

Speaking against God's Servant

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Date: 12 October 2025

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[0 : 00] I don't know how many of you follow politics keenly.! Maybe not so much. You just tune in when it's time to vote, perhaps. But if you do, and even if you don't, you may find a common pattern that often emerges.

So a leader wins an election, and initially their popularity soars. They seem to be able to do no wrong.

Everywhere they go, people want to take selfies with them. The polls show that if an election were to be held today, they would win by a landslide. Then, over time, a crisis emerges in the country.

COVID, housing crisis, illegal immigrants, complex problems which divide people's opinion. So there are protests or media pressure where they're constantly being asked their views on this or that.

And that results in them making a deeply unpopular decision. Or they might make a remark that offends many. And from then on, their popularity tanks.

[1 : 17] Right? Their authority is severely undermined. Then you hear rumors that there are potential leadership challenges. From government ministers that previously swore absolute loyalty to the prime minister or the leader.

All of which rattles the leader even more and leads to then further bad decisions and panicked responses. And it doesn't matter which side of politics it is or the caliber of the leader.

Once this sort of challenges starts to emerge, it becomes very difficult to overcome. Well, something similar happens in Numbers chapter 12 today.

Not identical, particularly in the outcome. But Moses, if you recall, has had a few challenges with his leadership of light. The people have been complaining and protesting.

Yes, God has judged them for it. But then Moses had found the burden too much to bear. So much so that he asked the Lord to relieve him of it. Now, Miriam and Aaron, Moses' sister and brother, have witnessed all of this.

[2 : 34] And so now, of all people, they think they can do a better job. Verse 1. Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife.

For he had married a Cushite. Now, if you go all the way back to Exodus, it's told us that Moses married a lady by the name of Zipporah. She was Jethro's daughter, a Midianite.

But some say that the region of Cush would have covered Midian as well. And so this person, this Cushite wife, is a reference to her. Others think, no, that actually Moses married another wife after Zipporah.

But regardless, Miriam complains against Moses. And here, I think she's considered to be the instigator because in those days, it is not common for a female to be named first.

And so I think the fact that she appears first is an indication that actually she's sort of leading the complaint. Now, that also makes sense because later on, we see that it's only Miriam that appears to be punished.

[3 : 43] Aaron, though, on the other hand, is not blameless because he must have gone along with it, right? Now, this, again, is consistent with Aaron's nature because he's done similar things, particularly back in Exodus.

If you recall, Moses was up on Mount Sinai. Aaron was down at the bottom of the mountain. And the people had pressured him to build a golden calf.

And he had done the same thing. He had given in to them instead of standing up for what is right. And Moses was not happy at the time. Now, there's no indication here as well that Moses hears any of this.

It may well be that Miriam and Aaron are whispering behind closed tent flaps. Now, what's the issue then with Moses having a foreign wife?

Well, not clear. Because if this is Zipporah that Miriam is complaining about, then it sort of doesn't quite make sense why she's waited so long for the complaint to be raised.

[4 : 46] In any case, when we read verse 2, I think we can see that this complaint is really just a smokescreen because we're given the real reason in verse 2. So really, the truth is that they're peeved and envious of Moses' special relationship with God as his spokesperson.

It may also be that what happened last week, if you recall, was a trigger because Moses had asked for additional sharing of the burden last week and God had put his spirit on 70 elders.

But in that chapter, it appears that Miriam and Aaron were bypassed. But we need to get the facts straight here because both Miriam and Aaron are really actually prophets.

Miriam, in Exodus chapter 15, was called a prophetess. And of course, Aaron is, as high priest, God's prophet through Moses. At the burning bush back in Exodus, Moses had continued to be reluctant to be God's spokesman and it was then that Aaron was appointed to be Moses' mouthpiece.

Further, as the high priest, Aaron would often be with Moses, you would assume, when God gave Moses the commands at the tent. So it's not like Aaron and Miriam are nobodies, right?

[6 : 21] They were already leaders in their community, in Israel. And they had occasion already to speak for God. But of course, they were doing it under Moses' leadership.

And obviously, that was not enough for them. They were envious and they wanted more. They wanted equality with Moses. And so, even though they perhaps did not dare complain loudly in public, the Lord heard them anyway.

And of course, the Lord would, because God is able to search even our deepest thoughts and motives. So, before we get to what happens, in verse 3 now, the narrator interjects with a comment.

He says, Now, Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. Now, it is often said that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, but I don't think he wrote this particular sentence.

All right? He didn't... I'm a very humble person, okay? That's why it's sort of... The Bible has put it in brackets. So, probably in the narrator inserted it after Moses had finished whatever else he was writing.

[7 : 29] Now, this again is consistent with what we know of Moses. Throughout his leadership, he's shown that he cares more for the people than for his own status. And as I said already, even from the very start at the burning bush, he kept persuading God not to appoint him as leader.

And of course, you have to bear in mind that he said all this after, actually, he started life as a prince of Egypt. Right? When he grew up, he actually grew up in Pharaoh's court.

And he would have had power and prestige and leadership. But then what he tried to do was take justice to his own hands by killing an Egyptian that was abusing his people.

But it's not like Moses was unfamiliar with leadership and the responsibility and prestige that goes with it. Likewise, we saw last week that even though Moses wasn't perfect, he was humble, wasn't he?

Anyway, what we find now in verse 4, that the Lord acts decisively against this murmuring. And so what we read is, at once, and that means suddenly, without any warning, at once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, come out to the tent of meeting all three of you.

[8 : 47] So the three of them went out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud. He stood at the entrance of the tent and summoned Aaron and Moses. When the two of them stepped forward, he said.

It's a bit like, I don't know, maybe at school, you're being summoned to the principal's office kind of thing. Three of you lining up. And then the two culprits are being asked to step forward.

Well, the Lord says, Listen to my words. When there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, reveal myself to them in visions. I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles. He sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?

And the anger of the Lord burned against them and he left them. And this anger of the Lord burning against them, that's been a common and repeated refrain, isn't it, over the last few chapters where God then punished them.

[9 : 50] Well, this then is God's response to Miriam and Aaron. He doesn't deal with Moses' wife because I think it's a non-issue. It doesn't justify a response.

But as to the question of why God speaks only through Moses, God firstly indicates that actually Moses isn't the only prophet. There are others that God speaks to, including Miriam and Aaron.

And as prophets, God would speak through them as well. So yes, whereas God only speaks in riddles to them, Moses is unique among God's prophets.

Because with Moses, God says, he speaks clearly, face to face. The Lord, or rather Moses, is able to see the form of the Lord.

And we saw that in Mount Sinai where God passed by Moses. Moses was in the shelter of a rock and could see just the back of the Lord. And that is right about God, isn't it?

[10 : 58] Because given our own finite nature, he is really inaccessible. Hid from our eyes, as the hymn, immortal, invisible, God only wise says.

And yet, even though God is inaccessible, he reveals himself to us, to humanity. But it's only when he does, it's only because he does, that we can know him at all.

And so it's really God's prerogative to choose how, or to whom, through whom, he chooses to speak, so that the rest of us can hear God's words. And during the time of Exodus, it was Moses.

He is God's chosen servant. And as you see that passage there, twice it refers to Moses, God refers to him as my servant Moses. And that's a significant phrase.

Now you may wonder, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Or rather, in this case, did God choose Moses as his servant because Moses is faithful to God's house?

[12:09] Or, is it the other way around, that God, that Moses was faithful because God chose him? Was God, did God choose Moses because he was faithful?

Or was Moses faithful because God chose him? Well, the answer, of course, given that God is sovereign in election, is that God chose Moses first, right?

But then, by God's enabling, Moses is then able to respond by being faithful. But, the converse is not true because God's sovereignty does not absolve Miriam and Aaron of their sin.

They too were appointed by God as his prophets, and yet, they proved themselves to be less than faithful. And so, rightly, God's anger burned against them.

Why? Because they were not just envious of Moses, that was the horizontal aspect of the sin, but also by their envy, the vertical aspect of the sin was that they opposed God.

[13:13] To speak against Moses is to speak against God's servant, to challenge God's appointment of him, and thereby, calling God's authority and wisdom into question.

Now, it says here that God's anger burned, but then we don't have an explicit judgment made by God because what happens is it just occurs in verse 10.

God leaves, and when the cloud lifted from above the tent, verse 10, Miriam's skin was leprous. It became as white as snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had a defiling skin disease, and he said to Moses, please, my Lord, I ask you not to hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed.

Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten. It's pretty graphic, isn't it? But Miriam is afflicted with a defiling disease.

Aaron, on the other hand, seems to be spared. Perhaps, as I said earlier, Miriam's the main culprit, but perhaps God is being merciful to Aaron. But actually, if you think about it, I think God is being merciful to Miriam as well because the last time God's anger burned, people died.

[14:31] but instead here, all she has, I mean, all she has, pretty bad, but it's a defiling skin disease which she gets to recover from. But her punishment could have been far worse, right?

And now here, to Aaron's credit, he does step up, doesn't he? You know, he has that pattern of shifting the blame to others, but now here, he actually steps up to mediate and intercede for Miriam because he owns their sin collectively.

He says, we have foolishly committed this. He seeks forgiveness and not just from the Lord, but interestingly, from Moses as well. But here's the irony, isn't it?

Because Aaron had been complaining not being able to speak for God directly or to the Lord directly. And now here, what he has to do is to plead to the Lord, not directly, but through Moses who has to intervene on their behalf.

And of course, Moses does this because he knows that his role is to serve God and to intercede for them. And so he graciously does this in verse 13 and cries out to the Lord, please, God, heal her.

[15:43] Now, again, it's quite interesting that even though the cloud has lifted at this point, it's in Buckley sort of saying that the Lord had left them, yet the Lord is still present, isn't he, to hear Moses' cry.

And so he replies, if her father had spit in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days, confined her outside the camp for seven days. After that, she can be brought back. So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days.

And the people did not move until she was brought back. After that, the people left Hazerot and encamped in the desert of Paran. So you can imagine what's been happening here, right?

It's sort of like they've been summoned to the tent and maybe at that point nobody else in the camp really realizes it, right? It's in front of the camp within the enclosure. It was just maybe the priests that were there that witnessed this.

But then after all this happens, everyone, don't they, they see the cloud lifts suddenly. And, you know, two weeks ago, what happens when the cloud lifts? It's time to pack up, right?

[16:48] And start moving. Except, this is not what happens. But what they see instead is Miriam, right, being led away from the tent which is right in the middle of the camp and then taken and banished outside the camp.

It's a very public disgrace, isn't it? And then, of course, during those seven days when they're all waiting around, seeing the cloud is lifted, hey, why are we not moving?

Oh, Miriam. Right? Everyone was aware of why they were stuck. Right? It was Miriam. So, this is not just a skin disease that was the punishment, is it?

There was the shame of knowing that she had been publicly found out and being punished by God. And again, this is ironic because it's a far cry, isn't it?

She wanted to speak God's Word. She wanted to be the prophet to be able to, you know, sort of issue instructions to the people and now, instead, she finds herself humbled and having to be subjected to God's punishment.

[18:02] But, you know, in a sense, that's the way humbling does work, isn't it? Because God does that to help us see our pride so that we can repent. All right.

It's a relatively short chapter today, so we've got to the end of it. And you might think that that's the end, but it's not. Because we do need to work out what the relevance of this whole story is for us.

What is the warning and what is the comfort? Well, if you're thinking I'm going to use this opportunity to encourage you all to respect your leaders and not give your pastor a hard time, then tempting though that may be, that's not the point of the message.

Okay? So rest assured. Instead, I want to focus on Moses as God's servant. And in fact, that reading in Hebrews explicitly guides us as to how we are to apply this passage.

Because there we read on the next slide, Therefore, holy brothers and sisters who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest.

[19:11] He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. That's the same phrase, isn't it? 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, bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future.

But Christ is faithful as the son over God's house, and we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

So, it's clear that the writer of Hebrews is referring to this passage, and the lesson he wants to draw for us is to point us to Jesus, or, as we've sung today, Jesus is the true and better Moses.

Right? And so, if Miriam's punishment is anything to go by, then how much more if we speak against Jesus? Moses was merely a servant of God's house, in God's house.

[20:22] Jesus, on the other hand, is the son over God's house, and with God, the builder of this house. And, while Moses, even though he was faithful, was not sinless, Jesus is both faithful and sinless.

And that's why the writer of Hebrews actually begins his whole letter with this declaration, that in the past, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, including Moses, at many times and in various ways.

But in these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe.

Jesus. And so, even though Moses did speak God's word and he heard God clearly, he doesn't speak as God, he doesn't speak as Jesus does, because Jesus is God's very own Son, and he speaks with the authority of one who has been with the Father, who has actually been party to everything that the Father says from the very beginning.

That is the power of Jesus' words. That is the authority of his words. And so, this is my plea to anyone here who is still half-hearted about whether to accept Jesus' words or not.

[21 : 43] Because when you read the words of Jesus in the Bible, you need to realize that these are not just words of a human prophet, but rather of God's Son.

and then consider what Miriam's fate was for speaking against Moses. And so, the one that the Father has appointed over his house, and the house here is the church, the body of Christ, is Jesus himself.

And that also, as well as being a warning, should be a great comfort to us, because even when our human leaders fail, and they will, we know we have Jesus, God's servant and Son, who will always be faithful, and therefore not fail the Father, and therefore us.

And that's why the writer says, let's fix our thoughts on the better Moses, Jesus. That's the main lesson from Numbers 12, that we look not to Moses or other human leaders, but that we look to Jesus, the true and better Moses.

And even though Jesus may then appoint others like pastors to be his under-shepherds, all these people are constrained by God's word.

[23 : 01] We have no voice of authority that is independent of Jesus. Our only mandate is to faithfully proclaim what God has already revealed in his scriptures.

Which means, if you look to the next point in the outline, there are certain things that follow from that, that if Jesus is the true and better Moses, then here are the things that apply to us.

First, we need to recognize that apart from Jesus, every other leader, as I said, will be weak and fallible. So, please don't put any leaders on a pedestal, even though they might be teaching and impressive in how they preach, do not put them on a pedestal.

Nor should you have your faith shaken if a leader that you once respected has somehow failed. Because, we know that even though human leaders can fail, Jesus will still be there to do what is right.

Look to Jesus for your confidence instead. And yet, even though human leaders are weak, God still chooses to use them. Just like God did with Aaron and Moses and Miriam, but we need to be realistic then in our expectations of them.

[24 : 20] They will never be perfect, so don't be upset when they're not, but actually graciously accept and acknowledge this. Because otherwise, you put a burden on them as leaders that is not fair for them to carry, nor should they.

If, on the other hand, God has given us this responsibility to lead, and that's many of you, then let's be humble, like Moses was, and realize that apart from God's grace, we wouldn't be up to the task.

And then be faithful with what you've been given to do. That's a few years ago now, but when I was sort of still working in finance, I had a performance review to do of a young graduate.

It was about three to six months into the job. So we sat down, went through the sort of rubrics. But instead of considering at that time how well he had been doing and what areas of improvement there were, guess what he was really just concerned about?

And he asked me, when would he be promoted? Now, some of us, I think, can be like that as leaders in the church, right? before we've learned to be faithful in a particular role, we're already thinking how God might use us in a bigger and mightier way, isn't it?

[25 : 48] What grand mission God has lined up for us. When we do this, we're like Aaron and Miriam, aren't we? They already had important work given by God, and yet they were looking at Moses and thinking, oh, you know, why can't I do what he does?

Now, others are a bit more like Moses, right? If you recall, and I said already, at the burning bush, Moses continually tried to turn God down, to say no to God.

And you know, we might think, oh, what a humble guy he is. But actually, if you go back into Exodus chapter 3, I think it is, and you look at right at the end, it actually said that God's anger burned against Moses, the very same phrase that happens here.

So his refusal was not actually a virtue, right? Because he was saying no to God. Now, God was being gracious, gave him a helper in Haran, even though he didn't want to do it, but he did not relieve Moses of his responsibility.

Likewise, last week, God supplied the elders, but also did not relieve Moses of his leadership, even though he requested it. And so, friends, if you are being called to serve or to lead, and you feel like it's overwhelming and you want to give up, be comforted to know that God will supply your need.

[27 : 12] Our response, really, is to be faithful. Yes, sometimes we may need to get extra support to help you, but don't give up. It's not like God did not know your weaknesses before he appointed you.

He already knew that, and yet, he calls us to serve anyway. All of us are like that. We are not really up to the task that God asks us to do, and yet, he calls us, and then he will enable us, just as he does Moses.

But in either case, whether it's pride like Aaron or reluctance like Moses, let's not fix our eyes on us, right? About whether we're good enough, whether our gift should require us to do more, but rather, let's fix our eyes on Jesus, and then humbly submit to what he has asked us to do.

That's point one. Now, the second application there is that even if you're a leader or if you're not, all of us will be under some sort of authority one way or another.

So, I, as a pastor, Andrew has authority over me, and Andrew, too, is accountable to the bishop and the archbishop. And so that means that it's important to respect the authority that God's servant has over us.

[28 : 33] We respect them not because they're gifted or perfect, but we respect them because it is God that appoints them. In fact, knowing that they're not perfect, it's all the more important, isn't it, to support them and to realize, actually, they have quite a difficult job and so help them to do what God has appointed them for.

Now, that doesn't mean we just blindly follow leaders and don't raise concerns or don't suggest improvements or call out things that are not right, but let's do it in a way that does not undermine their authority from God because ultimately, we are submitting to God by submitting to them.

And of course, let's pray for them. Now, I'm not saying any of this because there's a problem here in our midst, far from it, but this is something for us to all bear in mind, isn't it, wherever we may be.

Some of it might be at places that we work at, at school, at home. All authority is given by God, so let's submit and respect it. But then finally, third point, let's pray that God will raise up more leaders like Moses, especially in the church, people who will be humble and faithful to God.

And we need them, not just as senior pastors or pastors, but at all levels of leadership. Even you, when you're leading kids ministry or youth ministry, be like Moses because we need people in churches to serve humbly and faithfully, just like Moses, just like Jesus.

[30 : 07] God's servants who are more focused on the job than on the status of it, more caring of the people than what others think of them. So, let's keep our eyes on Jesus, not just because he's our role model, but also because he's our saviour who did that very thing first, served us humbly so that we too might serve him humbly, whatever he's appointed us to.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your son through whom we have heard your voice and seen your face. thank you that he speaks perfectly your word and faithfully serves you as your son over us, your house.

Humble us to follow him wholeheartedly and strengthen us in our weakness to serve you like Moses. Whatever you have called us and appointed us to do, may we serve like our saviour, Jesus.

In his name we pray. Amen. Amen.