

The Cloud of Witnesses

Miriam The sister of Moses

Lesson 1: Miriam – Introduced Moses to Pharaoh's daughter

Reading: Exodus 2:1-10

The record of Moses' birth is amazing. It is set within a period of increasing hostility. The Hebrews were in Egypt, having immigrated as a result of a famine in Canaan. Jacob's adult sons had journeyed to Egypt to buy food. However, their sibling Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery, had become the equivalent of the Prime Minister of Egypt. Joseph, instead of retaliating against their treachery, invited the entire family to join him and to enjoy the material blessings of his new home. There were about 70 members of the family who joined Joseph, and they settled in the area called Goshen.

Time passed. Jacob the patriarch died. Joseph also died, as did the Pharaoh who had appointed Joseph to his role. A new Pharaoh came to power – one who wasn't interested in history and who didn't want to recognise the positive influence Joseph had made to his country's fortunes but saw, instead, the growth of the Hebrew population as a direct threat to his reign.

The new generation of Egyptians were equally concerned and so a period of slavery and harsh treatment followed. However, during this time of physical oppression the Lord continued to cause the number of Hebrews to grow. This frightened the Pharaoh into decreeing that every Hebrew boy born should be murdered by being thrown into the Nile to drown.

Into this horrendous milieu, Amram and Jochebed conceived and a male baby was born – a son, a brother to his older brother, Aaron, and his oldest sibling and sister, Miriam. It is thought that Aaron was about three years older than his brother and Miriam about seven years his senior.

No doubt, even before the baby was born, there would have been considerable discussion within the family as to what they should do if the baby turned out to be a male. I would be very surprised if Aaron and Miriam were unaware of the consequences, should their mother have a baby boy. Indeed, I'm quite sure there would have been a real bitter-sweet reaction when the baby finally arrived. Rejoicing in the safe arrival of a new addition to the family and a deep-seated joy that it was a boy, and yet, at the same time, a real fear that the baby would be confiscated and thrown to his death.

(You will notice that I have not referred to the baby as Moses. The reason for that is we are not told what Amram and Jochebed called their son.)

It must have been a time of extreme terror when the baby arrived, knowing that it would have been difficult for the baby to escape death for a variety of reasons. First, Jochebed was no longer pregnant or carrying the baby, so people they knew would naturally want to know what had happened. Secondly, the authorities would have been charged with looking out for any newborn. Then, of course, the sound of a baby's crying would inevitably have alerted people to where the baby was.

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The Bible tells us that Jochebed hid her baby for three months. It would have taken incredible ingenuity and probably a miracle of God's grace and power, since I have never known of anyone who is able to stop a baby crying in its first three months – and usually very loudly at that. Nevertheless, the baby must have been successfully hidden.

After the three months, the next stage in Jochebed's plan had to be executed. Unable to keep her baby at home and in secret any longer, something far more daring and risky would have to be done. Jochebed decided to release him to God's protection and will. So, instead of her son being drowned according to Pharaoh's edict, she made an ark – a basket of rushes – and placed him into it. She released the ark at the spot where Pharaoh's daughter was known to go bathing. No doubt, hoping with all her heart that the sound of a baby crying would soften Pharaoh's daughter's heart and thereby save her son. She was right.

However, Jochebed must have planned beyond the baby being discovered. She would have decided that it would be a good idea if she could continue to nurture and train her own child. So she developed a clever strategy. Rather than guarding the site where the baby might be found, which would just raise suspicion and disdain, Jochebed enrolled her daughter Miriam as scout, spy and negotiator.

Miriam must have been a wonderfully obedient daughter and an extremely brave sister. She executed her role to the letter – she watched the watering place, waited until Pharaoh's daughter had picked up her brother and then casually approached with a practical offer to find a suitable nurse for the baby from amongst the Hebrew women. Please notice that the Bible doesn't say that Miriam suggested getting the child's mother. No, that would have uncovered the plan and probably led to murder. Instead, Miriam just offered for one of the Hebrew women to help.

I reckon that Miriam was one fantastic seven year old, don't you? Someone used by her Mum to rescue her brother. However, I guess Miriam would have eventually realised that she was actually used by God to rescue His people, the Hebrew nation.

Miriam would say to us today...

I love my little brother and would do anything to save his life. As I look back, I can see how God has used me to not only save Moses, but all the Hebrew people, including me, as well.

Prayer

Father, thank You for the example of Miriam. Please help me to take risks that will advance and extend Your Kingdom on earth, even though it may seem just a small thing to me. Help us to encourage children to be obedient to their parents by sharing this wonderful story with them. Amen.

Additional Readings

- 1 Chronicles 6:1-3
- Numbers 26:52-61
- Acts 7:17-29

Questions

1. Why was Miriam's action so significant?
2. What emotions do you think Miriam experienced as she waited to see what Pharaoh's daughter might do?
3. Why do you think Miriam carried out her mother's plan?

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Lesson 2: Miriam – The worship leader

Reading: Exodus 15:1-21

Let's go over our thoughts for a moment. Miriam and Aaron were brought up as slaves and foreigners in Egypt, and had been experiencing hardship every day for decades. Moses had, of course, been brought up in the palace of the Pharaohs but not so Aaron and Miriam. Remember, the edict demanding all male children be drowned had been given prior to Moses' birth. The harsh treatment of the people persisted and yet it wasn't until after Moses had grown up and left the palace that he killed the Egyptian and fled into the wilderness.

Moses lived in Midian for forty years before God called him back to Egypt to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. All that time the Egyptians continued to oppress the Hebrews. When Moses returned to Egypt and confronted Pharaoh and his royal court, they made things even worse for the people, including Miriam, who by now was over 80 years old.

However, eventually through God's grace and mighty acts, Moses was permitted by Pharaoh to lead the people away. Nevertheless, as soon as Pharaoh realised the ramifications of his action, he changed his mind and, together with his chariots and army, proceeded to chase after the Israelites in order to recapture them.

Imagine being Miriam. You have been treated abominably for years and then miraculously rescued by God through your brother. You see the light at the end of the tunnel and run as fast as you can towards it. Everything seems almost too good to be true. You finally make the break from slavery, hatred and fear, and walk with increasing joy into the light of the future.

Then, just as the significance of what has incredibly taken place was dawning on you, the whole dream is shattered. There, before you, looms the Red Sea, a great and impregnable barrier. How on earth are they to cross over? And if that isn't bad enough, there arises a horrific scream. Someone looking back sees, on the horizon, the rising dust of the advancing Egyptian army chariots.

Now what are they to do? Stuck between the immovable Red Sea in front of them and the murderous Egyptians behind them, who were gaining ground by the second. How would you feel if you were Miriam and the other Hebrews? It got worse.

Suddenly, all the people turned on Moses and blamed him for antagonising Pharaoh by taking them out of Egypt. What would become of them all?

God, through Moses, performed another miracle and all the Hebrews passed through on dry land. But that wasn't all. The huge wall of water that had rescued the Hebrews suddenly returned to 'normal' once the Egyptian chariots were well on their way through the dry channel. All the enemy forces were drowned; not one escaped. The Hebrews watched in absolute awe and wonder.

After Miriam had witnessed their miraculous deliverance she burst forth in praise and worship. Not only did she sing her praises to the Lord but she also led the women in dancing and playing their tambourines.

As we read the account and consider the emotions involved, we can readily understand her desire to use her whole body to express her love, thanks, praise, worship and adoration to the Lord. No doubt she was releasing all that pent-up energy in response to the very real sense of finally being

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set free through the grace, mercy and love of her God.

Have you ever felt that way? If so, try not to lose the wonder and sense of awe and gratitude. If you haven't, God longs for you to do so. He sent Jesus to die for you so you too could be set free from sin, guilt, death and Hell.

Miriam would say to us today...

Never lose sight of the wonder, joy, and feelings of freedom and release when you have been forgiven and set free. Our worship should be genuine, an overflow from our heart, exuberant, expressive and uninhibited. Being over eighty is no excuse!

Prayer

Father, please help me to never forget or minimise Your awesome grace and mercy in paying the price to redeem me. May my life be a spontaneous and joyful expression of my heartfelt thanks to You for all you have done for me, for Your unconditional love and amazing forgiveness. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Micah 6:1-8
- 1 Chronicles 15:16-29
- 1 Chronicles 29:10-13

Questions

1. Why do we find it hard to flow in spontaneous worship?
2. What are the reasons you want to worship God?
3. How do we keep ourselves ready for worship?

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Lesson 3: Miriam – Was jealous of her brother

Reading: Numbers 12:1-16

None of us is perfect. Moses wasn't, but neither were Aaron and Miriam. Aaron was involved with the golden calf debacle, although it doesn't seem Miriam was implicated.

Moses made some 'interesting' choices for his marriage partners. His first wife, Zipporah, was a Midianite. Whilst her father Jethro (Reuel) had invited Moses to stay with him, that may have been partly due to the fact that they thought Moses was an Egyptian, not a Hebrew. The Midianites did not like nor treat the Israelites well. Midian was one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah who was banished by Abraham. The Midianites were the ones who took Joseph from the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites.

So whilst marrying one of Jethro's daughters may have been a marriage of convenience, Moses, nevertheless, had made a poor choice. This is proven by his failing to have the boys circumcised, probably due, in part, to Zipporah's reluctance to acknowledge their Hebrew heritage.

Whilst Zipporah and the boys accompanied Moses to Egypt, it is sad that she eventually forsook Moses and returned with the boys to her homeland and family.

When Moses took an Ethiopian wife, Miriam finally lost her cool. How often were Hebrew men commanded to only take a wife from their own people? How many Hebrew women would have loved to be chosen to be Moses' wife? Tradition suggests that Miriam certainly married a Hebrew man – either Hur or Caleb, we can't be certain – however, both were of Israeli stock.

This series of bad choices was undoubtedly part of the excuse for Miriam's indignation. However, Scripture suggests it was not righteous indignation. Who Moses married was no business of Miriam's. We have no right to control other people and we are certainly not responsible for their choices, good or bad. (The parable of the prodigal son is a classic example of how God deals with our poor choices.)

However, there is probably an even more inappropriate reason for her gossip, and that is jealousy mingled with pride. I suspect Miriam never forgot that she was Moses' older sister. She was the one who had effectively saved his life. And I'm sure she never forgot that Moses was once a murderer.

Moses may have had an incredible revelation of God. Yes, God had used Moses mightily in many ways. But didn't Moses decline to be obedient to God until God relented and sent Aaron along to be his mouthpiece? Didn't God also speak through Aaron and Miriam, and weren't they co-leaders? Moses' choices were now going to reflect badly upon them as well.

There is an old but very apt saying, "*God is the silent listener to every conversation*". Maybe it originated with Aaron and Miriam. Scripture records that the Lord heard their criticism. I love the fact that Moses didn't have to tell God about it. He was able to leave it all in the Lord's hands. God heard and God dealt with it. God does not overlook sin; He deals with it.

Aaron and Miriam were publicly humiliated in front of Moses. Miriam was made leprous. Aaron cried out to Moses for forgiveness and Moses turned to the Lord. Miriam was healed but had to endure public humiliation by being confined outside the camp for seven days. Scripture adds that the people didn't move on until Miriam was restored to the camp. Her rebellion had consequences

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on everyone.

I'm sure David remembered this when confronted by Saul's hostility. David remained tranquil behind the principle that he would not touch the Lord's anointed. It's a lesson we all need to learn. Our spiritual leaders are directly accountable to God, not us.

Miriam would say to us today...

I got it terribly wrong. I was jealous of my brother. I should have prayed for him and encouraged him. I've since realised how hard it is to lead. I now appreciate what a great leader Moses was and recognise his incredible humility.

Prayer

Father, thank You so much for the spiritual leaders You have appointed over me. Please help me support and encourage them, recognising the awesome responsibility You have entrusted to them. Please bless them in every way: their marriage, their family, their finances, their health and their ministry. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Genesis 4:1-12
- Genesis 37:3-28
- 1 Samuel 26:7-24

Questions

1. Why do we measure ourselves against others?
2. When and how is it appropriate to speak in censure over our leaders?
3. What actions should we take to support our leaders?

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Lesson 4: Miriam – Died at Kadesh

Reading: Numbers 20:1-12

Once Miriam returned into the Hebrew camp, the people moved on towards Canaan.

However, Aaron and Miriam's rebellion was not the only challenge Moses faced. That was quickly followed by the ten spies stirring up the people so they refused to enter the Promised Land.

Shortly after, Korah, Dathan and Abiram rebelled against Moses' leadership. They were supported by a group of 250 antagonists from among the leaders of the Israelites. God stepped in, once more, and brought a swift judgment on the rebels who were all swallowed alive by something like an earthquake.

Following that incident, God re-established His recognised leaders to avoid any further rebellion. In this instance, although all the leaders of the tribes presented their staff before God, God showed His approval of Aaron by causing only his staff to burst into bud. Aaron's staff, still in bud, was then placed in the Ark of the Covenant as a permanent reminder of God's choice and anointing.

So what of Miriam? What was her final epitaph and legacy? Well, we can never take away, from her, the fact that she helped save Moses' life and, hence, the lives of the Hebrew nation. Tradition suggests that Miriam was very well respected and held in high honour.

Although there is only one other person recorded in the Bible with the same name, there is ample reason to believe that the New Testament name 'Mary' is a derivative of the name 'Miriam'. Miriam's life is likely to have inspired many people – the reason why we read of many women called Mary within the New Testament era and the millennia to follow. Even the mother of Jesus was called Mary.

Miriam may have failed ethically through her jealousy of Moses. However, it seems to me, that she was totally forgiven by God and restored to her leadership role. She was recognised and honoured, by the Israelites, as a gifted leader and prophetess. I think God's final approval was established through Micah's prophecy, where Miriam was included when it was quoted that God sent Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead the people out of Egypt and redeem them from the land of slavery.

The story of Miriam's life is, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 10, an example. An example to follow and an example to avoid. As we see in so many records of the people in the Bible, God not only records their successes but He also records their failures.

Miriam the loving, obedient and courageous sister, the spontaneous and extravagant worshipper was also the inappropriate, self-protecting, misguided and jealous criticiser. However, once she had been sentenced, humiliated, forgiven and healed, she was restored to the community and to her original position, just as if the incident never occurred. Unlike Korah, Dathan and Abiram whose lives were cut short, Miriam was able to forget the past and move on.

We all fail God one way or another. However, God longs for us to be restored. He sent Jesus to pay the price for us. Have you appropriated that forgiveness for yourself yet? Don't let failure and guilt haunt you and hold you back. Confess what you have done wrong, ask God to forgive you, wash you clean and set you free – and then MOVE ON!

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Today, God is inviting you to break with the past, come back into His family (and to the Christian community) and move forward into your destiny. Like Miriam, thank the Lord and then, as an expression of your enthusiastic worship, pick up your tambourine and dance.

Miriam would say to us today...

I shall never forget the joy I had when I was allowed back into the camp once I had been forgiven, healed and restored. Our God is a merciful God, who loves us and longs for us to have an open and intimate relationship with Him.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for being a merciful and forgiving God. Thank you that You forgive completely and set us free, through the ransom paid by Jesus Christ Your Son. Please help me to live in that freedom and faithfully follow You until I see You face to face. Amen.

Additional Readings

- Micah 6:1-8
- Psalm 103:1-18
- Matthew 1:18-21
- John 1:19

Questions

1. How do we learn to accept the forgiveness God offers us?
2. Why is it that we so often think we have committed the unforgivable sin?
3. What is your lasting impression of Miriam?