

The Sin of Miriam and Aaron.

Numbers 12.

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The instruction found in this chapter is most striking and solemn instruction never more needed than at the present moment. "Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married." In the previous chapter the people had fallen into sin, complaining of the hardships and deprivations of their pilgrim life; and Moses, chafed in spirit at the conduct of the people, and weary of his service, also failed; and now Miriam and Aaron rise up in rebellion against Moses as the leader of the people. Miriam was a prophetess, and Aaron was the priest, while Moses was "king in Jeshurun." It is the rebellion of the people therefore (for Miriam and Aaron are representatives of Israel) against the rights and authority of Christ; or, to speak more accurately, it is the people using their privileges as being the messenger of Jehovah, entrusted with the communications of His mind, and hence His witnesses, and as enjoying access to Him through the priest, to cast off the authority conferred on Moses as the faithful servant and administrator of Jehovah's house. It is a solemn thing when the people of God employ the position which grace has bestowed upon them, to claim the rights which belong alone to Christ; as if the dignities which have flowed from grace could ever be independent of their source.

Miriam would seem to have been the instigator of the rebellion, for she is first named, and on her falls the weight of the chastisement. The occasion, or the ostensible occasion, was the fact that Moses had married an Ethiopian woman. This he had certainly done, but it was long before he was appointed to be a ruler and deliverer of his people — when indeed he had been rejected of Israel in Egypt, and driven into exile by the wrath of the king. In this position therefore the very marriage of which they complained was the exhibition in type of the sovereign grace of God, who, on the rejection by Israel of His beloved Son, would give Him a bride from among the Gentiles, to be His companion for ever in glory. Miriam and Aaron were thus not only blind to the actings of the sovereign grace of Jehovah, but they also were forgetful that they themselves were debtors to that same grace; for He who had called Moses to be the mediator, had also assigned to them their respective places.

In truth, however, jealousy was the fount of these bitter waters, as verse 2 reveals. The marriage of Moses was only used as a blind to conceal what was working in their hearts. What they desired was equality with Moses; for they said, "Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? hath He not also spoken by us?" All this was very specious and deceptive. It might seem to unwary souls as if Miriam and Aaron were only guarding the rights of the Lord's people, merely asserting that while Jehovah was their common Lord they were all alike brethren. Such a thing is not unheard of today — saints claiming (as if there could be claims where all is of grace) to be on a common equality, as to gift as well as to position, to the forgetfulness of the fact that the Lord as Head has given gifts to His Church according to His own will. The same sovereign will that put Moses into his place, determines the places of His servants in the assembly - a

sphere where the Lord alone has His rights, and where He will surely vindicate His authority when His people call it in question, or fail to uphold it. What might have seemed zeal on the part of Miriam and Aaron was in fact therefore rebellion against the authority of Jehovah.

The next record is, that "the Lord heard it." We may well lay it to heart, as reminding us how near the Lord is to us even in our failures. It is not surprising that He should hearken and hear the conversation of those that feared Him, and spake often one to another, as recorded in Malachi; but the history of Thomas, as well as the present incident, teaches us, what we otherwise might forget, that He equally listens (but with what a different attitude!) to our sinful and doubting words. Mark, too, that before the action of the Lord is described, consequent upon His hearing the words of Miriam and Aaron, the Holy Spirit turns aside to bear testimony to His servant Moses. This is exceedingly beautiful, and the testimony is not less so. It says, "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth." (v. 3.) This, we say, is a wondrous testimony, and one that points to the fact that in personal character — character produced assuredly by the Holy Spirit — as well as in office, Moses was a distinct foreshadowing of Christ. (See Matt. 11: 29.) There is a special reason for the introduction of this testimony in this place. A meek spirit never resents an insult, but bows its head unresistingly in the presence of evil, accepting all without complaint. Moses therefore would not have vindicated himself; and on this very account it is that the Lord Himself stepped in to clear His servant from the aspersions cast upon him. (Compare Rom. 12: 19.) The testimony to his meekness gives thus the ground also for Jehovah's action in summoning Moses and his accusers to meet Him at the tabernacle of the congregation.

The Lord spake *suddenly*, it will be observed. He was prompt to vindicate His sovereign rights, and He spake "unto" each; for He had to deal with each individually. They obeyed, perforce obeyed, the divine summons, "and they three came out. And the Lord came down in the pillar of the cloud, and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam: and they both came forth." (vv. 4, 5.) It is to be noticed that, while all three were commanded to come out to the tabernacle, only Aaron and Miriam are spoken to when the Lord came down to meet them. His object was to deal with the sin of the two rebels, and to maintain the position of His servant; and in His tenderness, He permits Moses to be present to hear his own vindication. And what a vindication it was! To a prophet the Lord would make Himself known in a vision, and would speak unto him in a dream; but a far closer intimacy He had reserved for His servant Moses, who was faithful in all His house. (See Heb. 3: 5, 6.) To him "will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold."

The Lord thus testifies, in this remarkable manner, both to the fidelity of His servant and also to the special place of nearness which He, in His grace, had vouchsafed unto him. Miriam and Aaron had said, "Hath not the Lord also spoken by us?" "None but Moses," is the Lord's answer, "has the privilege of being spoken to 'mouth to mouth,' and of beholding 'the similitude of the Lord.'" There is an especial significance in this statement. It points back to the apostacy of Israel, in which Aaron and Miriam had had their share, when Moses alone was faithful, and when, in communion with Jehovah's mind, he had taken the tabernacle, and pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of the congregation; for then it was that the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle (as in the scene before

us), "and the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh, unto his friend." (Exodus 33: 7-11.) Where were Aaron and Miriam at that time? And yet they had dared to deny his place of intimacy with the Lord, and to claim equality with him! What wonder that the Lord says, after recalling this to their minds, "Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" (v. 8.) This was to sin indeed, and to sin both against holiness and grace; and hence "the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and He departed." (v. 9.) But when the cloud had departed from off the tabernacle, it was seen that His hand had smitten Miriam; for she was leprous, white as snow. And Aaron, who had joined her in rebellion, is made to perceive the awful consequences of their sin. Time was when Miriam, the prophetess, had led the song of the women of Israel on the banks of the Red Sea; and now she was a defiled leper! How often is it that the character of sin is not seen until its fruits are reaped! The eyes of Aaron are opened the moment he beheld the chastisement inflicted on his sister, and, humbled, he turns at once to Moses (to Moses, whose mediatorship he had denied), and cries, "Alas, my lord, I beseech thee, lay not the sin upon us, wherein we have done foolishly, and wherein we have sinned. Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed when he cometh out of his mother's womb." (vv. 11, 12.)

It is evident that Jehovah had wrought mightily in Aaron's soul through the dealing of His hand; for nothing could be more complete than his confession and intercession. First, by turning to Moses he humbles himself, and acknowledges the special place which Moses occupies before God; next, he fully identifies himself with Miriam's sin ("Wherein *we* have done foolishly, and wherein *we* have sinned"). He then owns their common desert; and, finally, he takes the place of intercessor on behalf of Miriam.* Moses instantly responds to the appeal of Aaron. Nothing could be more beautiful than the self-forgetfulness of this meek and faithful servant in all this scene. He had left himself in the hands of the Lord, and he had been amply vindicated; and with unruffled calm he responds to the intercession of Aaron, and takes his place of mediator, showing that there was not a trace of feeling upon his lowly spirit, as he thus immediately cried unto the Lord, saying, "Heal her now, O God, I beseech thee." (v. 13.) Jehovah heard His servant's prayer. But the sin of Miriam had not only been against God, it was also against Moses; and hence Jehovah will have her to suffer certain consequences of her rebellion in the eyes of all His people. A far less thing — even if her father had but spit in her face — would have entailed seven days' shame. How much more when she had been polluted with the leprosy in chastisement of her sin! She was healed in answer to the prayer of Moses; but she must be shut out from the camp seven days before she could be restored to the enjoyment of her lost privileges.

*There is doubtless, whatever the contrast, a typical reference also in this to the intercession of Christ, as founded upon His identification with His people's sins on the cross, on behalf of Israel, smitten with leprosy because of their rejection of grace, which included the Gentiles (the Ethiopian) as well as themselves.

These facts are very instructive. Whenever sin is committed by the people of God, it is forgiven on confession. (See 1 John 1: 9.) This is undoubted; but at the same time the forgiven saint has often to suffer, after he is forgiven, certain governmental consequences of his sin. Thus if a sin, for example, has been committed by a believer against the people of God, the one who has committed it may often be outside of the privileges of the assembly long after he is assured

of forgiveness. Moreover, it should be remarked that while forgiveness is immediate on confession, restoration to communion is a work of time. Seven days must elapse, as in the case of Miriam — a period during which self-judgment will have its perfect work, bringing the soul to view its sin in communion with God, and thus taking His part against it. When this point is reached, restoration is complete, and the soul can be received back again into the assembly as the expression of their confidence in its restoration. It is well when the people of God have apprehended this divine method with souls.

Another thing is to be observed. "The people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again." The sin of one delayed the progress of all the people. In truth, when the assembly is occupied with discipline, and there are seasons when the Lord's honour requires that it should be so occupied, it has no leisure for edification or progress. When Achan sinned, the victories of Israel came to an end; and they were compelled to purge themselves from evil before they could resume their conflicts with the foe. And so here, the camp could not take one further step towards Canaan until Miriam is brought back. This shows out, in a very solemn manner, the nature and consequences of sin in the midst of God's people.

May we learn from the example of Miriam more of the evil of sin before God, and more also of our mutual responsibilities. E. D.