

Numbers 12

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[0 : 00] Let's do this and open your Bible to Numbers 12. If you're a leader, you have to watch your! Whether it's Theresa May and Jacob Rees-Mogg or Jeremy Corbyn and Hilary Ben, sooner or! sooner or later every leader faces a challenge to their leadership.

And as one of you have said, the crisis that you've really got to worry about is the one that you don't see coming. Well, Moses has faced, doesn't he, a challenge after challenge as we've gone through the book of Numbers, but he didn't see this one coming. In chapter 11, you've got this challenge from the ravel in verse 4, the riffraff, the mixed company that's come out of Egypt when God released the Israelites from slavery. It wasn't just the Israelites that came out. There was a whole load of other people groups that came out with them. And in chapter 11, the rabble, the mixed multitude, they began to grumble about food. And there's a crisis. A leadership crisis. They complained to Moses, they complained about Moses, and he didn't handle it very well. We saw, didn't we, a few weeks ago that he basically said, Lord, let me die. He spits out the dummy. It's more than I can bear. And God answered by making him a Presbyterian, didn't he? He gave him a plurality of elders.

He gave him 70 elders in order to share the leading of this people. It's a blessing, isn't it, of God to serve with spirit-filled elders. But now there's another challenge to Moses' leadership. And it's so difficult because it comes from within his own family circle.

It's not from outside the riffraff, the rabble, but his own nearest and dearest. It's from his big sister, Miriam. She was the one who watched over Moses in the golden rushes, back in Exodus chapter 2. It was Miriam who'd gone to Pharaoh's daughter. And his brother, Aaron, who'd been a real supporter and a strength to him. It was Aaron who'd held Moses' hands up, in the day of battle. So surely you would think, wouldn't you, that Miriam and Aaron would be Moses' two biggest supporters. But look at when you read verse 1. Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he'd married. It's the beginning of our whispering campaign. And it's interesting, the verb is in the feminine singular, if you look through that. Which indicates that Miriam is the instigator of this whispering campaign.

That fits the psychology of the chapter, really. Aaron, she probably bullies into coming along with him, with her. Aaron, for all the fact he was supposed to be a leader, he wasn't much of a leader, was he, really, at all. Do you remember the episode of the golden calf? The people wanted a golden calf. So what did Aaron do? He gives them the golden calf. What kind of leadership is that? What kind of leadership is it when politicians consult the polls before they lead? We don't give the people what they want. That's not moral leadership. So you read there in verse 1, they spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Kushite woman.

[3 : 38] It's a real kick in the guts for Moses. It seems that Miriam, Moses' sister, had a problem with the fact that Moses had married someone from a different ethnic background.

We know, don't we, that Moses was already married to Zipporah, who was a Midianite. It could be that this is a second marriage. We're not told the circumstances. Whether it was another wife in addition to Zipporah. It could be Zipporah because sometimes Midianites were called Kushites, but I don't think there's a lot of evidence of that. It's quite likely knowing the life expectancy and the age of Moses that Zipporah has died and this was a second marriage. And this woman he married was an Ethiopian. And that was a problem for Miriam. There's a real kick in the guts for Moses and it attacked me by all means, but leave my wife out of it. And they start this whispering campaign about Moses' wife because he's married a black woman from Ethiopia, a Kushite.

It's particularly nasty, isn't it? Because there's racial overtones. I love that verse in Acts 17 where Paul is talking to the Athenians and he says, remember, what he says? He says, God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth. Skin colour is a very superficial thing.

God has made of one blood all the nations of the earth. There is only one race and it is called the human race. And anyone who thinks otherwise is not a racist. And there's no places there for that in Christian circles. Whenever we come across that, we need to confront it and challenge people about it. You see, it makes God angry. But verse 9 is wonderfully ironic, isn't it?

Why are you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. And he departed. And when the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous.

[5 : 40] There stood Miriam, her face as white as snow. It's interesting, isn't it? She's got a problem because Moses married a black man. And what does Moses do? He makes her face, well, she becomes a white supremacist, quite literally. And so God makes her face as white as snow and for a whole week she is forced to live outside the camp. Racism grieves the Spirit of God. It makes God angry. There is only one race and it is the human race.

And to judge someone by the colour of their skin, it's something that makes God very angry and yet it's more serious than that. It isn't just a case of sibling rivalry. Miriam and Aaron, they are both older than Moses, the younger brother. And it's not just sibling rivalry, it's not racism, as nasty as that is. There's something else going on here. But what presents as the problem is not the real issue. And the real issue is not Moses' wife and the colour of their skin. The real issue is verse 2. What's the real issue? And they said, has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?

What's the real issue? The real issue is Moses' status. Aaron was Moses' high priest. Miriam was a prophetess, a leader of all the spirit-filled women in the camp. She was a prophetess.

And so what you have on the one hand is a high priest and a prophetess. A coalition of the priest and the prophet challenging Moses' leadership. Who does he think he is? Does he think, verse 2, he's got a hotline to heaven? Doesn't he speak through us as well? Why should Moses be the only mediator between God and his people? Why does he disappear into the tent and come out with his face shut? Why does God speak face to the folks with Moses? Doesn't he speak through us as well? And you see, this is something more, isn't it, than just jealousy and rivalry.

It is jealousy, but it's more than that. It's not Moses that they are speaking against, is it? It is God. It is rebellion. It is rebellion against the way God has arranged things.

[7 : 46] It's rebellion against God's way of revealing this. And look at the end of verse 2, it says, and the Lord heard it. God is never somewhere else when we rebel. And we need to keep remembering that, don't we? That helps us enormously as we live as a Christian. Every sin is rebellion.

In order to sin, we have to say, I know God, you say thou shalt not, but I'm going to do it anyway. That is rebellion, isn't it? You might not say it out loud, you might not say it to another person, but in your heart of hearts, that is what you're saying. That's what you do every time when you sin. God has said, thou shalt not, but I don't care what God has said. It's what I want to do. And guess what? God isn't somewhere else when you think like that. It's what David discovered, isn't it, in Psalm 51. After he'd sinned with Bathsheba and committed adultery and committed murder. And when he comes to his senses and repentance, he says, against you, you, Lord, you, O Lord, have I sinned against. You only have I sinned. And I've done this evil in your sight. God wasn't somewhere else. God didn't get to hear about it from someone else. No, God was there. When David slept with Bathsheba and they were committing adultery, they were doing it before the face of God. God was in the room with them, if I put it like that. Jesus says in Matthew 10, there's nothing hidden that will not be revealed.

Nothing concealed that will not be brought out into the open. And what is whispered behind doors will be shouted from the rooftops on that day. It's sobering, isn't it? Our petty little rivalries. Our spiteful conversations. Every stab in the back, every pious piece of gossip, every whispering campaign, one day will be seen for what it really is. And guess what?

There's no prizes for guessing what colour your face will be on that day. And it won't be black, it won't be brown, and it won't be white. It'll be red. It'll be red with embarrassment. And so, first of all, here is God's servant, God's leader, under attack from an unexpected source. From his own family servant. Now, secondly, notice God's servant and God's leader vindicated, defended by God. Look at verse 3. Now, the man Moses was very meek. More than all the people who are on the face of the earth. It's interesting. Augustine, in his confessions, has a prayer. Deliver me from the lust of vindicating myself. When you know that people are saying things about you, when you're the

subject of a whispering campaign, or whatever, and you're being unfairly criticised, your instinct is to defend yourself. It is to jump to your own defence. And Augustine calls it a lust. It is a strong force in me to want me to leap to my own defence. And he says, Lord, deliver me from that lust of vindicating myself. Look at verse 3. It's interesting. If you've got a different vision, it might be brackets. And now Moses is the author of numbers. Some versions want to say this is an editorial comment. I don't think it is. But it doesn't sound very humble, does it? Moses was a very humble man. The humblest man, more than anyone on the face of the earth. He wrote it about himself. But that is what

God has made him. That is the testimony of God in Moses' life. When he was a young man, do you remember him in Egypt? There in Pharaoh's palace. He's got a short fuse. He's full of injustice. He's passionate for the cause of the Hebrew slaves. And he killed someone. He murdered a man. He says, this is what God has done in my life. He's turned that weakness into a strength, if you like. He turned that sense of justice and that sense of injustice and passion for the cause of the Hebrew people. And he's made it, instead of being something that will make me fly off the handle and act in all sorts of unpredictable ways, it's made me meek and humble. The word meek is the picture of a horse. If you think of somebody meek that you trample over and somebody's weak, that's not the picture. It's like a bitch that you put into a horse's mouth to control it. That is what meekness is. It is power that is under control. That's what meekness is. It's not weakness. It's passion under control, being controlled. And that's what God has done. God has put the bit into Moses' mouth so that he's meek and humble. He's still very passionate. He's still got a sense of justice and injustice.

[12:36] All that is there, but now it's controlled. The fruit of the Spirit is self-controlled. It's the Spirit of Jesus in Moses, isn't it? Jesus said about himself, come unto me for I am meek and lowly in heart. Come to me, I am gentle and humble of heart. And maybe that is what Moses is saying about himself. Certainly what other people are saying. But he's saying here, not because it's natural, not because it's supernatural. It is God dealing with him.

I am meek and lowly of heart. That is what God has done in my life. There's something very Jesus-like about verse 3. We don't look, do we, enough at ourselves and others and see how much of the Spirit of God is at work in us. We very easily see the sin and the failures.

We don't want to be cultural Christians, do we? Church people, religious people, it's an ugly thing and a horrible thing. It puts people off. But there's something, isn't there, very attractive about the Spirit of Jesus in a people, in a person. And we need to look for that.

And we need to pray for that. And we need to ask God to suit us so that anything that grieves the Spirit of Jesus would be rooted out of us. So Moses doesn't retaliate. He doesn't jump to his own defences. He might have done when he was younger. He leaves it to God to vindicate him. And that is exactly what happens. Look at verse 4. And suddenly the Lord said to Moses to Aaron and to Miriam, come out you three to pretend to meet him. I'm mucking about once on the way to school with a couple of my friends. And the headmaster used to stand at the gate in my school. And as we walked past him we didn't realise he'd seen us as he drove by and he said, you three, my office, 9 o'clock. Felt pretty fearful. Imagine how scary verse three was. And suddenly you see rebellion and envy for what it really is because it's a gospel issue. It's an attack on the way to salvation. And he calls unto them tent of meeting and then he says, verse 6.

Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision. I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses. He's faithful in all my house. He's faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles. And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why therefore you are not afraid to speak against my servant Moses. They're asking the question on this, it's got a very modern ring to it. Is there really only one way for God to speak to us? Is there really only one revelation through Moses? It's the difference between Christianity and religion, isn't it? It's the direction we're going in. A religion of whatever colour or kind is us telling God. It is us giving to God expression of our hopes and fears. It's us making it up to God. It's us talking to God. That is religion. But Christianity goes the other direction.

[15:51] It is God revealing himself to us. It is God coming to us. It is God in Christ revealing himself. And so you have had the conversation of you, surely there's more than one way to God. How arrogant of you Christians to think that you've got a monopoly of the truth. Well it would be arrogant, wouldn't it, if it was religion. As saying, well, our view is better than your view. We've got a superior understanding of God than you have. That would be arrogant.

Sinfully arrogant. But that isn't the message of Christianity. People say, we've moved on, help me, from a Judeo-Christian belief system. Society has moved on from that. That was okay back in the day, but we know better now. Christians are a minority in this culture, so they shouldn't be treated in any different way from any other minority group. Why should we listen to Moses?

Why should we be tied just to one belief system? Why doesn't God speak through us too? Doesn't God speak through other traditions if he's there? It's a very important issue. What does the Bible say about that? The Bible has something very interesting to say. In Mark 13, it's quite a difficult chapter, but Jesus is predicting the destruction of the temple, and he talks about the temple being destroyed. He speaks about the gospel being preached at the ends of the world. And then he says in Mark 13, let me read it to you, he says this, and if anyone says, you look, here is the Christ, or look, there he is, do not believe it, for false prophets and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders to lead astray, you possibly elect, be on your guard. Where does that leave someone like Mohammed? He came after Jesus, he claims to be, doesn't need the final word, and Jesus says, don't believe him. He says in those days there will be false trusts, false prophets, and they will say this is the way, and they will say you've got to believe me. Don't believe them. Because it is finished, it's come to its culmination in me, let me read you from Hebrews 1. Long ago in the past that many times and in many ways God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he's spoken to us by his Son, whom he's appointed the heir of all things, through whom he created the world, and so on. See what he's saying? He's saying that there is a greater than Moses than has come, and he ties it in with Numbers 12.

Moses heard the word of God. Jesus is the word of God. Moses saw the form of God. Do you remember he says, Lord show me your glory, and he has to hide in a little cave, and God passes by, and he sees the back part of God. He gets a glimpse of God. He sees the form of God, but Jesus is in the form of God. That's what Hebrews said. He is the radiance of God's glory. He is the exact representation of his being. Moses was a servant in God's house. That's what Numbers 12 tells us. God says about Moses, he's a servant in God's house. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the heir of all things. He is the one whom the house belongs to. He is the son over the household. Hebrews 3, 15 and 16. Moses interceded for Israel. That was his great job. When Israel stuffed up, Moses got down on his knees, and he put his face to the ground, and he prayed for them. You see, in this chapter, he pleads with God for his big sister Moses, for his big sister Maria. What a loss Moses must have been. He was the intercessor, praying for people who spitefully used him and abused him.

[19 : 55] Even those within his own household. But he died. But Hebrews tells us that Jesus ever lives to make intercession. He prays for you now, right now. He intercedes for us in the power of an endless life.

There's no stopping him. Like Moses, Jesus was criticized and spoken against throughout his life. And right throughout history, to the end, to this very point. It's interesting, when you read the teaching of Jesus, you wonder, why do people speak against him so much? Why are people so angry about Jesus in our culture? Why is it when people bang their thumb with a hammer, they don't say, oh, Mohammed, or Buddha? Why don't they say that? Why is the name of the Lord Jesus a swear word?

What do you tell me? Why is Jesus spoken against right up to the present time, and he's silent? There's no thunderbolts from heaven, no lightning flash. Why? Like Moses, too, is silent. He doesn't defend himself.

He opens not his mouth. Instead, what does he do? He commits it all to God. And guess what? God vindicates him. And on the third day, God raised him from the dead. And Peter stands up on the day of Pentecost, and he says, this Lord whom you crucified, God has raised, and made Lord in Christ. And in the end, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The suffering servant, who was led like a lamb to the slaughter, who opened not his mouth, God vindicated. So here's God's servant attacked, defended, and vindicated. But thirdly, this passage has something very direct to say to you and I tonight. It's one of those seven deadly sins.

[21 : 57] It's that of envy and jealousy. Moses and Aaron are jealous. And they want what God has given to Moses, and they want it for themselves. Richard Nixon, you know, the American president from Watergate fame, he was defeated by JFK for the US presidency in 1960. It was a razor-thin majority.

And JFK made a very famous inaugural speech. You'll know it. It says, ask not what your country can do for you. It's that speech. And apparently, after the inaugural speech, Richard Nixon, who'd lost the election to JFK, is reported to have told Kennedy's advisor, Ted Soreson, there were things in that speech I wish I could have said. And Soreson said, did you mean the line where he said, ask not what your country can do for you? No, said Nixon. The part where he said, I do solemnly swear. Because we want what the other guy's got. Jealousy. And envy Alexander White, preacher, once put it like this, what an utterly evil passion. Envy is. Which is awakened, not by bad things, but by the best things.

John Gielgud. John Gielgud, he played Othello. Othello is a Shakespeare player, he's going to have jealousy, he kills his wife. And John Gielgud was interviewed, and he once said this, I really don't know what jealousy is. But then he paused. And then he smiled and said, oh yes, I do.

I remember when Larry, that's Sir Lawrence Olivier, had a success in Hamlet. I wept. Weeping at other people's success, that is envy and that is jealousy. Good things, fine things, happy things. In others and for others, making our spirits sour. And it is a horrible and ugly thing. And you say, well, that's just human nature. We all sin. Sin is very ugly and destructive and horrible. And envy destroys us from the inside out. And that is why we need a saviour.

We're not here. Are we pointing the finger? I don't think we are. We're in the same boat as human beings and it's called the Titanic and it's going down and we need a saviour. And we need someone to rescue us because these things like envy and jealousy, they eat us away from the inside. And they're souring us and they make us less than human. That's what sin does. Envy and jealousy. It is the sin from which all other sin derives. It's the devil's sin. Have you seen that? The devil, he wasn't content, the Bible tells us, with the extraordinary status that he'd been given. Lucifer, the bright and shining one, he wanted what belonged to another. He wanted what belonged to God and so the devil reached out to grab for something that didn't belong to him. It's the sin of Adam and Eve. There's a thing called an ego search on Google. None of you have done it. None of you have done it. None of you have done it. None of you have done that. But it leads to comparisons and to envy and to jealousy. And the spirit is grieved and the work of God comes to a standstill. Why did they crucify Jesus? Envy and jealousy. Pilate knows it, doesn't he? Pilate knows it.

[25 : 59] He sees it in the scribes and the Pharisees. He saw because they wanted what Jesus had. Jesus had popularity with the people. He had power and they wanted it for themselves. And because they couldn't have it for themselves, they didn't want him to have it either. And so they hand him over to be crucified. And none of us is free from it. We've all sometimes envied some time or something. We envy someone's looks. We envy other people's gifts. We envy other people's families. We envy other people's athletic prowess. We envy, don't we, we envy other people's intellect, other people's winsomeness. It's interesting that it was finding envy in himself that brought Paul to Christ.

It's really fascinating. Romans chapter 7. When Paul gives his testimony. Let me just read you a little bit of it. And he says there, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet, to be envious. If the law had not said, you shall not covet. But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.

It was through the law of Moses. Discovering envy, that he was an envious person. And we play all sorts of games, don't we? We try to spin this and God shows Paul that he was a religious, jealous, covetous man. And he brought him to the point where he needed a saviour. Because he couldn't deal with himself. And so I'm asking you, have you come to this point? It may not be envy, it may not be jealousy, it may be something else. But have you been brought to the point where you see that unless Jesus comes into your life, unless you have a saviour, this is going to destroy me? But I can't be the person I was created to be because I need a saviour. So being a Christian is, it is saying, Lord, help me. I can't help myself.

I can't be the person that I really should be. And he comes and God puts his spirit in you and the spirit of Jesus and the fruit of the spirit begins to appear. That love and peace and joy and patience. Don't you want to be that kind of person? And it brings us back to Numbers 12. What do we do about sin and envy and jealousy? You cannot just ignore it tonight. You can't pretend that it doesn't matter. Because it does matter. Look at the Romans, look at Numbers chapter 12 and verse 15. Numbers 12 and verse 15. So Miriam was shut outside the camp for seven days. And the people

did not set out on the march until Miriam was brought in again. It's one of the reasons why sin and our own personal sin matters because it brings the work of God to a standstill. It grieves God's spirit. Verse nine. The anger of the Lord burns against them. And jealousy can wreck churches. And it may be that we have to face great moral crises amongst our church families. We've not had that, praise the Lord, for the last 15 years. But actually, how does God destroy churches? It's by things like jealousy and envy. How are churches destroyed? It takes one person to hold up the work of God and life. You see, don't be that person. Let's resolve before God. I don't want to be that person. That if there are issues in my life that are undealt with or unresolved, Lord, please help me to do business with you tonight. Because there's nothing more important is there than the cause of Christ going forward. That people should be saved and rescued and disciplined and brought under his lordship. So what do we have to do? Well, verse 11, we have to confess.

He goes to his little brother, I love it. Aaron, the big brother, says to his little brother, Oh my lord, my brothers have never ever said that to me. Oh my lord, do not punish us.

[30 : 33] Because we've done foolishly and I have sinned. Heart's humility is, what an idiot I've been. What a fool. We've been such idiots. We've been guilty of envy and jealousy. Let's confess it. We plead with God. Forgive us like Aaron pleads with Moses to forgive him. Don't hold this against me. And then something marvellous happens. We're nearly finished. Look at verse 13.

Moses cried to the Lord, Oh God, please heal her, please. Isn't that lovely? It's a heart-fart prayer. After all that Miriam has done and all the damage and all the hurt that she's caused, don't you see the spirit of Jesus there? Pray for your enemies. Who despitefully use you, who abuse you, mistreat you, and misrepresent you. That's the antidote to envy. It's pray for them. You may be jealous of someone in this congregation. How do you deal with that? You start to pray for them. And when you see other Christians going on, or a Christian being blessed, or other churches being successful, what's the antidote? The antidote is to pray for them. And Moses intercedes, and somebody has said that intercession is love on its knees with tears in its eyes.

And when God deals with his sister, Moses falls on his face and pleads with God, Lord, please, please heal her. And what's God's answer? Verse 14. But the Lord said to Moses, if her father but spat in her face, should she not be shamed for seven days? Let her be shut outside the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again. Let her be shut outside the camp for seven days, and after that she may be brought in again.

I cannot imagine my daughter doing anything that would make me spit in her face. What would it take for a daughter, for a father to treat it like that? That's how disgraceful envy and jealousy are, as far as God is concerned. We say that it's not serious. Nobody knows about it. It's not the way God sees it. He sees it as disgraceful.

And so Miriam is in disgrace, and because of the skin condition, it makes her ceremonially unclean, and she's not able to come to the tent of the meeting. She's banished for seven days, but again, you have this beautiful picture, don't you, that where did Jesus come? He came outside the city wall.

[32 : 49] That's where Jesus came. He came outside the camp, Hebrews 13 tells us. He came to be excluded, so that you might come back in. He came to bear the shame and the disgrace of our sins, so that we might be accepted in him.

And so what's the cure of envy and jealousy? In the end, it's the cross. And so the writer of the Hebrews says to the Hebrews and to us, he says, let us go to him.

Let us go to where he is, outside the camp. That's where he is. Let's go to him. And what's he doing there? He is bearing shame and scoffing rude. And in my place condemned, he stood.

There is a substitute. There is a sepia. There is someone who will take the shame and the disgrace and the punishment of our sin. And so let's go to him tonight. It's madness not to.

A week outside the camp of Israel, let's say a week is a long time in politics. And it may be so, especially if there's a leadership crisis. John Kennedy, Jared Kaye said this.

[34 : 00] Written in Chinese, the word crisis has two characters. One represents danger. And the other represents opportunity. There's great danger in the camp.

When envy and jealousy get left undone with. But what an opportunity tonight, this evening. We have to do something about it. We have a great, great saviour.

And let's go to him. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.