

## "Growing in Humility"

### *Numbers 12*

Last week we were in Num. 11 and learning about grumbling. Most of us don't have to learn about grumbling because we have had lots of firsthand experience with it. And I'm sure, like I was reminded this week a few times, you too, were reminded or convicted about grumbling.

However, we are not done with grumbling as we come to Nu. 12. Miriam and Aaron, Moses' very own sister and brother, grumble against Moses, who humbles himself before God. Interesting how we deal with both here because you can't be humble and grumble. To grumble means you are upset because life isn't going your way. That your circumstances are unpleasant and not problem free. We grumble when we think wrongly about ourselves, whereas humbling is seeing ourselves as God sees us. Some people incorrectly think that humility is seeing ourselves as unworthy, sinful, selfish worms who need to keep quiet to show how humble we are. But humility is seeing us as God sees us, greatly loved despite our unworthiness. Not beating ourselves up but being willing to be lifted up by God in service, knowing we will fail at times. We continue in faith because God loves us and wants to use us to glorify Himself.

God's not very humble then, is He if He wants all the glory? Unless of course, glorifying God brings us joy (since we're not living for ourselves) and joy to others (when they understand this through the gospel) understanding then that glorifying God is the best thing for us and for God. That too is humbling.

This incident follows quickly after the grumbling in Ch. 11 when the Israelites complained life was hard and the non-Israelites complained about God's provision of manna and Moses grumbled about having to shepherd all these grumblers. Yet Moses, we are told, was humbler than anyone else on the face of the earth. Ch. 11 was a lesson in humility for Moses and he practices it here in Num. 12.

What can we learn about humility from Moses here in the midst of being criticized for doing God's will? Whether we like it or not, growing in humility requires

### **Handling Criticism in a Godly Manner** **(12:1-3)**

Miriam and Aaron are leaders too, but they have become discontent with their roles from God. This incident happened shortly after Moses complained to God about the stress of leading the nation and God graciously responded by taking the Spirit from Moses and sharing it with 70 elders who will help Moses lead Israel. But the Spirit did not come to Miriam or Aaron, who complain to Moses about his Cushite wife. Moses doesn't react to this, rather,

#### ***He listens for the real issue (vv.1-2)***

We are given no details about his Cushite wife. This is not Zipporah, a Midianite, Jethro's daughter whom Moses married 40+ years ago, soon after he left Egypt. She may have passed away. Or Moses took another wife, like many others had. Cush is south of Egypt, in the area of modern-day Sudan or Ethiopia. Some think they were complaining because she was dark in complexion. If anything, it would be a complaint because she wasn't Jewish. Marrying foreign women could drag

you away from God. Yet Ruth and Rahab are just two examples of non-Israelite women whom God used for His plans to ultimately bring Jesus into the world. His Cushite wife is not the real issue. The real issue is, Miriam and Aaron are envious of Moses' sole leadership role over Israel and they think they should be equal leaders with him. Because they next say,

*Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?"*

A factually accurate statement, but they twist this into justifying their actions. A dangerous road to go down when we use Scripture to justify our own self-righteousness.

It's true. God had spoken to and through Miriam and Aaron. In Ex. 15 God spoke through Miriam, called a prophetess, who led Israel singing songs of praise for God's rescue out of Egypt. Did Miriam also think that if it wasn't for her bravery watching baby Moses float down the Nile, Moses wouldn't even be alive?

God spoke directly to Aaron in Lev. 10:8 after the deaths of his two sons Nadab and Abihu, to remind him of God's promise of the priestly line through Aaron's sons and His expectations for them. Aaron was Moses' spokesperson to the Pharaoh. So, yes God had spoken to and through Miriam and Aaron, but God did not choose them to lead Israel. God chose Moses. *"And the Lord heard this."*

God hears our criticism of others and our grumbling. He hears all our armchair leading when we think we would be better than someone else. Maybe we could do a better job than others but 1) we're not who God chose and 2) we're not acting humbly. There is an inserted comment in the text, probably not by Moses himself, but possibly by Joshua who would have most likely added the comments about Moses' death at the end of Deuteronomy. Regardless, it's part of God's Word and God said there was no other person alive humbler than Moses. Why? He handled criticism in a godly manner. He listened for the real issue and

### ***Resisted the temptation to defend himself immediately (v.3)***

Whereas we often respond quickly and verbally. We don't listen well. We do get defensive. And we didn't ask God what part of the criticism is valid. There's usually an element of truth to criticism. We need to honestly listen and ask God what's true here. The only time Moses opens his mouth in this chapter is when he prays for Miriam.

Ironically, Miriam and Aaron, who boasted that God spoke to them too, suddenly get a firsthand chat with God!

*<sup>4</sup> At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out. <sup>5</sup> Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, <sup>6</sup> he said, "Listen to my words:*

They got called to the "principal's office" to explain their attitudes. So Moses has learned that when you are following God and you get criticized for it, that God will defend us in His own time and way.

## **We Need to Give God Time to Work** **(12:4-10)**

When we don't patiently listen and start defending ourselves and possibly even childishly criticizing the person back, we take away what God can and will eventually do. The hard part in this of

course, is trusting God when He doesn't respond right away. Here, God responds immediately because they are about to go into the Promised Land and God wants Moses leading the nation. So He quickly deals with Miriam and Aaron whose unjustified criticism of Moses is fueled by their envy of Moses and most likely that others received the Holy Spirit and not them. What does God do here and what do we have to trust God to do for us?

### **God will reveal the truth in His own time (vv.4-6)**

God doesn't always right a wrong done to us, very quickly, and that delays the truth coming out. That's hard. But God has a better way of dealing with injustices done to us than we do. Paul reminds us in Rom. 12:17-21

*17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

God confronts Miriam and Aaron and explains to them that, yes, He does talk to people in different ways because He assigns people different roles that, when we trust God with, He uses us to work in harmony with one another to build up the body of Christ and accomplish His purpose of glorifying Himself. God can't glorify Himself if we keep getting in the way. Miriam and Aaron were getting in God's way here. Their criticism of Moses could create division in the nation. The nation needed to clearly know God had set Moses aside to lead them into the Promised Land. He gave him 70 elders to help deal with the people as Moses listened to God's leading for how to get them to the land of Canaan.

Many of the psalms are lament psalms where the writer calls out to God for help in his situation. Often the psalm ends with the situation unresolved, but through prayer and reminding himself of God's character and promises, he ends the psalm with his hope being renewed in God.

Pride wants to defend ourselves, whereas humility wants to see God glorified by waiting for His timing and manner to resolve a difficulty someone has with us. And in time,

### **God honours our faithfulness (vv.7-8)**

Perhaps Miriam and Aaron thought they were better speakers or more gifted organizers or more charismatic leaders than Moses. And maybe they were, but knowledge, talents or charisma doesn't overrule God's sovereign choice. God wasn't looking for that in a leader; He was looking for someone who was humble, faithful and did His will consistently.

*Listen to my words: "When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. 7 But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. 8 With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord.*

Moses saw a form of God when God gave him a glimpse of His glory on the mountain in Ex. 34. But that was more than anyone else. God communicated with Moses directly at the Tent of Meeting. God tells us of Moses' faithfulness, a phrase the author of Hebrews uses to describe Moses in Heb. 3. God defends Moses directly here because the issue needed to be dealt with immediately.

God will defend our faithfulness and integrity when we're criticized. Those of us who know the truth or the situation more clearly can bring clarity and correction if necessary. It's hard to wait on God in those situations but stick with the truth and stay faithful to God and in His time He will bring clarity. And

### **God attests to our humility (vv.8b-10)**

God tells Himself through His Word that Moses was the humblest man alive at that time. Doesn't mean he was perfect. Doesn't mean he won't still blow his testimony through selfishness. It's always a temptation for all of us. Later on Moses will get angry at the people and respond inappropriately and he will lose out on God's blessings. We have to learn when our pride rears its ugly head and we fail to be humble, trying to do things our own way, we will lose out on the blessings He had ready for us had we waited on Him.

God attests to Moses' humility here when He says to Miriam and Aaron

*Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"<sup>9</sup> The anger of the Lord burned against them, and he left them.*

'You, Miriam and Aaron, of all people know Moses is my chosen servant to lead you to the land of Canaan. Why are you arrogantly demanding I speak to you as I do Moses.' And ironically, He is speaking to them directly. Then He affirms Moses' leadership and humility by judging Miriam. Why only her? Her name appears before Aaron's in v.1 implying Miriam took lead on the attack against Moses. To validate that, the Hebrew word in v.1 for 'began to talk against' is feminine, pointing back to Miriam being the spokesperson.

Miriam's name appears only twice [other than in a genealogy] in the rest of the Old Testament. In Deut. 24:9 as a warning:

*Deut. 24:8 In cases of leprous diseases be very careful to do exactly as the priests, who are Levites, instruct you. You must follow carefully what I have commanded them.<sup>9</sup> Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt.*

The other, however, is in Micah 6:4, when Micah recalls God's leading hand in Israel's rescue out of Egypt,

*<sup>3</sup>"My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. <sup>4</sup>I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.*

*<sup>5</sup>My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord."*

God did use Aaron, Miriam and many others in the exodus and leading to Canaan, but they wanted more recognition and were not content with God's full knowledge of all they did. That helps us remain humble, knowing that every wrong done to us and every right done by us is known by God. If God wants to lift us up He only does it because He knows we will lift Him up. Be content with who God made you and how God gifted you. Be faithful to Him whether leading or not. Trust Him to do right.

*<sup>10</sup> When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam—leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy.*

God strikes Miriam with leprosy. She wanted more prominence with the people and God judges her by moving her away from the people and everyone would know this. Why wasn't Aaron struck as well? Aaron is the high priest and perhaps God used him to confirm Miriam's leprosy. Aaron does confess their sin and cries out to Moses for her healing. Now we hear from Moses who

## **Intercedes for Those Who Undermine Us** **(12:11-16)**

He pleads with God to heal her but God explains that what she has done is shaming and according to the Law she needs to be disciplined. Her leprosy will remain for 7 days, then she will be declared clean and can return to the community. Moses models for us Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount:

*Matt. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> that you may be sons of your Father in heaven*

Moses demonstrated humility by praying for those who sought to criticize him, as should we

***Pray for our 'enemies' so that our hearts don't get hard (vv.11-13; Matt. 5:43-45)***

Praying for those who mistreat us or wish us harm keeps our hearts soft. Thinking vengeful thoughts only makes us hard and bitter. This is how we trust God through these difficulties. It shows our spiritual maturity and humility. Leave it with God. Pray for them to repent and soften their hearts. Forgive them before they apologize and even if they don't apologize. That too is God-like.

***Forgive those who trespass against us (vv.14-16)***

Jesus said in Matt. 5 when we pray for our enemies and forgive them we are like sons of God; like Jesus. Jesus humbled Himself to become one of us. Jesus said He was humble and gentle. Sometimes people think, 'I'll humble myself by avoiding all leadership or responsible situations.' But that's actually selfish. You're not willing to trust God if He wants to put you in those situations. God believes we can be faithful to Him if He puts us in those situations and gifts us through the Spirit. The examples of humility come from leaders; Moses and Jesus.

God commands us to humble ourselves and never to humble others.

*<sup>1</sup> Pet. 5:5 Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

*<sup>6</sup> Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time, <sup>7c</sup> Casting all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

Miriam and Aaron's selfishness delayed God's blessing for everyone. Everyone waited 7 days for Miriam to be restored. Aaron would not live to see the Promised Land. Moses too would sin and lose the blessing of entering the Promised Land, although he saw it. We never hear from Miriam again. Her desire for recognition resulted in a loss of recognition. Did God have another role for Miriam? We don't know. But we do know pride goes before a fall. We need to watch for arrogant attitudes of any kind because we will hurt others and ourselves.

Humility is about making God greater than ourselves. It doesn't mean devaluing yourself. It mean acknowledging God's gracious hand in your life. If He wants us to be lifted up, it just means more opportunities to exalt Him. To belittle ourselves is to belittle what God has done in our lives. Thank Him in all circumstances, pray for those who hurt you and give Him room to work His will in and around you. And let's be found faithful in His house.

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