

# CHAPTER 12

In the foregoing chapter we had the vexation which the people gave to Moses; in this we have his patience tried by his own relations.

**I.** Miriam and Aaron, his own brother and sister, affronted him (v. 1-3).

**II.** God called them to an account for it (v. 4-9).

**III.** Miriam was smitten with a leprosy for it (v. 10).

**IV.** Aaron submits, and Moses meekly intercedes for Miriam (v. 11-13).

**V.** She is healed, but put to shame for seven days (v. 14-16). And this is recorded to show that the best persons and families have both their follies and their crosses.

## ~~CH12~~ NUMBERS 12:1-3

### MURMURING OF MIRIAM AND AARON

Here is,

**I.** The unbecoming passion of Aaron and Miriam: they *spoke against Moses*, v. 1. If Moses, that received so much honour from God, yet received so many slights and affronts from men, shall any of us think such trials either strange or hard, and be either provoked or discouraged by them? But who would have thought that disturbance should be created to Moses,

**1.** From those that were themselves serious and good; nay, that were eminent in religion, Miriam a prophetess, Aaron the high priest, both of them joint-commissioners with Moses for the deliverance of Israel?

~~306~~ Micah 6:4, *I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.*

**2.** From those that were his nearest relations, his own brother and sister, who shone so much by rays borrowed from him? Thus the spouse complains (~~206~~ Song of Solomon 1:6), *My mother's children were angry*

with me; and quarrels among relations are in a special manner grievous. A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city. Yet this helps to confirm the call of Moses, and shows that his advancement was purely by the divine favour, and not by any compact or collusion with his kindred, who themselves grudged his advancement. Neither did many of our Saviour's kindred believe on him, ~~(v. 5)~~ John 7:5. It should seem that Miriam began the quarrel, and Aaron, not having been employed or consulted in the choice of the seventy elders, was for the present somewhat disgusted, and so was the sooner drawn in to take his sister's part. It would grieve one to see the hand of Aaron in so many trespasses, but it shows that *the law made men priests who had infirmity*. Satan prevailed first with Eve, and by her with Adam; see what need we have to take heed of being drawn into quarrels by our relations, for we know not how great a matter a little fire may kindle. Aaron ought to have remembered how Moses stood his friend when God was angry with him for making the golden calf (~~(v. 20)~~ Deuteronomy 9:20), and not to have rendered him evil for good. Two things they quarrelled with Moses about: —

- (1.) About his marriage: some think a late marriage with a Cushite or Arabian; others because of Zipporah, whom on this occasion they called, in scorn, an Ethiopian woman, and who, they insinuated, had too great an influence upon Moses in the choice of these seventy elders. Perhaps there was some private falling out between Zipporah and Miriam, which occasioned some hot words, and one peevish reflection introduced another, till Moses and Aaron came to be interested.
- (2.) About his government; not the mismanagement of it, but the monopolizing of it (v. 2): “*Hath the Lord spoken only by Moses? Must he alone have the choice of the persons on whom the spirit of prophecy shall come? Hath he not spoken also by us? Might not we have had a hand in that affair, and preferred our friends, as well as Moses his?*” They could not deny that God had spoken by Moses, but it was plain he had sometimes spoken also by them; and that which they intended was to make themselves equal with him, though God had so many ways distinguished him. Note, Striving to be greatest is a sin which easily besets disciples themselves, and it is exceedingly sinful. Even those that are well preferred are seldom pleased if others be better preferred. Those that excel are commonly envied.

**II.** The wonderful patience of Moses under this provocation. *The Lord heard it* (v. 2), but Moses himself took no notice of it, for (v. 3) he was very meek. He had a great deal of reason to resent the affront; it was ill-natured and ill-timed, when the people were disposed to mutiny, and had lately given him a great deal of vexation with their murmurings, which would be in danger of breaking out again when thus headed and countenanced by Aaron and Miriam; but he, *as a deaf man, heard not*. When God's honour was concerned, as in the case of the golden calf, no man more zealous than Moses; but, when his own honour was touched, no man more meek: as bold as a lion in the cause of God, but as mild as a lamb in his own cause. God's people are the *meek of the earth* (~~Q11B~~Zephaniah 2:3), but some are more remarkable than others for this grace, as Moses, who was thus fitted for the work he was called to, which required all the meekness he had and sometimes more. And sometimes the unkindness of our friends is a greater trial of our meekness than the malice of our enemies. Christ himself records his own meekness (~~Q11B~~Matthew 11:29, *I am meek and lowly in heart*), and the copy of meekness which Christ has set was without a blot, but that of Moses was not.

## ~~Q11A~~ NUMBERS 12:4-9

### MURMURING OF MIRIAM AND AARON

Moses did not resent the injury done him, nor complain of it to God, nor make any appeal to him; but God resented it. He hears all we say in our passion, and is a swift witness of our hasty speeches, which is a reason why we should resolutely bridle our tongues, that we speak not ill of others, and why we should patiently stop our ears, and not take notice of it, if others speak ill of us. *I heard not, for thou wilt hear*, ~~Q11B~~Psalms 38:13-15. The more silent we are in our own cause the more is God engaged to plead it. The accused innocent needs to say little if he knows the judge himself will be his advocate.

**I.** The cause is called, and the parties are summoned forthwith to attend at the door of the tabernacle, v. 4, 5. Moses had often shown himself jealous for God's honour, and now God showed himself jealous for his reputation; *for those that honour God he will honour*, nor will he ever be behind-hand with any that appear for him. Judges of old sat in the gate of the city to try

causes, and so on this occasion the *shechinah* in the cloud of glory stood *at the door of the tabernacle*, and Aaron and Miriam, as delinquents, were called to the bar.

**II.** Aaron and Miriam were made to know that great as they were they must not pretend to be equal to Moses, nor set up as rivals with him, v. 6-8. Were they prophets of the Lord? Of Moses it might be truly said, *He more.*

**1.** It was true that God put a great deal of honour upon the prophets. However men mocked them and misused them, they were the favourites and intimates of heaven. God *made himself known to them*, either by dreams when they were asleep or by visions when they were awake, and by them made himself known to others. And those are happy, those are great, truly great, truly happy, to whom God *makes himself known*, Now he does it not by dreams and visions, as of old, but by the *Spirit of wisdom and revelation*, who makes known those things to babes which *prophets and kings* desired to see and might not. Hence in the last days, the days of the Messiah, the *sons and daughters* are said to *prophesy* (<sup>2028</sup> Joel 2:28), because they shall be better acquainted with the mysteries of the kingdom of grace than even the prophets themselves were; see <sup>3001</sup> Hebrews 1:1, 2.

**2.** Yet the honour put upon Moses was far greater (v. 7): *My servant Moses is not so*, he excels them all. To recompense Moses for his meekly and patiently bearing the affronts which Miriam and Aaron gave him, God not only cleared him, but praised him; and took that occasion to give him an encomium which remains upon record to his immortal honour; and thus shall those that are reviled and persecuted for righteousness' sake have a *great reward in heaven*, Christ will confess them before his Father and the holy angels.

**(1.)** Moses was a man of great integrity and tried fidelity. He is *faithful in all my house*. This is put first in his character, because grace excels gifts, love excels knowledge, and sincerity in the service of God puts a greater honour upon a man and recommends him to the divine favour more than learning, abstruse speculations, and an ability to *speak with tongues*. This is that part of Moses's character which the apostle quotes when he would show that Christ was greater than Moses, making it out that he was so in this chief instance of his greatness; for Moses was faithful only *as a servant*, but Christ *as a son*, <sup>3002</sup> Hebrews 3:2, 5, 6. God entrusted Moses to


deliver his mind in all things to Israel; Israel entrusted him to treat for them with God; and he was faithful to both. He said and did every thing in the management of that great affair as became an honest good man, that aimed at nothing else but the honour of God and the welfare of Israel.

(2.) Moses was therefore honoured with clearer discoveries of God's mind, and a more intimate communion with God, than any other prophet whatsoever. He shall,

[1.] Hear more from God than any other prophet, more clearly and distinctly: *With him will I speak mouth to mouth, or face to face* (<sup><01></sup>Exodus 30:11), *as a man speaks to his friend*, whom he discourses with freely and familiarly, and without any confusion or consternation, such as sometimes other prophets were under; as Ezekiel, and John himself, when God spoke to them. By other prophets God sent to his people reproofs, and predictions of good or evil, which were properly enough delivered in dark speeches, figures, types, and parables; but by Moses he gave laws to his people, and the institution of holy ordinances, which could by no means be delivered by dark speeches, but must be expressed in the plainest and most intelligible manner.

[2.] He shall see more of God than any other prophet: *The similitude of the Lord shall behold*, as he hath seen it in Horeb, when God proclaimed his name before him. Yet he saw only the similitude of the Lord, angels and glorified saints always behold the face of our Father. Moses had the spirit of prophecy in a way peculiar to himself, and which set him far above all other prophets; yet *he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*, much more does our Lord Jesus infinitely excel him, (<sup><01></sup>Hebrews 3:1, etc.

Now let Miriam and Aaron consider who it was that they insulted: *Were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Against my servant, against Moses?* so it runs in the original. "How dare you abuse any servant of mine, especially such a servant as Moses, who is a friend, a confidant, and steward of the house?" How durst they speak to the grief and reproach of one whom God had so much to say in commendation of? Might they not expect that God would resent it, and take it as an affront to himself? Note, We have reason to be afraid of saying or doing any thing against the servants of God; it is at our peril if we do, for God will plead their cause, and reckon that what *touches them touches the apple of his eye*. It is a dangerous thing to *offend Christ's little ones*, (<sup><01></sup>Matthew 18:6. Those are

presumptuous indeed that *are not afraid to speak evil of dignities*,  Peter 2:10.

**III.** God, having thus shown them their fault and folly, next shows them his displeasure (v. 9): *The anger of the Lord was kindled against them*, of which perhaps some sensible indications were given in the change of the colour of the cloud, or some flashes of lightning from it. But indeed it was indication enough of his displeasure that he departed, and would not so much as hear their excuse, for he needed not, *understanding their thoughts afar off*; and thus he would show that he was displeased. Note, The removal of God's presence from us is the surest and saddest token of God's displeasure against us. Woe unto us if he depart; and he never departs till we by our sin and folly drive him from us.

## NUMBERS 12:10-16

### MIRIAM SMITTEN WITH LEPROSY

Here is,

**I.** God's judgment upon Miriam (v. 10): *The cloud departed from off* that part of *the tabernacle*, in token of God's displeasure, and presently Miriam became leprous; when God goes, evil comes; expect no good when God departs. The leprosy was a disease often inflicted by the immediate hand of God as the punishment of some particular sin, as on Gehazi for lying, on Uzziah for invading the priest's office, and here on Miriam for scolding and making mischief among relations. The plague of the leprosy, it is likely, appeared in her face, so that it appeared to all that saw her that she was struck with it, with the worst of it, she was leprous as snow; not only so white, but so soft, the solid flesh losing its consistency, as that which putrefies does. Her foul tongue (says bishop Hall) is justly punished with a foul face, and her folly in pretending to be a rival with Moses is made manifest to all men, for every one sees his face to be glorious, and hers to be leprous. While Moses needs a veil to hide his glory, Miriam needs one to hide her shame. Note, Those distempers which any way deform us ought to be construed as a rebuke to our pride, and improved for the cure of it, and under such humbling providences we ought to be very humble. It is a sign that the heart is hard indeed if the flesh be mortified, and yet the

lusts of the flesh remain unmortified. It should seem that this plague upon Miriam was designed for an exposition of the law concerning the leprosy (Leviticus 13), for it is referred to upon the rehearsal of that law, ~~(524)~~ Deuteronomy 24:8, 9. Miriam was struck with a leprosy, but not Aaron, because she was first in the transgression, and God would put a difference between those that mislead and those that are misled. Aaron's office, though it saved him not from God's displeasure, yet helped to secure him from this token of his displeasure, which would not only have suspended him for the present from officiating, when (there being no priests but himself and his two sons) he could ill be spared, but it would have rendered him and his office mean, and would have been a lasting blot upon his family. Aaron as priest was to be the judge of the leprosy, and his performing that part of his office upon this occasion, when he *looked upon Miriam, and behold she was leprous*, was a sufficient mortification to him. He was struck through her side, and could not pronounce her leprous without blushing and trembling, knowing himself to be equally obnoxious. This judgment upon Miriam is improvable by us as a warning to take heed of putting any affront upon our Lord Jesus. If she was thus chastised for speaking against Moses, what will become of those that sin against Christ?

**II.** Aaron's submission hereupon (v. 11, 12); he humbles himself to Moses, confesses his fault, and begs pardon. He that but just now joined with his sister in speaking against Moses is here forced for himself and his sister to make a penitent address to him, and in the highest degree to magnify him (as if he had the power of God to forgive and heal) whom he had so lately vilified. Note, Those that trample upon the saints and servants of God will one day be glad to make court to them; at furthest, in the other world, as the foolish virgins to the wise for a little oil, and the rich man to Lazarus for a little water; and perhaps in this world, as Job's friend to him for his prayers, and here Aaron to Moses. ~~(619)~~ Revelation 3:9. In his submission, 1. He confesses his own and his sister's sin, v. 11. He speaks respectfully to Moses, of whom he had spoken slightly, calls him his lord, and now turns the reproach upon himself, speaks as one ashamed of what he had said: *We have sinned, we have done foolishly*. Those sin, and do foolishly, who revile and speak evil of any, especially of good people or of those in authority. Repentance is the unsaying of that which we have said amiss, and it had better be unsaid than that we be undone by it.

**2.** He begs Moses's pardon: *Lay not this sin upon us.* Aaron was to bring his gift to the altar, but, knowing that his brother had something against him, he of all men was concerned to reconcile himself to his brother, that he might be qualified to offer his gift. Some think that this speedy submission which God saw him ready to make was that which prevented his being struck with a leprosy as his sister was.

**3.** He recommends the deplorable condition of his sister to Moses's compassionate consideration (v. 12): *Let her not be as one dead*, that is, "Let her not continue so separated from conversation, defiling all she touches, and even to putrefy above ground as one dead." He eloquently describes the misery of her case, to move his pity.

**III.** The intercession made for Miriam (v. 13): He *cried unto the Lord* with a loud voice, because the cloud, the symbol of his presence, was removed and stood at some distance, and to express his fervency in this request, *Heal her now, O Lord, I beseech thee.* By this he made it to appear that he did heartily forgive her the injury she had done him, that he had not accused her to God, nor called for justice against her; so far from this that, when God in tenderness to his honour had chastised her insolence, he was the first that moved for reversing the judgment. By this example we are taught to *pray for those that spitefully use us*; and not to take pleasure in the most righteous punishment inflicted either by God or man on those that have been injurious to us. Jeroboam's withered hand was restored at the special instance and request of the prophet against whom it had been stretched out, <sup><III></sup>1 Kings 13:6. So Miriam here was healed by the prayer of Moses, whom she had abused, and Abimelech by the prayer of Abraham, <sup><III></sup>Genesis 20:17. Moses might have stood off, and have said, "She is served well enough, let her govern her tongue better next time;" but, not content with being able to say that he had not prayed for the inflicting of the judgment, he prays earnestly for the removal of it. This pattern of Moses, and that of our Saviour, *Father, forgive them*, we must study to conform to.

**IV.** The accommodating of this matter so as that mercy and justice might meet together.

**1.** Mercy takes place so far as that Miriam shall be healed; Moses forgives her, and God will. See <sup><III></sup>2 Corinthians 2:10. But, 2. Justice takes place so far as that Miriam shall be humbled (v. 14): *Let her be shut out from the*



*camp seven days*, that she herself might be made more sensible of her fault and penitent for it, and that her punishment might be the more public, and all Israel might take notice of it and take warning by it not to mutiny. If Miriam the prophetess be put under such marks of humiliation for one hasty word spoken against Moses, what may we expect for our murmurings? *If this be done in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?* See how people debase and diminish themselves by sin, stain their glory, and lay their honour in the dust. When Miriam praised God, we find her at the head of the congregation and one of the brightest ornaments of it, <sup><025D></sup>Exodus 15:20. Now that she quarrelled with God we find her expelled as the filth and off-scouring of it. A reason is given for her being put out of the camp for seven days, because thus she ought to *accept of the punishment of her iniquity*. If her father, her earthly father, had but spit in her face, and so signified his displeasure against her, would she not be so troubled and concerned at it, and so sorry that she had deserved it, as to shut herself up for some time in her room, and not come into his presence, or show her face in the family, being ashamed of her own folly and unhappiness? If such reverence as this be owing to the fathers of our flesh, when they correct us, much more ought we to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of the Father of spirits, <sup><80D></sup>Hebrews 12:9. Note, When we are under the tokens of God's displeasure for sin, it becomes us to take shame to ourselves, and to lie down in that shame, owning that *to us belongs confusion of face*. If by our own fault and folly we expose ourselves to the reproach and contempt of men, the just censures of the church, or the rebukes of the divine Providence, we must confess that our Father justly spits in our face, and be ashamed.

**V.** The hindrance that this gave to the people's progress: *The people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again*, v. 15. God did not remove the cloud, and therefore they did not remove their camp. This was intended,

**1.** As a rebuke to the people, who were conscious to themselves of having sinned after the similitude of Miriam's transgression, in speaking against Moses: thus far therefore they shall share in her punishment, that it shall retard their march forward towards Canaan. Many things oppose us, but nothing hinders us in the way to heaven as sin does.

**2.** As a mark of respect to Miriam. If the camp had removed during the days of her suspension, her trouble and shame had been the greater;

therefore, in compassion to her, they shall stay till her excommunication be taken off, and she taken in again, it is probable with the usual ceremonies of the cleansing of lepers. Note, Those that are under censure and rebuke for sin ought to be treated with a great deal of tenderness, and not be over-loaded, no, not with the shame they have deserved, not *counted as enemies* (~~scribes~~ 2 Thessalonians 3:15), but *forgiven and comforted*, ~~scribes~~ 2 Corinthians 2:7. Sinners must be cast out with grief, and penitents taken in with joy. When Miriam was absolved and re-admitted, the people went forward into the wilderness of Paran, which joined up to the south border of Canaan, and thither their next remove would have been if they had not put a bar in their own way.