. Gossiping about one another. Jealousy over spiritual gifts. Vicious maligning among brothers and sisters. Rebellion to authority. This sounds like a description of Christians in a local church who are out of fellowship with their Lord, but it is actually a description of an incident in the life of Moses when he was attacked verbally by his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron. There are tremendous lessons for us Christians to learn from this incident in Numbers 12, for the discipline which happened to Miriam could happen to any of us in other forms if we display the same kind of attitudes and actions as did Miriam and her brother Aaron.

In Numbers 12, a severe test came to Moses. This was an attack upon his person, his family life, and his leadership by members of his own family. Miriam and Aaron were Moses' older sister and brother. Moses was marvelously used by God in leading Israel out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Yet, with this high position many other strong, natural leaders became jealous of Moses and actually wanted to take his position, two of whom were Miriam and Aaron. Moses learned in this experience what the Lord Jesus taught hundreds of years later about men who are faithful to God. Jesus said, "***And a man's enemies will be the members of his household***" (Matt. 10:36).

We are told that Israel broke camp at Kibroth-hattaavah, which means "graves of greed," where Israel lusted for meat and God gave meat to them as a form of discipline until it ran out their nostrils. At Kibroth-hattaavah, every Israelite was struck with dysentery and some actually died. Israel then moved on to Hazeroth, and at this place Miriam and Aaron rebelled against Moses and his leadership.

VICIOUS MALIGNING OF MOSES BY MIRIAM AND AARON - Numbers 12:1-3

"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses ..." Miriam and Aaron maligned and gossiped about Moses and judged him and his family with a critical spirit. As we shall later find out, this sedition against Moses came about because his sister and brother were jealous of him, and this jealousy caused them to do all kinds of ugly things against Moses. The Hebrew grammar indicates that Miriam was the instigator of this criticism because her name appears first and the verb "spoke" is in the feminine gender. This explains why later on Miriam was struck with leprosy and Aaron was not. God will always deal more severely with the instigators of sin than those who merely get caught up in a negative way of thinking.

Notice carefully who it was that was rebelling. These were not just rank and file Jews. Miriam was a "prophetess" (Exodus 15:20) and she was a leader among the Israelite women, for she had led the women in a song of praise after the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21). Aaron was the high priest in Israel who wore the Urim and the Thummin through which he ascertained the will of Jehovah in regard to any important matter affecting the theocracy of Israel. This was rebellion from high-ranking leaders who also happened to be blood family.

We see here how easy it is for men and women in leadership to get out of fellowship with the Lord and stir trouble with other leaders and fellow saints.

"...Because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a

Cushite woman)...” The maligning and the gossip came because Moses had married a Cushite woman. Notice that this is repeated twice so it was a big issue with Miriam and Aaron, even though we will find that this was only a smoke screen for deeper spiritual problems on the part of Miriam and Aaron.

This Cushite woman was probably Moses’ second wife. Zipporah, his first wife, was dead although we are not specifically told this from Scripture. Moses was lonely and he needed a companion to love and to help him be a better leader over the children of Israel. Apparently his Cushite woman was the right mate for Moses. We hear no more about this woman, but we can assume that Moses had a very happy marriage the second time around.

Miriam may have been jealous because she was a very possessive big sister, for she had watched over Moses when he was a baby and hidden him among the reeds in the Nile River (Exodus 2:3, 4). When Moses was a bachelor, Miriam cooked for him and acted as his hostess or whatever. Perhaps with the death of Zipporah, Miriam expected to have a greater influence over Moses than before, for she was a woman filled with power lust. Perhaps she could not stand being “second” to any woman in Moses’ life. Whatever, her disappointment with the second marriage was great and she despised the Cushite woman.

There were definitely some cultural reasons why Miriam despised the Cushite woman. First, she was a Gentile woman. She was an African from the stock of Cush in Ethiopia. Miriam and Aaron thought that Moses should have married a Jewess rather than a Gentile even though Moses was perfectly within the Law to marry a Gentile woman who was a believer in Jehovah. The Law only forbid the marrying of Canaanite women (Exodus 34:11-16). Miriam and Aaron were filled with racial prejudice, believing the Jews to be the superior race, and could not accept this marriage. Second, the Cushite woman was probably taken from the “mixed multitude” or the “rabble;” that is, those Gentiles who came out of Egypt with the Israelites. Therefore, Miriam and Aaron thought that Moses had married into a low class of society. Third, the Cushite woman may have been a black woman. The word “cush” means black or sunburned. We do not know too much about the Cushites genealogically. We do know that Cush was a direct descendant of Ham and that Cush was the father of Nimrod. **“And the sons of Ham were Cush and Mizraim and Put and Canaan . . . Now Cush became the father of Nimrod . . .”** (Gen. 10:6, 8). Cush was probably a black or dark complected son of Ham who settled in the area of Ethiopia. The Ethiopians were primarily black in skin tone. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?” (Jer. 13:23) The Cushites were conquered by the Egyptians and there was intermarriage, and later the Sebians, who were Arab in race, conquered them and there was intermarriage. The Cushite woman, therefore, could have been Negroid, although we cannot prove it definitely.

Moses married across racial lines, social lines, and perhaps color lines, and this was enough to get all Israel buzzing. Yet, Moses had a right to do this by Law and by love for the woman. She must have been some kind of a woman to hold Moses’ interest. We also know that God approved of this marriage because He took Moses’ side and stood against Miriam and Aaron.

Miriam was a busybody and instigated this gossip about Moses. Apparently, Miriam was a very strong-minded, self-willed woman, and a natural leader. Aaron, on the other hand, was a weak personality and got sucked into the gossip and criticism. Miriam took a “cheap shot” at Moses to malign his character in order to ultimately undermine his authority. Apparently, she wanted to overthrow Moses and put Aaron in his place as leader in Israel. She wanted Aaron because he was a weak man and she could rule him. There would then be “petticoat” government. Miriam had a huge ego and a strong power lust, and she knew how to wheel and deal people. But

she could not rule Moses. Miriam wanted to run the show, but only Moses stood in her way, and because of this she became more jealous of Moses' position and authority.

Miriam and Aaron displayed outwardly their jealousy of Moses by speaking evil of him. They were guilty of the sin of the tongue and God hates this as much as he hates murder, adultery, fornication, or stealing.

“There are six things which the Lord hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness who utters lies, and one who spreads strife among brothers” (Prov. 6:16-19).

If Miriam were in the average local church today, she would be a heroine. She would not be condemned but praised as a leader really interested in the work. Christians tolerate gossip, critical spirits, vicious maligning, when God hates all sins of the tongue. What comes out of our mouths really tells us what is in our hearts. If we gossip and speak critically of others, we know our hearts are a cesspool of evil.

“...And they said, ‘Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?’” Now we begin to see that the problem was not just a matter of marrying an unacceptable Cushite woman, but the real problem was the challenging of Moses' authority. Miriam was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20), and she began to think that her prophecies were as good as Moses' and that she and Aaron had as much authority as did Moses. Miriam probably felt she was never given proper recognition as a prophetess. She was always subordinate to Moses. She thought that as a prophetess she should rank above everyone and everything else. I can hear it now, “Is Moses the only one who can preach the Word? Am I not as good a Bible teacher as he is? Aren't there others of us who are just as qualified for leadership as Moses?” Miriam and Aaron wanted equal authority with Moses and even more authority. Oh the wickedness of the human heart!

“And the LORD heard it.” Even though Miriam and Aaron did not realize the seriousness of their vicious tongues and the challenge to Moses' authority, the Lord heard it all. This does not mean that God did not hear all the other garbage Miriam had been speaking previously and just heard this one evil comment. No, it means that God heard everything, and He finally heard enough and would now take definite discipline against Miriam.

If only Christians could remember that the Lord is listening to their conversations, then most gossiping tongues would be stopped. Think about it. God listens to every idle word we speak and we must give an account. It is a wonder that God does not bring more discipline than He does upon critical, maligning, and gossiping saints.

“(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)” This statement is a parenthesis to indicate how Moses reacted to the accusations. He had a humble spirit. When Miriam and Aaron made their charges, Moses did not answer a word—he reflected the character of God. Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth at that time. This man who had great humility was subjected to great criticism. Apparently Moses did not try to defend himself. He was not vindictive. He did not seek revenge against his brother and sister. Moses just took his cares to the Lord and rested under the shadow of the Almighty.

“Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Psalm 55:22).

“...Casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

Do we really understand the implications of the statement, “Moses was very humble”? Moses, before he was forty years of age, was an administrative genius who was being primed for the office of pharaoh in Egypt. He was a military genius, who three times saved the Egyptians from the Ethiopians. He was a musical and literary genius, and to top it off, he was a handsome, hulk of a man. Moses was successful in every endeavor he undertook in the ancient world. Yet, up until age forty, he was not humble. He was very proud of his attainments. Then God took Moses on the backside of the desert for forty years to teach him humility and patience, which he would desperately need to lead the sons of Israel out of Egypt into Canaan. It was on the backside of the desert for forty years that Moses learned that in himself he was nothing and that all he had was by the grace of a sovereign God.

“For who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7)

Moses was a great man in every way, but he did not express humility by speaking in a whispering voice, wearing old clothes, putting his eyes at half-mast, driving a used chariot, or saying, “Ah, shucks, I’m nothin’!” No, he attributed all he was and had to the grace of God and did not brag on or defend himself. The more one recognizes God’s grace, the more will he be truly a humble person. A truly humble man also knows that God can and will remove His grace from the life of a believer if he begins to take credit to himself and not give it to God.

VINDICATION OF MOSES BY GOD - Numbers 12:4-8

“And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and Aaron and Miriam, ‘You three come out to the tent of meeting.’ So the three of them came out.” God called these three to the entrance of the outer court of the Tabernacle. Apparently this was a public rebuke and there was a large crowd around the outer court.

“Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward He said, ‘Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream.’” The basic means God used in the Old Testament to bring divine revelation to the prophets was dreams and visions.

“Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; with him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings, and he beholds the form of the LORD.” God spoke to Moses mouth to mouth; that is, he received direct revelation from God’s mouth. Moses was the greatest of all prophets until Jesus Christ came (Deut. 18:15).

Notice how God describes Moses. He was faithful. Moses did many wonderful things and was a wonderful person, but God does not mention any of these things. As a humble man who lived by and under God’s grace, he was faithful to God. It is more important to be faithful than successful. It is of more value to be faithful than fruitful, although a Christian who is faithful to God and His Word may well be fruitful and successful in his ministry. ***“Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful”*** (1 Cor. 4:2).

“Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?” There was no fear of the Lord in Miriam and Aaron. Even though Miriam was a prophetess and Aaron the high priest, they had no right to challenge Moses’ authority, for he was the leader appointed by God over Israel. They had not yet learned they were not to touch the Lord’s anointed. ***“Do not***

touch My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm” (1 Chron. 16:22). Miriam and Aaron naively thought God would not discipline them for insubordination, sedition, and rebellion, but how wrong they were. No one ever rebels against God’s leaders and authority without somehow experiencing the scathing discipline of God.

VERDICT OF GOD ON MIRIAM -- Numbers 12: 9-10

“So the anger of the LORD burned against them and He departed.” -- God became angry with Miriam in particular and Aaron in general. God gets angry with His people when they refuse to obey His holy law and, in this case, it was a refusal of two leaders, Miriam and Aaron, to submit to God’s ultimate ordained leadership of Moses.

“But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous.” In anger and disgust, God removed His presence from over the Tabernacle, and immediately Miriam was struck with leprosy. Undoubtedly God struck Miriam and not Aaron because Miriam was the instigator of this whole mess. Leprosy was a horrible disease at this time. Leprosy was nothing short of a living death, a poisoning of the muscles and ligaments, a corrupting of the bone structures, a deterioration of the skin tissues, so that one limb after another actually decayed and fell off. God, in discipline, struck Miriam with a disease that would ultimately kill her. Why? What had she done to deserve such punishment? She gossiped; she maligned; she was jealous; she rebelled against authority. God hates these things and will always mete out discipline against them.

Christian, if you choose to be critical, to spread evil gossip, to harbor jealousy, to malign the brethren, and rebel against God’s appointed leadership in the church, be prepared to receive discipline from God, for He will never blink His eyes at these kinds of sins which seem so harmless to us. God may not strike us with leprosy, but He may discipline us with sickness, or family problems, or financial reverses, or the death of a loved one, or even our own death, or He may bring us just general unrest in our lives and a spiritual drought where there is leanness of soul. Therefore, Christian brethren, think twice before you gossip! Think twice before you carry jealousy in your soul! Think twice before you malign other Christians! Think twice before you act in an insubordinate way to ordained church authority! The consequences could be devastating!

VEHEMENT CONFESSION AND PLEA OF AARON — Numbers 12:11-12

“Then Aaron said to Moses, ‘Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us, in which we acted foolishly and in which we have sinned.’” It was the duty of the high priest to inspect and diagnose diseases in Israel (Lev. 13, 14) and perhaps Miriam was Aaron’s first case. If so, in his inspection of Miriam, he was cut to the quick with conviction because he realized that he had been just as guilty as Miriam. Perhaps Aaron panicked and thought he too would be struck with leprosy. Whatever, he was brought to the place of repentance. He acknowledged his own sin and the sin of Miriam. He confessed. He repented (changed his mind) and asked Moses to forgive them. Notice Aaron said, “We acted foolishly,” because all sin, great or small, gross or subtle, is foolishness because we are going against God’s moral law and inviting divine discipline into our lives.

“Oh do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother’s womb!” Aaron pleaded with Moses to not let her suffer and die, even though he knew God had every right to bring the maximum discipline.

VITAL JUSTICE OF GOD IN DIVINE DISCIPLINE — Numbers 12:13-14

“And Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘Oh God, heal her, I pray!’” Even though Moses knew that Miriam spoke evil things about him, hated his new wife, maligned his good character, was jealous of his position, and attempted to throw him out of leadership, Moses prayed for Miriam. He interceded for her and did not get mad or hold grudges. He cried out, “Oh, EI (Mighty Creator), heal Miriam!” He pleaded for a miracle based on God’s love, mercy and compassion.

What a man Moses was. He forgave as Christ forgave. He forgave and forgot. He knew how easy it was for even leaders to get out of fellowship with the Lord for he had done it himself. He knew that when Christians are out of fellowship, leaders or not, they are capable of all kinds of sins. Yet, the moment they repented, Moses forgave and forgot, trusting in God to completely restore them.

“But the LORD said to Moses, ‘If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again.’” In the Jewish culture, one of the worst forms of discipline a father could give his rebellious child was a spit in the face and seven days of solitary confinement. Because Miriam had acted like a foolish, rebellious child, she too was to suffer the pain and shame of leprosy for seven days outside the camp of Israel. God’s justice demanded that Miriam should be disciplined for her sins, and in this case, God would lift the discipline after seven days.

When a Christian sins against his Lord, God’s justice demands that a Christian be disciplined. The length of time God keeps the discipline on will be commensurate with the sin done. God always lifts discipline when he thinks the offender has truly learned his lesson. Some discipline lasts hours, others days, still others weeks or months, and in some cases years. Remember, Christian, if God brings you discipline for sin, do not become bitter, but ride your discipline out in fellowship with Christ or you will receive even more severe discipline.

“...And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:5-11).

VEERING FROM THE COURSE BEFORE GOING FORWARD - Numbers 12:15-16

“So Miriam was shut outside the camp for seven days and the people did not move on until Miriam was received again.” Miriam’s sins of gossip, maligning, jealousy, pride, and rebellion held up the children of Israel from going forward to the promised land for seven days. They lost seven days because of one person’s sin.

There is a lesson here for us. Individual Christians who are in sin can hold back the work of the Lord in a local church or a Christian organization. You see, our sins not only affect us but they affect others as well. Therefore, my Christian brethren, let us ***“encourage one another day***

by day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:13).

"Afterward, however, the people moved out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran." After much sin and seven days of delay, the children of Israel moved on. However, they did not move until sins had been confessed and repented of and God removed the discipline.

Christian, we will not go forward as individuals or a local church as we should until all sins have been confessed and repented of and God lifts any discipline we might be under. It is, therefore, so important that we right our lives before God so we may receive His full blessing.

CONCLUSION

Are you a non-Christian, an unbeliever? If you are, I must clarify some matters with you. God's anger is sometimes against His people, who have Christ as Savior and Lord. When they sin, God does discipline them because He loves them and desires that they should seek holiness of life and conform to the Lord Jesus Christ. But God does not love those people who are outside of Christ with saving love. His wrath burns hot all the time against their sins because they do not have Christ as Savior and Lord. God has sent His Son Jesus Christ to die for sinful men, and if sinful men refuse to accept Jesus Christ as God's only answer to their sin problem, then God's hate is continually against them. If sinful men die without Christ, they shall be cast into outer darkness where there is screaming and gnashing of teeth for all eternity.

How can you escape God's wrath and judgment on you and your sins? Trust in Jesus Christ. Receive Him as your Savior from sin and bow to Him as your Lord. Turn to Christ lest you suffer the anguish of your sins for all eternity. Receiving Christ is no light matter. What you do with Christ in this life will determine where you will spend eternity.

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36).

Trust Christ so you can experience God's love, grace, and mercy. Trust Christ and become a child of God. Trust Christ and have the fear of death taken away. Trust Christ and experience the abundant life, which is in Christ.