

# Old Testament Lessons

OT Stories That Teach Us About God and Faith

July 12, 2020

## I. Introduction

A. Over the past three weeks, we've talked about the power of wealth (*money and possessions*), the power of culture, and the power of selfishness and pride to turn us away from God. Today, we will look at the power of envy and pride to turn us away from God. Of course, where there is envy and pride, there is discontent, and in our discontent we often feel like a victim. To look at the power of envy and pride, we will use the story of Miriam and Aaron criticizing Moses for not treating them as equals.

## B. Prayer

## II. How envy, coupled with an unhealthy desire for recognition and respect drives undue criticism, discontentment with God's choices, pride, and sin.

A. To better understand our story, I want to give you some background information about Miriam, Aaron, and Moses.

1. As you may recall, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were siblings. Their parents were from the tribe of Levi, which meant the three children were Levites.
2. Miriam was the oldest, and according to **Exodus 15:20**, she became a prophetess. Aaron was the middle child and the first Levite to fill the role of High Priest in Israel. Moses was the youngest of the three, and like with David, God chose the youngest son to be His chosen leader of the Israelites.
3. We don't know what Miriam and Aaron did while Moses was being raised by Pharaoh's daughter, nor is there any mention of them during Moses' 40 years tending his father-in-law's sheep.
4. However, after God spoke with Moses in the burning bush, God visited Aaron and told him to meet Moses in the wilderness. We read about this in **Exodus 4:27-31**, where we learn that the LORD said to Aaron, "Go meet Moses in the wilderness." So Aaron went and met Moses at the mountain of God (*Horeb*). Moses told Aaron all the words that the LORD had spoken to him, and all the signs that God had commanded him to do. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; and **Aaron spoke** all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. Aaron then performed the signs in the sight of the people.

- B. Our story begins in **Numbers 12:1** . . . Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman);
1. Moses' first wife was Zipporah (*zi POH ruh*) and according to the scriptures, she was a Midianite with whom he had one son. At the time of this story, we don't know if Zipporah had died, or if she was mixed Midianite and Cushite, or if Moses had taken a second wife.
  2. All we know is that Miriam and Aaron used Moses' marriage to a foreign woman as the reason why it wasn't right for him to act as the sole leader of Israel – answerable only to God.
  3. Miriam and Aaron's criticism of Moses makes it appear (1) they are jealous, or (2) feeling they are not getting the respect they deserve as the older siblings, or (3) feeling overlooked and discounted when they are at least equally important because their roles were spiritual while Moses' role was managerial.
  4. Remember, Miriam was a prophetess, and as such was a spiritual leader in Israel. Aaron was the High Priest, which made him the religious leader of the whole nation.
  5. The reality is, both of them knew God. Both of them, represented God to the people, and spoke words of God on God's behalf. And both of them felt Moses was not worthy of being Israel's sole authority, because he had taken a foreign wife.
- C. [2] and they said, "Has the Lord indeed **spoken only through** Moses? Has He not **spoken through us** as well?"
1. The answer to the first questions is "No," God had not spoken only through Moses. And the answer to the second question is "Yes," God had spoken through them.
  2. The problem was not with the questions, but with the reasons for asking the questions. And those reasons negatively affected the method they used in dealing with what they thought was a problem.
  3. In other words, the problem was in Miriam and Aaron's heart, and that affected their reasoning, attitudes, and their methods.
    - a. For example, they began their confrontation by attacking Moses' choice of a wife, which was an indirect way of saying he was a sinner and therefore too flawed to be the sole leader of Israel. And of course, they saw Moses as more flawed than themselves – which was their justification for attacking him.
    - b. There are several lessons here. **First**, it is easy to find flaws and condemn when another person has what we want. **Second**, it is common to feel mistreated, slighted, or cheated when we

cannot get what we want – yet someone near or dear has it or has the ability to give it to us. **Third**, it is all too human to attack a person’s character when we are trying to win an argument, or get a favorable resolution in a conflict, or pressure someone to do what you want. And **fourth**, it is prideful to think more highly of ourselves than we ought – and as in this case, to judge our motives and character as good while judging our opponents motives as bad and his character as flawed.

4. Aaron is a classic example of this. He could have remembered that he was the one who made the golden calf, and that God was angry enough to destroy him. But Moses prayed for him, and God let Aaron live (**Deuteronomy 9:20**).
    - a. This doesn’t mean Aaron couldn’t talk to Moses about his concerns, but it does mean that Aaron’s honesty about his own foolish past and his appreciation of Moses’ intercession with God on his behalf should have produced a humility that was obvious in his approach to Moses on this issue.
    - b. However, regardless of our past, Paul, in **Romans 12:10-11**, describes what ought to be our attitudes, reasoning, and methods when dealing with each other: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; [11] not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord (*rather than serving yourself or your interests*).”
    - c. And in **Philippians 2:3**, Paul says, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves.”
  5. So let me ask, when you are in an argument or conflict or when you are making a complaint, do you deal with the issue in a direct, honest, humble and respectful manner, or do you beat around the bush, attack the person’s character, or make degrading and manipulative comments in an effort to win?
- D. [2b] And the Lord heard it (*a reminder that God is always present and always aware of what we are doing*). [3] (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)
1. I think God put this comment about Moses here for two reasons.
    - a. **First**, to explain that humility was the reason Moses chose to leave this situation in God’s hands, rather than try to defend himself or try to convince Miriam and Aaron they were wrong.
    - b. **Second**, to give us an OT example of humbly remaining silent and trusting God to work things out for good when wrongly

criticized, falsely accused, and misunderstood. Jesus is our NT example of this. And so we read in **1 Peter 2:22-23**, “Who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; [23] and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

2. If we are going to follow Moses’ example humility, then in these kinds of situations we must have a mindset and attitude that (1) recognizes our own failings, weaknesses, and sins; (2) that refuses to use angry, derogatory, and unconciliatory tactics; and (3) that trusts God to bring about good when we face undeserved character assassination, unfair condemnation of our motives or methods, and the damage to our reputation that comes from being misunderstood or misrepresented.
- E. [4] Suddenly the Lord said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, "You three come out to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. [5] Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward, [6] He said, "Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. [7] **Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; [8] with him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly (or face to face), and not in dark sayings (that is, not in visions or dreams), and he beholds (sees) the form of the Lord.** Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?" [9] So the anger of the Lord burned against them and He departed.
1. Miriam and Aaron had allowed envy and pride to narrow their perspective to a one-sided picture of the situation – a picture that reinforced their sense of being cheated out of what they believed they deserved. Due to their victim mentality, they focused on what they didn’t have, while ignoring what they did have. And in looking through the lens of envy and pride, they saw Moses as standing in the way of what they believed was rightfully theirs.
  2. Yet Miriam and Aaron had exalted positions. They had honor, power, and influence. But what they didn’t have was as much power and influence as Moses.
  3. And beyond that, they didn’t have the kind of relationship with God that Moses had. In fact, according to God, the intimate, face to face relationship Moses had with God should have been reason enough

for Miriam and Aaron to keep silent and humbly accept God's will for each of them.

4. Paul addresses this problem of envy and pride in the church when he writes in **Romans 12:3-6a**, "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. [4] For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, [5] so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. [6] Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly."
  - a. The reality is, we are all one in Christ. We serve the same God, and we have the same Holy Spirit. We all belong to the Body of Christ. And yet, we do not have the same gifts or abilities or function in the church – just as Miriam, Aaron, and Moses did not have the same gifts or abilities or functions.
  - b. And according to Paul, even among those who have the same gift or ability or function, God designates some for greater responsibility and some for lessor. And these decisions are solely up to God – who is depending on us to serve Him in the position and in the way He wills.
  - c. Therefore, as members of the Body of Christ, and as servants of God, there is no justifiable reason for envy and pride among us. Our path is the path of humility, regardless of our position, rank, power, or amount of influence.
5. Of course, the supreme example of this kind of humility is Jesus, who said in **Luke 22:27**, "I am among you as the one who serves."
  - a. Paul applies those words to us in **Philippians 2:5**, "Have this attitude or mindset in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.
  - b. And I want to urge you to have this mindset and attitude in the church, in the home, in the workplace, or wherever you go.
- F. [10] But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous.
  1. There are two things that I believe are important here.
  2. **First**, neither Miriam nor Aaron were honest with themselves that they had given in to envy and pride. And neither realized they had sinned until the consequences became apparent.

- a. Sadly, the same is true with too many of us. Either we act impulsively, or we act without measuring our actions by the word of God, and in so doing, fail to give sufficient, biblically supported thought to the appropriateness of what we are doing and how we are doing it.
  - b. Therefore, we stumble blindly or foolishly ahead and do not realize our error until we get hit with the consequences. But by then it is too late, just as it was with Miriam and Aaron.
3. **Second**, Miriam and Aaron acted together, yet Miriam was punished with leprosy while it appears Aaron was not punished at all. Why?
- a. I don't really know. Any explanation is speculation – including mine. The most common explanation is that Miriam was the instigator and therefore bore the greater guilt.
  - b. A less common explanation and the one I like is that Aaron was spared leprosy because according to **Leviticus 21:16-24**, no one could serve as High Priest who had a blemish, and leprosy would have been a major blemish. In addition, according to God's law, it was the priest's responsibility to identify leprosy, determine when healing had taken place, and walk the healed leper through the purification ritual. If God had punished Aaron with leprosy, there would have been no priest in the camp of Israel to serve in that capacity.
- G. [11] Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us (*that is, don't let us be punished like this*), in which we have acted foolishly and in which we have sinned. [12] "Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother's womb!" (*Seems to refer to a still-born baby who comes into the world partially decomposed.*)
1. Notice Aaron's change of heart and attitude. Even though he didn't want to have to endure this punishment, he did make a change.
  2. For example, he didn't say, "Hey little brother, fix this!" as if Moses had to do what Aaron said. Instead, Aaron humbled himself, addressed Moses as lord, confessed that he and Miriam had acted foolishly, admitted that what they did was sin, and pled with Moses to intercede with God on Miriam's behalf.
  3. Interestingly, in urging Moses to intercede, Aaron gave recognition to the fact that Moses' relationship with God was superior to both his and Miriam's, a fact they should have used to challenge their envy and pride from the beginning.

4. I think we all know that it is always best not to sin, not to speak or act foolishly, not to pridefully act as if we deserve more respect, a higher position, or greater power than we have.
  5. But should **you** sin or act prideful or unjustly criticize or speak derogatorily, then as soon as you come to your senses, humble yourself, take full responsibility, confess your sin by naming it and acknowledging there is no excuse for what you've done, seek to make right the wrong you have done, and return to being and doing what you know you ought to be and do as a humble follower of Jesus Christ.
- H. [13] Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "O God, heal her, I pray!"
1. Though Moses didn't do this perfectly all the time, I want to point out that he did not let the unjustly critical, envious, prideful, and therefore sinful behavior of Miriam and Aaron motivate him to become sinful himself in his response to them.
  2. As the scripture says, do not be overcome by the pride or foolish envy or sin of others. Do not return evil for evil, but rather give a blessing – just as Moses did in praying for Miriam.
  3. In other words, when unfairly criticized, unjustly condemned, or verbally attacked, respond to pride with humility, to derogatory comments with silence, to sin with compassion, to hatred with love, to cruelty with kindness, and to lies with truth. And let us leave the rest in God's hands – as Moses did.
- I. [14] But the Lord said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again." [15] So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on until Miriam was received again.
1. Aaron begged Moses not to make he and Miriam bear such punishment for their sin – much like so many of us who choose to sin but want to penalty, no consequence, no costly loss for having sinned.
  2. Moses did pray, which was a demonstration of his forgiveness and compassion, and God responded by limiting the consequences to seven days.

### III. Conclusion

- A. I want to end with this scripture because it covers so many situations. "Flee youthful lusts, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (**2 Timothy 2:22**).