

Miriam



Here in Exodus 15 the nation of Israel sings a powerful song of praise to God. They were slaves in Egypt for a long, long time. But God had led them out of that slavery with His powerful hand. In fact, when the Egyptians had pursued them God had opened up the Red Sea to let Israel pass and then buried the Egyptian army in the waters as they pursued.

So they sing with all of their hearts because they sense the passion of the moment.

And, not only do they feel the passion, but there are a couple of people to lead them in their singing.

First, there's Moses. **Exodus 15:1** says *"Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: 'I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'"* And this song goes on for 19 verses (that's a long song)

Then in **v. 20** Miriam picks up a tambourine and leads the women in song and they repeat the first verse of Moses' song: **Exodus 15:21** *"Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea."*

When I was younger, some Christian we used to sing a version of this song.. well.

I don't know what it sounded like, but I DO know that the people sang their song of praise with all of their hearts because they sensed the passion... and they had people to lead them in singing

And one of those people who led them in singing was Miriam – Moses' big sister. Today we will focus on her story.

We're first introduced to Miriam when she's just a young girl (12/13?). In **Exodus 2** Moses' parents are faced with a crisis. The pharaoh has decreed that every Hebrew baby boy was to be thrown into the Nile to drown. For three months they hide their baby, but eventually it becomes obvious that will ultimately be fruitless. So they devise a plan. They build a basket and coat it with pitch, they put the baby inside, and then they put the basket in the reeds along the shore to be found.

Exodus 2:4 tells us *(Moses') sister stood at a distance to see what would happen to him.*

Now, she might have been there because her mother asked her to. Or, she might have decided this on her own (we're not told). But one thing becomes apparent... **she's a very SMART girl.**

We're told in **v.6** that when Pharaoh's daughter opens the basket, realizes it is a Hebrew child, and

she *"feels sorry"* for the baby. At this point Miriam comes up asks Pharaoh's daughter, **Exodus 2:7** *"Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?"*

Now, notice: She didn't ask Pharaoh's daughter if she wanted to keep the baby. She didn't ask if Pharaoh's daughter even loved the child. She simply PRESUMED this Egyptian would both love her baby brother and keep him as her own, because she treated the decision as if it were already a decided fact.

One of the rules of sales is when making a sale - never ask if the client wants to buy your product. Instead, to close the sale, you give them choices. You ask if they'd like the product in pink or blue. You ask if they'd like it the medium size or extra large. Because once they've begun to make those choices, you've made the sale. That's what Miriam did with Pharaoh's daughter. She was a very smart girl...

But she was also a very SPIRITUAL girl. Her parents had made this basket and they placed it in the river trusting that God would look out for their baby. They trusted God and that was a good thing. But Miriam went down to the river and WATCHED to see what will happen to the baby. She EXPECTED something to happen. And she expected something to happen because she believed God would do something. That's a mark of a deeper spirituality

There are a lot of people who place things before God. They'll pray and then leave that matter in God's hands... but they never bother to watch to see what God will do. Now that's ok – in so far as it goes. But they don't pray "expectantly". They just put their basket in the river and hope for the best.

Miriam had a deeper spiritual walk because she went the extra step of watching for God to act.

One of the things you notice is that this whole family is very dedicated to God. And I believe that it was because Aaron and Moses *and Miriam* were children of very Godly parents and they all showed a dedication and trust in God. And that is probably why - in the book of Micah - God tells Israel: *"I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and MIRIAM."* **Micah 6:4**

Miriam (like her bro's) grew up to become the kind of person that God could entrust with great things: She was sent by God to help lead His people

How did she do that? How did Miriam lead God's people? Well, **Exodus 15:20** tells us she was a prophetess. A prophet or prophetess was someone who declared God's word to others. We often think a prophet would have been someone who predicted the future, but that wasn't always true. Sometimes they were proclaimers who told others what God intended them to hear. And they didn't even always just preach: sometimes these prophets were people who led others in singing.

Colossians 3:16 tells us that this is one of the purposes of singing... to teach others. *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."*

The songs we sing each Sunday aren't merely for our enjoyment – they allow us to minister to others and lift them up before God. God intends for us to use the songs we sing to teach and admonish us. And when someone comes up on stage and sings a song to glorify God – they are also teaching and admonishing us.

1 Chronicles 25:1 tells us that *"...David and the captains of the host set apart some of the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, for the ministry of PROPHECYING with harps, with lyres, and with cymbals"*

Like those prophets... Miriam, it appears from **v.20** led the women in worship and singing.

As I studied, I noticed something unusual about this verse. In **verse 20** – whose sister is Miriam said to be? She's *Aaron's sister*.

I puzzled over that for a little while. You would think she would be called Moses' sister? Then it occurred to me. What role did Aaron play in Israel? Well, he was the High Priest. It was his job to lead people in worship. By calling Miriam "Aaron's sister" in this verse, it might be that the author was telling us that Aaron and Miriam worked together in ministering to the people's worship needs.

Thus, during the Exodus, it would appear that... · Moses led the people on their journey · Aaron led the people in their worship · And Miriam led the women in singing and praising God

Each of them had their specific and very important area of responsibility.

Bigotry and Jealously - Numbers 12

But there came a day when Miriam wasn't happy with that arrangement. Turn with me to **Numbers 12:1**. This tells of an incident that occurred not more than a couple of years after they crossed the Red Sea,

just before they come to the border of the Promised Land. It says: *"Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite."*

Notice Miriam's name comes first - it's not "Aaron and Miriam, but *Miriam and Aaron*. Both she and Aaron are complaining about Moses' marriage to a Cushite. In the KJV you'll see that they translate that word as "Ethiopian" because Cushites were Ethiopian. They were dark skinned Africans.

Both Aaron and Miriam complain - but Miriam's name comes first in the verse. And later in the chapter she's the one who God punishes (not Aaron). In other words, she's the one who's REALLY complaining and making noise about Moses and his marriage with this Cushite woman. Aaron, who seems like a weak leader, foolishly goes along.

Actually the marriage itself could not be criticized for the Cushites were not among those whom God said the Israelites should not marry (Ex. 34:11, 16).

A lot of the details in this chapter are left to our imagination, but from the little we ARE told I've come to believe that Moses' first wife, Zipporah, has died and he's taken this 2nd woman, this Cushite to be his bride.¹ She's not an Israelite, she's a black woman. She's different. And Miriam isn't happy so she used the "race card".

Not only is Miriam a SMART woman, and a SPIRITUAL woman, she is also a BIGOT! A racist. She plays the race card to get something she wants.

You see, her *racist tirade* is not the real reason for her displeasure. It's only a means to an end. The real reason is clear from Miriam and Aaron's question, **v. 2** *Has the LORD spoken only through Moses? "Hasn't he also spoken through us?"* Envy, perhaps simmering for a long time, now came to the surface.

But Moses isn't listening to her. Now Moses, we know, was a very Godly man. He talked with God all

¹ The identity of this Cushite woman has been debated by scholars. First, on the basis of Gen 2:13; 10:6; Ps 68:31; and Isa 18:1, Cush, the first son of Ham, is identified with Nubia (or perhaps Ethiopia), which bordered ancient Egypt on the south. If this connection is assumed, Moses' Cushite wife would have been a woman other than Zipporah, his Midianite wife from the clan of Jethro and Reuel. Some have suggested that Zipporah had died, and the Cushite wife was of a recent marriage.⁷³ On the other hand, the synonymous parallel cola in Hab 3:7 would evidence an association of Cushan with the Midianites, giving credence to the identity of the Cushite woman with Zipporah.¹ BUT IN EITHER CASE THE ACCUSATION WAS ETHNIC!

the time. Do you suppose he'd talked with God about who he was going to marry? Of course he would have. And God has probably given His approval of the marriage... and Moses would have told Miriam as much. That's the only reason I can think of for Miriam and Aaron to protest: **Num. 12:2** *"Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?... Hasn't he also spoken through us?"*

In other words: *"How dare you tell us God spoke to you and gave you His approval. We're prophets too and He didn't say anything to us!"*

Now, Miriam was a very **smart** woman and a deeply **spiritual** woman... but she suffered from **bigotry**, and even deeper, **SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND PRIDE**. She was a leader in Israel. She was Moses' big sister. She seemed to suddenly not like that her younger brother had a higher position. After all, she had a position that deserved to be respected too. But little brother Moses isn't listening to her!

And the more she thinks about it, the madder she gets until finally – I suspect - she challenged him before the entire assembly (it says she *"began to speak against Moses"*)

She began to speak against Moses...but notice it also says, *"And the LORD heard this."* God listened in. And then God stepped in.

Look with to **Numbers 12:4-10**. We're told God heard what Miriam had said... and *"At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, 'Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you.'*

(I've heard that from my dad...now that is NOT something I'd want to hear from God)

So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, he said, 'Listen to my words:

"When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?"

9 The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them. When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam— leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy." (vv. 4-9)

Leprosy is a terrible disease that results in a person's body literally decaying before the sufferer's

eyes. And one of its characteristics is when a person's skin turns white.

When God administers justice, the punishment fits the crime. God essentially was telling Miriam – "So you don't like the color of your sister-in-laws skin? Ok. If you like white, I'll give you white!" ("I'll give you leprosy.") And since her sin was a public sin, her punishment was a very public punishment. Now it goes on to say that God DID heal her – because Moses asked Him to – but in **verses 14-15** we're told that the Lord told Moses *"... Confine her outside the camp for seven days; after that she can be brought back."* So Miriam was confined outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on till she was brought back."

Miriam had apparently been very public in her criticism of Moses and his wife, and so the punishment was also very public. Everybody in camp knew Miriam had overstepped her bounds.

Lessons

And that is the end of our story. Now, what does all this teach us?

1st - It teaches us that Godly children reflect the godliness of their parents. Parents take note: Miriam and her brothers became the kind of people they did because their parents trusted God and took their faith seriously. Thus Miriam, Aaron and Moses honored their parents in turn by taking their faith seriously. And because of the kind of home they grew up in God eventually entrusted them with powerful ministries.

Parents remember this, and work to make your children successful in life by being sure that you do everything you can to make your faith real to your children. And children take note: you honor your parents most when you live your lives to honor God.

2nd - It teaches us that God wants us to use our gifts for Him. Miriam could sing. And she was willing to be used by God with this gift. Because she was willing to be used by God, He entrusted her with the very special ministry of leading others closer to God.

3rd It teaches that God does not honor those who do not honor and do not treat all made in his image, with equal honor. "you like white...?"

Recently I saw a movie about Nelson Mandela and apartheid in South Africa. It was mostly about one of the prison guards who had the responsibility to watch over Mandela for most of the 27 years he was imprisoned because of his color and view that all are equal before God and man.

One day the guards' children saw some black people being treated very harshly by the police. She

was upset. Why did they do that? The mother told them that keeping the races separate was God's way. It was the Bible's way. She told her children that God created the animals unique and different from each other and that showed that God did not want us to mix with each other.

What hogwash! She forgot that we are not separate species but all part of the same Human Race.

One of the greatest gifts that the Christian church can give to the world is to lead the way in showing that Christ followers live without racial or social prejudice. That we choose to see people the way our heavenly father sees them – objects of his love. That means throwing off false notions we sometimes learn from our families – when they don't line up with the WOG. We must never forget that Jesus was not Caucasian, and we are just as much the benefactors of His wide open arms as are all the other non-middle eastern races. Objects of redemption.

4th- It teaches us that God expects us to treat His gifts and the positions of responsibilities He gives us as privileges... not rights. Miriam had a position of responsibility. She had influence and respect...but she took her position and used it as a weapon to influence Moses to do things HER way. As we've just discovered – that didn't work real well. God wasn't going to tolerate that kind of power play. And part of the reason God wouldn't permit that is because that's not how things are supposed work in God's kingdom.

In the Gospels we're told that at one point Jesus told His disciples: *"You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Mark 10:42-45)

CONCLUSION: What I want you to focus on in this story about Miriam was that she was Godly woman. True, she stumbled and suffered a punishment for a harsh sin. **But she remained a deeply spiritual woman – so much so that (after she'd been rebuked) God continued to use for His purposes. She became a FORGIVEN WOMAN.**

I doubt she intended to do what she'd done. She didn't set out to disobey God. But she did forget, for a

short period of time, that she owed her ministry to God and that it was a precious commodity.

But God returned her to ministry. And He did that because she really did love Him. She loved Him so much that she constantly had a song to sing to glorify Him. **That's what every Christian should have in their lives: a song that glorifies God.**

What is your song? Maybe it's not music, but it's something else. Some other talent or spiritual gift that God has given to you to use for his glory.

But somewhere along the way you stopped using it. Maybe like Miriam, you fell into sin and thus were ashamed to serve. You need to come to God for forgiveness and then forgive yourself. If God almighty forgives you, what right do you think you have to withhold forgiveness? Are you more righteous and holy than God?

Maybe something else happened, not necessarily your fault. Someone hurt you. Belittled you?

In his book "Psalms of the Heart," George Sweeting illustrated a great truth from the experience of two Moody Bible Institute graduates, John and Elaine Beekman. God called them to missionary work among the Chol Indians of southern Mexico. Sweeting reports that they rode mules and traveled by dugout canoes to reach this tribe. They labored 25 years with other missionaries to translate the New Testament into the language of the Chol Indians.

Today the Chol Church is thriving. More than 12,000 Christians make up the Chol Christian community, which is financially self-supporting.

What's interesting is that when the missionaries came, the Chol Indians didn't know how to sing. With the coming of the gospel, however, the believers in the tribe became known as "the singers". "They love to sing now," Sweeting commented, "because they have something to sing about."

If you are a child of God, you too have something to sing about. Someone to serve. No matter what has happened in the past, God will continue to use you – if you come to him, humble yourself before Him and receive his forgiveness and his recommission to service.