

AWAKEN FROM RESENTMENT

God's Dealings with Miriam

By Steve Zeisler

Heart disease sometimes strikes without warning. Individuals who had appeared healthy and felt healthy, who dieted, exercised, and minimized stress are occasionally stricken in the prime of life. Tests later showed that deterioration had been proceeding undetected, and that the heart had been operating with difficulty for years without the patient ever knowing it. We occasionally hear of great athletes who unexpectedly collapse. Although they appeared to be the picture of health and vitality it was discovered that they had damaged blood vessels and valves, causing cardiac arrest and then death.

HEART DISEASE

Undetected heart disease can be spiritual as well as physical. The Scriptures call one such disease of the heart "the root of bitterness". It is like a weed that sinks its roots into our spirit and issues a plant with poisonous fruit. Our inner life can be in such a state without our knowing it until the venom bursts forth in a terrible way. Spiritual hearts can be diseased as well as physical ones as we will see in the Scripture we are examining.

If you exposed your wrist you could take your pulse and measure the rate of your heart-beat. If we had more sophisticated equipment we could make further discoveries about its condition. In a similar way, I would like to propose a test to determine whether the heart of your spirit is healthy. The test is: Can you rejoice when the truth prevails and Christ is honored even though you don't receive your share of the benefits and prominence? Can you rejoice when the name of the Lord is praised even though the credit that might be deserved by you is given to someone else? One of the greatest tests of spiritual maturity is the freedom to let others have credit in the work of God, to believe in what Paul says in I Corinthians, "If one member is honored, all are honored."

Numbers chapter twelve records an incident that deals directly with these questions. Amran and Jochebed, a Levite couple who lived during Israel's sojourn in Egypt, had three children who were all remarkable. Micah, the prophet, says years later about the Exodus: "Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and ransomed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." These three siblings were all used by God in setting his people free. In this study we will consider Miriam, whom God spoke to personally, directly and forcefully about the condition of her heart. Unknown to Miriam, she had a serious heart problem, requiring the Great Physician to intervene through radical surgery.

MEETING MIRIAM

There are two incidents in Scripture that will give us a context for considering Miriam. The first occurred during Moses's infancy. Since Israelite male babies were to be killed when they were born, Moses's mother devised a plan to set Moses adrift in the Nile in a little boat. The second half of the plan included Moses's older sister, Miriam. She was to persuade Pharaoh's daughter not only to be concerned about the child when she found him, but to give him back to his natural mother to nurse.

Sara Buwell wrote about Miriam in her book, "The Challenge of Old Testament Women":

"When Pharaoh's daughter discovered the baby, Miriam stepped forward and asked, 'Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?' Although it was her mother Jacobed who had engineered the scheme to save Moses and had carefully rehearsed Miriam in her role, the success of the rescue mission depended heavily on the girl's poise, charm and articulate self-expression. She had to be in the right place at the right time, using the right words and manner to impress the princess. God delivered Israel's future deliverer

through Miriam's perfect delivery of his message."

Even as a young girl Miriam was courageous, winsome, and effective in her presentation. Moses was delivered and kept his Hebrew identity, partly because of God's use of Miriam.

Another incident that reveals more about Miriam is found in Exodus 15. Moses had written a song for the people, beginning with these words: "I will sing to the Lord because he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider, he is hurled into the sea." At the end of the song Miriam, who was a prophetess, took up the tambourine to dance to the song. All the women in camp followed her, dancing with music and energy. It was Miriam's enthusiasm, charisma, and natural leadership that made the words come alive to the people. We sense that she was a vital, gifted woman who was capable and charismatic in her leadership.

Prior to the Exodus, Moses had spent 40 years in Pharaoh's household, living mostly as an Egyptian. He spent 40 more years in the Midian wilderness caring for his father-in-law's sheep. For those 80 years the children of Israel lived under abuse as slaves in Egypt. During that time it seems that both Miriam and Aaron were used by God to bolster his people in their affliction. When Moses asked God to send someone to Pharaoh who was more articulate than he, he gladly accepted Aaron as the substitute. Aaron was evidently known to Moses as a talented spokesman who had been used in the life of his people. Likewise, Miriam was a woman who had been used to speak and comfort the people of God throughout the years that Moses was exiled. She was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20) who conveyed a word from the Lord as it was given to her periodically, encouraging the Israelites to be courageous under hardship and to trust the Lord.

MIRIAM'S MURMURING

We then come to Numbers 12:

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the Lord heard this. Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth. At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the tent of meeting, all three of you." So the three came out. Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance to the tent, and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward he said, "Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions and I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddle. He sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The anger of the Lord burned against them and he left them.

When the cloud lifted from above the tent there stood Miriam, leprous like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy, and he said to Moses, "Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin which we so foolishly committed. Do not let her be like a stillborn infant, coming from its mother's womb with its flesh half eaten away." So Moses cried out to the Lord, "O God, please heal her!" The Lord replied to Moses, "If her father had spit in her face [that is, if her father had chastised her], would she not have been in disgrace for seven days? Confine her outside the camp for seven days. After that, she can be brought back." So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on until she was brought back to them. After that the people left Hazeroth and camped in the desert of Paran.

We need to understand some things before we try to interpret and apply the passage. One has to do with the question of why Miriam was punished and Aaron wasn't. Obviously, both of them were murmuring against Moses, and Aaron took responsibility for his part when he pleaded for Moses to help. However, it is noteworthy that when the trouble began (12:1) Miriam's name was listed first.

Let us consider Miriam's character. Of the three siblings, Miriam was probably the most intrinsically gifted. Moses fought battles with self-worth throughout his life. He repeatedly had to be reminded by God that he could do what he was called to do. Given the failure of his past, it was difficult for him to believe. On the other hand, Aaron had little influence on his people that didn't derive from his office. He was appointed to be the

high priest by God, and serving in that role he had great influence.

Aaron, however, was a man who blew where the wind blew. When Moses was with the Lord on Mount Sinai for 40 days, Aaron responded to the people's appeals for a visible god by making a golden calf for them to worship. Later, when Moses failed the Lord by striking the rock at Meribah, Aaron complied with that also. Aaron was the type of man who was easily influenced by the circumstances around him. By the Lord's reaction it seemed to be Miriam who had the heart disease of deep resentment. Miriam's bitterness had festered within her, and she subsequently led her brother Aaron to murmur against Moses. Therefore, it was God's foremost concern to deal with the spiritual disease that had frightfully formed and threatened to disable her permanently.

The second background note about the Lord's statement to these people concerned what had been true about prophets and prophetesses, and now what was true of Moses. In the 430 years that the children of Israel resided in Egypt God periodically touched the life of an individual through a vision or dream, and gave him a prophesy for the people. When a specific word was needed from God, he would use the prophet (or prophetess) as a spokesman to comfort and encourage the Israelites. Miriam, in her role as a prophetess, was allowed to transmit God's word to the people. In addition to her natural leadership ability, it seems she periodically had dreams and visions from God and explained them to the people.

A NEW MINISTRY

At the Exodus, however, something new began. The Lord said, I speak to Moses face to face, I explain myself to Moses." Instead of being a people who heard occasionally and only in visions from God, Moses became the lawgiver on Mount Sinai. God began to teach the people about his own heart, giving them truth that they could understand on their own. In Exodus 33 we are told that the Lord would speak face to face to Moses as a man speaks to his friend. God revealed himself to the people through Moses so that they could think along with their Lord and determine why he cared about the things he did. Thus, they could begin to make choices and comfort one another based on an expanded knowledge of the truth instead of requiring a prophet to seek a dream or vision from the Lord in explanation.

It was a great gift for God to explain himself in the written law so that everyone could grow in the knowledge of it. However, the result was that people like Miriam were less necessary. It wasn't her fault that God's method had changed, it was a perfectly good thing that her role should diminish. She had the same opportunity as the rest of the nation to learn the law, and thus become more intimate in her knowledge of God.

In every age, as change takes place the need for certain kinds of gifts or talents may change also. There was a time when church musicians primarily played the organ. When I was young, organs gradually fell into disuse so that if a person couldn't play the guitar he was no longer useful. It wasn't anyone's fault that guitars had replaced organs, but a musician could feel isolated and less useful through no fault of his own because the times had changed. Likewise, many cathedrals in central cities are now less useful than when they were erected because the neighborhood around them has changed. There are people who were raised in parts of Santa Clara County who can't go back to their own neighborhood to minister unless they can speak Cambodian.

CHARACTER ASSASSINS

Miriam's experience was like that. Instead of appreciating that God was using another as she had been used, being thankful that when one is honored then all are honored, she grew to resent it. The resentment gnawed at her heart, and she became progressively sicker on the inside.

In verse 1 we see that she fooled herself. She and Aaron focused on the problem of Moses's Cushite wife, but that was a smoke-screen. The next verse clarifies the real problem: "Does the Lord speak only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?" It is a common response to rationalize when we feel unfairly treated or resentful of another person's advantages. Miriam and Aaron chose to assassinate Moses's character, to gossip about him and his failures.

We only know about Moses's Cushite wife through these verses. Cush was a region south of Egypt, a

province of Egypt during the time when Moses was an Egyptian prince. There was no time for him to have married a Cushite wife after his forty years in Midian since the events of the Exodus began immediately. I would speculate that Moses married a woman under indiscreet circumstances sometime in the first 40 years of his life when he was a relatively young man. Cush is known now as Ethiopia, a region that is primarily black in populace. There may have been some sort of racism in Miriam's comment. She was probably referring to a marriage in the past that hadn't worked out, an incident that Moses had been forgiven and cleansed of long ago. Yet Miriam and Aaron in their resentment claimed he was unfit to lead because of this circumstance.

It is easy to gossip when we are resentful. We like to pass on tidbits of failure about a person who has a place that we wish we had. Character assassination always goes hand in hand with resentment. Divorced parents, for instance, must deal with the temptation to point out their ex-spouse's faults in order to diminish them in the eyes of their children. Some years ago, when I was a student intern here, Ray Stedman would take interns on ministry trips with him. It was a badge of honor to be asked on a trip with Ray. I waited for my turn, arms folded, hoping that he would invite me to do something like that. Much to my irritation, he asked a man to go on a particular trip that I didn't feel deserved the honor. I thought "I know this guy. If Ray knew what he was really like, he would invite me instead." The temptation to say what I was thinking and gain the desired end was difficult to resist.

THE MOST HUMBLE MAN

The Cushite wife wasn't the problem, it was the bitterness and jealousy that had been nurtured in the hearts of both Miriam and Aaron. They spiritualized it: "Maybe with Moses in the spotlight, God is denied the opportunity to use us and our gifts. Aren't we also spokesmen for God?" The problem with that theory, however, was that Moses never looked for recognition. If he had, the Scripture would have noted arrogance or selfishness on his part. Instead, it said he was "very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth." Moses did not call the meetings with God, or appoint himself deliverer of the people. He had been isolated, caring for sheep in Midian. God always took the initiative with Moses.

Chapter 11, verse 26 further elucidates Moses's character:

However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders but did not go out to the tent, but the spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." [This would have been something like the ministry that Miriam had had previously in which the Spirit of God gave someone a word to say.] Joshua, son of Nun, who had been Moses's aide since youth, spoke up and said, "Moses, my lord, stop them" But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them" Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Moses had not done anything to push Miriam or Aaron out of the spotlight. He was not jealous for his own reputation. The fact was that God had begun this new work of explaining himself with the result that Miriam and Aaron's services were less required. It was their resentment that was sin, not

Moses's arrogance. It is clear by God's action in Miriam's case that he understood her bitterness to be an affront to himself. We might perceive that God's response to the siblings' murmuring was disproportionate to the act. After all, all they were doing was venting their frustration and resentment against Moses. The Lord intervened swiftly. He heard (verse 2); he called the three of them together (verse 4); he chastised Miriam and Aaron (verses 5- 8): "The anger of the Lord burned against them and he left them (verse 9)."

The result of the Lord's intervention was that Miriam stood there leprous, covered with the most feared and hated human condition of the ancient world. Leprosy was always symbolic of sin. We can hear the quaver in Aaron's voice: "Can't you do something, Moses, please?" He saw her as a deformed child who was so ill-formed that it couldn't be born alive. They knew of lepers who over the course of their illness lost body parts as they were eaten away by the terrible disease.

THE SUBTLE SIN

Why did God storm upon them? Why did he disgrace Miriam and give her this frightening and painful disease? Why did he expel her from the camp? The whole nation was at a standstill, detained for a week as a result. Miriam, in disgrace and agony, was sent out from them by herself into the wilderness. Doesn't it seem a bit out of proportion? Moses killed a man, Aaron made an idol, but they didn't get leprosy. God's strong reaction to Miriam's undermining Moses was out of concern for the attitude of her heart.

There is subtlety in human resentment. Killing someone is recognized as antisocial and immoral behavior. It is obvious; someone was alive, is now dead, and the murderer is standing over the body with a smoking gun. Idolatry has the same external feature to it. Everybody will know if a person has made an idol and led other people into worshipping it. The anger of God can properly descend on that action; it is apparent to all.

But resentment typically takes place inside. We justify it, hold onto it, and relish it. We use words like fairness and justice: "It's not fair that they should have those advantages those benefits. It's not just. I deserve better. What about me?" We let ourselves be jealous and compare our circumstances to another's. We honor it, have a right to it, and draw others into it. That is the point of Hebrews 12:15. The root goes deep in our heart, the poisonous fruit comes up, and other people are defiled by it as well. It is precisely because resentment is so subtle and slippery that God had to take strenuous, frightening action to expose what was for Miriam a deadly disease of the heart.

Resentment impedes other people. The whole nation was set aside for seven days because of what Miriam did. It ruins the lives of other people, not just our own. It is disfiguring and ugly, just as Miriam was leprous. She became loathsome to look at. Likewise, resentment disfigures us.

Remember the apostle Paul's experience in discovering his sin? He wrote in Romans 7 about how the tenth commandment-which requires obedience internally-had led to his demise. The command is, "Don't covet." It was exactly the same problem that Miriam had; that is, don't wish you could have for yourself what God has given another. Don't resent your neighbor for the advantages and benefits that you desire for yourself. Paul said, I couldn't stop coveting. It was the thing that convinced me I was a sinner. There was nothing I could do in myself to stop doing it. All of a sudden, sin came alive, and I died." It is the very subtlety of resentment that makes God take such strenuous action against it.

HIS LOVE IS ENOUGH

The Lord never said that he was committed to being fair. He makes no promises that he will equalize life on this earth for all of us. He doesn't equally distribute wealth, or attractiveness, or happiness in family life. What he does promise to do is give all of himself to those of us who know him. Nobody receives more of Christ than another. Nobody has greater access to the love of God than another. He has given us everything we need to make us grateful.

It's as if we were arguing about the equality of water in drinking glasses. You have 12 ounces, she has 16 ounces, I have 9. Yet all of us have the title to Lake Tahoe. We own all the water we'd ever want to use in our life and yet we argue about the relative amount in glasses. Having given us himself, the Lord never considered it necessary to even out all the particulars. Therefore, we do not have the right to resent what he chooses to do for other people, to other people, or to insist on the recognition for ourselves that he decides another should have. We are not grasping the fullness of his gift if we choose to let resentment and bitterness fester.

GRATITUDE AND HUMILITY

How can we get over resentment? The simple antidote is gratitude. In Romans 1, when the people of God descended from knowledge of God to the most vile sins, the very first step down the spiral was that they did not give thanks. The way to be healed from this vicious heart disease is to begin to look at what God has given us in himself, to appreciate the lives that we have to live, and to use the opportunity we have. We must make a habit of daily expressing our thankfulness to God in humility. It is precisely that which turns us from resentful people into those who glorify the Lord.

Peter writes in 1 Peter 5:

All of you clothe yourself in humility towards one another because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you. Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you.

God will exalt us, in his timing and in his way. It is for his purposes that he will give honor to all of his children, not for their own ego satisfaction. Our choice must be to humble ourselves under his hand; receive the gift from him without complaining about what he's doing in the lives of other people.

Miriam and Aaron had a problem. They had a little brother who was destined to have a greater name than they. At various times, both Miriam and Aaron had given themselves to making Moses successful. Moses said, "I can't talk to Pharaoh." So Aaron had to be the spokesman without receiving equal credit. It was Moses who was the greater figure and Aaron was his servant. It was Miriam who saved Moses's life as a baby. She gave life to his song and inspired the people to sing it. It was hard on the older siblings to do the work that made Moses's name greater among the people. It was difficult for them to look at their little brother spending every day in the tent of God, talking face to face with him, giving the law and leading the people. Moses had succeeded because they had served him well, and yet they felt that they had not been recognized for their efforts.

For many of us, the position we are in requires us to make someone successful. The Lord has the right to require us to elevate another to prominence, to live our life for the greater public respect of another figure. It is not wrong or unfair for him to do that. It is wrong for us to resent it if he does.

WHAT HAPPENED TO MIRIAM?

The Scripture records no word or action of Miriam in the final years of her life. There is a notation of her death in Numbers 20:1, but nothing else was said about her. What took place after the interchange with the Almighty in Numbers 12? I will have to speculate on what subsequently happened in the wilderness because there is no information about it. It is the pattern of God in Scripture to use time alone in the wilderness to strengthen, correct and heal his children. It was true of the patriarchs, of David, and it was true of the apostle Paul. I'm convinced that that is what happened to Miriam. The fact that she did not receive any more attention doesn't suggest to me that she wasn't godly and effective. It does suggest that she subordinated herself to Moses as God originally intended her to do. Thus, she never had a high enough profile to find her way into the record again.

She no longer would need the focus of attention on herself. So I would surmise that her time in the wilderness was not only a punishment, but also a healing time. We might also note that the people did not learn from her lesson. The next chapter of Numbers tells of the entire nation's refusal to take Moses's word and go into the land. I think Miriam's punishment was God's last public effort to tell the people, "Listen to my servant. Do not rebel against him." And yet even the graphic seven day period of waiting for Miriam didn't teach them this lesson.

To summarize, resentment is heart disease of the spirit as surely as anything is a disease of the spirit. It is disfiguring, deadly, and it can go undetected for years. It can eat away at our insides. It is the kind of sin that we often defend as justice and fairness rather than call it the sin that it is. We must be a people who recognize resentment for its damaging effects. We must refuse to gossip about others as though we were telling the truth, doing good instead of evil. We must not use religious language to defend what is jealousy, and be willing to see this problem of the heart. As Peter said, we are to humble ourselves under the hand of God, to let him exalt us in due time.

Hebrews 12:12-15, 28-29:

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Make level paths for your feet so

that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed. Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy. Without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no root of bitterness grows up to cause trouble and defile many...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe for our God is a consuming fire.

Title: Awakened from Resentment
By: Steve Zeisler
Series: Numbers 12
Message No: 6
Catalog No:4174
Date: May 7, 1989

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