

# Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses

## Numbers 12

The title of my message today is “Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses.” There is a lot here, and I will be spending two weeks on this text. The opening words are very revealing: “Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses.” Here are Miriam and Aaron complaining against their brother’s standing as the prophet appointed by God to lead his people from Egypt to the Promised Land. The previous chapter had the people complaining. Now in chapter 12, more complaining!

It is noteworthy that the Hebrew literally has, “And Miriam spoke, and Aaron, against Moses.”<sup>1</sup> Notice that *Miriam* is mentioned first. Moreover, the word for “spoke” is a third person *feminine* singular verb (we do not have a comparable verb form in English). The Hebrew makes clear that *Miriam* was the instigator in this situation. She was implying that God had been unfair in giving Moses, the youngest of the three siblings, too much authority. When Miriam began to complain, then Aaron began as well. The two of them said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” The verse ends with the words “*And the LORD heard it*” (reminiscent of what we had in the last chapter: “Now when the people complained, it displeased the LORD; *for the LORD heard it*”).

Note well: We cannot hide our sins from the Lord. Proverbs 15:3 warns: “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” We may be able to hide our sins and crimes from our parents, teachers or friends, but we cannot hide them from the LORD. He knows everything, including the act itself, and the motivation behind it. When we do get caught, we tend to explain what happened in a way that makes us look better. But God is not fooled, for he knows perfectly “the thoughts and intents of the heart.”<sup>2</sup>

I have three points this morning: (1) God chooses to do his work through ordinary human beings. (2) Sanctification in this life is always incomplete. (3) Sometimes the most difficult place to practice your faith is in your family. First,

### **1. God chooses to do his work through ordinary human beings.**

Miriam was Moses’s and Aaron’s older sister. She was a remarkable woman. As a young girl she had the strength of character and quickness of mind to be entrusted with the care of her baby brother during a time of persecution. She was sent to keep watch over the little three-month-old boy when his mother could not, or she would risk arrest for disobeying the king’s edict to destroy all the Hebrew baby boys. The family were in grave danger for doing the right thing and doing

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<sup>1</sup> Heb: וַתִּדְבֹר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה. BDB explains that בַּ can have the meaning *against* “with words expressing or implying an act of hostility” (BDB, בַּ [Logos Bible Software]).

<sup>2</sup> Heb. 4:12

their part to protect innocent human life, but Miriam stepped up and saved her baby brother, which was all part of God's perfect plan.

In Exodus 15:20 the Holy Spirit calls Miriam “the prophetess” (הַנְּבִיאָה)—amazing, when you think of it. Miriam led Israel in singing the song of triumph after their deliverance through the Red Sea. (Note: this was a spontaneous song praising the LORD for his supernatural protection. It was *not* the leading of the regular Sabbath worship at the tabernacle, which should not be done by a woman.)

Aaron was Israel’s high priest, who offered sacrifices and represented the people before God in the Holy Place and Most Holy Place at the tabernacle.

Here were a woman and her brother with outstanding gifts, but they are stricken with jealousy.

Jealousy is a violation of the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet,” which requires full contentment with all that God has given us. To be discontent with what we have been given is to doubt God’s wisdom in giving us the exact gifts that he wanted us to have, that he knew were best for us. It is to accuse God of being unwise and uncaring. The Christian—no matter his lot in life, no matter how dire his situation—can truly say, “My cup runneth over.” If *God* is your portion, then you can learn to say that too! You can say with the Psalmist, “My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my *portion* for ever” (Ps. 73:26).

So here are Moses’ older siblings publicly complaining! They were jealous of Moses’ superior gifts, so they begin to speak against their brother! Miriam is the instigator, therefore she receives the more severe punishment—divinely-inflicted leprosy, and mandatory expulsion from the camp. She is suddenly stricken with a highly infectious skin disease that under biblical law necessitated her being put out of the camp for seven days.<sup>3</sup> How old was she when her mother gave her the important task of watching over baby Moses?<sup>4</sup> I would guess about 8 or 9. Fast forwarding to more recent times, we know that Moses was 80 and Aaron 83 when the two of them went before Pharaoh to demand that he let the people go.<sup>5</sup> Since one year had now passed, Moses was 81 and Miriam was approaching 90. Imagine putting a nearly 90-year-old woman out of the camp all by herself for seven days! Not only was this a public shaming, it was indeed a harsh punishment, but it was appropriate for having undermined the morale of God’s people.

And remember from the chapter before, Moses himself had doubted God’s ability to supply Israel with meat every morning and evening. Miriam, Aaron and Moses were *fallible*.

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<sup>3</sup> “He who is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, shave off all his hair, and wash himself in water, that he may be clean. After that he shall come into the camp, and shall stay outside his tent *seven days*” (Lev. 14:8).

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 2:4

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 7:7

The point is that God chooses to do his work through ordinary human beings, not supermen who are infallible. At all times and through every age those who lead God's people are always accountable to higher courts, such as the seventy elders in the last chapter who received the Spirit, and to church sessions, presbyteries, synods and general assemblies under New Testament church governance. No church leader is unaccountable. Overseers are tasked with shepherding the church of God which is under their care, remembering always that they will one day give account to the Chief Shepherd. Just as a wife is to submit herself to her own husband "as to the Lord"—that is, to obey him as he leads her in obedience to God's commands—so the church is to obey its undershepherds as they follow Christ. No person can ever be required to disobey Holy Scripture.

The Roman Catholic church claims to have authority to designate men and women (and even angels—supernatural beings) as saints.<sup>6</sup> Past and recent popes (not a biblical office) have been declared to be saints. Saints are individuals who have died and are regarded by the church as now united with God in heaven, and are recognized for living lives of "heroic virtue." At least two miracles attributed to the person's heavenly intercession must be verified, which allows the Pope to formally decree the person as a saint for universal veneration. Pope John Paul II is now called Saint John Paul II.

There are a number of problems with this arrangement. The first is that this was never a power given to the church in Holy Scripture. The Roman church does this because the Roman church declares that it has the authority to do this! Second, according to the Bible, the ascended Christ, the only mediator between God and man, authoritatively intercedes for his people. The Bible never teaches that people are to pray to Mary or to the saints, and it is idolatry to do so. Third, how can any court of the church declare with certainty that a supposed "miracle" was done because of the specific intercession of a particular dead saint, excluding the intercession of any other person whatsoever? That is like declaring that a certain event happened because of one cause, and *only* one cause. This is not something that can be proven with certainty. Fourth, *all* humans with a natural human father are sinners. "*All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." The only sinless One is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Highest. He alone is "able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Christians in this life can and should pray for one another, but prayer must be offered to God alone, through the perfect intercession of Christ, the Son of God. The Bible gives no assurance that saints in heaven can hear what is said or thought on earth. God alone knows the thoughts of the heart.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.catholic.com/qa/st-moses-and-st-isaiah-yep>, accessed 10-17-26

But let's move to point two,

## **2. Sanctification in this life is always incomplete.**

In our text this morning, three of the leaders of Israel—Moses, Aaron and Miriam—are called before the LORD. “The LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward.” The LORD spoke. He ended his speech with the words, “Why . . . were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” (We’ll look more closely at the other things the LORD said next week.) But here he says, “Why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” Clearly, the LORD was showing that Miriam and Aaron had sinned.

When I was in school I lived in fear that I might be called to the principal’s office. It was expected that the classroom teacher would handle day-to-day disciplinary matters, but if a student was especially disrespectful, he could be sent to the principal’s office. This arrangement worked well enough for most students.

But imagine being called into the presence of the LORD God Almighty!

On this occasion the glory-cloud, the cloudy pillar that supernaturally led Israel through the desert, descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle. Moses, Aaron and Miriam were not called to the principal’s office; they were not arrested and brought before a human court; they stood before the God of heaven. This was a foretaste of the final judgment! Scripture declares that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10).

Moses, Aaron and Miriam were adults—actually senior adults. They had walked before the LORD for many years. They had raised families and instructed their own children. They were not new converts. They were mature saints. But still they failed. This teaches us that sanctification in this life is always incomplete. As believers it is our intention to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Yet there is always room for more growth. The apostle Paul gave his own personal testimony: “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (Phil. 3:12).

We know that the church needs leaders. Our congregation prays that God might raise up a new treasurer and deacons in our midst. Perhaps some of you have considered volunteering for special service in the church. But you hesitate. You think to yourself, *I still have so much to learn, I haven’t made progress in the faith to the degree that I would like*. This is natural. But do not hold back because you have not yet reached perfection. You and I will never reach perfection until the Lord calls us home to heaven. “Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor.

13:12). In this present life it is our privilege to “serve the LORD with gladness” (Ps. 100:2).

The fact is that God’s people, like all people, are sinners. We sinned in Adam, and we inherited Adam’s fallen nature. When we are born again, we are given a new nature that hates sin and loves righteousness. We understand the gospel and are drawn to Christ the Savior. But each born-again person must recognize that there is remaining corruption in our flesh that must daily be put to death by the power of the Spirit. Paul, speaking by the Holy Spirit, says, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13). Each of us must fight against the remaining corruption of the flesh. In another place he says, “Do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you.”<sup>7</sup> We are not to give in to sin but regard it as dead. We are to make the deliberate choice, moment by moment, to obey God, as he has spoken in his Word. Let us all, in reliance on the Holy Spirit, do this daily.

Thirdly,

### **3. Sometimes the most difficult place to practice your faith is in your family.**

Here were Moses, Aaron and Miriam, two brothers and a sister. Things had been going well. Aaron had been ordained and installed as high priest of Israel. He was overseeing the tabernacle work. His sons served as priests and offered the daily sacrifices, assisted by the Levites. Israel under his leadership had recently observed its first memorial Passover. To him belonged the job of going into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement.

Miriam was a leader among women, and also served in Israel’s musical ministry. Her voice inspired the singing of thousands.

Moses met with the LORD to receive his laws, statutes and ordinances. He delivered the word of the LORD to Israel. He also served as a civil judge in a court of appeals. Most of the cases were handled by Levites who heard cases and rendered judgments. But the most difficult cases were appealed to Moses himself.

These three were brothers and a sister, part of the same family. They had worked together well for a time.

But then things fell apart. Miriam began to complain against Moses. Aaron joined in. Their disunity, if unchecked, threatened the people’s morale.

Psalm 133 says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!” Indeed, it *is* good and pleasant! And when God’s people, instructed by the same perfect Word, are disunited, it is regrettable. God’s people have every incentive to be unified. Our Savior prayed for his people’s unity, saying

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<sup>7</sup> Rom. 6:13–14

to the Father, “that they may be *one* just as We are one” (John 17:22). That is the ideal that is to be sought for in every age of the church.

Disunity among Moses, Aaron and Miriam threatened the whole covenant people. This had already been shown by the fire of the LORD, in the previous chapter, that “burned among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp.” Sometimes the most difficult place to practice your faith is in your family.

In the case of Moses and his siblings, disunity was not something to be celebrated; rather, it was regrettable. But Calvin points out that there was an unintended benefit. “If Aaron and Miriam had always quietly and cordially supported the honor of their brother, and had not been carried away by perverse and ungodly jealousy, their harmony, however holy it was, would have been . . . alleged . . . a deceitful and insidious conspiracy.” In other words, wicked people would think that the three siblings had made up the whole thing as a power-grab. But Miriam’s and Aaron’s public opposition to their brother clearly showed that there was no conspiracy, but that Moses was indeed God’s chosen servant. God, who makes the wrath of man to praise him, was glorified through Miriam’s and Aaron’s sinful rebellion, for it showed that Moses was indeed called by God to his prophetic office. And even at the present hour the church is led by faithful men who are called to special office.

I recently saw an old church newsletter from a church in our area which celebrated its pastor’s “fifty years in the professional ministry.” (The newsletter was written by the pastor himself.) “Professional ministry”! Brothers and sisters, being a pastor is not a *profession*, as one might choose to become a doctor, lawyer or university professor. It is a calling of God to exercise spiritual oversight, with the ruling elders, over God’s people, who voluntarily receive such men as their leaders. A pastor is not a professional! Being a pastor involves the authoritative preaching of God’s Word and the exercise of discipline, according to the Word of God. Pastors are *shepherds*, and God’s people are the *sheep*. The Lord Jesus is the *chief shepherd*, to whom all will give account.

So what happened to Miriam? She was stuck by leprosy, an infectious, disfiguring skin disease. When Miriam became infected with it, it would have been evident on her face and hands. There was no question that she was being judged by the LORD.

The other day, while waiting in a checkout line, I could not help but notice the man in front of me unloading the items from his cart. He was a handsome middle-aged man with a dark complexion, but the skin where his beard should have been was ivory-colored, wrinkled and blotchy. Some people in such a condition might avoid going out in public, but this man held his head high and got on with business.

Why do people get infectious skin diseases? For the same reason we get any sicknesses. The earth is under God's curse because of sin, but Jesus took our sins upon himself at the cross. When we come to him, he makes our life new, and in the meantime we press on, awaiting the day when our risen Lord will say, "Behold, I make all things new." There will be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, nor any more pain! In the new heavens and earth there will be fulness of joy forevermore in the bodily presence of the Lord. What a day that will be! You can be a part of it. Admit that you are a sinner. Ask the Lord to save you. He promises: "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out." The Lord will never reject the sinner who comes to him in faith. Today is the day of salvation! Amen!