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Moses And Miriam

“Please heal her, O God, I pray!”

Numbers 12:13 NKJV

Miriam’s Sin

The account of the journey of the people of Israel from Egypt to Canaan contains many valuable lessons for the Church of God in the present dispensation. We too are a pilgrim people, but we are on our way to a better country – a heavenly one (Heb. 11:16). Exodus tells about Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, while Numbers describes their journey from Mount Sinai up to and including the conquest of the land from the hand of the two kings of the Amorites (Deut. 3:8), east of the Jordan.

The book of Numbers particularly speaks about the failures of God’s people during their journey through the wilderness. Israel failed to listen to God’s Word, failed to submit to Moses’ authority, failed to take possession of the Promised Land, and failed in many other ways. In this respect the complaint that God uttered in Numbers 14:22 is particularly striking: “These men ... have put Me to the test now these ten times, and have not heeded My voice.” Time and again the grumbling people were punished by God, but it all seemed to be of no avail. The people died a miserable death in the desert, and therefore it was a new generation, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, that entered the land of promise. Man in the flesh tested by the law could not please God and had to be born again. Every attentive reader of Numbers must come to this conclusion, and no doubt this is one of the important lessons that God wants to teach us here.

In Numbers 12 the spirit of rebellion that dominated the people also seemed to take control of Miriam and Aaron, the older siblings of “Moses the man of God” (Deut. 33:1). Both Miriam and Aaron had been used by God and played an important part in the exodus from Egypt. Apparently Miriam contributed most to this rebellion against Moses, but Aaron was far too willing to listen to her. Therefore their confession, voiced by Aaron, is put in the plural: “Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly” (v. 11).

What was the reason for what they did? Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married (v. 1). Is one not allowed to talk about the marriage of one’s own brother? Of course this is allowed, but what is important is the manner in which one talks about it! Miriam did so in a negative way and became guilty of slander. She disapproved of Moses’ marriage and thus damaged his position and good name. This can be clearly gathered from the context. Miriam opposed Moses’ course of action and therefore she turned to Aaron for support. Together they then said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” (v. 2). “And the LORD heard it,” says the next sentence. Let us remember that when we feel we have to say something about our fellow believers. There is a Witness who hears and who knows our thoughts and what is at the bottom of our hearts. We cannot hide anything from Him.

It is not without reason that the apostle James so seriously warned about the dangers of the tongue, which can be “full of deadly poison. With it [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God” (Jas. 3:8-9). This is a serious evil. Persisting in it ultimately leads to exclusion, for a reviler should be put away as a wicked person (see 1 Cor. 5:11-13). In 1 Corinthians 6:10 Paul says that a reviler is among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such a person is considered to be among “those ... who are outside” (5:12). Unfortunately, things can reach this stage when somebody will not keep his tongue under control through the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

Miriam Put Out Of The Camp

This is what happened to Miriam as we see in type in this story. She had not hesitated to speak against Moses, and therefore she had to be put out of the camp as a leper. Under the law, this was the place of all unclean persons (Num. 5:1-4; the lepers are mentioned first in those verses). It is the same in Leviticus 13 and 14, where we find the laws concerning leprosy and the cleansing of healed lepers. A

leper was unclean as long as he had the plague: “he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (Lev. 13:46).¹

The remarkable thing is that with Miriam it was apparently a form of leprosy in an advanced stage. The LORD’s anger was aroused against Miriam and Aaron and immediately Miriam stood there “leprous, as white as snow” (Num. 12:10). This complete whiteness was, according to Leviticus 13:13, precisely the condition for being pronounced clean again! This means that Miriam was stricken by God’s judgment, yet immediately a proof of His grace could be observed – grace that had her restoration in mind. She was completely leprous, there is no doubt about that. She had to be put outside the camp as an unclean person, and she had to cry out that she was unclean (v. 45). But it was not forever. God wanted to receive her again after she had been shut out of the camp seven days (Num. 12:14).

The period of seven days, which was also common for other cleansing ceremonies (see, for example, Numbers 19), refers to the complete measure of repentance required for godly restoration. Similarly, a work of repentance had to take place with the person excluded in Corinth before he could be received again in the midst of the believers (2 Cor. 2:6-8). Godly sorrow had produced “repentance leading to salvation not to be regretted” (7:10), both in his heart and in the hearts of the Corinthians who had first tolerated the wicked person in their midst.

Removing a wicked person from the midst of the believers, like shutting a leper out of a clean camp, should therefore always take place with the hope of restoration. Priestly attention and care are necessary to be able to determine what stage the leprosy has reached. It is an image of sin in a manifest form. When a leper has been completely stricken with the disease, then the typical lesson is that the person excluded no longer expects anything from himself and recognizes that “nothing good dwells” in his flesh (see Rom. 7:18). In other words, clear signs of repentance can be observed in him. As soon as that has been established, the person involved can be restored and brought back to his former place among the believers.

After seven days Miriam was allowed to re-enter the camp. She was “received again” (Num. 12:14). This is a striking example of the excommunication of a wicked

¹ Here the camp was the dwelling place of God’s people as recognized by Him. He was in their midst as the Holy One and the Just, and they were encamped around the sanctuary of God as a holy and righteous people. As soon as the camp was defiled by idolatry, the place of the faithful was with Moses “outside the camp, far from the camp” (Ex. 33:7). Similarly, after the rejection of the Messiah the place of the Hebrew believers was with their Lord “outside the camp” (Heb. 13:13).

person but also of the restoration of the offender. We cannot deal lightly with sin. God wants us to enforce discipline but at the same time, in His grace, He wants to prepare the way for a complete restoration. It is very striking to read that the people within the camp also waited for seven days until she had joined them again: “the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again” (v. 15). She waited outside and the people waited inside until the work of restoration had been accomplished!

And Learn From Me

Let us then notice Moses’ attitude, which also has much to teach us. No doubt Moses was grieved about the sin of Miriam and Aaron, who as an older brother should have known better but who also had played a sad role in the story of the golden calf (Ex. 32). What then was Moses’ reaction to this act of rebellion against his authority as the man of God? He kept silent and committed it to “Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:23). The only thing that we read here about Moses is that he “was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth” (Num. 12:3). He was not naturally humble. He had learned this humility in the school of God. By nature he was a quick-tempered man. He killed the Egyptian, and even in his old age his hot temper flared up again, when in his indignation against the rebellious people he started striking the rock instead of speaking to it (Num. 20:1-13).

Here in Numbers 12, however, Moses reminds us of the One who said to His disciples, “Learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:29). As disciples of Christ, as students who are brought up in His school, we need to react in this way when we have become the object of slander. That is what our personal attitude should be, although in such matters there is also a common responsibility of the Church according to Scripture.

We see in Numbers 12:13 that Moses prayed for his sister with a view to her restoration. “He cried out to the LORD, saying, ‘Please heal her, O God, I pray!’” In this, Moses was a type of Christ, who prayed for His enemies, even for those who stood up against Him and mocked Him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). Just as Miriam was restored on the basis of Moses’ intercession, so the people of Israel were shown mercy because of Christ’s prayer on the cross. In the book of Acts we see how the way of salvation and restoration was shown to Israel (see 3:17-26).

Prophetic Lessons

There are more prophetic lessons in the story of Numbers 12. Moses is a type of Christ as the great Prophet, Apostle and Teacher of His people (Deut. 18:15; John 5:46; Acts 3:22; Heb. 3:1-6). Now if Moses is a type of Christ, what does his marriage to a foreign woman have to say to us? The answer is obvious: Christ took a bride from the Gentiles. Moses' Ethiopian wife was a stranger – she did not belong to the people of God, yet this Gentile woman became the bride of Moses. Likewise, the Church, which is now the bride of Christ, is made up mostly of believers from the Gentiles.

We can also see Zipporah (Ex. 2:21) as such a type of the Church, and similarly Asenath, the Egyptian wife of Joseph (Gen. 41:45). The grace and love of God that have been revealed in Christ could not be limited to the Jews. The core of the gospel is that all men are equal before God. They are all sinners, but God wants to bestow His grace on all. Jews and Gentiles are alike “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). God has made us alive together with Christ and has created one new man from the two. That is the Church, which is the body and the bride of Christ, the habitation of God in the Spirit.

This grace shown to the Gentiles, however, resulted in a breach with the people of Israel, just like Moses' love for his Gentile bride broke off his ties, temporarily, with Miriam. Christ was rejected by His own, His kinsmen according to the flesh (John 1:11). He had to endure “such hostility from sinners against Himself” (Heb. 12:3), but He endured it in a patient and gentle way. He acted like Moses, who resigned himself to the opposition from his relatives and left it in the Lord's hands. Israel's rejection of the LORD's Servant, however, resulted in the nation being set aside. Similarly, Miriam's rebellion against Moses – who was God's servant (Num. 12:7-8) – resulted in her being shut out of the camp. Because of their rejection of the Messiah, God has temporarily rejected Israel as His people. He has now stretched out His hands toward the nations, and the Lord Jesus is joined with bonds of love to His Gentile bride.

In this matter between Miriam and Moses, God pronounced the verdict. Because of her sin she was put out for a certain period of time. Likewise, Israel has become “Lo-Ammi” ... “not My people” (Hos. 1:9). In the same way that the cloud of God's presence departed from above the tabernacle when He had spoken to Aaron and Miriam (Num. 12:9-10), God has now withdrawn from His people. The glory of the LORD has left the people of Israel, and it will only return at the beginning of the millennium (Ezek. 43). Miriam was shut out of the camp, outside the place of

blessing in the presence of God. Similarly, wrath has come upon Israel as a rebellious people, and the blessing of God's presence is now found in the midst of the Church.

But there is a glorious and gracious "until." Israel's rejection is not final. All Israel will be saved. The story of Numbers 12 did not end with the sad message of Miriam's exclusion but with her restoration. God's wrath may have come upon Israel to the uttermost, or fully, yet He is gracious, and even in His wrath He remembers mercy (1 Thess. 2:16; Hab. 3:2). He determines the extent and measure of Israel's suffering, as He also determined the period of seven days of Miriam's exclusion. God will be merciful to Israel and comfort His people when her "warfare is ended" and "her iniquity is pardoned" (Isa. 40:1-2).

This serious story has a happy ending. As Miriam was received again and cleansed from her leprosy, so also Israel will be received again as God's people (after the rapture of the Church) and be cleansed from all ungodliness. God chose Paul – who suffered so much opposition from the Jews as he preached the gospel of God's grace to the nations – to reveal to us the divine mystery of Israel's restoration. He did not desire that we should be ignorant of this mystery, "that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom. 11:25). In this passage we find the gracious "until," the announcement of a time determined by God in which He will restore the fortunes of His people.

In the same way as the LORD (as the One who heals His people) acted in favor of Miriam and healed her, so He will save His earthly people in a coming day. He will save them not only from their enemies who oppress them from outside, but also from their sins which accuse them inwardly. The LORD took away the leprosy from Miriam, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob and accept His people. They will be raised spiritually from death to life.

Israel's rejection meant the reconciling of the world, for God stretched out His hands to all mankind and extended the word of reconciliation to both Jews and Gentiles. So "what will their acceptance be but life from the dead" (Rom. 11:15)? Just like Miriam as a cleansed person was received again in the camp, so Israel will be received again by God as a nation that has been raised from its death sleep and cleansed from the sickness which branded it "as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed" (Num. 12:12). Some translations read that Miriam was to be "brought back," or "brought in again" (v. 14). The original meaning of the word seems to be "to gather" or "to collect." That is also the meaning of the word "acceptance" or "receiving" in Romans 11:15. God will gather the people to Himself again, the nation from which He had to hide His face for a certain period of time. He will bring

them back to the place of blessing in His presence. That will mean a new beginning, a spiritual revival: life from the dead (consider Ezek. 37).

Let us meanwhile, as members of the family of God, be on our guard that we do not fall into the same error and rebel against Christ, our great Moses. Resistance against His authority, against His Word and Spirit, are characteristic features of the last days and will inevitably bring about God's judgment (see Jude).

