

TRAVELING WITH A HOLY GOD REQUIRES SUBMISSION TO HIS PROPHET

Numbers 12:1-16

INTRODUCTION

As I trust you know we live in a religiously pluralistic world. There is an almost limitless variety of religious systems and explanations of reality across the face of this globe. In addition to the major world religions of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism there are numerous sects within each of these and an endless number of folk religions, animistic and neo-pagan systems as well. Each religion claims that God is the author of their system. In other words, each religion claims to speak for God.

It is the fact of religious pluralism that has led most people in our culture, indeed throughout most of Western culture to assert that because there is so much diversity of opinion in the world about religion, therefore there can be no one true religion. All religions are equally true. All are equally a revelation of God. God speaks through all of the various religious traditions and thus it is an error of the highest order to claim that any one religion is the true religion. It is not only an error but the height of arrogance for any religion to claim that it alone is the only authoritative revelation of God in the world.

While Miriam and Aaron, the sister and brother of Moses, were not motivated by the same impulse that causes most of our neighbors to claim all religions are equally true, yet they in essence are in agreement with our neighbors. In v. 2 they are not saying that God has not spoken through Moses but they are saying that Moses and his revelation of God are not unique. They also have revelation from God which is equally authoritative to that of Moses. They are making the argument that Moses should not be accorded any greater respect or authority in religious matters than they themselves are accorded. He is not the only one who speaks for God. Each of them equally speaks for God. They are also insinuating that Moses is arrogant and presumptuous in his claiming to uniquely represent God and his Law.

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses says, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers--it is to him you shall listen..." Jesus said that Moses, when he wrote the first five books of the Bible was writing about him. As we heard read for us earlier, the author to the Hebrews, alluding to v. 7 of this chapter, makes a direct comparison between Moses and Jesus. It is without question that Miriam and Aaron's rejection of the unique authority of Moses and their claim to have equal authority is a representation of how the world treats Jesus and the religion he founded: Christianity. They typify the reaction of most people in the world to Jesus. Most people are willing to acknowledge that he was a spokesperson for God, that he had good things to teach us about God but they are unwilling to acknowledge that he is the only true spokesperson and the only one who can bring people to God. The vast majority of people in the world would say about Jesus the same thing Miriam and Aaron said about Moses: "Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Jesus? Has he not spoken through other religious leaders and traditions as well?"

If philosophical pluralism is true then the Christian religion founded by Jesus is false. For biblical religion insists that just as Moses' position in relation to God and Israel was absolutely unique and without peer, so also, Jesus is without peer in his relation to God. It is only through him that anyone can know the true God and live with him forever in the new heavens and the new earth. There is no other way to God than through Jesus and no one shares in his authority. He is the only one who speaks for God and thus, everyone who disagrees with Jesus is wrong. The only people who are loved by God and bound for heaven are those who trust in and submit to the historical Jesus who is revealed in the pages of this whole Bible. We are going to see in this story about Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' authority four reasons as to why Jesus is the only one who can take you to heaven. As this story shows the unassailable authority of Moses so it also shows the absolute uniqueness of Jesus who is the prophet like Moses to whom all people should pay attention.

MAIN POINT

Jesus, as he is revealed in the Bible, is the only one who can take you to heaven because...

I. He is the only humble and faithful builder of God's house (vv. 3-7)

Verse 3 is an editorial comment inserted in the story so that we, the readers, will be immediately tipped off that the complaints of Miriam and Aaron are completely unfounded. Their accusations that Moses is abusing his authority by marrying a foreign wife and by acting as though he is the only trustworthy spokesperson are completely groundless because Moses is the most humble person on the planet. The last thing that he would do is act in an arrogant or presumptuous manner. His humility is seen in that he does not respond to their accusations but rather he lets God defend him. His only words in this entire story are his prayer in v. 13 that the Lord would please heal Miriam. He does not take matters into his own hands but humbly trusts God to defend him and he does not bear a grudge against his slanderous siblings but wants only good for them. Moses does exercise authority over all Israel. However, in all of his authoritative declarations he is not promoting himself or seeking to assert his own authority but he is simply saying what God wants said and doing what God wants done. As God says about him in v. 7, he is a faithful servant in God's house. He is simply doing his master's bidding and seeking to promote his master's agenda and reputation. His only concern is that the people of God are built up and cared for no matter the cost to him because they are God's house and he is merely God's servant.

If Moses was a humble and faithful builder of God's house how much more is the Lord Jesus. Indeed this is the point of the author to the Hebrews in 3:2-3. He writes, Jesus "...was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses--as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself." While Moses was a servant in the house, Jesus is the owner and builder of the house itself. Moses is part of the house, which is the people of God, while Jesus is the builder of that house. Throughout his life upon this earth he was a humble and faithful builder of God's house. While he boldly proclaimed God's truth, like Moses and courageously confronted the religious hypocrites of his day, yet he never promoted himself or acted in an arrogant manner. His every action and every word were dependent upon the will of his Father. He spoke nothing but what God wanted spoken and he did nothing but what God wanted done. He never sought to defend himself but trusted God to defend him. Whereas Moses only had to face persecution from his sister the prophetess and his brother the priest for a short time, the Lord Jesus for three years faced the relentless hatred and slanderous attacks of the whole Jewish leadership and eventually of the entire nation of Israel. At the end, when he was before the Jewish and Gentile authorities he did not seek to defend himself against the many false accusations, nor did he retaliate when he was insulted. When the crowds screamed for his death and Pilate washed his hands of him and the soldiers cruelly mocked and tortured him he did nothing to harm them, even though, by his own admission, he could have called forth legions of angels to defend him. Well did Isaiah the prophet write of him 500 years before he came to this earth, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth." He was humble before God and man, seeking not his own benefit but the glory of God and the good of all God's people.

His humility and faithfulness to God's people are most clearly seen in the way in which he dealt with poor, miserable sinners. He cleansed lepers, healed the blind, drove out unclean spirits, raised the dead, fed thousands, blessed the children and was the friend of sinners. He turned away no one who came to him for help. Jesus' ultimate humility and faithfulness to God and God's people is seen in his willing death on the cross. As Paul writes, "he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross." By this death he secured salvation for everyone who comes to him and submits to him. You will find no other religious leader in this world who acted with the humility of Jesus and who offers to be the savior of every God-despising sinner who is burdened with the guilt of their sins and their inability to obey God. It is only people who are ignorant of who Jesus is and what Jesus did that can claim that he and Mohamed or Moses or Buddha or any other religious authority are on the same level.

II. He is the only one who knows God and comes from God (v. 8)

At the end of v. 2 we are told that the Lord heard what Miriam and Aaron said against Moses. In v. 4 God suddenly shows up and tells Moses and Miriam and Aaron to come to the Tent of Meeting. He then calls Miriam and Aaron forward and explains to them his relationship to Moses. He tells them that his normal mode of revealing himself to the prophets of Israel is through dreams and visions and “dark sayings” but that is not the way he communicates with Moses. With Moses he communicates face to face, clearly, not with the riddles he normally uses. Indeed Moses sees the form of God. This point has been made prior to this in the history of God’s relationship to Moses. In Exodus 33 we are told that the Lord, “would speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks with his friend.” Moses’ face shown with the glory of God whenever he came out of those meetings with God. His shining face scared the Israelites so that he had to wear a veil over his face when he came out. While Moses did see the form of God, he did not see God in his actual being because as that same chapter in Exodus records when Moses asked God if he could see him in all of his glory, the Lord told him that no one could see him and live. So the Lord only showed to Moses his back on that mountain. However, the main point of God’s statement here is to show that no human ever had the level of intimacy with God that Moses had, that is, until Jesus showed up.

The apostle John in his gospel goes to great lengths to show the superiority of Jesus to Moses. In language that is reminiscent of that used here John describes the relationship of the Word of God, who took on human flesh to God. (Turn to John 1, page 886) In v. 1 of his gospel he says that this Word of God who became man and came into this world was with God and was God. In v. 14, when this Word who is God became flesh, John says that he and the other apostles saw the glory of the Son of God who came from God and who was full of grace and truth. Just as the Israelites saw the reflected glory of God in the shining face of Moses when he came from being with God so all who saw the historical Jesus saw the actual, not the reflected, glory of the Son of God. Finally, the absolute superiority of Jesus over Moses is asserted in v. 18. John first says, “No one has ever seen God”. Moses did not see God in his actual being. He only saw a visible manifestation of God’s glory, his form, as it were. However, Jesus, who is God, has lived throughout all of eternity at the Father’s side. That is the language of the love and intimacy that characterizes the parent/child relationship. God spoke to Moses as a friend, the Son of God who became a man lived with God in the intimacy of the Trinity forever. It is this close association of Jesus with the Father that is the basis of his claim that he alone knows the Father’s will and he alone is revealing God’s purpose and plan for his world. He says in John 6:45-46, “Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.” In John 14:9 in response to Philip’s request that Jesus show the disciples the Father, he says, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”

This is what sets Jesus apart from every other founder of religion in the world. He does not merely say that he speaks for God but that he has lived with God the Father as his son throughout all of eternity in the loving fellowship of the Triune God and thus he is himself God. He alone has come from God and seen God. All other religious founders claim to speak for God, none make the claim to be God. This is the fact that led the famous professor and author C.S. Lewis to say in his book, “Mere Christianity”, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

III. God rejects everyone who rejects Jesus (vv. 8b-10)

After the Lord explains the uniqueness of his relationship with Moses he demands that Miriam and Aaron answer this question: “Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” They better than anyone else knew who Moses was and the nature of God’s relationship to him. Just like those Jewish leaders who followed them thousands of years later, they should have known better than to speak against their brother. So God then abandons them being full of wrath against them. The phrase used in v. 9 “the anger of the Lord was kindled against them” has been used several times prior to this and on every occasion it is used there are dead bodies left in the wake of this anger. However, in this case, no one is killed. Rather Miriam is afflicted with a skin disease that has turned her skin white. Her appearance is so grotesque that Aaron describes her as having the appearance of a stillborn child coming from the womb whose flesh has already begun to decompose.

There are two questions that we have to answer in relation to God’s judgment upon Miriam. First, why did the Lord not kill her but simply afflicted her with a skin disease? Again, we think of the two sons of Aaron whose only offense was using the wrong kind of incense and the Lord’s anger was kindled against them and he immediately burned them up with fire. We do not know why he didn’t kill her other than he, according to the pleasure of his own will and in accordance with his eternal plan, freely, graciously did not kill her but only afflicted her with a skin disease. While less than the death she deserved, the disease was judgment because she would never again be permitted to come into the camp of Israel but would always remain outside it where those who are unclean and unfit for God’s presence live. Her exclusion from the people of God would be a constant reminder of what happens to those who reject God’s prophet. Those who reject God’s prophet are put outside the camp, away from the presence of the Lord, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The other question is this: why was only Miriam afflicted and not Aaron? The ultimate answer is again, God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy. Both deserve death and so anything less than death is an expression of God’s grace. He is not being unfair to Miriam but gracious to her because he does not kill her. He is being gracious to Aaron by not killing him. Miriam is clearly the instigator of this rebellion and so her guilt is the greater. Also, Aaron is the high priest and thus he must be able to make intercession for the people in order for God to live among the people and he cannot do that if he has a skin disease. Therefore, God’s mercy to him is for the sake of the nation, not simply for Aaron’s sake. So this judgment shows both God’s anger against those who reject his spokesperson and it also reveals the freedom of God’s grace. He is under no obligation to be kind to anyone because all have sinned and thus deserve death. He is free to be kind to whom he wants. Miriam cannot complain that she was not treated justly and Aaron cannot boast that he was treated well because he was such a good guy or because he believed God. God’s grace is not given in response to what Aaron does but according to his own purposes and pleasure.

In John 5 Jesus tells the religious leaders that their rejection of him proves that they have rejected Moses because Moses wrote of Jesus. Jesus told these leaders that they would die in their sins for not believing that he was the only Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of the world. Later he told his disciples, “I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me.” The only people who know God and who will live with him forever are those who come to God through Jesus. Paul says that when Jesus comes again he will inflict vengeance upon all those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus. Thus all who reject Jesus are rejected by God the Father. God’s anger burns against all who refuse the Son and he puts them outside the camp, into the outer darkness. If you do not embrace Jesus as God’s only mediator and savior and prophet, as the only way to God and the only one who can give life, then you will die in your sins. You cannot live with God in the new heavens and the new earth if you treat Jesus as if he is simply one option among many. He must be everything to you in order for you to be welcomed by God into his eternal kingdom. There is no salvation but only wrath for all who do not have an explicit faith in God’s only Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ because God only honors those who honor Christ and he rejects all who reject Christ.

IV. He is the only one to whom God listens (vv. 11-16)

We can see in Aaron's response to Miriam's affliction the evidence of God's gracious work in his life. As soon as he sees her grotesque appearance he repents of his rebellion against Moses. He openly acknowledges that what he and Miriam said was treachery, an act of sin that deserves God's just condemnation. But notice that his prayer is not offered to God but to Moses. The Lord is the one who has sent the skin disease and who is angry and yet Aaron asks Moses not to punish them. He asks Moses to not let Miriam remain in this condition. Thus we see that not only does Aaron acknowledge his sin but he also acknowledges that Moses alone has God's ear. He acknowledges the truth of Moses unique relation to God which he had so recently denied. He knows that God will only listen to Moses and thus it is in Moses' power to either condemn her to permanent exclusion from the people of God or to obtain forgiveness, pardon and healing. Moses shows his humility and compassion by praying a very simple prayer: "please Lord heal her, please." The Lord listens to Moses and heals her but requires that she remain outside the camp for seven days, bearing the shame of what she has done. This is in accord with God's law regarding skin diseases. Once the disease is healed the cleansed person must remain outside the camp for another 7 days before she is able to return. This is not penance. In other words, God is not saying that she is making up for her sin by being unclean for seven days. Rather, as is obvious from v. 15 this is for the sake of the whole people of God. Miriam's 7 day exclusion from the camp clearly communicates that Moses alone is the prophet that the people must respect and pay attention to. But again, the main point here is that Moses intercedes for Miriam, not counting her sins against her and the Lord listens to his prayer and heals her and welcomes her back into the camp and into her position of leadership.

What a marvelous picture of the compassion and love of our Lord Jesus. He willingly intercedes for God-despising, Christ-belittling rebels like us. He says in John 6:37-40, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." I call upon every person in the sound of my voice to turn away from your indifference towards and your rejection of this Jesus. Run to him and tell him you are sorry for rejecting a Savior like him, for treating him as if he is simply one option among many. Plead with him that he would not punish you as your sins deserve but that he would heal you of your uncleanness and make you fit for God. Ask him to not send you outside the camp, into the outer darkness where there is only misery. Depend only upon him, not your sincerity or your prayers or your sorrow to obtain a pardon from God for your hard-hearted indifference to his son these many years. God will listen to the Son as he prays for your healing just as he listened to Moses' prayer for Miriam and so through him you will be cleansed and welcomed into God's camp.

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