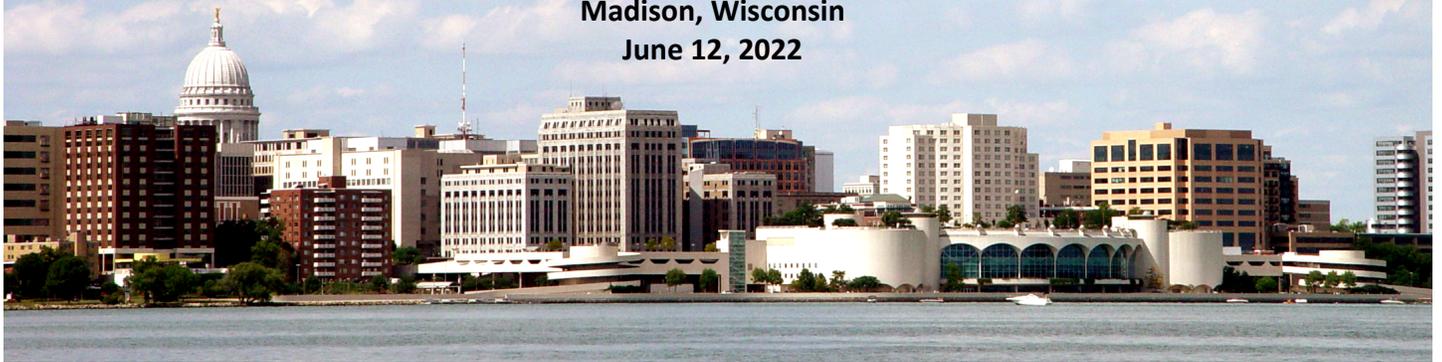


Hurt By Those We Love

NUMBERS 12:1-16 • PART 1

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It's good to see you this morning! If you don't yet have the elements for the Lord's Supper, please remember to get those from the table right inside the front door, and if you are visiting with us today, we would invite you to fill out a visitor card online. We would really appreciate having a record of your visit with us today.

We are starting today with God's plan for saving us through the gospel (the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus). We obey the gospel by believing it, by repenting of sin, by confessing our faith in Jesus as God's anointed King, and by calling out to God for salvation in the act of baptism, an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins. And this morning, we have an example of a brother and sister obeying the gospel at the Honolulu congregation. They posted a week or so ago and said, "Welcome your new sister and brother in Christ. Ridenben (21 years old) and his sister Rachel (17 years old) both obeyed the gospel today. Praise the Lord!" If you have any questions or concerns as to why this is so important, as to why we make a point of repeating this every week, please pull me aside after worship today, and we would love to open the word of God with you this afternoon.

We live in a world where nearly everybody seems to be a critic. Back in the olden days, we would perhaps read a review in the newspaper, and we would then make the decision as to whether to try out a new restaurant. I love, by the way, that we have a restaurant critic by the name of "Dan Curd" here in Madison. That is just awesome. Today, though, all of us are critics. Before going just about anywhere, many of us check out the online reviews – on Facebook or maybe on Google Maps or Yelp. And not only do we check reviews, but we sometimes write reviews ourselves.

I'm not sure why, but one of my most popular reviews is of a small restaurant just south of Hurley, Wisconsin, The Bell. They used to be known as the Liberty Bell Chalet, in downtown Hurley, but several years ago they moved several miles south of Hurley on Highway 51. We go there for the green spinach noodles with chicken cutlet. It is a highlight of each trip. So, we let people know about it. And every once in a while, I will get a message from Google basically saying, "You are important! People care about what you think! 6000 people have read your review of the Bell," or whatever.

One thing I've noticed through the years is that I tend to have some strong opinions about food. I love eating. When I'm on the road, or even here in the Madison area, I not only check the reviews written by others, but I

will sometimes give some criticism of my own, both positive and negative – Sugar River Pizza down in Verona (we went there based on Patsy’s recommendation), Bill’s BBQ down in Henderson, Tennessee, Cottage Café (of course), the Essen House (one of my rare negative reviews); and then churches – Shelbyville Road in Indianapolis, and even our favorite dog kennel down in McFarland. And I’m sure many of you do the same. We share our opinions. We criticize, sometimes these comments are positive, and sometimes these comments are negative.

This morning, I’d like for us to study a passage from the book of Numbers, where we find some incredibly negative comments within a family, and I’d like for us to come away from this passage with some encouragement concerning how to handle criticism and the negative comments that come from those we love the most. The passage is Numbers 12:1-16 (p. 237). The context is that God’s people have just left Egypt, they have received the Law on Mount Sinai, they have crossed the Red Sea, and they are now three days into their journey (roughly one year after they leave Egypt). Now, though, they are finally heading out for the Promised Land. Unfortunately, they have already done some complaining. In Numbers 11, they start whining about the food; they start whining about the lack of meat; and it gets to the point where they wish they could go back to Egypt. At least there they had cucumbers, and melons, and leeks, and onions, and the garlic. But now, nothing but manna. And they complain to the point where even Moses gets discouraged. Basically, “Dear Lord, why have you done this to me? Why have you put me in charge of these people? In fact, if this continues, Lord, please, just kill me now.” It’s that bad. The Lord then has Moses appoint seventy men to assist in leading the people. Then, based on the complaint about the lack of meat, God “blesses” the people with quail; in fact, he buries them in quail – dead birds, three feet deep, for a days’ journey in all directions! “You want meat? I’ll give you meat!” And the Lord buries them in meat. We can hardly imagine! This, though, leads us to what comes next, as it seems that the critical spirit has spread even to Moses’ own family.

I’d like to start our study of this account by going through this chapter chunk by chunk (there are four chunks here) – we will do this today. Next week we are having a song service, and then, two weeks from today, I’d like to go back and look at three very practical applications. Let’s start, though, by looking at the text itself.

I. And the first paragraph comes in verses 1-2 where we have the PROBLEM.

Let’s start, then, by looking at Numbers 12:1-2,

¹ Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman); ² and they said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?” And the LORD heard it.

So, this is the problem. The issue here is that Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses. They complain. They criticize. Remember: Moses has just dealt with the whining of the people (in chapter 11), and almost immediately he now hears from his own family. And isn’t that how it happens sometimes? We get beat down in the world all week, and then we come home only to be whacked by those in our own family – by our parents, or children, or maybe (like Moses) by our own brothers and sisters. Home is supposed to be a refuge, but sometimes it is not.

And we notice a problem here, don’t we? There is the complaint, and then there is the complaint behind the complaint. On the surface, we have Miriam (with Aaron has her sidekick) complaining to Moses that he had married a “**Cushite woman.**” And that description, “**Cushite woman,**” is repeated twice in this first paragraph. Miriam and Aaron were upset that their brother had married a “**Cushite woman.**” And this criticism seems

fresh. So, who is the **“Cushite woman”**? And why are they mad about this now and not 40 years earlier? Ultimately, we don’t know. We don’t have enough information here, but we do have several possibilities:

First of all, this might be a reference to Zipporah. Back in Exodus 2, when Moses was around 40 years old, he kills an Egyptian and flees to the wilderness where he meets the daughters of the priest of Midian and defends these women from some local shepherds. He ends up marrying one of these women, Zipporah. They have two sons together, and after another 40 years or so, Moses heads back to Egypt to see how things are going. There is the flinging of the foreskin along the way (things get a bit ugly between Moses and Zipporah on that journey), and it looks like Zipporah then stays behind while Moses continues on to Egypt and meets up with Aaron and Miriam. But here we are, several years later, with everybody headed out for the Promised Land. Some people have suggested that Miriam and Aaron are upset that Moses has married Zipporah. And this is fresh, because (although Moses has been married for many years) Miriam and Aaron are just meeting her for the first time. Now they are upset, and in the process, they describe her as a **“Cushite woman.”** The problem is: Cush is a land south of Egypt (including modern-day Ethiopia), and we know that Moses actually met Zipporah in Midian (which is not south of Egypt). This is where we have a problem: How is Zipporah a **“Cushite woman”** if she is not from Cush? One way around this is that **“Cushite”** is something of a racial slur. So, they aren’t really describing where this woman is from, but they are cutting on her as a “foreigner” (and the word seems to be used this way in Habakkuk 3:7). So, the first possibility is that Zipporah is the **“Cushite woman,”** but it’s a racial slur, a comment about her appearance.

The second possibility is that Zipporah has died and that Moses has remarried a woman from the land of Cush. After all, Moses is at least 81 years old at this point, and it is possible that he has outlived Zipporah.

A third possibility is that Jethro, the priest of Midian, was originally from Cush (or Ethiopia), and that he traveled to Midian, making Zipporah a **“Cushite”** by birth.

A fourth possibility is that Moses has married a Cushite woman in addition to Zipporah, that he now has two wives. But, this issue isn’t that he has taken “another” wife; the issue is that this woman is **“a Cushite.”**

Ultimately, though, we don’t really know who this woman is. However, I hope we notice that Moses’ choice of a wife is not the real issue here, is it? Some commentaries have referred to this first complaint as something of a “smokescreen.” As with a lot of complaining, the issue is not the issue! They start with a complaint about this **“Cushite woman,”** but then they immediately say, **“Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?”** I see that transition between verses 1-2, and there is no transition! What in the world does one have to do with the other? I guess we could say that sometimes our whining doesn’t make sense. Then again, maybe there is a connection. Perhaps Moses’ wife was seen as a threat: Who is this strange woman who is advising our brother? Who knows? But ultimately, they transition to the real issue, which is that Miriam and Aaron seem to be envious of their brother’s position. Who does he think he is to have this hotline to God?

And another note here: Don’t we see something slightly similar in the life of Jesus? Remember the time when his own brothers thought he had lost his mind, and they tried to take him away? What happens here in Numbers 12 is also very similar to Jesus being rejected in Nazareth. **“They took offense at Him”** (according to Matthew 13:57), but Jesus said to them, **“A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household.”** This is what Moses is facing.

And when we think about it, this is where we realize that Miriam and Aaron are really not accusing Moses of doing anything wrong. Have we noticed that in this passage? Who are they actually accusing in this passage? Aren't they really upset with God here? ***"Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?"*** That's not Moses' fault! Moses tried to get out of this! This is God's fault.

They seem, then, to be motivated by envy, even though both of them certainly have some clout on their own. Aaron is the high priest (the only one allowed to enter the Most Holy Place to intercede on behalf of the people), and Miriam is described as a ***"prophetess"*** (in Exodus 15:20), taking a leading role in worship among the women of Israel (also in Exodus 15). So, in reality, the answer to their second question is really "yes." ***"Has he not spoken through us as well?"*** Yes, God has spoken through Miriam and Aaron. But, they are envious. I would note that Moses is their younger brother. Miriam rescued him from the crocodile-infested Nile and arranged for his care in Pharaoh's household. Aaron was Moses' spokesperson (taking a leading role publicly). Miriam and Aaron, though, are clearly not content. They had their own work to do as prophetess and priest, but they are looking over at their brother, and they are not content. In fact, they seem to resent their brother's relationship with God. They seem to resent his position. And really, they seem to be in the process of rejecting his leadership. Like the nation rejecting Samuel in favor of a king, and like the scribes and Pharisees rejecting Jesus as their king, Miriam and Aaron are challenging Moses, but they are actually challenging God himself.

I would also emphasize that Miriam seems to lead this attack. Her name is listed first in this passage, and I believe the verb "to speak against" (in verse 1) is feminine. Miriam, then, is leading the charge, and Aaron is simply along for the ride. It almost reminds me of Adam and Eve in the garden. Eve takes the lead, and Adam lets himself get dragged into it. This, by the way, will factor into the punishment that comes later.

Before we move on from "the problem" in this first paragraph, let's just note here at the end that God sees the problem, doesn't he? ***"And the Lord heard it."*** My understanding is that this is only two words in the Hebrew language, ***"Yahweh heard."*** In a way, that's rather terrifying. Miriam and Aaron complain to their brother (apparently in private), and God hears it. Yahweh hears. We certainly think about what the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 12:36-37, ***"But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."*** In doing the research for today's lesson, I came across a good reminder, "No matter how much you lower your voice when you speak against someone, God hears. God knows what is prompting you to say it, and God is himself wounded over the diminishment of one created in his image." What a great reminder. So, this is the problem: Miriam and Aaron are unjustly criticizing their younger brother – they start with what seems to be fake outrage over his Cushite wife, which is just a cover for expressing their envy over Moses' authority, which was given to him by God.

II. As we get back to our text, let's continue with GOD'S DEFENSE OF MOSES.

We see this in Numbers 12:3-9,

³ ***(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)***

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, and not in dark sayings,
And he beholds 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.***

Moses, then, is basically accused of arrogantly speaking on God's behalf, and then we have this little parenthetical statement in verse 3, ***"Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth."*** Remember: The book of Numbers was written by Moses! Several weeks ago, I mentioned that if you ever get a humility award, and if you ever hang it on your wall, that's when they take it away from you! The way I see this, Moses doesn't write these words, but this statement in verse 3 is added by whoever compiles Moses' writings after he dies (similar to the passage about Moses' death at the end of Deuteronomy). Like writing about your own death and burial, it's a bit difficult to describe yourself as being the most humble man on the face of the earth. It's a true statement, it's inspired, this is from God, but there's a good chance Moses didn't write it. Nevertheless, in terms of God's response, it starts with this reminder: Moses is not the problem here! And in fact, God responds ***"suddenly"*** (at the beginning of verse 4), immediately summoning Moses and Aaron and Miriam to the tent of meeting. In my mind, this is a bit like being called into the principal's office. God comes down in the pillar of cloud, and then he calls Aaron and Miriam. Up to this point, Aaron and Miriam might have been thinking, "Yeah, Moses is gonna get it! Moses is really in trouble now!" But that doesn't seem to be the way this is going. Some of the ancient Jewish rabbis suggested that Moses is left out of this, because God didn't want Moses to hear what he's about to say! God doesn't want Moses to "get the big head" over this. The problem, though, is clearly with Aaron and Miriam, not Moses. And God goes on to give this poem, praising Moses.

Normally, God says that he speaks to prophets in visions and dreams, using dark and mysterious sayings. With Moses, though, God speaks openly, mouth to mouth; face to face, so to speak. In Exodus 33:20, God says, ***"You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!"*** So, I would take this ***"mouth to mouth"*** as a figure of speech. And God can do this, God can speak to Moses in this way, he says, because Moses ***"is faithful in all My household."*** God can trust Moses. God and Moses have an understanding between them. We think of the trust between Potiphar and Joseph or the trust between Abraham and Eliezer.

As we think about God's response, what is truly ironic is that when Miriam and Aaron complain that God is only speaking to Moses, God comes down immediately and speaks to Miriam and Aaron, while excluding Moses! Of course, this is not the kind of communication Miriam and Aaron were hoping for! God, though, does speak to them, doesn't he? ***"Hear now My words,"*** God says, ***"Moses is faithful in all My household."*** Twice in this passage, Moses is referred to by God as ***"my servant."*** He's not Miriam and Aaron's servant; he is God's servant. And God is communicating with Moses at a level that Miriam and Aaron could hardly even imagine. And if I could paraphrase the last part of verse 8, God is basically saying, "How dare you? If it weren't for Moses, you two would be nobodies." Or, as the Lord actually says, ***"Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moses?"*** How dare you lecture almighty God concerning how he runs his kingdom? And so, in verse 9, ***"The anger of the Lord burned against them."*** God is mad.

III. This brings us to MIRIAM'S PUNISHMENT (in verses 10-12).

Let's look at Numbers 12:10-12,

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. ¹¹ Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us, 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!"

We have several things going on here, starting with the fact that Aaron seems to notice that Miriam is covered with leprosy, even before SHE notices that she is covered with leprosy. I don't know whether you've thought about this, but one job that was given to the priests was inspecting skin conditions. In some ways, they were almost like the Department of Public Health. If somebody thought they had a skin problem, they had to take it to the priests. So here we have Aaron doing his job! Aaron is suddenly back in his lane!

And perhaps, it is also somewhat ironic that by choosing leprosy as a punishment, God turns this woman white! Remember: One possibility we discussed earlier is that Miriam is upset that Moses' wife is from Ethiopia, and that by referring to her as ***"the Cushite woman,"*** Miriam is using a slur; she's commenting on her appearance: This woman is obviously not one of us. And if that is the motivation here, I do find it interesting that God chooses leprosy as the punishment. It's almost as if God hears her complaint and then says, "If you are making judgments based on skin color, let's make your skin as white as snow for a while, and let's see how that works out for you."

And let's not forget: In those days, being diagnosed with leprosy was pretty much a death sentence. You had to leave the camp and not come back until you were clean and cleared by a priest (which was rare). The social stigma was intense. Those with leprosy had to cover their upper lip and cry out, ***"Unclean! Unclean!"*** It was a permanent quarantine. We might compare it to being COVID-positive, but permanently. Many of you have had to quarantine in your own homes. I nearly lost my mind, cut off from the world for five days back in April. I exhausted Netflix and Amazon Prime and had to resort to the free section on Roku, where I wiped out 5 or 6 entire seasons of This Old House. It was terrible! Miriam, though, would have been banished, only to die a slow and agonizing death.

So, as God leaves, we have Miriam covered in leprosy, we have Aaron making the diagnosis (apparently even before Miriam realizes what's going on), and now we have Aaron begging Moses to intercede. So, we have Aaron acknowledging the sin, don't we? At this point (in verse 11), we have Aaron begging for forgiveness, and he is asking for forgiveness for ***"us"*** in this incident in which ***"we"*** have acted foolishly and in which ***"we"*** have sinned. So, Miriam is hit with the leprosy (as we discussed earlier, she is the one who speaks here), but Aaron knows that he is guilty as well. He was definitely in on it. Aaron was there for support. And as an accomplice, Aaron is therefore unable to take care of this on his own. He is guilty, unable to approach God on his own. Aaron, then, is forced to ask Moses for help.

I would also note how Aaron emphasizes that they have ***"acted foolishly."*** Remember: Under the Law, intentional sin was punishable by death, but mercy was often available for those who sinned unintentionally. Aaron, then, is emphasizing that this whole thing has been an "accident." I think of our kids when they did something when they were 4 or 5, "It was an accident!" Of course, it was! But that seems to be what Aaron is doing here, "Yes, we sinned, but we sinned because we were foolish." Nevertheless, we have God's punishment

as Aaron begs his younger brother Moses for mercy. Aaron finally understands that Moses has a pretty important role for a reason.

IV. And this leads us to the last paragraph, where MOSES INTERCEDES.

We pick up with Numbers 12:13-16,

¹³ Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "O God, heal her, I pray!" 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. ¹⁶ Afterward, however, the people moved out from Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

Moses, then, intercedes. Since Aaron is guilty of sin himself, Moses steps in, ***"O God, heal her, I pray!"*** And I don't know whether we've realized this, but these are Moses' first words in this chapter. We'll have more on this in two weeks. But for now, Moses intercedes and begs God for mercy on behalf of his older sister. There is some back and forth here, as God basically makes the point that she really needs to feel this for a while she needs to ***"bear her shame,"*** and he lands on a period of seven days. For seven days, she is shut up outside the camp. And the entire nation of Israel pauses this journey until Miriam is cleared for travel. So, instead of a lifetime of leprosy, instead of a lifetime of loneliness, God intervenes and shows mercy, all because Moses speaks up here. Sin can be forgiven. We may have some consequences, but sin can be forgiven.

How do we know Miriam is forgiven? Well, first of all, she survives this incident. Secondly, Miriam is honored with a reference to her death, many years later. But also, we have an interesting reference hundreds of years later, where God is pleading with his people, begging them to repent before it's too late, and as he summarizes everything he's done for them, he says (in Micah 6:4), ***"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."*** Miriam is listed as a leader of Israel, right alongside Moses and Aaron (even though God could have very easily erased her from the Biblical record). Moses, and Aaron, and Miriam were not perfect by any means, but they certainly allowed themselves to be used by God for great good.

Conclusion:

And this brings us to the end of today's study, with a reminder that even when we sin, even if we criticize unjustly, forgiveness is available if we repent and if we ask God for forgiveness. Some have suggested that the nation showed grace by sticking around for those seven days. But we need to remember that these people were following the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They stayed put for seven days because God is merciful. No one left behind! Let's leave it here for today. Next week we sing. And the week after that let's come back to study some very practical lessons from this passage: How to Handle Hurt, the Danger of Envy, and the Value of a Mediator.

Before we prepare for the Lord's Supper, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You have revealed yourself to us this morning as a God who does not tolerate unjust criticism motivated by envy. And yet, you have also revealed yourself as a God of mercy and grace. Thank you, Father, for being so patient with us. Thank you for sparing us. Thank you for making us a part of your kingdom, the church. As a part of this congregation, we pray that we would lean on each other for support. We pray that when we are tempted, we would reach out for help. We pray for wisdom as we encourage and as we hold each other accountable.

Father, you are worthy of all praise. You have redeemed us, people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. As your priests, we pray for your help as we struggle with sin.

We come to you today in the name of your Son, Jesus, our King. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com