

Grumpy leaders

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[0:00] So if you'd like to open your Bibles at Numbers chapter 12.!

As we start let me remind you of a few words of Jesus. Matthew 5.5 said, Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Seems an odd thing to say actually, I mean you wouldn't think the meek would inherit the earth. But that's what Jesus said. So as we come to this passage we find the people are on the move.

And as soon as they start to move, at once things start to go wrong. These places that are mentioned here, we don't know their exact locations. But from the text it's clear they're somewhere in the desert of Paran.

And they're heading towards Kadesh Barnea on the borders of Canaan. And the people as we saw last week were starting to grump.

[1:21] There was dissension among the people over food. And you'll remember that part of the solution to that challenge was to extend the leadership team of the people by especially commissioning 70 elders.

It's likely that the elders were already there in place as it were. But they were given a special anointing of the Holy Spirit to take on that role.

But extending the leadership team brings the seeds of another problem. Or at least it can do. And this was hinted at in the previous chapter with two of the elders refusing to come to the meeting tent in chapter 11-26 and an objection raised by Joshua, another one of the leaders, in chapter 11-28.

And in this section, the writer here addresses the problems of leadership head on. And he gives us what you might consider to be a particularly peccant or sharp example.

Because the problem here is within Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And of course, these three are not just the leaders of the people, but quite literally, of course, brothers and sister.

[2:34] They're siblings. Miriam, as far as we can tell, seems to have been the eldest. If you are familiar with the story of the birth of Moses, you will know that it was Miriam who, Miriam's quick thinking, really, that both saved Moses' life when she was found in the rushes by Pharaoh's daughter, both saved Moses' life, and also by recruiting Moses' mother as a nurse, actually making sure that Moses didn't lose contact with his roots and just disappear into the palace culture.

So, Miriam was, as I say, she was obviously a very quick thinking girl at that time. Now, she must have been in her 90s or around that age.

So, it's sometime under the bridge, a lot of water under the bridge since then. But she was still a significant person in the leader, one of the leaders of the people, as we'll look in a minute.

But now, it turns out, there's an argument amongst the three siblings. And why does the writer tell us this?

Well, if he bothers to tell us, it must be because he wants us to learn something from it. So, we need to look at this dispute in order to see what we can learn from it.

[3:59] Now, although the... This is not actually a chiasm, exactly.

It is true that the structure and the dynamic is very Hebrew because, in a sense, the central spiritual high point of the discussion in the center is from verses 6 to 8.

And so, it might seem more natural for us Westerners to address this section at the end. And I did wonder whether to do that, but I thought, actually, the narrative is driven...

The dynamic of the narrative heads towards the restoration of Miriam and then the waiting and the moving on. So, let's keep that structure, even though it may seem a little bit odd to us when we...

It means, in fact, that, in a sense, the most important bit, if you like, is in the middle. But that's the way the passage was written. So, let's work to that structure. And I'd like to look at it under, as you can see on the screen there, under these four headings.

[5:08] First of all, we'll look at issues of plurality and diversity and dissension. Sorry about the long words, but it seemed the best description of it. And then, we will look at this central section where it talks about Moses as being the special prophet.

And then, we'll move on to address the issues concerned with the restoration of Miriam to her place. And finally, we'll look at the last verse. We could easily forget the last verse, but it's there for a reason.

And it reminds us that they moved on. And I think that's an important thing to bear in mind. So, that's the way we're going to divide up the passage this evening. So, the first thing to notice here is that leadership can be a burden.

It is a burden, in a sense. It is a burden of leadership. And that no one person should or can carry the entire burden of leadership. We've already seen that amongst these ancient Israelites, there were 70 elders, and below them, presumably, the heads of families, clans and families.

In the New Testament church, there wasn't one apostle. There were 12 apostles. And as we read about the establishment of the churches in the book of Acts, we don't find that Paul appointed one elder in each church, but he appointed elders.

[6:44] Plural. Indeed, this is actually, I think, a particular case of a more general principle that we are designed to work in teams.

We shouldn't be working alone. So, we have this passage of Ecclesiastes. I've just put the first two lines up on the screen. Let me read the whole thing to you.

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work. If one falls down, his friend can help him up.

But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up. Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. I suppose that last line is just to say he's not necessarily recommending two, but the point is that there's more than one.

[7:50] A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. But, of course, there is a problem there also. If two can defend themselves, it's also true that two can disagree and fight one another.

And notice that the point here, of course, is that the point of sharing leadership is not that the leaders shall all be identical clones.

They shouldn't all be doing the same thing and thinking in the same way. That's exactly what we don't want. There should be diversity. Diversity is essential.

And in our passage here, Moses, the lawgiver, Aaron, the high priest, and Miriam, whose role seems to have been particularly to lead the women in worship, we find that in Exodus 15, verse 20, had different roles.

And yet, the answer to the question in chapter 12, verse 3, has the Lord not spoken through us also? Of course, the answer is yes. The Lord had spoken through Aaron and through Miriam.

[9:04] And the Hebrew word, Dabar, which comes all through this chapter, perhaps more literally means speak with than speak through.

So, some translations say, does the Lord not speak with us also? It's apparently a different word. The word used in verse 4, Amar, just means to say or to answer.

But the word Dabar seems to imply this idea of conversation. But it also, I mean, the literal meaning is words. And this idea of hearing the words of the Lord actually runs through the whole chapter.

Here. But just think about some other examples before we dive into that. We have four gospel writers, don't we? And we don't have four gospel writers that they can all write the same thing. Well, the four gospels are different. We have these sort of theological and philosophical discussions that we get in John's gospel.

[10:12] And you might contrast that with the approach of Luke, the cool, careful historian who more or less just says, these are the facts. Go and figure it out for yourself.

The gospels are different. And as I've already said, we had 12 apostles. And they weren't all 12 identical apostles either. I mean, just think.

We had Peter, who was, of course, well known to have been impulsive and always the first one who was dived in first. We've got John, as we've already said, was the more thoughtful and philosophical turn of mind.

We've got Thomas the skeptic. He had a role to play when the resurrection of Jesus appeared to some of the other apostles and he wasn't there.

He says, I won't believe it until I touch him myself. Thomas was there for a reason so that we might indeed say, well, yeah, we might be skeptics too.

[11:19] But Thomas was there and he didn't believe it either until he touched the risen Christ. And we have Philip, not Philip the evangelist, the deacon, but Philip the apostle who seems to have been the approachable one.

We find that often people wanted to come and talk to Jesus. They came on a couple of occasions. I think we read they came via Philip who seems to have been the one that was easy to approach.

We have 12 different apostles. Later on, of course, we have Paul, the theologian. The leaders are supposed to be different.

They're not supposed to be all the same. And it's worth bearing that in mind. But, of course, if we have both plurality of leaders, if we have several leaders, and if we want them to be different, we want them to be diverse, then that does, of course, carry with it both a challenge and a temptation. And that's what the writer is trying to show us, I think, in this passage. Thank you. Well, why do I say that?

[12:40] Well, first of all, what is the challenge? The challenge is that different leaders will do things differently. Sometimes it may even be necessary to call another leader to account.

I think it's not that the object, the problem here is not that they called Moses to account over his wife. I'll say a bit in a minute. Sometimes that is necessary. So we know that Paul confronted Peter, for instance, in Galatians chapter 2, 11 to 14.

In our passage, it seems that Miriam and Aaron objected to Moses having a non-Israelite wife. It says a Cushite, which is slightly puzzling because the wife we know of, of course, is Zipporah, who was certainly not an Israelite, but she wasn't a Cushite.

She wasn't an Egyptian either. She was a Midianite. And so the reference is slightly puzzling. Was it actually Zipporah, who maybe perhaps had some connection with Cush that we don't know about? Or was it some other wife? Had Moses taken another wife? Although if that's the case, we don't read about it anywhere else. So was there any justification for the charge that Aaron and Miriam had raised?

[13:50] We're not really told, although the wording of verse 8 would suggest not. But you can see why they raised it. Moses himself had said that people should not take foreign wives.

But of course, I think that was intended to be qualified with a wife who would not, if a wife converted to Judaism, of course, and would follow the Lord, then that wasn't a problem.

I think that's the qualification. But you can see why they complained in a sense. But we're not actually told, really, whether the charge has any basis or not. Although, as I say, that verse 8 would seem to suggest that it didn't.

But that's because, the reason we're not told is because that's not the point. The writer wants us to pull on another thread here. He wants us to see the trap and the temptation that Miriam and Aaron actually fell into, verse 2, but that Moses managed to avoid.

And that is because disagreement began to change into rivalry and competition. And instead of worrying about the state of the people, Miriam and Aaron started to become more concerned, didn't they, with their own status in the kingdom and with the actual question at hand.

[15:09] It's clear from that verse where he says, hasn't the Lord spoken to us also? And so what might have started, perhaps, as a genuine concern, turns into a power struggle.

And that's a temptation, I think, for any management or leadership team anywhere. You know, you need multiple leaders, but you need a management team.

But by a management team, you're going to get people doing things in different ways. and leading in different ways. That's a problem for any management team anywhere. But it's a particularly acute problem when it comes to leaders of God's people.

Why is that? Well, it is because the leaders of people are spiritually equipped. And as we've said, the answer to the question of verse 2 is yes.

Aaron and Miriam are prophets. Their calling is genuine. And yet, they came to a disagreement. The fact that they do, that it was true that the Lord spoke through Aaron and Miriam was, in a sense, the cause of the problem because it didn't seem to come out quite the same.

[16:31] And I think that's the issue that, actually, the writer deals with in this middle section. But how can Christian leaders avoid this trap?

And the short answer, I think, is verse 3. To seek that much underrated virtue of meekness or humility, if you want to translate it that way. That's the short answer to the question.

That Moses was meek. Aaron and Miriam, at the time at least, weren't. They needed to learn that meekness and humility. But in the next verses, the Lord expands on this theme but also deals with the unique nature of this particular power struggle because there was something special.

It wasn't just an ordinary disagreement among the leaders. There was something special in this particular case. So we'll look at this central section now which is actually a poem of 11 lines that just before the actual words of the poem itself which starts at verse 6.

Just look at the previous verse, verse 5. And observe the, in case you missed it, observe the dramatic irony here. On this particular occasion, the Lord spoke to Miriam and Aaron not in a vision or a dream or a riddle which is what he's going on to say but in the same way as to Moses, didn't he?

[18:04] He appeared at the tent of meeting in the cloud and spoke to them from the cloud and so here the message is crystal clear. But then we move on to these, this 11 line poem which unusually for a Hebrew poem is not in trip in twos but in threes.

Lines are organised in threes. But the first line of it which sometimes the, well certainly in the NIV the formatting doesn't make quite clear but the first line of the poem is listen to my words because that sets the theme for the rest of it.

And again the word is the bar for words but it says the Lord is speaking here to Aaron and to Miriam and says well you are, you claim to be prophets indeed you are prophets so shouldn't you be listening to what the Lord actually has to say?

and again the Hebrew word here implies that you listen carefully you pay attention you give heed we might say in the modern is now listen up pay attention and the word for words is *dabar* again say this idea of the Lord converting talking to his people runs all the way through this poem and this whole poem is about words and speaking and then first of all the Lord points out that sometimes the message of the Lord even through a prophet can be enigmatic he says here doesn't he that a prophet does hear the words of the Lord but he does so in visions and dreams and then in verse 8 he talks about again a difficult word to translate most versions translate it riddles but the meaning seems to be not like an English riddle which is sort of puzzled to guess but rather an enigmatic saying a saying you're perhaps it's more like the sort of zen what's the sound of one hand clapping something something that you're supposed to think about and encourage your thinking to learn from that seems to be what it means by a riddle or an enigmatic sayings the same idea comes in in Proverbs where the words of the wise are riddles that we're supposed to think about and that is actually a little strange isn't it because we would think that when the spirit comes we ought to understand everything and yet what the spirit tells us is in fact is that we don't understand everything in fact what we when the spirit comes what we understand is that we don't understand everything and we gain in the moral certainty that we're morally unfitted to the task as verse 8 suggests here why were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses there's a moral failure here not just an intellectual failure there's both there's an intellectual failure to fail to understand what the Lord really required and the way that the word of the Lord works but there's also a moral failure and both of course are related but they're both there so any preacher and any leader and any Christian indeed who has not grasped both these facts that we don't always fully understand what the Lord says and that always our understanding or our lack of understanding is not just an intellectual failure but a moral failure if we don't grasp those two things we're in danger and heading

for a fall and so if we lack meekness we find that meekness isn't our thing then meditating on this passage ought to help but of course the Lord also points out here that this particular disagreement is rather a special case because he says there is actually a difference between the word as it came from Moses and the word as normally comes to a prophet because we're told here that Moses is the faithful steward

[23:08] Moses is the foster parent the steward the overseer who's put in charge of the household and we're told that he has in a sense here a clearer vision than your average prophet that he sees we're told the form of the Lord and yet not actually his face if we look at Exodus 33 we find that he doesn't see the face of the Lord but he does see the form of the Lord whatever exactly that means perhaps it's not clear but it's meant to see obviously to suggest that Moses sees the Lord perhaps in a clearer way than the other prophets and so to speak to borrow again it is against Moses is to undermine the peace of the household because he is the one that the the Lord has set as the faithful steward over the household so there is a particular problem with speaking against Moses because to speak against

Moses is to question the wisdom of the Lord himself and Moses really was the key figure in Israelite history Abraham was the father and the original recipient of the promise and there were great kings David and Solomon and there were numerous faithful prophets but it was Moses and the law of Moses which really defined what the nation was there is a sense if you think about it in which any nation is defined by its law isn't it that's why we have all these arguments in favour and against Brexit it's a matter of law ultimately the law is a codification of what a nation is about isn't it of its values and ways of doing things and operating principles and a different law will mean a different culture I mean I just thought I'd give you an example of this Lindsay's not here tonight is she but we don't have an American here tonight but just think of

British culture and American culture now in many ways of course the British and American constitutions and laws are quite similar but there are some ways in which they're different and one way in which the constitution is different is the American constitution gives all its citizens the right to bear arms which is not true under the UK constitution now I'm not going to argue about whether that's a good thing or the bad thing I'm just telling you that is the case and in all sorts of practical ways for better or worse that makes differences between British and American society doesn't it I mean you've only got to watch the American cop shows and the British cop shows to see that they're different that one law the difference of that one law makes a cultural difference between the Americans and the British and so in that sense it's Moses as the lawgiver who was the founder of the

Israelite nation and Moses we're told is the faithful steward over the whole house and so in challenging Moses Miriam and Aaron threatened the very foundation of the nation and yet it's also worth noting that the Lord's words are very precise here they may be enigmatic but they're enigmatic because they're so precise and what the Lord says here is that even Moses' authority is not absolute he is the faithful steward but he's not the householder himself he sees the form of the Lord but he doesn't see his face and of course as we read on in Numbers and in the other books of the Pentateuch we find Moses himself was far from perfect and in fact in the end he failed to enter the promised land because of a failure on his part so that begs the question doesn't it if Moses is the faithful steward who is the householder was it perhaps

King David and yet David submitted to the law of Moses the law he didn't really make much difference to the law of Israel he largely just kept the Mosaic law well we know the answer to that don't we because we've got the book of Hebrews and the book of Hebrews comments on this particular passage this particular poem this particular phrase as Moses being the faithful servant in all my house so let me read it this passage in Hebrews 3 1 to 6 which tells us who the faithful true who the true heir is and indeed who is the true high priest and who is the true prophet as well so Hebrews chapter 3 verse 1 to 6 says the following therefore holy brothers who share in the heavenly calling fix your thoughts on Jesus the apostle and high priest whom we confess he was faithful to the one who appointed him just as

[29:03] Moses was faithful in all God's house Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses just as the builder of a house has greater

honor than the house itself for every house is built by someone but God is the builder of everything Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house notice the emphasis of the word servant there which is what the steward means servant in all God's house testifying to what would be said in the future but Christ is faithful as a son over God's house and we are his house if we hold to our courage and the hope of which we boast it is Moses who sees the form of the Lord but it is Jesus Christ who talks with the father face to face it is Christ who is not just the but the household of the son and the heir and what should we learn from this well there are still enigmatic sayings in the scriptures there are still things we do not fully understand

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 now I understand in part it's only then that I will understand fully and as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13 that should control our attitude to and treatment of others that was the problem that Miriam and Aaron had wasn't it that they didn't realize that because they understood some things then they understood everything and the Lord had to point out to them that they didn't and therefore we need to listen to each other's opinions other people's understanding might be as good or better than our own and but at the center of this we remember that just as Moses was the faithful law giver the faithful steward over the house so Jesus Christ in Jesus Christ we see the Lord clearly and in

Colossians chapter 1 verse 15 we read he is the image of the invisible God the firstborn over all creation in other words he is the true Adam as we were thinking this morning who is it was created in the image of God it was Adam but Adam's image was defaced and so if we want to see the Lord clearly then who do we look at well not Aaron not even at Moses but at the Lord Jesus Christ himself because he is the true image of the invisible God and the firstborn the heir of all creation the true Adam so if we were writing this in terms of western culture that's where I'd stop but the writer doesn't stop there actually and I thought I would go on and complete the rest of the passage because it actually addresses a delicate question can a leader who exhibited some moral failure be restored to their position if you think of what the sort of general attitude among the evangelical churches today

I think you would say most certainly not and yet the case of Miriam suggests that sometimes at least there can be a restoration she was a prophet she was a leader of the women she was of value to the people of God and in her case at least she was restored and I think as we consider this question we have to illuminate that by what's gone before the first thing of course is that if we demand moral perfection and unerring knowledge from our leaders then you know what will happen we won't have any leaders at all I think those are words of Edith Schaefer wasn't it if you demand perfection or nothing then you know what you'll get but on the other hand of course the integrity and peace of the people of

God must not be threatened the church mustn't be held up to public condemnation or any charge of hypocrisy and of course in some cases for example the mistreatment of a child reinstatement might not even be legal let alone morally justifiable and of course there is always a risk of the failure being repeated yet it seems that even in the case of a public thing like that of Miriam that in this case at least restoration was not out of the question and perhaps one could also point out that sometimes those who have learned the hardest lessons might be the best qualified to pass those lessons on why was Peter so good at feeding the flock why did Jesus say to him feed my sheep well in a sense it was a result of his own failure the understanding that the sheep needed supporting and leading and feeding so I think this is always going to be a difficult question but at least we can see that at least two things must be needed before any leader can be restored to their position first of all there must be a genuine repentance and we find that don't we in verse 11 and we notice actually that although it was

[35:28] Miriam who got the skin disease it was actually Aaron who had to make the apology and it is Aaron who said to Moses please my lord do not hold against us the sin we have we have so foolishly committed there was a genuine apology he acknowledges Moses lordship there you notice you don't normally address your brother as lord but here he does and he says we made a we foolishly committed a sin there's a folly and of course folly in Hebrew thought always has a moral dimension to it it's not just

as I say it's not just an intellectual failure it's a moral failure and then he has to pray to to what he prays interestingly to Moses for forgiveness for Miriam that her disease would be taken away and Moses actually cries out to the lord to heal her and although it doesn't explicitly say so here the other different passages of scripture and the implication here is that she was of course healed and yet that wasn't the end of it because there had to be a period of uncleanness let me get this rather thing if the woman is just dishonoured by her father there would be had to be a period of uncleanness and this in a sense is a much greater dishonouring and so there is this period only of seven days in this case but a period of uncleanness and I think you could say well this is just a ritual thing but I think actually it's more than that

I think that in this situation there needs to be a time for reflection reflection both by the person who has fallen into this problem but also a reflection on the part of the people you can't expect things to be right instantly there has to be a time to reflect on it and for sort of I suppose for emotions to settle down and for people to take a more balanced view and to consider forgiveness and so on so I think that we shouldn't just think of this period of uncleanness as a kind of just a ritual thing I think there's probably a real reason for it and that it's good advice if some elder or some leader is caught in a sin then while restoration in certain circumstances may not be impossible there probably should be a delay a time of delay and I think that would apply for any not just for elders but for any Christian leader or anybody really who has any role or function in the kingdom that when that trust has been what's the word I mean the trust has not been justified the trust that people have put in him has not been justified then there needs to be a time of reflection on both sides and I think that's good advice but perhaps we do go too far in our modern churches I mean it's always going to be a problem isn't it but how many genuine gifts have been lost to the church through the moral failure of the recipients I guess that many of us wouldn't be too challenged to produce a lengthy list can they be restored to positions of leadership this passage at least suggests that we shouldn't reject the idea out of hand but I think it's always going to be a very delicate business and it's always going to be something that requires care and certainly no cover up should be allowed because we don't want to open ourselves to the accusation of hypocrisy so that's an open question I think I don't think this solves all the problems but it does at least make us think don't think that just because some Christian leader has made a mistake that certainly means that there should not be any it's hopeless because often as I say like Peter the one who's made a mistake is better able to deal with those who might be in danger of making the same mistake so that's always going to require care I think that particular issue but at least we say here that Miriam was restored as was Aaron of course to their positions within the kingdom as leaders of the people and later on in numbers we read of their death and burial and they're buried with all due ceremony as one might say we might get on to that later and oh yes I did want to point out it's not only Miriam has to wait a week but the people have to wait a week as well we find that in verse 15 the people couldn't move on until she was brought back people had to wait also but after that week then they do move on and I think the final message of this passage is precisely that that it is possible to move on the crisis was a severe crisis but it wasn't terminal it didn't defeat the whole expedition and by the grace of God the church can survive even a fallout among its leadership or a moral failure of its key personnel and again I don't want to name names but many of us are aware of churches who have survived exactly those things in very recent memory and in this passage it's the meekness and the patience and the forgiving nature of Moses the faithful servant isn't it which averted disaster Moses was not just right but uncaring judgment judgmental he actually prays for his sister for her healing and restoration it's this forgiving meek nature patient nature of Moses which averse here averse the disaster and

[42:34] I wanted to say that meekness can be misinterpreted humility can be misinterpreted meekness is not lack of moral courage Moses was quite capable of standing up to Pharaoh I might quote those words of C.S.

Lewis I believe said that humility doesn't consist in clever men thinking they're pretending they're stupid and beautiful women pretending they're ugly I think that's what he said something like that anyway I should have looked it up and I hadn't but he said something like that that's not what humility is humility is having a true judgment of yourself and knowing that compared with the Lord

compared with Christ then we are stupid and ugly and to keep that in mind but we should remember also that our leader is one greater even than Moses we have a priest who is better qualified even than Aaron because he has gone through the veil and doesn't just go in once a year and come out again but he stands there pleading for us for each of us in our moral failures we have a prophet who has more insight than

Miriam did and we have a leader who is meeker even than Moses although in his case it's not because he is ugly or stupid but he does describe himself as meek or humble doesn't he lowly of heart and that's I think because of his forgiving nature he has compassion of us he is the high priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses and what Aaron didn't do that in this occasion and one who was never guilty of moral failure and it's because we have such a high priest such a prophet such a captain such a leader over the household that it's both possible to move on and indeed it's necessary to move on on the people had to say part for a week but then the time came when the Lord said no now you've got to move on you've had this problem but don't be defeated by it don't be undermined by it it's time to move on it's both possible and necessary to move on so let me finish with these words from Hebrew that I've already quoted bits on but let me just read those few verses for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin let us therefore approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need