

Ministry of Grace Church

Numbers Chapter 12 – Speaker Notes

Last time we were in the Book of Numbers we learned that the children of Israel complained because they wanted more than just manna to eat, they wanted meat! This meat craving began among the “mixed multitude” that was among them. And as a result of their complaining, *Yahweh* sent fire that burned among them and killed many in the outlying parts of the camp.

Moses heard the people crying and he saw how *Yahweh's* anger burned against the people. So, he cried out to *Yahweh* saying,

Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? (Numbers 11:11)

Moses felt a great burden for the children of Israel and as their leader, he was frustrated by their lack of faith in *Yahweh*. He knew that he couldn't continue on as he had been, He knew that he needed help. *Yahweh* also knew that Moses needed help, so He commanded him to select seventy men of the elders of Israel to assist him in caring for the people.

Now, we learn from chapter 12 that Miriam and Aaron complained about the Cushite woman that Moses had married. However, it appears that their real issue was not really the woman whom Moses had married. It was that Moses was doing all the leadership by himself, and when it was too much for him, he appointed the 70 elders to assist him - but he didn't include either Miriam or Aaron among those 70.

Numbers 12:1

Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.

According to verse sixteen, these events took place at Hazeroth, between Kibroth Hataavah and Kadesh. It was here that Miriam and Aaron rebelled against their younger brother. Let's learn a little bit about Moses's older sister and brother. Here are a few things that Scripture says about them:

The name of Amram's wife was Jochebed the daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt. And she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses and Miriam their sister. (Numbers 26:59)

So, we see that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were, in fact, brothers and sister.

Although we aren't told for certain, Miriam is probably the older sister, who watched Pharaoh's daughter take Moses up out of the river:

Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And **his sister** stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. (Exodus 2:1-4)

If, this is referring to Miriam, as we assume, it shows that she was older than Moses. Also, we learn in **Exodus 15:20** that Miriam is a Prophetess:

Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. (Exodus 15:20)

We also learn from Scripture that Aaron was three years older than Moses:

Now Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh. (Exodus 7:7)

And, he was the High Priest of Israel, entrusted with the Urim and Thummim. Therefore, he was responsible for judging the spiritual issues of the nation of Israel:

And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron's heart, when he goes in before the LORD. Thus Aaron shall bear the judgment of the people of Israel on his heart before the LORD regularly. (Exodus 28:30)

Now, about Moses's wife: there has been discussion for centuries as to whether or not the Cushite woman mentioned in Numbers 11:1 is a reference to Moses's wife Zipporah. However, we saw in Exodus chapter two that Zipporah was a Midianite, not a Cushite:

Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, ... And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. (Exodus 2:16a, 21)

Therefore, we can conclude that the Cushite woman who Moses married was a second wife. We are never told whether he had both wives at the same time or if Zipporah died and Moses remarried.

Numbers 12: 2

And they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it.

Although, on the surface, it appears that the issue was the woman whom Moses had married, the dispute was apparently triggered by the fact that Moses selected the seventy men of the elders of Israel who were to share in the leadership of the people (see Exodus chapter eleven). Miriam appears to be the prime instigator of this rebellion because she is mentioned first in verse 1 and because she is the one struck by God with leprosy. It may be that Miriam felt that Moses's Cushite wife had undue influence on the selection of those who were chosen to be the leaders by Moses. Be that as it may, after the choosing of the seventy leaders, first Miriam, then Aaron questioned Moses's right to choose these leaders. After all, was Miriam not a prophetess and was not Aaron the High Priest of all Israel?

One other thing to consider: Back in the book of Exodus, when Moses was first commanded to select 70 of the elders of Israel to go up Mt. Sinai with him to meet with *Yahweh*, Aaron was also included.

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. (Exodus 24:1)

Perhaps, leaving him out when selecting the 70 elders this time is another thing that prompted this rebellion.

Numbers 12:3

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.

The word translated "meek" could also be translated as "humble." Some critics have used this verse as "proof" that Moses did not write this book or that this verse was added later by someone else. After all, would the person who is the most humble of all men on the face of the earth write a declaration that he is the most humble of all men? It is not unreasonable, however, to assume that the writer, as a result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would write something which would otherwise be out of character for him.

Numbers 12:4, 5

And suddenly the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron and Miriam, “Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.” And the three of them came out. And the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward.

It appears that *Yahweh* acted immediately, perhaps so that the rebellion would not spread to others. Or, perhaps, *Yahweh's* immediate response indicates His great displeasure. Up to this point it appears that the dispute existed only between these siblings. *Yahweh* immediately separates them from the rest of the Israelites so that He can deal with His leaders apart from those whom they lead.

The pillar of cloud which represented *Yahweh's* divine presence moved from being “over” the tabernacle to being at the door of the tabernacle. This was the normal way in which *Yahweh* spoke to Moses. However, as we learn in the following verses, this was not the normal way for *Yahweh* to speak to a prophetess or the High Priest of Israel.

Numbers 12:6-8

And he said, “Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the LORD make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”

Yahweh said, “Hear now My words.” This indicates that God spoke audibly to all three of them. It is interesting that *Yahweh* makes mention of the method of speaking to a prophet but makes no mention of how (or even, if) He speaks to the High Priest. Again, this seems to be evidence that Miriam was the instigator of this attitude of rebellion against their brother Moses. God’s normal methods of speaking through prophets was through ecstatic visions or dreams. Thus, the communication occurred when the prophet was in an altered state of consciousness. Also, consider that the prophets often did not understand the message which they had been given by God to be delivered to the people. (see **1 Peter 1:10-12**)

Then, *Yahweh* said of Moses, “He is faithful in all My house.” Not only is this an outright praise of the faithfulness of him who is the most humble of all men on earth, it is an indication of the value that God puts on faith. It appears from these verses that humility and faith are somehow interlinked. Our own saving faith comes only after we recognize our sinfulness in comparison to God’s holiness. And genuine faith produces in each of us recognition of how undeserving we are of the gift of grace God bestows on us.

Though *Yahweh* spoke to prophets in dreams and visions, he spoke to Moses audibly, without an intercessor, while Moses was in a normal state of mind. God is now speaking directly to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam and has just declared that this is the way He always speaks to Moses. This is a clear demonstration of the high esteem in which God holds Moses. Clearly, Moses’s position is more elevated in God’s eyes than the position of a prophetess or a High Priest.

Yahweh informs the trio that when he speaks to Moses he speaks, “clearly” Literally, this means “and by an appearance.” This may be a reference to Moses’s having seen God in a visible form. However, since it is placed in opposition to the following expression (not in riddles), it seems to mean that God communicated with Moses plainly, not obscurely.

Yahweh then makes it even more emphatic when He says that he speaks to Moses, “not in riddles” This literally means, “not in puzzles.” As mentioned earlier, the prophets often did not understand the message that was delivered to them, which they delivered to the people. This is especially true of the gospel message of the victorious dying Messiah. However, God spoke to Moses without obscure or confusing sayings (not in puzzles).

Yahweh makes it clear that Moses was not in an altered state of consciousness when he saw *Yahweh* in a form of some kind. Certainly, Moses was not permitted to see the full glory of God, for no man can behold God's holy Shekinah glory and live. But - it is demonstrated here that Moses did behold a form of God.

After praising Moses and showing in what high regard *Yahweh* holds him, he follows up with a very pointed question, "Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" Literally, this reads, "So why have you not been afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?" *Yahweh* first rebuked them for speaking against His servant. Then he specifically singles out Moses as the servant against whom Miriam and Aaron have just complained.

God now reprimands both Aaron and Miriam for their presumptuous complaint against Moses and his leadership.

Numbers 12:9, 10

And the anger of the LORD was kindled against them, and he departed. When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous.

Clearly, this is a position that nobody wants to be in. *Yahweh* has been offended because someone has spoken against His chosen one. That is a direct affront to God, not against the leader. Our God is a righteous God. That means He always does the right thing. Since He is the one who selected Moses as leader, Aaron's and Miriam's complaint against Moses is an insult to God, incurring His anger. Then - not only did the pillar of cloud leave the entrance of the tabernacle, it departed from over the tabernacle and Miriam became leprous. This is further evidence that Miriam was the primary instigator of this rebellion. Had Aaron led the charge, it is more likely that he is the one who would have been afflicted with leprosy.

Numbers 12:11, 12

And Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, do not punish us because we have done foolishly and have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes out of his mother's womb."

Aaron's response to Moses began with, "my lord" This is from the Hebrew *adōni*, meaning "ruler or master." It is recognition by Aaron of Moses's elevated position above his own. You will notice a very different attitude here on the part of Aaron as compared to verse two. Also notice that Aaron makes no attempt to lay the blame solely on Miriam. Aaron now humbles himself before *Yahweh*, and his brother, pleading for the life of their sister. Notice that Aaron is not afflicted with leprosy, only Miriam. And, notice that Miriam did not plead with Moses. Perhaps, she was so shocked to have been afflicted with leprosy that she could not speak. Also, the fact that she was sentenced to remain outside the camp for an entire week may indicate that she had not yet humbled herself before her younger brother, nor before *Yahweh*.

Numbers 12:13, 14

And Moses cried to the LORD, "O God, please heal her—please." But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, should she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp seven days, and after that she may be brought in again."

Once again, we see Moses's recognition of his own station in life. He was not the one who had power to heal his sister. He was a humble servant of the one who had the power to inflict and the power to heal.

Notice also, that Moses does not seek any vindication against his rebellious sister. He knows that Miriam's sin was against *Yahweh's* choice of a leader, not against Moses himself. Therefore, Moses is quick to lay the cause before *Yahweh*, pleading for mercy and restoration of Miriam's health.

Yahweh's purpose in Miriam's punishment was to humble her. We just saw in verse eleven how quickly Aaron humbled himself before Moses (therefore, before *Yahweh*). It appears that Miriam was not as quick to humble herself. Her sin was rebelling against the authority of her younger brother. By causing her to become a leper, God was demonstrating her lowly position. Her banishment from the camp for seven days would have been a humiliating experience for her. The period of seven days without company would likely have driven her to seek forgiveness from *Yahweh*. At the end of the seven days, she would have had to go through the cleansing as prescribed in Leviticus chapters thirteen and fourteen. This inspection and cleansing would have had to be performed by her brother Aaron, thus showing Miriam's need to humble herself not just to *Yahweh* and the leadership of her brother Moses, but also to the spiritual leadership of her other brother Aaron. It is obvious that *Yahweh's* purpose in inflicting Miriam with leprosy was to humble her before Him and others.

Numbers 12:15, 16

So Miriam was shut outside the camp seven days, and the people did not set out on the march till Miriam was brought in again. After that the people set out from Hazeroth, and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

The only other mention of Miriam in the Bible after this event is the record of her death at Kadesh Barnea:

Then the children of Israel, the whole congregation, came into the Wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed in Kadesh; and Miriam died there and was buried there. (Numbers 20:1)

After Miriam's leprosy was healed the people moved from Hazeroth to the Wilderness of Paran. According to Numbers 13:26 the place in the Wilderness of Paran was called Kadesh (or Kadesh Barnea).

So What?

We see two characteristics that Moses possessed which made him a beloved servant of God; his faith and his humility. Let's look at these two attributes.

Faith

Not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. (Numbers 11:7)

Faith is the very foundation of who we are in Christ. We know that it gives substance to the things that we expect from God and it provides us with solid evidence regarding those things which can't be seen:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is a prerequisite for pleasing God:

And without faith it is impossible to please him, (Hebrews 11:6a)

Reading through the eleventh chapter of Hebrews we clearly see that faith is of paramount importance to a fulfilling life in the presence of Almighty God. We also see in this chapter that faith is demonstrated by the works that follow such faith. We know from Genesis chapter fifteen that it was Abraham's faith, his belief in the promise of God, which resulted in his being declared righteous:

And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

We also know that it is through faith in the atoning blood of Christ (not works) that we are saved:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

And we are told in both the Old Testament and the New Testament that those who are just, the ones who God has declared as righteous, live by faith:

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4)

This verse in the Old Testament is so important that it is quoted directly twice in the New Testament.

... as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17b)

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11)

There are two ways of looking at the expression “The righteous shall live by faith.” The first is: true life, spiritual life, that is eternal life, is not attained by works, but by faith, as Paul tells us in the passage above from Ephesians. The other is that in living this life (after salvation) we are to do so by faith. For we know that we belong to God (we have been purchased by the blood of Christ and God has adopted us as His children).

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for **you were bought with a price**. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (Galatians 3:26)

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:14-15)

he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, (Ephesians 1:5)

God is our Father (because He has adopted us) and He has purchased us (with the blood of Christ). Therefore, He is our Lord and we are His subjects. As His subjects we are to believe everything that He tells us. We are to follow when He leads us. That is, we are to live each day of our lives by faith, believing the promises He has made to us and – we are to be travelling through this life facing Him, walking toward Him, following Him ... by faith. As it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.

As we look at the story being told in Numbers chapter twelve, we see that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were all three chosen ones of God. Through their faith they had all experienced the miracle of the Passover. They had all passed through the parted waters of the Red Sea and they had all heard the voice of God proclaim the Ten Commandments from the top of Mt. Sinai. Each of them had a position of responsibility and visibility before God. Miriam was a prophetess, God spoke through her. Aaron was the High Priest for the entire nation of Israel. He, alone, could approach God in the Holy of Holies once a year to present the blood offering which atoned for the sins of the people. But Moses was God’s chosen leader through the wilderness wanderings. He is the one whom *Yahweh* chose as the intercessor between Himself and the Israelites. It is He who *Yahweh* told to select seventy of the elders of Israel to assist him in ruling the people. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were all to discharge their responsibilities by faith in accordance with the directions that God had given them. But Moses was more faithful than anyone else.

Humility

Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.
(Numbers 12:3)

We've all heard the saying, "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am." The problem with this statement is not its truthfulness, for it is true that the more elevated position a person has, the more difficult it is to be humble. The problem with this statement is that it is focused on self. And that's precisely the message that we are being bombarded with daily from the world. "Be all that you can be." "After all, you're worth it." "You deserve a break today." "The power to be your best." "Have it your way." "You deserve to be pampered."

When we focus on ourselves, we take our focus off of God. When we have our focus on ourselves, we compare ourselves with those around us and we want to attain personal greatness in one form or another compared to others. Even the disciples of Christ had this problem.

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:1-4)

Jesus' message to His disciples was, "You achieve greatness by shunning it." But instead of trying to avoid greatness, they sought it. They even fought among themselves as to who was the greatest.

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Mark 9:33-35)

In fact, Jesus taught His disciples that those who tried to be great, to exalt themselves, would be humbled instead. But those who learned to humble themselves would be elevated.

The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:11-12)

Luke, in his gospel account of the life of Christ, relates Jesus's teaching on the importance of humility in prayer.

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:10-14)

In the New Testament, both James and Peter teach us the importance of being submissive to others and of humbling ourselves before God:

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (James 4:10)

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, (1 Peter 5:5-6)

Neither Aaron nor Miriam had learned these lessons yet. They were both older than Moses and they both had positions of respect and authority among the people. But in this situation, they both were focused on themselves rather than *Yahweh*. They compared themselves with their “little” brother and when he made some decisions that they didn’t agree with, they challenged his authority. Had they been focused on God instead of themselves they would have recognized that they each had a particular position in God’s service. All three of them had important positions. They all had special dealings with God that not all Israelites had. But Miriam and Aaron wanted to “be all that they could be.” They both knew “after all, I’m worth it.” And they both wanted to “have it their way.”

Do you see what happens when we spend most of our time listening to the messages of this world system? Do you see what happens when we stop listening to God’s message? Do you see how important it is to keep our focus on God?

Moses had learned, perhaps from being a shepherd for forty years, how important it is to listen to the voice of *Yahweh*. He had experienced close fellowship with *Yahweh* from twice spending forty days and forty nights alone with Him on Mt. Sinai. In fact, he became such a close companion with *Yahweh* that his face began to shine from having been in His presence. According to verse three of this chapter in Numbers, Moses had become the most humble person on the face of the earth. Why? Because he was focused on *Yahweh*. He recognized *Yahweh’s* greatness and holiness. Since Moses was so focused on *Yahweh*, he could only compare himself to *Yahweh* and compared to Him, Moses was nothing. Moses could never think of himself as being anything great because he could only see God’s greatness and his own weakness. Moses was humble, not by trying to become humble, but by constantly focusing on who God is and what God wanted him to do.

In **Numbers 12:7**, we hear *Yahweh* giving praise to Moses’s faithfulness. Oh, that you and I might receive such praise from our God! What was it that made Moses so faithful? He spent time focused on God. He spent time communing with God. He spent time listening to God. He spent time obeying God. He ... spent ... time ... with ... God, period. Not only did this result in Moses focusing on God instead of himself, it resulted in Moses knowing God better and hearing God more easily. It made Moses humble!

Where the Rubber meets the Road

OK, what about you? Where has your focus been this past week? Have you been focusing on yourself and your problems? Or - have you been so focused on the greatness and holiness of our God that you have been humbled by how great He is and how unworthy you are of His blessing and His love. Have you come face to face with the blackness of your own actions compared to the purity and holiness of His? Have you spent so much time with your Heavenly Father this past week that your face shines? Or have you been so focused on yourself that it seems like God has abandoned you, or perhaps is even angry with you? If so, you know how Aaron and Miriam felt. If so, don’t wait for God to send you out of the camp for a week to humiliate you! Don’t wait until he has to chasten you as a child that He loves. Fall on your knees before Him. Do it now! And, as James says:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. (**James 4:8-10**)

Let’s bow our heads and our hearts, right now, before Almighty God!