

Speaking Against God's Servant

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Date: 07 September 2025

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[0 : 00] Your Bibles and turn back to Numbers chapter 12 as we continue our series through this book. So when it comes to a family photo, this dog wants to be in the centre and so parks itself right in front of the camera.

Or this one gets envious of its owner's marriage proposal and so puts its paw out because it wants a marriage proposal too. They can even become envious of other dogs getting attention.

So one dog was getting a photo taken and another one decided to stick his head in the side. Just so he didn't miss out. Well as we come to Numbers chapter 12 today, we see a couple of Israelites who are envious of the attention that Moses is given.

You see the Israelites have just left Mount Sinai in the wilderness after spending about 11 months there. And they're on their way to their promised land. But last week we saw it took just three days before they complained or grumbled against God because of their hardship.

And not long after that first incident, they did it again where they craved food, you might remember. And that second time was when they were camped at Kibroth Hattava.

[1 : 38] And those who instigated that craving, complaining, you might remember, were judged more severely for infecting the whole nation. But this week, the verse before our chapter tells us that they've journeyed from Kibroth Hattava and now have arrived at Hazoroth, which is where our chapter takes place today.

And here we see a third episode of complaining. But this time it's not the whole nation because they craved food. It's just two Israelites because they craved attention.

And so they complain about Moses. Point one, verse one. Miriam and Aaron are the two who began to talk or speak against Moses because of his Cushite wife.

For he had married a Cushite. Now Miriam and Aaron were Moses' siblings, brother and sister. And it seems Miriam here is the one who instigates this complaint against her brother because she is named first here and she actually is judged more severely later.

But their complaint has to do with Moses' marriage to a Cushite, which is probably modern day Ethiopia. Now while the law did forbid intermarriage with various tribes in the land, you know, so those tribes wouldn't lead the Israelites away to worship other gods, Cush is not one of those tribes.

[3 : 06] And they're not actually in the land yet, are they? What's more, it doesn't say Moses took a Cushite wife or married one.

It says he had married one, suggesting that this happened some time ago. And so it begs the question, why are Miriam and Aaron complaining about it now?

Why this seemingly racist complaint now? Well, because it's really a smokescreen for their envy. Verse two. Has the Lord spoken only through Moses, they asked.

Hasn't he also spoken through us? And the Lord heard this. It doesn't use the word envy here, but that seems to be what's going on.

It seems they're envious of the attention or recognition that Moses is given by God. And we get a glimpse of this last week where we saw Moses cry out to God in despair.

[4 : 05] And so God told him to choose 70 elders to help him. And you might remember those 70 prophesied to prove they'd been anointed with God's spirit, but only for a moment.

For we're told that the elders only prophesied once to show that Moses is still the main prophet, you see. It was God's way of recognizing Moses' position as his main representative, his appointed servant.

For God had already saved Israel from Egypt through Moses, and he continues to primarily speak and lead Israel through Moses to their promised land.

But having seen this, Miriam and Aaron seem to then, well, they do say in verse two, has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't God also spoken through us?

In other words, where's our recognition? Where's our attention from God? It reminds me of Shannon Knoll's One Hit Wonder. I don't know if you remember this song.

[5 : 10] What about me? It isn't fair. Do you remember this at all? I've had enough. Now I want my share. That's what they're singing here. What about me?

Hasn't the Lord spoken through us as well? And that's despite Aaron being the high priest and Miriam being the prophetess. God has already given them a privileged position, and with that, a deal of recognition.

But like last week with the manna, it seems what God has given them is not good enough. And so this week they envy Moses' attention and recognition.

And so they complain or speak against him. And I wonder if we can sometimes fall into this trap too. You know, we can envy the attention or recognition that others get, which can then cause us to speak against them in our hearts or even to others.

You know, if someone is recognized or praised for doing something, we can think, well, actually, I've done this. And I've done that. And, you know, they actually failed to do that. So where's my praise?

[6 : 16] Where's my thanks? Or if someone is recognized for how nice they look or how much weight they've lost, we can envy them thinking, I wish that was me, and then speak against them thinking, I bet they paid a fortune for that outfit anyway.

And I bet they're always hungry. Or if a couple is recognized, you know, for perhaps their 60th anniversary, we can envy them thinking, I wish I still had my partner or have one.

And then we can speak against them thinking, well, actually, I could never be married to that person for 60 years. Envy is not good for us, is it? It makes us bitter and can cause us to speak against others.

But the last five words of verse two sound an ominous note. They are, and the Lord heard this. You see, Aaron and Miriam don't lament to God, as I think Moses did last week, but they grumble in the hearing of God, just as Israel did last week.

And so, like Israel last week, they will face the anger of God, as God vindicates Moses as his appointed servant. So point two, verse three.

[7 : 30] Now, Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. Here, Moses' vindication begins with his character.

The writer vindicates him as a humble man. I mean, more humble than anyone on the face of the earth. What a compliment. But it's actually backed up by Moses' actions last week.

And so, you might remember when Joshua heard that there were other elders prophesying the camp, he ran to Moses and told him to stop. But verse 29 of chapter 11, Moses replied, Are you jealous for my sake?

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them. See, he doesn't care about being the only prophet. He's not in it for his recognition or glory.

He's in it for God's, you see. And in fact, Moses' wish here has come true, hasn't it? Don't all who believe in Jesus have God's spirit?

[8 : 31] And so, can't we all prophesy, that is, speak God's word in a spontaneous way? You know, in conversation over morning tea? Or to one another out at the pines having a coffee or wherever?

The question is, do we? Do we talk about what we found encouraging from God's word to each other? Do we speak God's truth to encourage one another? That's prophesying, and we can all do it, because we all have God's spirit.

But the point here is, Moses showed his humble character last week, and is vindicated for it this week by being called humble. But unlike Miriam and Aaron now, he did not seek his own recognition last week, but humbly cared more about God's.

And humility is a key, if not the key character trait for leaders. Imagine if our world leaders acted with more humility.

Can you imagine the difference it would make to our world? You know, not caring about their own political ambitions? And for those who lead, whether in the home or at work, and especially in church, we're to have humility too, which among other things means we'll lead, not for our own recognition, but for God's.

[9 : 49] That we might point people to God. And yet it's not just leaders who are to be humble, it's all God's people, isn't it? And doing so will actually help us not to envy.

You know, when others get recognition or praise in life, humility helps us not to become envious of them, but rejoice with them. It helps us to genuinely say, I'm so happy with you, or for you rather, without wishing that it was you.

Or in the church context, humility helps us not to envy each other, but rejoice because of each other. It helps us to say, I'm so happy because of you, because you help point us to God, or you help support the ministry.

In other words, humility helps us not to be envious for our recognition, but to see God's recognition like Moses. We'll come back to this later, but for now, his character vindicates him as God's appointed servant, as does his uniqueness, verse 4 to 8.

And once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, come out of the camp to the tent of meeting in the middle, all three of you. So the three of them went out, then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and he stood at the entrance to the tent, and summoned Aaron and Miriam.

[11 : 05] When the two of them stepped forward, he said, 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 God's house. When I speak, so 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? Here, Miriam and Aaron get their wish for more attention from God, but it's not exactly the kind of attention they wanted, is it?

They are rebuked for speaking against Moses. And in the process, God vindicates or affirms Moses as his appointed servant. And God does this in two ways.

Firstly, by calling Moses my servant twice, verse 7 and the end of verse 8. And second, by pointing out the unique way God speaks to Moses, not in dreams and visions like the other prophets, but face to face.

[12 : 14] Now, I should point out, face to face is an expression, an idiom, that means directly. It's not talking literally. Because God had told Moses, even back in Exodus 33, that you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.

Even here in verse 8, we're told that Moses saw the form of God, not literally the face of God. But God did speak to him directly, in a conversational sort of way.

We see that at the end of Numbers 7, where Moses speaks to God and God speaks back. And that makes Moses unique. You see, God vindicates or affirms Moses' right to be recognized as God's appointed servant.

God's representative, through whom God speaks and leads his people to the promised land. Which means to speak against God's appointed servant is actually to speak against God himself.

I mean, if it's dinner time at home, and you send one of the grandkids or nieces or nephews or something to go and tell the others that dinner is ready, come to the table now, you are speaking through that kid you sent, aren't you?

[13 : 36] And so if the other grandkids, or whoever you're looking after, ignores the one you sent, or grumbles against them, then they're really ignoring you, and grumbling against you who sent them.

Aren't they? Actually, do you know who the quickest to come to our dinner table is in your house? The dog. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so, you see, for Miriam and Aaron to grumble or speak against their sibling, Moses, when he's God's appointed servant, is to grumble and speak against God himself.

And that's why at the end of verse 8, God says, Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Because he's my appointed servant.

You speak against him, you're speaking against me. It also helps us understand why then God is so angry at verse 9. The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them.

When the cloud lifted from above the tent, Miriam's skin was leprous. It became as white as snow. Aaron turned towards 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.

[14 : 51] Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away. God is angry because to speak against Moses is to speak against him.

Now because Miriam instigated this envious complaining against Moses on this occasion, on the next occasion it's some men, then she is more culpable and judged more severely here. Unlike those who instigated it last week with the craving for food. But also perhaps it's because she is more stubborn than Aaron too. Because do you notice how she doesn't actually ask for forgiveness?

It's Aaron who humbly admits we have sinned. And so please forgive her. It's Aaron who comes to Moses, isn't it? Either way, in verse 11, Aaron now recognizes that Moses is God's appointed servant.

By asking him to pray for Miriam, to intercede for Miriam. In fact, in verse 11, Aaron even recognizes it by calling his younger brother my Lord.

[16:02] In verse 11. Which shows humility rather than envy, doesn't it? I mean, growing up, my younger brother would love me to have called him my Lord. You know, past the tomato sauce, my Lord.

There's no way I was going to do that. He's my younger brother. But Aaron does it here. He humbly recognizes Moses as God's servant. And asks Moses to pray for Miriam.

And Moses does, verse 13 and 14. So Moses cried out to the Lord, please God heal her. And the Lord replied to Moses, if her father had spat in her face, would she not have been in disgrace for seven days?

Confine her outside the camp for seven days. After that, she can be brought back in. Here Moses intercedes or prays for Miriam. And God answers him.

Which again, vindicates Moses as God's servant. You know, he does pray. And God does answer. He is God's appointed servant. But at first glance, verse 14 sounds a bit odd, doesn't it?

[17:03] But God seems to be referring to an ancient practice more than a specific law. In the ancient world, if a child did something shameful, then it seems the father would sometimes spit in their face, which was to, you know, show that they've been disgraceful, and the whole community would shun them for seven days as kind of punishment.

It's not the punishment God told parents to use. Rather, he's just using an existing custom as a way of showing why Miriam should be disgraced by their community for seven days.

You know, if even the ancient world does this, then so should the Israelites with Miriam. Because she did something shameful. So God's answer is that yes, he will heal her or forgive her, whether her skin healed immediately or during the seven days, it's hard to know.

But there's still a consequence. There's still discipline that she must endure. Like a parent who forgives their child but still disciplines them for their good.

And that's the point here. God does this out of love to teach her. To perhaps humble her stubborn heart. Teach her not to speak against the one God has appointed.

[18:19] And to teach the people too. Because the whole nation has to wait for Miriam to come back inside the camp. Verse 15 and 16. So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days and the people did not move on until she was brought back.

And after the people left Hazaroth, they camped in the desert of Paran which is on the edge of the promised land. See, God forgives but still disciplines.

Not only to teach Miriam but the whole nation that Moses remains God's appointed servant. The one through whom God not only saved them from slavery in Egypt but the one through whom God continues to primarily speak and lead them on their journey to their promised land.

And so they're not to complain or speak against Moses but they're to humbly honour Moses as God's appointed servant.

And for us, Moses points us to the next cool answer? Jesus, right? Jesus is the one through whom God has saved us. And not from slavery in Egypt but slavery to sin.

[19:29] He saved us from our judgement for our sin. Jesus is the one through whom God speaks to us and leads us on our journey through this world to our promised land the world to come.

Indeed, as we heard in our second reading, Jesus is greater than Moses. I mean, Jesus has greater humility. He did not seek his own recognition or advantage but he humbled himself to death, even death on a cross.

To take the punishment for our sins so that if we believe in him we can be saved from it and given life eternal with God. And Jesus has greater uniqueness than Moses.

And so the second reading also spoke about how he is not God's servant who was appointed inside God's house as one of the Israelites. No, no. He is God's son who has been appointed over God's house.

And we are that house. In other words, by his death and resurrection, God has appointed Jesus over us as our king and saviour for us, to speak to us and lead us.

[20 : 40] And he has seen, unlike Moses, he has literally seen God face to face. Indeed, he is God the son, right? Which means, as we just sung, God the father speaks perfectly through him.

He is God revealing God to us. And Jesus is a greater intercessor for he always lives to intercede for us with his blood and so always brings us forgiveness.

No sin, no mess up in our life will ever stop us from getting to our promised land. Jesus really is greater than Moses and so he really is worthy of greater honour than Moses.

While we've seen application about not envying and complaining against others, the big application really has to do with Jesus. We're not to envy and complain against Jesus in life but to honour Jesus for life.

How? Well firstly, by believing in him. I mean it's hard to honour him if we deny who he is and refuse to accept him as king and saviour. And so, have you put your trust in him?

[21 : 50] Do you believe in him as the loving king who died to save you? And for us who have, then one way we are to honour him is to care more about his recognition than our recognition.

You see, I doubt we actually envy the attention that God has given Jesus. I mean, I don't think we ever think like that, do we? But, we can still care more about our recognition than his.

That is, we can care more about how we are recognised by others than Christ being recognised as king and saviour in front of others. And so, are we happy to be known as Christians, even committed Christians, amongst our extended family or community groups or colleagues?

Because we care about recognising Christ as king and saviour in front of them. That they, hopefully one day, might recognise him as that too. Or do we care more about our recognition by others?

Now, we don't want to be recognised by them as a kind of Jesus freak and so we kind of, you know, say nothing and keep our faith to ourselves. I remember one time Michelle and I were in a touch football team and we played with a couple from her work straight after work.

[23 : 12] This was back when we were younger and fitter, pre-kids. And after the game, I remember her boss's partner, chatting with me about what we were doing for the rest of the night.

The game kind of finished at about 7 o'clock and so they were just asking what we were doing next. But it just happened to be our Bible study night which started at 8 o'clock. Again, younger and fitter, you can start later.

These days, oh, it's getting too late. But I paused. This was the partner of Michelle's boss and so I wanted him to like me, right?

And for a moment, I found myself caring more about him recognizing me as a cool guy than recognizing Christ as my Savior and Lord.

But after some ah, well, ahs, I ended up telling him, ah, we're going to Bible study. And I'd love to say that that led to a gospel conversation and he gave his life to Christ that night.

[24 : 11] But no, he thought I was a Jesus freak wacko. You study the what? Of course, God can still use that conversation and people still do become Christians as happened in our church this year.

But the point is we can be tempted to care more about our recognition, you see, by others than Christ recognition in front of others. Just as Miriam and Aaron cared more about them being recognized than recognizing Moses.

but the honor Christ means caring more about his than ours. And it means not speaking against Christ either. Because we can sometimes speak against Christ as Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses.

And not by complaining about his marriage that Jesus wasn't married, but by complaining about his teaching like his teaching on marriage because it's not accepted by our culture.

Or his teaching about loving our enemies because loving those who oppose us is really hard, isn't it? But to complain about his teaching is to speak against him and against God who sent him.

[25 : 19] Instead we're to honor him by listening and following his teaching. One of my daughters had to go to the Supreme Court in Melbourne a couple of weeks ago, not because she broke the law, it was part of her uni course.

And she just so happened to be there that day, in the courtroom when that mushroom killer Erin Patterson was sentenced. And so she heard lots of victim impact statements, including one from the only survivor, Ian Wilkinson, a Baptist pastor who then forgave Erin Patterson in the courtroom despite suffering the loss of his wife, sister and brother-in-law and nearly his own life.

Can you imagine doing that? In fact, he went on to say, this is a bit small to see so let me read it out to you. He said, I'm distressed that Erin has acted with callous and calculated disregard for my life and the life of those I love.

Erin has brought deep sorrow and grief into my life and the lives of many others. But in regard to the many harms done to me, I make an offer of forgiveness to Erin.

I say harms done to me, I have no power or responsibility to give harms done to others. In regards to the murder of Heather, Gail and Don, I am compelled to seek justice. However, I encourage Erin to receive my offer of forgiveness for the harms done to me, including the grief of losing my loved ones.

[26 : 48] And he ends by saying, I bear her no ill will. Can you imagine saying that? How's that for loving your enemy turning the other cheek?

And by following this teaching, Ian did not speak against Jesus, but honoured Jesus as God's appointed King and Saviour. It's not always easy, which is why we come back to humility.

If we remember Christ's humility that sent him to the cross for us, it will encourage us to have that same humility that we might not seek our recognition over his, nor speak against his teaching in life, but follow it for life.

Let's pray that God would help us do that. Our gracious Father, help us to humbly honour Jesus as your appointed one for the rest of our lives.

In his name we pray.