

GOD PORTRAYS WOMEN

by

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CHAPTER SIX

MIRIAM

Exodus 2; 15:20-21; Numbers 20

“I sent before thee Moses, Aaron and Miriam” (Micah 6:4).

WE WERE INTRODUCED to Miriam in the story of her mother Jochebed. The worldly privileges and advantages in the home life of this family seemed very circumscribed. But the spirit is not confined by walls or class distinctions. Socially they were slaves, spiritually they were God’s free men. The development of these three children evidenced the piety of the home in which they were reared and careful instruction in the things of God. It is not given to many families for all their children to be prophets.

A prophet is one who is intimate with God, knowing His mind and speaking for God to the people. Paul exhorts us to desire to prophesy, for **“he that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation, and comfort”** (I Corinthians 14:3). These three things we need from the cradle to the grave. Thank God, this ministry can be developed by every godly woman. The prophetesses are not all dead. Can we not each recall with heartfelt gratitude the women in our lives who have heartened us, comforted us, and built us up in our most holy faith?

We find the training of Miriam the prophetess began very early in life in her own home as she cared for her younger brothers. Some girls of teen age do not think the younger ones of the family are very important; perhaps life will show that they are very important, and that the care for them may prove to have been the greatest privilege of an older sister’s life.

It is delightful to see the godly concern of teenage girls in our Sunday school and high school fellowship groups, who have a watcher’s care over the children entrusted to them for instruction. There are many children who get no spiritual help at home. Their mothers are content if they are well-fed and well-clothed and sent to school. But it is the privilege of the Christian teacher to supplement their moral and spiritual development. Such work may seem to be a thankless task, and one may serve faithfully yet remain inconspicuous as Miriam did while standing afar off. But what a privilege it is to put in the right word at the right time for the salvation of a child!

Miriam was at her post when the emergency arrived. She was not fussily important, but with tactful self-control proffered an opportune question to Pharaoh’s daughter. Had Miriam prayed that morning for the child committed to her care?

Do you pray for each child before you face your class? Are you concerned and watchful “**to wit what would be done [by God] to him**” (Exodus 2:4)? Every child is cast on the waters of life. Thank God if you can be one of the watchers who minister to its eternal safety and welfare. There is nothing more interesting than to watch God’s hand in the lives of people.

Though Moses was transferred to a palace and later to the desert, yet Miriam’s and Aaron’s lives seemed to go on as monotonously as before. One day Moses returned and found his brother and sister responsive to him. He shared his fears and prayers and hopes with them. They were behind him no matter who condemned his enthusiasm.

After the privation of fellowship and understanding, how precious was their encouragement to him!

Those were anxious days when Moses and Aaron went to see the king to ask permission to go three days’ journey into the wilderness to worship the Lord. As the days of negotiation proceeded every heart was revealed: the carping criticism of their every act by the fearful, the fickleness of Pharaoh’s disposition, the loud denunciations of those who would not do anything themselves, the encouragement to go on by God Himself, and the men and women of faith who supported them by prayer, then came the unprecedented dark night of sorrow when God smote all the firstborn of the land of Egypt. But Israel kept their first passover with the firstborn in each house sheltered under the sprinkled blood of the paschal lamb on the door post. Where there was the death of the lamb, the firstborn was spared. Because of the death of the Lamb of God, we are spared the judgment of God.

After enjoying the lamb that died for them, the children of Israel hastened to leave the land of their slavery.

They arrived at the Red Sea but were greatly disturbed when they found they were pursued by their old masters. We too, after knowing the shelter of the blood of Christ from the penalty of our sins, are conscious that our old taskmaster Satan would pursue us and seek to bring us into subjection to him again. But God has declared that “**sin shall not have dominion over you**” (Romans 6:14) and is not to reign in our mortal bodies again. Who is going to deliver us? We cannot deliver ourselves. Thank God, Jesus Christ our Lord, who died for us, delivers us from the slavery of sin.

At the shore of the Red Sea, hemmed in by mountains, pursued by Pharaoh and his hosts, the panic-stricken people cried against Moses. Imagine Miriam’s and Aaron’s anxiety for their brother’s safety at that moment! But his words rang out, “**Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord . . . the Lord shall fight for you and ye shall hold your peace**” (Exodus 14:13-14).

Before the people Moses seemed a tower of strength. Before God he was as water poured out.

“And the Lord said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward” (Exodus 14:15).

There is a time to pray and a time to act. At the bidding of God, Moses stretched out his rod over the sea, and under a driving wind the waters divided. The people passed over in ranks of five between the emerald walls of water. The enemy pursued but God removed His cloud from before Israel and placed it as a smoke screen before the foe. At the command of God and at the signal of Moses' outstretched rod the waters returned, covering the pursuing host so that there was not one left.

When Moses saw what God had wrought, his heart broke out into the lovely poetical history of God's deliverance (Exodus 15). Did he catch the rhythm from the tramp of the host? This is not the only song he wrote; some of the psalms are his, and the last thing he did in his life was to write the blessings of Moses. Preceding the song we read: **"Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians; and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses"** (Exodus 14:30-31).

I wonder if Miriam composed the music as she took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, **"Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea"** (Exodus 15: 21).

One would judge that it was responsive singing. The three verses evidently were sung by the men, each answered by the chorus of the women. The verses spoke of the Lord's great redemption, of past mercies and future triumphs. It is significant and characteristic of the poet and emancipator that he left out of the song any reference to himself or the part he played in the great exodus. What a lesson to all who are being used of God to present only Christ and what He has done, carefully effacing self!

"Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord" (Exodus 15:1). There is no real song in our hearts or on our lips until we realize the Lord's wondrous redemption for us; when we do, we cannot refrain from singing His praises. Then we realize we have little to praise ourselves about in His presence.

This is naturally the first song of the Bible. Moses was as indebted to the Lord's salvation as was the meanest delivered slave. This redemption makes all the redeemed kin. When each and all are occupied with Christ and His work there is harmony, and discord vanishes. They did not sing by proxy but every heart breathed out its own gratitude to the Lord, singing in the spirit and with the understanding also. Have you never been conscious of saying the words, striking the notes, but without a song or melody in your heart? With blank faces, eyes looking about and thoughts wool-gathering, we go through the motions of a hymn, but never a word have we consciously sung to the Lord. Yet He says, **"Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me"** (Psalm 50:23). The Lord inhabiteth the praises of His people.

As the days passed and Israel journeyed, many problems arose; Moses, Aaron and Miriam were busy people.

Moses sat from morning till night to judge the people. Probably many a mother and young girl, distressed or discouraged, came for wisdom and comfort to Miriam and always found a sympathetic ear and encouragement in the Lord. After prayer they would depart, heartened, to face life again with Miriam's cheery words ringing in their ears. At the end of the day this dear old saint would be tired but happy as she thought of the privilege that was hers helping to lift up the hands that hang down and to strengthen the feeble knees. She was much loved and admired.

The Scriptures do not tell us she was married. Tradition has it that she was the wife of Hur (who helped to hold up Moses' hands during the battle with Amalek) and the grandmother of Bezaleel the supervisor and designer of all the tabernacle and its furnishings.

As each crisis arose that concerned the congregation, Moses found support in the fellowship and prayers of Miriam. What happy times they were when everyone was so eager to contribute what he could to the preparation of the tabernacle! What security they felt in its proximity to their tents with its protecting Shekinah cloud over them! A holy atmosphere pervaded the camp.

One day news came that Moses' father-in-law was bringing Zipporah and their sons. Moses paid great deference to old Jethro and was delighted to tell him all the Lord's leading since he left Midian. The people too were eager to meet Mrs. Moses and the children. The reunion of the family was of intense interest to all the camp.

And Miriam? "What is that that Moses is saying to Jethro? Did he really ask that man, a foreigner, who didn't come out of Egypt, to stay with us? Just because he had been brought up in the desert, he asked him to be 'eyes' for the migration of the camp? What is Moses thinking about?"

Something inside Miriam snapped that day. She was edgy. She was ominously silent when anyone spoke warmly of Zipporah. She hardly dared trust her own thoughts. She was so preoccupied with forming her opinion of her sister-in-law that those who came for help and comfort went away empty. Miriam was out of touch with God, therefore of no assistance to the people.

After some time she took Aaron to one side and asked, "What do you think of your sister-in-law? Whatever did Moses see in her to marry her? She hasn't our background," or, as we would say, she hasn't been brought up in our church or in our meeting. Soon Miriam could only refer to Zipporah as "**that Cushite woman**," and it became an obsession with her.

Her antagonism to Zipporah became apparent to outsiders. They felt embarrassed when they heard her unjust remarks about her honored yet humble brother Moses. Her tone was less sweet and comforting, the path to her door was not so worn. Her conversation very frequently was about their unique family, their accomplishments, their superiority.

Who likes to be entertained with this? We cannot live today on past experiences. Where is boasting then? "**It is** [appropriately] **excluded**" (Romans 3:27). It is sad to have it said of any of us, "**Ye did run well**" (Galatians 5:7).

We should be concerned about continuing to run well. Usually where disparaging remarks are made of others it is with the ulterior motive that the speaker might rise in the estimation of the listener. But such is not the result. **“Why dost thou set at nought thy brother?”** There is usually a reason. If spiritually healthy, we defend our brother.

Poor Moses was very tired at that time and oppressed with the heavy burden he was carrying. After his family arrived he was deeply grieved because he missed the usual fellowship with Aaron and Miriam, his beloved and trusted brother and sister.

When Miriam’s complaints were whispered about, those who respected and appraised Moses’ true worth, like Joshua, expressed their loyalty and appreciation of their wonderfully modest leader. **“And Miriam and Aaron spake against Moses because of the Ethiopian (or Cushite) woman whom he had married”** (Numbers 12:1).

“And they said, Hath the Lord indeed spoken only by Moses? Hath he not spoken also by us? And the Lord heard it” (Numbers 12:2).

Though the accusation sounded pious, the Lord tells us the motive behind the insinuation was hatred and jealousy of Zipporah. It is remarkable that no specific fault of the woman is named nor is her name mentioned; the only thing they could criticize was her nationality. The Lord knew their inmost thoughts and judged the unspoken personal animosity. He sees and hears behind our words. **“If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man’s religion is vain [or, of no value]”** (James 1:26).

Jealousy is a flame. It is cruel as the grave, tenacious and exacting; the coals thereof are the coals of fire which hath a most vehement flame. It burns up every good and exaggerates every evil or fault. Love too is spoken of as a flame which emanates from the Lord (Song of Solomon 8:6), a flame that many waters cannot quench.

Love and jealousy find expression through the tongue. They are set on fire either from Heaven or Hell. One is capable of doing the utmost good, the other the utmost evil. Either one affects the whole course of nature—and our behavior is affected by it (Read James 3:6.) No wonder we are told to set a sentinel before our mouth to challenge every word, because when spoken they will work for good or evil. **“Keep the door of my lips”** (Psalm 141:3). There are words too that should be muzzled with a bridle (Psalm 39:1) for when they pass our lips they cannot be recalled.

Will Carleton in his poem, *“The First Settler’s Story,”* says:

Boys, flying kites, haul in their white-winged birds;
You can’t do that when you’re flying words;
Thoughts unexpressed may sometimes fall back dead,
But God Himself can’t kill them when they’re said.

Jealousy too is insane and puts all judgment out of focus; it causes loss of spiritual discernment, it is malicious at the sight of the happiness or excellence of others. If you value peace of mind and sane behavior, tramp on it, stamp on it, quench it.

“The Lord heard,” not only the words, but the tones and the inflections, and they displeased the Lord greatly. He had indeed spoken in days past by Miriam and Aaron and used them as channels of blessing to many. But by their lack of the spirit of Christ, they disqualified themselves for future service. We do not read of Miriam ever being used again. She was still a child of God, needing to be disciplined, but as a servant of the Lord she was cast away.

In Ephesians we are told: **“Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers . . . Let all bitterness and all passionate feeling, all anger and loud insulting language, be unknown among you—and also every kind of malice [All these things grieve the Holy Spirit and hinder His workings] And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted”** (Ephesians 4:29, 31-32).

“(Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men which were upon the face of the earth). And the Lord spake suddenly unto Moses, and unto Aaron, and unto Miriam. Come out ye three unto the tabernacle of the congregation. 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” (Numbers 12:3-5).

Each person has to do individually with God. We give account for the deeds done in the body (II Corinthians 5:10), and for every word (Matthew 12:36-37). How conspicuous they must have felt standing there before the Lord! Moses did not charge his brother and sister; he did not drag them to court. It was the Lord who took the whole matter in hand. Moses was embarrassed and silent. Brothers and sisters think they can say what they like to and about the family, but there are things that are none of my brother’s business and in which there is no justification for his interference. They criticized Moses’ relationship with God. God will not have it. “Family familiarity may be fatal to fellowship.” This interview might have been held privately, but perhaps the incident would be repeated.

And God said, **“Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you [and Aaron was a prophet and Miriam a prophetess], I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so”** (Numbers 12:6-7).

He doesn’t say, “your brother” is not just a prophet, but rather **“my servant Moses.”**

God had a higher claim on Moses than had the family relationship. God had committed to Moses’ oversight **“all my house,”** and God said, **“In all my house trusty is he.”** I don’t speak in dark sayings to him; I talk to him, open up my heart and mind, and speak mouth to mouth, and the form of the Lord doth he discern. **“Wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”** (Numbers 12:8)

We must be content with our own position and in no way depreciate those even of our own relatives that the Lord sees fit to honor above us. Moses had needed a veil to cover the glory of his face when he came down from the forty days in the mount with God. At the moment which we are considering, Miriam needed a veil to cover her shame and embarrassment when God asked, **“Were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”**

“And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them; and he departed. And the cloud departed from off the tabernacle; and, behold, Miriam became leprous” (Numbers 12:9-10).

And Aaron, seeing Miriam, stood aghast. Leprous! Aaron was in a terrible position. He was also implicated in her crime though evidently she was the instigator. Aaron had the painful duty of pronouncing her excommunication, but he owned his own sin to Moses and was careful to speak with deference calling him **“my lord.”**

“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” (Numbers 12:11-12).

What agony and confession in every word! There was no resentment or vindictiveness with Moses, as there well might be, but he cried aloud, with anguish in every word, **“Heal her, now, O God, I beseech thee.”**

God explained His attitude to Moses. If her father was under such great provocation because of the shocking behavior of his child that he spit in her face—a sign of deepest contempt, such a case demanded banishment from the father’s presence for seven days. The Lord said in effect, **“I feel the same abhorrence of Miriam’s behavior; I will not see nor speak with her for seven days.”**

What black desolate days they were as Miriam sat alone with her thoughts and remorse, conscious of her uncleanness and her injustice to her patient, praying brother Moses, and shut out from God her Father! How terrible to be held in contempt by God!

“And Miriam was shut out from the camp seven days; and the people journeyed not till Miriam was brought in again” (Numbers 12:15).

Sin affects more than the transgressor. The whole camp was delayed. The tongue of one person, or one unclean life, may hinder aggressive work in the church for some time. They could not go on with her or without her. God thought too much of Miriam **“to drop her out”** in the wilderness. Remember what the Lord did to Miriam (Deuteronomy 24:9)!

The only other reference to Miriam is in Numbers 20:1. **“And the people abode in Kadesh. And Miriam died there and was buried there.”**

This was in the last year of the journeyings through the wilderness. How bleak the words sound! She died there and was buried there. May we not just make a good start but may we **“finish our course with joy and the ministry which we have received of the Lord.”**

Good old Moses was so honest that he told us the reasons why all three of them were deprived of entering the land. Aaron, three months after Miriam’s death, was told to go up to Mt. Hor and was unfrocked because of his rebellion, and he died there after investing Eleazar in his place. Moses the same year was told to go up to Mt. Nebo. He was given a vast panorama of the land by God Himself, and was told he could not go in because when provoked he spoke unadvisedly with his lips. He called God’s people names and took glory to himself that belonged to God.

But God loved him and he died at the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 34:5), or he died with the kiss of God on his lips in His embrace. He had as his last companion the Lord Himself. And God took the funeral service of “**my servant Moses.**”

He loved Moses and his family from the day of their birth till the day of their death. But Moses did go into the land later, in the presence of the Lord Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, where he talked with the Lord about the accomplishment of His death to take place at Calvary.

“Remember Miriam!”

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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