

Miriam and Aaron oppose Moses

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn back to the chapter we read, Numbers chapter 12. And we'll read from the beginning of the chapter again, but I want us to look at the whole of this chapter.

I guess that's the only way we can look at it. And try to draw out some, I hope, practical and simple lessons from this strange event that took place in Moses' life.

We'll read from the beginning of the chapter, Miriam and Aaron, and of course you know that Miriam was Moses' sister and Aaron was Moses' brother, spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married.

For he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?

And the Lord heard it. I don't know how many of you have ever been on holiday in a campsite.

[1 : 08] I guess that camping has become more popular now with the credit crunch. People can't afford more expensive holidays. And so I believe that campsites are fuller just now than they used to be.

But enjoyable as it may be, especially in good weather, there can also be a lot of awkwardness about it. One of the most awkward things about being on a campsite, and I don't want to put anybody off, but it's the fact that you can hear everything that goes on in your neighbor's tent. And that's the reason, of course, why everybody has to keep quiet in order not to disturb the neighbors, in order not to annoy them. Now, that's okay if you're only going to be there for a week or two weeks. But these people had been living in Kent on a massive campsite for over a year and a half.

And I don't think it takes much imagination to figure out that it would have been extremely awkward. And the more the journey would have taken them, the more awkward and the more frayed their nerves and their temper would have been there.

Already started complaining to the Lord. They complained about water. They complained about food. And even when God sent them the food, they complained again because they were fed up of the food that God had given them.

[2 : 24] And that was because a lot of the people of Israel were at heart. They just simply didn't worship God. They had no sense of love or reverence or worship for the Lord.

They were unbelievers. But it's one thing for unbelievers to complain against the Lord. You'd almost expect that. It's another thing when the trouble comes from your own home and your own family. And that's what we find in this chapter. Miriam was Moses' sister. She's one of the first people we hear about in the life of Moses. She was the one who his mother sent to watch over Moses when he was a baby, when she put him in the basket in the Nile.

And she was the one when the prince drew him out of the water. So she was the one who came forward and said to the princess, rather, he said to the princess, I will go and find a nurse for him. So she had been looking after Moses his whole life.

She was presumably quite a bit older than him as she was able to look after him. And Aaron was also another brother to Moses. Here we see a different side of them, albeit they were old.

[3 : 30] They were elderly. Moses himself was elderly, well into his 80s. Miriam and Aaron would have been even more into their 80s. So they had spent a lifetime of, and certainly the last year and a half had not been easy for any of them.

It was a difficult time for them. God was testing their faith. He was testing the extent to which they were prepared to trust in him and believe in the promise that he had given them that one day they would not be in the desert, but that they would cross over into the promised land.

And every day was another test of how much they believed in that promise. And like every test of people's faith, it wasn't easy. It involved hardship.

It involved trial. When they didn't see the promise as clearly as they perhaps did at the beginning. Now here we have another complaint against Moses, but it came from Miriam and Aaron, perhaps the last people that you would ever expect to complain about him.

And the complaint is a strange one. And the complaint is from within your own house. The complaint was about his wife. Now the immediate question that arises from verse 1 is, who was the Cushite woman whom Moses was allegedly married to, according to Miriam and Aaron, and who Miriam and Aaron took exception to?

[4 : 59] Now there are two views on this. One of the views is that the Cushite woman was none other than Zipporah, who he married way at the very beginning when he fled from Pharaoh into Midian.

And he met Zipporah and he stayed with Zipporah and her family for 40 years. And that was his one and only wife. Because apparently the word can be identified with Midian, they tell me.

The other alternative was that this was a second wife that he had taken, and she was a Cushite or an Ethiopian. So there are two views. One is that they really didn't like Zipporah from the very beginning.

They had it in for her from the very beginning. Moses and Aaron, Miriam and Aaron. Or he had done a very strange thing in their eyes and he had taken a second wife. Now we cannot decide, it's very difficult to decide, which one of these two opinions is the right one.

I'm more inclined towards the second opinion myself, probably because that makes more sense. After all, if they had been opposed to Zipporah, it's more likely that they would have shown that earlier on.

[6 : 08] But it's not impossible that this is the first time that they are opposed to her at this moment in time. But it's more likely that this was a second wife. Perhaps Zipporah died, I don't know.

But this was more likely to be a second wife. You know, of course, that in the Old Testament, God made an allowance. He tolerated the fact that some of his own people married two, three, four more wives.

So the best men in the Old Testament were married several times to several different people.

David, for example, had several wives. And God tolerated that in the Old Testament.

That did not mean that polygamy was God's plan for the human race. It wasn't. You want to know what God's plan for marriage was? You go back to Genesis chapters 1 and 2, and there you find it. There's for a man to leave his father and mother and be united to his wife. And they shall be one flesh. That's what marriage is all about. One man, one woman for life.

[7 : 08] And that's it. It's as simple as that. But as time went on in a broken and a fallen world, men started taking two and three and four more wives. And God allowed for the ignorance and the sinfulness of his people.

That did not mean that that was his ultimate approval or his plan. But in any case, it appears that Miriam and Aaron disapproved of this union.

And it comes to a head here in this chapter. And I think it's very obvious that this was something that didn't happen overnight. But there was something that they had allowed to brood in their own hearts, in their own minds.

And that it came to a head at this moment in time. And perhaps they fell under pressure. There was a lot of pressure. There was a lot of tension from within the camp. If you read the previous chapter, there was a huge complaint, a huge uprising from the people.

So much so that the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the parts of the camp. Now, with that kind of thing going on, it's not surprising that tensions are high and conflict is likely in that kind of thing.

[8 : 16] But it's one thing for the conflict to come from the outside. And all I'm going to do this morning is just go through this chapter and look at some of the elements in it and some of the things that they can teach us from the Bible.

I don't want to go too deeply. I just want to be very, very simple this morning. First thing I want to say is that those who love you most are those who can hurt you most. And I think everyone here today will probably agree with me on that.

Those you love the most are those who hurt you most. And the reverse is true as well. It's true that you're likely to hurt them as well. Conflict within the family can be a huge conflict and it can cause a great deal of pain.

And that's what we see here. And I think at the very least, what once again we're reminded of here is that we're not alone and we're not the first people to have conflict within a home.

Even that kind of awkward conflict, and I don't think it gets worse than this, when a brother and a sister, they rise up against Moses and threaten the position that God has given him and they're threatening the peace, not only of their home and their extended family, but they're threatening the peace of the entire community of Israel.

[9 : 30] And so I believe that the Bible is coming to us as it so often does and tells us that the problems that we experience in this world, we're not alone in that. Many people have experienced those same problems and the kind of conflicts that you and I experience sometimes, even amongst people that we love, are hugely complex and hugely difficult and they're painful, but yet the Lord knows about them.

That's the first thing that rises out of this chapter. A family who are at loggerheads, we would say. A family who are divided. A family who are critical of one another. And particularly in this case, Miriam and Aaron. I want to concentrate on Miriam and Aaron and I want to try and see the elements of their bad attitude towards Moses.

It's a bad attitude, but it takes place particularly, wherever you go in this world, you'll not go very far before you find bad attitude being shown. There's one thing to find it in an unbelieving world.

It's another thing altogether to find it in a believing community, in the church of God. This is the Old Testament church. These men and women are God's people. Miriam was a prophetess.

[10 : 54] She was a leader. If you go back to Exodus chapter 15, you'll find her song. After the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea, she sang a song. The Lord has triumphed gloriously.

She was a woman of God. This is not some unbelieving person who is opposed to the Lord's promises and the Lord's words. This is someone who's a believer.

And Aaron is the same. He was the priest, the high priest, the person who stood between God and the people. These are key people in Israel. And they are rising up against Moses and threatening by their criticism.

I want us to look at some of the elements of this bad and this negative attitude. First of all, by saying this, that it's a sure way of threatening the peace within the community of God's people.

Look at what this. If God had not called these three away from the community of God's people and dealt with them in private, look at the threat that this could have been to the peace and the security of God's people.

[12 : 00] And it all arises from an attitude which starts in your heart and an attitude which, in comparison with the big picture of what God is doing amongst his people, is of lesser importance.

Now, I don't know. We're left in the dark as to what Moses actually had done, what kind of woman he had married, whether it was a second wife or not, whether he was right or not in marrying this Kishite woman.

We're left in the dark as far as that is concerned. It could be that Moses was wrong in marrying this. And certainly if she was a second wife, it would not have been with God's approval.

So you're tempted to say, well, maybe Miriam had a point. And yet she is punished by the Lord, even if she has a point. Why? Because she allows this one issue to grow and to grow within herself so that it becomes the single issue of importance to her and so that it leads her to condemn and write her brother off in a spirit of hostility and a spirit of negativism against what God has done.

And that's the problem. So it's so easy to allow one particular issue to grow within our hearts with every encouragement that the devil gives us, to grow within our hearts and to allow one particular...

[13 : 32] Can I tell you, can I say this? And I say this with some years of experience. Many of you have many more experiences than I have, much more experience than I have. But I do say this from some experience. Beware of anything that becomes or threatens to become an obsession in your heart.

Beware of anything that is always with you. And you can see how this happened. This was something that they allowed this single issue. And it's almost as if Miriam and Aaron, they just seem to forget all the good that God had done through Moses and the importance of the role and the position that Moses had amongst his people and the fact that God had spoken through Moses and

done wondrous things through Moses.

Yet that seemed to have no importance at all. All these things were pushed to the one side for this one single issue which seemed to grow and develop and grow arms and legs within their hearts until it came to a head and they were ready to cause all kinds of trouble because of this.

Beware of anything that becomes an obsession in our hearts and that prevents us from seeing the big picture of what God is doing.

Beware of negativism as well. I'll say that in the third place. Beware of negativism and the kind of attitude that goes around and see wrongdoing in other people.

[14 : 53] That's what they were doing, Miriam and Aaron. They were seeing wrongdoing in Moses. And again, I'm not sure to what extent Moses was or wasn't wrong. They may have had a point.

In fact, don't you notice that when someone is critical, there's always a holy tone to the voice of criticism. Have you ever noticed that?

There's always a, or as you should say, frequently a holy tone to the voice of criticism. Even this very chapter, it leaves us thousands of years later wondering, I wonder if Moses did something wrong.

And that's what criticism does. It casts an aspersion. It casts a stain and creates a question mark over someone. Someone, there was nobody in the Bible amongst sinful men who was greater than Moses.

And yet, Miriam leaves us with this question mark. A negative, poisonous question mark over what Moses does. Leaving a legacy to us, even to this day, to the extent to which we're wondering, who was this woman?

[16 : 06] And was he right or was he wrong? She had no right to do that, and neither do we. God's people are God's people, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Our brothers and our sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, what I'm not saying is that we can tolerate sin. I'm not saying that we should ignore where there is sin.

But my first reaction to sinfulness is not to go and look for it in other people. When I think of sinfulness, I must first and foremost think of it in my own heart.

It's for me to deal between myself and the Lord, to deal with the corruption and the wickedness and the deceitfulness of my own heart. And you know, if I did that often enough, I wouldn't have time, or I'd have hardly any time at all, to look at the lives and the wrongdoings and the faults and the failures of other people.

Neither am I saying that there's no place for looking after one another in the church. Of course there is. The Apostle Paul, he says that in Galatians.

[17 : 20] He says, if you see your brother falling, being overtaken by a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him graciously and humbly. But there's a way of doing that.

And it's not by rising up against them. It's not by trying to gather support for your criticism and for your negativism. It's by going to that person personally as a brother of the Lord himself says, go and show him his fault.

The Bible tells us that whenever we do that, we have to remember that we ourselves are weak and that we are inclined to fall at any moment in time.

There isn't a single person in here that isn't inclined to either fall or drift into some kind of sin or another. We're all capable of any kind of sin.

There's no immunity even amongst Christians to sinfulness. And when we see a brother or a sister drifting, then it's you.

[18 : 23] But you have to be very, very sure that you are in a position to be able to go after that brother in a spirit of love and humility, remembering every moment of your conversation that I myself am a sinner saved by the grace of God and what I'm doing here, I'm doing in love and in longing for that person to come back to the fold.

There is a duty on all of us to go after the lost sheep. But that's not what they were doing. They were looking for this fault in Moses. And they were making something of this fault that they had absolutely no right to do.

And you know, I'll tell you something else. Of all the people in the world to criticize Moses, can you believe that Aaron has the audacity to be amongst him?

You know what I'm saying now? Because you look at Exodus chapter 33. What is Aaron doing? He's building a golden calf. Bowing down and dancing in front of this golden calf that they've built. He finds Aaron right in the middle of it, having built it. And now he's got the audacity. It's incredible, isn't it? The hypocrisy that there is amongst us.

[19 : 33] You know, nobody is immune to any kind of wrongdoing. And I have to constantly, and you have to too, we have to wake up in the morning and ask first and foremost that the Lord will keep us from the kind of deceitfulness and hypocrisy which is so possible and so probable in a fallen world.

And criticism becomes, it becomes collective if it's spread. Look at what Miriam does. She doesn't go to Moses privately and says, well, can we talk about this woman?

Can we just come to some understanding, prayerfully, about what has happened? No, no, she doesn't do that at all. She doesn't go to him. She goes to her brother. And the next stage would be to go to somebody else and somebody else and somebody else.

And you know, if you do that, you'll gather. You're bound to get somebody who's going to listen and agree with you and rise up and do the same as you are doing. It can often be collective if it is spread.

You know, there's something pathetically weak about Aaron. I'm not saying he wasn't a good man, but I think there are some negative lessons we can learn from poor Aaron. Aaron suffered a lot in this life for the death of his sons.

[20 : 49] And with a huge responsibility that was placed, he very often found himself in the middle of trouble and conflict. But there seems to be something about Aaron that is just not willing to stand for what is right.

way back in Exodus chapter 33 when all these people rose up, they said, Bill, the golden calf, he didn't have the backbone to say no. And here, when his own sister says to him, she starts spreading the poison about Moses and how he's done this, he doesn't have the backbone to say, Miriam, you're wrong.

Don't go any further in this. Is this not a lesson to us to have the bravery to stand for what is right and to be prepared to fall out?

He would have had to, he would have taken the risk of falling out with his sister, but so be it. If she's spreading poison, then he has to say, no, I'm not with you on this. Moses is a man of God.

God has spoken through him. He has been a leader. It is quite clear that God from the very beginning, he spoke to him through the burning bush and he sent him to Pharaoh. Who was it that the bravery to go in front of Pharaoh?

[22 : 03] Pharaoh could have had him killed. And it's so obvious that through the signs and the wonders of the plagues, the Red Sea, the manna, the glory of God in the mountain, everything that God has revealed himself through Moses is obvious, clear as day that this is the man who God has set up above us and he didn't have the bravery to say that.

Isn't that incredible? Isn't that incredible? You know, fear is a terrible thing. Don't be overcome by fear. Don't be overcome by fear. Always keep the big picture.

Now let's move on in the thing. I think we've said enough about the Christism. What else do we see in this story? Well, as the story unfolds and as they bring the complaints to Moses, Moses, of course, could have reacted by objecting, by a sense of outrage.

I'm sure he would have been well within his right to stand and read the riot act to them. But Moses did. He reacted as he always reacts. And that is in silence.

You know why that is? Because there wasn't ever a moment but that Moses was aware of the presence of God. And you know, that's a tremendously important fact for us all to remember.

[23 : 11] And how often we forget it. How often we go into tense and difficult, challenging situations and we do everything. We try to resolve them ourselves.

We react. We lose our temper. We do all kinds of wrong things sometimes. And the real reason is because we have failed to remember that God is right here. And he's in control.

That's why I stopped at that verse. The Lord heard it. To what extent do we always continually remember the presence of God. That God is the listener to every conversation.

And what that means of course is that as soon as you open your mouth God is hearing. Oh, I wish Miriam, you know what, I think that Miriam that day wished that she had never, have you ever?

I'm sure we've all gone through the experience of having said something. Having started a conversation. And by the end of the day you're wishing with all your heart you had never opened your mouth.

[24 : 17] Well, I'm sure, I'm quite sure that that's the way Miriam was. Because look at what happened. She went there with all her confidence and she thought she was right. She thought she was in a position to condemn Moses and what she found at the end of the day was that she had leprosy.

God had judged her and he had punished her. He had chastised her. And oh, how different things were from what she imagined them to be. as soon as you open your mouth and I'm talking to myself as well by the way, make sure that you remember God's listening to them.

And I'm standing before God in what I am doing and I'm responsible for the harm that I'm bringing by what I say. The Bible has lots to say about the way that we use our tongues and particularly the harm that we can bring to other people and to the community of God's people especially in this instance.

Do you realise the damage, the havoc that any one of us could cause to the cause of Christ and to the relationships that we have in our congregation and in which you have in your congregation if you're a visitor or whatever.

Do you realise that you singly, single handedly have the power to wreak havoc within your congregation and destroy the cause of Christ.

[25 : 36] We'll see in a few moments of time if we've got time that what Miriam did even after God cleansed and healed her and forgave her it still had a negative effect. It held up the progress of the people of God.

You see in the very last thing after that the people set out but they had to wait a week for Miriam to be cleansed before they did. What we do and what we say and the way we behave always has an effect.

You think it's private. You think it only affects you but it doesn't. It affects. It has a widespread effect on the people of God. You know David said once I have set the Lord always before me.

You know what that means? It means that he had he had practiced the discipline of the reality of the presence of God or as somebody else said he had practiced the presence of God and I can't think of a more crucial more important more immediate thing to say at this moment in time to practice the presence of God.

The Lord heard what was going on and this affected the way that Moses reacted because he knew that God was in control listening to this conversation able to work out his own plan and purpose able to take control and he was able to calmly say nothing.

[27 : 04] Probably the last thing that they expected him to do because their natural reaction as proud human beings would be to defend ourselves and to lose our tempers as we often do but that's not what Moses did.

He knew that God was in control and when things get difficult for ourselves when we're in a conflict situation we need to remember that ultimately the Lord will take control and we need to behave in a Christ like manner in a humble manner.

You know it reminds us of the Lord himself when he was taken before his accuser and when he opened not his mouth he did not open his mouth because he committed himself the Bible tells us to his father in heaven.

And God had something to say to Miriam it wasn't condemnation but it was chastisement. You see God does not condemn his people. The apostle Paul tells us that if we are in Christ there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

There is a big difference between God chastising his people and God condemning people.

whatever God does if you are a believer a follower of Jesus he will do to you in love and in mercy.

[28 : 33] But if you aren't a believer in Jesus this morning the Bible tells us that there is condemnation and that's why you need to come.

That's why you need to see that Jesus is the only way to God and you need to trust in him and so that God will create within you a new life and a new heart and a new beginning so that you will become a person of God a child of God a follower of Jesus Christ and so that you'll be able to say with the apostle there is therefore no condemnation for me whatever I do and I'm not saying that we can be complacent of course you don't want to be complacent if you're a Christian you want to give

your all to the Lord but when we fail and when we fall we can say nevertheless there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus and yet there was chastisement the Bible tells us that God chastises those he loved and he did this in the first instance by bringing leprosy on Miriam now leprosy of all the diseases you could catch in the Old Testament leprosy was the most dreaded and it came on her immediately which was a sign that God had brought it didn't normally come on a person immediately normally developed and grew started off with a spot but now all of a sudden when Miriam looked at her body it was full of leprosy she was absolutely horrified and she knew that this was because she had risen against

Moses and by so doing she had risen against God now there was a very important reason why God had to do this and the reason is this as an example for the rest of the people of God you might be forgiven for assuming or for thinking that God might turn a blind eye because it's Miriam because she's Moses' sister but he doesn't he can't he can't a lesson has to go out to the people of God that God does not tolerate rebellion against them and that was the lesson and yet there was a further lesson a further principle that I want to end with today and it's this in wrath God remembers mercy and that's what the gospel is all about in wrath God remembers mercy

God acted on Miriam out of judgment and out of his righteous anger and he brought leprosy upon her as a sign of his holy and his righteous displeasure but look at what happens that's not the end of the story aren't you aren't you so happy that this is not the end of the story because Moses prayed for her he prayed earnestly for her he pleaded for her he said Lord please heal my sister and the Lord heard his prayer and the Lord said alright but at the very least she has to be unclean for the next seven days and only after that she may be received back into the camp and into the fellowship of God's people again and I hope that this is an encouragement for all of us who are followers of the Lord because none of us can claim a life that hasn't done something and said something and thought something every one of us today has something to confess to the Lord and the

Bible tells us that if we confess our sin he is faithful and just and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness and here we have it here we have it literally before us leprosy you can understand as a form of God's judgment that God takes that judgment away he takes that punishment away from us as we come and as we turn away from our sins and as we plead the Lamb of God the Lord Jesus Christ he has taken our punishment on our behalf instead of us as our sacrifice so that God can now say your sins and your iniquities I will remember no more isn't this a most precious picture of the Christian life acting with such foolishness there was nobody as foolish and stupid as Miriam was and she paid the consequences of it but the Lord had mercy on her and received her back into the fellowship of his own people and the fellowship of himself and the same is true with ourselves this morning as we act sometimes with tremendous foolishness but yet we can come to the Lord and we can know that there is forgiveness with him let's pray together

[33 : 24] Father in heaven we thank you for how practical and how real and how relevant your word is for every age and every generation oh Lord and we even in our modern world where there is so much strength we go back to the Bible where we find men and women who are just as foolish as we are and who by their example and by the example of the way the Lord dealt with them we can come to you as the God who never changes the God who is the same yesterday today and forever and who is willing to do in us and for us exceeding abundantly more than we can ask or even think we give thanks Lord for the grace of God that we have been thinking about and reading about and that we have experienced in our own life we pray that if there is anyone here today that hasn't come into that grace for the very first time that we pray that as we worship that they will be drawn by your spirit to a new love and a new life in

Jesus so we ask in his name amen time for quandary just like A great-bye Merkel