

INTRODUCTION

Unity is the key for a team's success. Those who work for the Lee Kam Kee Group know this very well. Many of you may have one or more of its products in your kitchen. The company is famous for its oyster sauce. This condiment was discovered by surprise. Mr. Lee was a chef who worked in the Canton providence. Once he dozed off when cooking oyster. Before he knew it, the meat had become a thick and brown paste. He tasted it and it was actually very good. Hence, oyster sauce was invented. In 1888, Mr. Lee founded his company to market the sauce. After 130 years, Lee Kam Kee is still a private company owned by the family. The Group navigates through many challenges in all those years. But the biggest crises come from within. On three separate occasions, family members had disputes over business strategies and money issues. Therefore, an uncle turned against his nephew, and two brothers fought in court. An executive from the third generation of the Lee family knows that something has to change. As a result, a family council was formed and a family constitution was written. The most important goal is not about making greater profit, but to pass along core values that are critical to the family. In Numbers chapter 12, we see a similar version of family conflict. Miriam and Aaron indicted Moses of his sin. Who were Miriam and Aaron? They were Moses' older brother and sister! When you became a Christian, you call fellow believers your brothers and sisters-in Christ. How can we avoid our differences become a source of conflict? We shall learn from this passage that submission to God's authority must include accepting the role He assigns to us.

EXPLANATION

1. False Accusation 無理的控告

Miriam and Aaron stepped up to falsely accuse Moses. Let us read their accusation in **verse 1** again: Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. Cush is in north Africa. Bible scholars debated about the background of that wife. Exodus chapter 2 tells us that Moses fled from Egypt to Midian. There he married a local lady named Zipporah. She was an Arab, not an African. Some scholars said Zipporah was the person in question. Others said she was perhaps a second wife Moses married when Zipporah was still alive or had passed away. Those are all speculations that cannot be proved conclusively from the Scriptures. When we move onto **verse 2**, we understand that the accusation was not about a Gentile sister-in-law at all: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the Lord heard this. Can you see a huge gap between verses 1 and 2? A foreign wife and how God spoke to Moses are completely unrelated issues. It is like when you meet a sister in the hallway and she comments: "What a nice outfit you have today!" Then she switches topic in her next sentence: "Oh, by the way, something you said the other day really hurt my feeling." All of a sudden, you realize what the conversation is all about. Miriam and Aaron were jealous because God only spoke to Moses but not to the two of them. They dared not blame God and so they criticized Moses. In your upbringing, your parents may show favoritism to your siblings. It is not your fault if your brother gets better grades or your sister has a cuter face. When I was a sophomore in college, my dad finally realized that I was a

biology major. He thought I studied business all along. I was like: “Duh! All this time your attention is only on my older brother!” But then I thought it would give me zero pressure whether I got A or F in school. Anyhow, parents should not play partiality to their kids because God shaped each of them differently. However, it is still wrong to be jealous about your siblings. Miriam and Aaron were guilty as charged. Do you still remember their roles? Exodus 15 records that Miriam was a prophetess, although we do not see how she performed that role in the Bible. In comparison, Aaron played a more prominent position as a High Priest. Among the twelve tribes of Israel, only the Levites were appointed by God to serve in worship matters. However, according to Exodus 29 all the future priests must be descendants of Aaron. Therefore, both Miriam and Aaron were leaders among the Israelites. They should not be jealous about Moses only because God put them in different ministries. Pay attention to a remark at the end of verse 2: “And the Lord heard this.” Is it not redundant to mention that the all-knowing God heard the criticism from Miriam and Aaron? The implication is that since God knew that His servant Moses was being attacked, He would stand up to defend him. Then **verse 3** is another interesting interjection that comes out of nowhere: (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) If we believe that Moses was the author of the book of Numbers, then our conclusion is perhaps he is prideful rather than humble. It is like when we claim that: “I have never told any lie.” You slap yourself in the face right away by that statement! Here, the implicit meaning behind the remark is that Moses, being a humble man, might have let the accusation go unnoticed. He did not want any conflict in the family to become a public soap opera. That would negatively affect his work as a leader and the confidence of the Israelites in him. But as we shall see, God would not let the offense go away.

Miriam and Aaron falsely accused Moses because they thought that Moses received a special favor from God. They only focused on part of the picture. They failed to realize the responsibilities Moses had as God’s spokesman. Moses was under constant pressure from the people. They grumbled about the lack of food and water, and other hardship they faced. Similarly, our world glorifies people’s success and riches. People neglect the price it pays to climb to the top. Yes, some CEO may fly on a private jet and live in a mansion. But they may have to work long hours and sacrifice family time. Wall Street and stock-holders also chase after their back for sales numbers. The world is quick to put a person on the pedestal and crowns him as a hero, just like it does not waste time to find a scapegoat when things go south. With privilege comes responsibilities. Sadly, it is not uncommon even for Biblical leaders to face false accusation. Many Old Testament prophets were blamed by their people and the Israel kings. Believers in the early churches questioned Paul about his status as an apostle. In the gospels, even Jesus’ own brothers labeled Him as crazy. You have to prepare for false accusation when you serve in the church. People may misunderstand you or even maliciously attack you. But God calls us to be servants, not bosses, in the church. Do not get mad when you are an innocent victim. Let God come to your defense. On the flip side, we have to be careful when making judgment about our brothers and sisters. Have we investigated the facts or do we trust the rumors we hear? God will hold us accountable if we falsely accuse someone. God hears it and He will deal with it. He will protect His servants.

2. Fair Vindication 合理的平反

Moses was falsely accused by his siblings. He might choose to ignore the offense. But God came to Moses' fair vindication. There are two steps in this vindication. First, God explained why Moses had a special position. After that, God exercised discipline to the offender. God called the three siblings to the Tent of the Meeting. Next, He appeared in a pillar of cloud. Then God asked Miriam and Aaron to step forward. The two of them complained moments ago that God only spoke to Moses. Now God told them: "You want me to speak to you. Alright, let's talk." God's message is in **verses 6 to 8**. This speech appears as a poem. In particular, the verses were written in a chiasmic structure. It is a special writing style that is unique to the Hebrew language. In a chiasmic structure, the first line echoes the last line in their meanings, the second line to the second last line, and so forth. Let me draw your attention to the screen as I explain it:

A prophet of the Lord (v. 6a)
I reveal myself to him in visions (v. 6b)
I speak to him in dreams (v. 6c)
He is faithful in all my house (v. 7)
With him I speak face to face (v. 8a)
He sees the form of the Lord (v. 8b)
My servant Moses (v. 8c)

Here, "a prophet of the Lord" (v. 6a) is parallel to "my servant Moses" (v. 8c) because both lines talk about a person. "I reveal myself to him in visions" (v. 6b) corresponds to "He sees the form of the Lord" (v. 8b) when God indicates how He appears to His servants. "I speak to him in dreams" (v. 6c) and "with him I speak face to face" (v. 8a) pair up, because they are about the ways God speaks to a person. You can picture the structure like a sandwich. You have a piece of bread on the top and another loaf at the bottom. Next you put two layers of veggie, followed by a smear of sauce on both sides. The most important ingredient is the meat at the center if you are a meat lover. In this poem, "he is faithful in all my house" in verse 7 is the meat God wanted to highlight. God complimented Moses as faithful. He spoke to Moses face to face like a friend. He even granted Moses the power to perform miracles. But God emphasized in **verses 7 and 8** that Moses was only a servant. Moses was far from perfect. He grumbled just one chapter ago that the leadership burden was too heavy. Faithfulness is not measured by results. Many missionaries might not lead one person to Christ even though they were faithful in what God called them to do. Many stay-home moms are faithful in managing the home and raising kids, despite the world thinks that they do not generate any income. Faithfulness means committed to the tasks God entrusts you. Let us encourage each other to be faithful servants. There should be no comparison or even competition in the church. There will be no jealousy if you can truly appreciate what other people do. You thank them for their faithfulness, and you thank God for giving them gifts and talents. God equips each of us in different ways. I admire many brothers who are handy in fixing things, and some sisters who have wisdom to teach kids. I am grateful that no one stops my preaching and asks me to fix a leaky roof or to change diapers. It is wonderful if you can speak three foreign languages or play three musical instruments. Use it for the Lord! Only when we make up for each other's shortcomings can we build up God's church.

After God explained why Moses had a special privilege, He then disciplined the wrongdoer. Read **verse 10**: When the cloud lifted from above the Tent, there stood Miriam - leprous, like snow. Aaron turned toward her and saw that she had leprosy. Bible scholars commented that

God was showing His humor here. Miriam and Aaron accused Moses for marrying a Cushite woman, who had a darker skin. Now Miriam got leprosy. The verse describes that her skin turned white like snow. Whenever we see the term “leprosy” in the Old or New Testament, it can be referred to various forms of skin disease. We wonder why only Miriam received the punishment but not Aaron. There can be at least two possibilities. First, Aaron confessed his sin. He said to Moses in **verses 11-12**: 11 “...Please, my lord, do not hold against us the sin we have so foolishly committed. 12 Do not let her be like a stillborn infant coming from its mother’s womb with its flesh half eaten away.” We do not see a similar reaction from Miriam. Aaron was being smart here. Imagine you and your brother did something bad when you were still little kids. Mom spanked your brother, and you knew you would be next. A smart thing to do is to tell mom that you are sorry. But an IQ 200 move is to play the sympathy card. You say to mom: “Please don’t spank Bobbie anymore. You have caused so much pain to him already.” This is perhaps what Aaron tried to do. Aaron asked God to stop punishing Miriam so that he could be spared too. Another hint why Aaron was not disciplined can be found in verse 1. The verb “talk against” in the Hebrew text carries a feminine pronoun. It means that although both Miriam and Aaron accused Moses, it was “she talked against Moses” but not “they talked against Moses.” Miriam was the primary culprit in the incident. Another interesting thing we see in the passage is that Aaron pleaded to Moses. Aaron was jealous that God spoke to Moses directly. But now Aaron had to rely on Moses to play the middleman to seek God’s pardon. God forgave the sin Miriam and Aaron committed. But because of her leprosy, Miriam had to be isolated from people for seven days. That was consistent with the instructions God spelled out in the book of Leviticus for dealing with leprosy patients. God gave Miriam a period of time-out just like a rebellious kid for her to examine her sin. The Israelites waited a week for Miriam before moving on. God showed grace in His discipline of Miriam. God did not take her life. Miriam and Aaron might have condemned Moses in private. But Miriam had to bear the shame publicly for her sin. Everyone knew why they had to stay at that location. For the rest of the book Miriam’s name was never mentioned again until chapter 20. The author only added a brief note that Miriam passed away and she was buried.

CONCLUSION

We learn from the incident in this chapter that submission to God’s authority must include accepting the role He assigns to us. God summoned Miriam and Aaron as if it were a court proceeding. God was the prosecutor to convict the two siblings, the defense attorney for Moses and the judge to declare His sentence. Why did God take a family dispute so seriously? It was because the disagreement was between three leaders. Remember the Israelites were going to Canaan. They still had a long way to go. How could the leaders work together if they were jealous of each other? Crisis would come from the inside, not the outside like the Lee family in our introductory story. God’s people would crumble before they fight any external enemy. There will be conflict within a team if each person only focuses on himself/herself but loses sight of the big picture. The same problem can happen in any church too. Jealousy will only lead to disunity. Does it really matter who gets a job done, or whether people recognize who should take the credit? Will you feel bad if your name is put the last but not the first? At one time a coworker got my Chinese name incorrectly. I jokingly commented: “That brother doesn’t really know his pastor.” No big deal. We do not serve in the church to build our own reputation. God cares about us because He cares about the purity of His church and He cares about His own glory.