

Special Focus Session

May 28, 2023

AVOIDING A CRITICAL SPIRIT

Numbers 12:1-15

A critical spirit can pop up from almost anywhere. But while the circumstances surrounding their appearance may differ, all critical spirits share the same common source: selfish pride. In every case, they are driven by the desire to *have* what someone else *has*, or to *be* what someone else *is*. Whether that is accomplished by promoting oneself *upward* or dragging someone else *downward*, a critical spirit bristles with the attitude of selfishness.

Pride exposed (vv. 1-3). Miriam was Moses' older sister. She was responsible for watching over him when he was placed in a basket as an infant and hidden in the reeds of the Nile (Ex. 1:22ff). She was called a *prophetess*, leading worship after the crossing of the Red Sea, and even sang a song of deliverance (Ex. 15:20ff). Even though she held a prominent position in these formative years of the nation of Israel, apparently, Miriam wanted even more. Her attack on Moses had little to do with his Cushite wife. Whether this was Zipporah (Ex. 2:21) or another wife who came later, we can't tell. But Miriam used her as an excuse to divide the family. While Aaron (Moses and Miriam's brother) is also mentioned, the way it is written indicates he was not the instigator. The real issue appears to be jealousy: "Does the Lord speak only through Moses? Does He not also speak through us?" This was not about Moses' wife, but rather about Moses being in charge; and Miriam wanting to be. As such, it was a complaint against the God who chose him.

Pride explained (vv. 4-9). Verse 3 points out that "Moses was a very humble man." His quiet humility is clearly contrasted with Miriam's selfish pride. He didn't deserve this kind of attack. To somehow blame Moses for his choice of a wife—while poisoning Aaron's attitude along the way, attacking God's deliverer of Israel directly, and shamelessly promoting her own agenda—didn't fool anyone... especially God. Miriam wanted some recognition, and in verse 4, she was about to get it! The intervention of the Lord took the form of a *sudden* meeting. All three parties were called to a meet with Him at the door of the tabernacle. That made this a *spiritual* meeting. Notice as well, that while all three were called out, the Lord summoned only Aaron and Miriam to stand before Him (v. 5). So, this was a *separating* meeting. And based on what the Lord had to say in the following verses, this was a *serious* meeting. When the three came out, the Lord came down (v. 5). The Lord's defense of Moses is not so much a chastisement of their selfish ambitions as an elevation of Moses. It seems that while no prophet is without honor, some have greater honor than others. And Moses had perhaps the highest. In some cases, the Lord spoke to prophets in visions (see Gen. 15:1; Gen. 46:2; Dan. 8:1ff, for example). In other cases, He spoke to them in dreams (see Gen. 28:12, et al.). In those cases, the word of the Lord was essentially indirect; it came shrouded in an appearance or event. "Not so with My servant Moses," the Lord said (v. 7). With him, things were different. So faithful was Moses before God and among His people, that God spoke to him directly, with even a semblance of Himself present. In other words, Moses was more than a prophet. He visited with God as with a friend (see Ex. 33:11ff). How dare Miriam attempt to insert herself into that role as Moses' equal? (v.8).

Pride punished (vv. 9-13). Sin always has consequences. In this case, the anger of the Lord (v. 9) resulted in immediate judgement. While the word *leprosy* is not used here, the description leaves little doubt. Aaron's response to this tragedy is confession and repentance. He refers to the power-play as "a sin foolishly committed" (v. 11) and pleads for Moses' intercession. For the first time in this story, Moses speaks. Certainly, his humility is on full display, as any outrage he might have felt toward his sister melted away at the sight of her suffering (v. 13).

Pride repaired (vv. 14-16). The Lord's reply to Moses indicates both justice and compassion. Clearly Miriam deserved some punishment for her selfish pride. Yet the Lord set her outside the camp—separated and unclean—for only seven days, minimizing the humiliation, while still making His point. It should be noted as well, that the entire nation waited for her in her repentance and subsequent suffering. Only when the week was over did the people move on.