

THE PLAGUE OF JEALOUSY

Moses - Part 17

Numbers 12

Intro: The dictionary defines a plague as “anything that afflicts or troubles,” or “any deadly epidemic disease.” The word “plague” will always remind those of us who read the Bible of the ten plagues that the Lord brought upon Egypt some 1500 years B.C. But most of them were physical in nature, and caused a great deal of death. But there are spiritual plagues too. The Banner of Truth used to publish a Puritan writing which carried the title, “The Plague of Plagues,” and, of course, it has to do with sin. Sin is a plague that we all have to deal with because even though we are saved, it is still possible for us to sin. In fact, we sin daily in one way or another – in thought, in word, in deed – which is just another way of saying that we can sin by the way we think, and by the words that we speak, and so often by the way we live, sometimes by what we don’t do, and, at other times by what we do.

Not many of our politicians understand it, but sin is the plague of our beloved country. Sin is everyone’s plague regardless of where they live or the language they speak. We are all cursed by sin. But those of us who know the Lord can thank the Lord that we know the answer to this terrible plague, and that is in Christ Who died to save us from the penalty of our sin, and also from the power of our sin. But He not only died for our sins, but He was raised in triumph over sin and the grave, and by the power of His life within us, we can be more than conquerors over the plague of sin in our daily lives. But apart from Christ there is no hope for anyone. This is why the preaching of the Gospel is so important.

Now in this series on the life of Moses we have been looking at some of the crucial experiences in the life of Moses where his faith in the Lord was really put to the test. And so in the passage before us, we see that Moses suddenly was faced with a problem brought on by sin in the hearts of his own brother and sister. I don’t know, because the Scriptures do not tell us, that Moses was aware that Miriam and Aaron were not supporting him like they did at the first. Instead it seems that he was completely unaware that trouble was brewing, as we say. Aaron had been a great disappointment to Moses by what he did at Mount Sinai in connection with the golden calf that he had made, and that the people had worshiped. Otherwise things seemed to have been going smoothly in his family.

As I think of this situation in Moses' life, I am reminded of the warning that the Apostle Paul gave to the elders of the church at Ephesus as he was leaving them, never expecting to come back to Ephesus again. Perhaps you remember Paul's words too. He said this. These words are found in Acts 20:28-31:

28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

Note those words, "Also of your own selves." We expect trouble from the outside, from the world of unbelievers who have no place for the truth in their hearts. But from the ranks of believers, from those as David once said, with whom we have walked together to the house of God, we should be able to expect cooperation, encouragement, and support in the battle for the truth of God's Word.

And so the first point we come to in this chapter is:

I. THE ATTACK OF MIRIAM AND AARON AGAINST MOSES (Num. 12:1-3).

Moses should have been able to expect that his own sister and brother would have been his greatest allies in the work of the Lord, but no, at this point in the history of the nation, they were his primary enemies. And what did they do? They reached back into Moses' past life, and brought up the fact that he had married Zipporah. Many expositors believe that this was what Miriam and Aaron were doing because there is no evidence that Moses had married another woman at this time. Zipporah was Jethro's daughter whom Moses had married while he was in exile from Egypt. Miriam and Aaron could not find anything current in Moses' life for which to attack him, and so they went back into his past to bring up his marriage which, as far as the record in Scripture is concerned, was not a happy one.

But that was not all that they did. They must have felt that Moses' marriage, which was not with one of the children of Israel, gave them the basis

for attacking Moses' position in the nation. Notice the words "spake," or *spoke*, in verse 1, followed by the words, "And they said," in verse two. These were not personal words spoken about Moses to Moses, but these were words spoken publicly to the people. They fully intended to drive Moses from the position that the Lord had given him in Israel.

Now although Moses and Aaron were in their eighties, and Miriam was older than both of them, that made no difference to Miriam and Aaron. In fact, it might have been one of the reasons that they felt justified in criticizing Moses the way they did. He was the "baby brother," the youngest of the three, born last of their parents' children.

But now notice the last statement of verse 2: "And the Lord heard it." The Scriptures do not say that Moses heard what Miriam and Aaron were saying (although he must have known what his brother and sister were saying about him). But it is simply recorded that "the Lord heard" what Miriam and Aaron were saying. You will notice that I have been saying, "Miriam and Aaron" instead of "Aaron and Miriam," because it seems from the judgment which followed that Miriam was the chief instigator of what the two of them were saying about Moses. We know from what happened at Mt. Sinai when the nation called upon Aaron to make them a golden calf to worship, that Aaron had a streak of weakness in him. So it appears that this attack upon Moses was primarily Miriam's idea, and that she was able to convince Aaron to join her in the attack.

It does seem that there was some justification for what Miriam and Aaron were saying about themselves. We were told when Miriam led the women in song after the people had crossed the Red Sea, that Miriam was a "prophetess." (See Ex. 15:20.) This means that there were times when she received revelations from the Lord, probably for the women of Israel. And Aaron was the high priest who had a unique place between the Lord and the people of Israel. So, because of the positions they held, they felt that they had as much right to lead the people as Moses did. However, they were completely overlooking the fact that the Lord had called Moses to be the leader of the nation, and that it was through Moses that the Lord had given the revelation of His will for the people. In other words, they were setting aside what the Lord had done, and were putting themselves in a position at least equal with Moses.

Now I want to go back to the statement in verse 2, "And the Lord heard it." Moses had to know what was going on, but, as the following verses

went on to show, Moses had heard it too, *but he was not doing anything about it!* And that seems to be confirmed by what we are told in verse 3. (Read.) And the translators of the KJV, as well as of most of the more recent translations of Scripture have indicated that Moses was leaving all of this in the Lord's hand, and so they have put verse 3 in parentheses! And yet here is one of the greatest testimonies to the character of Moses that we have in all of Scripture. Moses had come a long way since he killed the Egyptian who was abusing an Israelite, and then hid his body in the sand. He had learned to trust the Lord in a greater way. He knew that the Lord was in charge of everything, and that he could safely trust the Lord to carry out His own will. So we are not told that Moses did anything in his own defense, but that the Lord knew what Miriam and Aaron were saying, and that He was very displeased with them.

What does it mean that Moses was “very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth”? It means that he was truly humble. It means that he was trusting the Lord, walking by faith and strong in his faith, content to leave his affairs with the Lord. Moses was like Abraham when his herdsmen were disputing with Lot's herdsmen over the pasture lands when they got back into Canaan. He let Lot have the first choice of the land, knowing that the whole situation was in the Lord's hands and subject to the Lord's will after all. Miriam and Aaron at this particular time had forgotten the Lord, and so they did not recognize that the Lord heard everything that they were proudly saying in favor of themselves and against Moses.

Next in the text of Scripture we come to:

II. THE ACTION TAKEN BY THE LORD (Num. 12:4-10).

The Lord doesn't always move as fast as He did in this instance, but in verse 4 we read that “the Lord spake suddenly to Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam.” Miriam and Aaron had been speaking; now they were going to do some listening, not to Moses, but to the Lord! And the first thing that He said was to tell them where He wanted them to go – to “the tabernacle of the congregation” – the place where the Lord manifested His presence among His people.

Then something happened which I am sure was very disturbing to Miriam and Aaron. (Read verse 5.) This was not a case where Miriam and Aaron had the privilege of consulting with a lawyer to defend themselves before

the Judge of the all the earth. This was a time when these two who had been talking, were going to do some listening! And this ought to be a revelation to people who think that they are going to make their own defense when the time comes for them to stand before the Lord. Our trials sometimes go on for months, and even years, but the Lord took care of Miriam and Aaron in a matter of seconds! He called for Miriam and Aaron. And they came. They stood before the Lord, not to talk, not to defend themselves, but to listen to the Lord. And what the Lord said to them ended in a question which the Lord did not wait for them to answer.

But first the Lord said what His usual practice was in speaking to a prophet. He made Himself known either in a vision or in a dream. And evidently both Miriam and Aaron had had that experience. *But then the Lord said that it was different with Moses. And then He gave Moses another commendation: He said that Moses was unique among all of the house of Israel, that is, of all the nation, in that Moses was faithful.* This means that the Lord was saying that Moses was obedient to the Lord, that he was a man who was trusting the Lord, that he was consistent in doing what the Lord had called him to do. Having just been through the book of Hebrews, we ought to have fresh in our minds what the writer of Hebrews said about the faithfulness of Moses and comparing Moses with our Lord. Cf. Hebrews 3:1-6:

- 1 Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus;
- 2 Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house.
- 3 For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house.
- 4 For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God.
- 5 And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after;
- 6 But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

Evidently, although there were other faithful men in OT times besides Moses, but none surpassed him until the Lord Jesus Christ came, and He was the most faithful of all! But it is remarkable that Moses is compared in Hebrews with our Lord, as only being surpassed in his faithfulness by

the Son of God.

But how did the Lord speak to Moses? (Read verse 8.) “Mouth to mouth” means that the Lord’s revelations to Moses were absolutely and totally person, not by a vision or a dream, but a personal communication to Moses directly from the Lord. And He spoke plainly to Moses, not in parables or any such way that might require an interpreter. And Moses came closer to seeing the Lord in Person than anyone else ever has.

And then came the Lord’s question to Miriam and Aaron which He did not wait for them to answer: “Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” The behavior of Miriam and Aaron showed that they did not fear the Lord! And it brought upon them the anger of the Lord. How we should be afraid of doing anything that would displease the Lord! Miriam and Aaron’s talk had been in direct violation of what they knew was the will of the Lord.

The Lord did not wait for an answer. They had answered Him by what they had done. And as the cloud departed from the Tabernacle, the Lord struck Miriam with leprosy!

There have many people, including medical people, who have questioned whether or not the disease which is called leprosy in the Bible was actually the disease which we know today as leprosy. I am not qualified to enter into that discussion. But I do know this: Miriam was struck with a fatal disease! There was no known cure for it. And this shows us the seriousness of her criticism of Moses: it was a sin unto death! She knew it. Aaron knew it. And Moses knew it.

Finally we come to:

III. THE THREEFOLD RESPONSE (Num. 12:11-16).

By “threefold” I mean the response of Aaron, the response of Moses, and the response of the Lord.

A. The response of Aaron (vv. 11-12).

It is very evident that Aaron panicked. Maybe he thought that he would be next. But he did acknowledge in no uncertain terms that he believed that he and Miriam were guilty of major sin. He spoke to Moses as

though his destiny and Miriam's destiny were in the hands of Moses. He was pleading with Moses for Miriam's life, and probably his own life.

But Moses understood how Aaron felt, and obviously believe that Aaron was sincere. Further, Moses believed that Aaron was appealing to Moses to intervene with the Lord. He wanted Moses to pray for the mercy of the Lord.

And so here we have the second response to what had happened:

B. The response of Moses (v. 13).

What greater evidence do we need of the meekness and faithfulness of Moses than without asking Aaron or Miriam for greater evidence of the sincerity of their confession, he prayed for them. He prayed; he prayed immediately; he prayed simply; he prayed effectually.

When people make life miserable for us, it is natural for us to want to see them suffer for what they have done. But that was not at all in the heart of Moses. In just a few words he called upon "God" to heal Miriam, and to heal her "now." How could we have greater evidence of the meekness and the faithfulness of Moses?

And now we come to the third response:

C. The response of the Lord (vv. 14-16).

The Lord let her suffer the consequences of her sin as though it was nothing more than if her father had spit in her face. He left her with the leprosy for seven days, *and then, miraculously, she was healed!* It showed that, as James was later to teach us, that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (Jas. 5:16b).

Concl: This event in the lives of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron has many lessons for us. Chiefly, it teaches us how sinful it is to be critical of each other, especially of those who are over us in the Lord. To be jealous of a person because of his or her relationship with the Lord, or because of the position that a person holds as a servant of the Lord, is sin, grievously sinful in God's sight. What Miriam and Aaron did in criticizing their brother was sin unto death. It showed that their hearts were not right with the Lord. Their criticism of Moses was entirely unjustified. How

different it would have been if they had been challenged by Moses' life to walk with the Lord as Moses did that the blessing of the Lord upon the whole nation might increase. Let us remember what Paul wrote to the believers at Rome, that if we are going to be critical, we need to be critical of ourselves. I am referring to Romans 14:13:

13 Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way.