

# The meekest man on Earth (Numbers 12)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Numbers

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## I. Review from Prior Lesson

- a. As mentioned in prior lessons in this series, one of the main benefits of Christians studying the book of **Numbers** is that it provides a map of the Christian life.
  - i. As Paul explained in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, the exodus journey of Israel in the Wilderness is not only a true story, but also an allegorical foreshadowing of the spiritual journey of a Christian.
    - 1. The 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness represents the Christian life.
    - 2. The Promised Land represents the reward we look forward to, after this life.
    - 3. The nation of Israel represents the church.
      - a. The various trials they faced represent the trials in this life that test the hearts of Christians.
      - b. The few who were faithful to the end (Joshua and Caleb) represent Christians who remain faithful to the end and receive the promised reward.
      - c. The many who were baptized and ate the spiritual food and drink, even drinking from Christ, who fell in the desert represent those who become Christians but do not remain faithful. During the time of testing and temptation, they fell and did not make it.
      - d. The trials and temptations they faced (in **Exodus** and **Numbers**) represent the trials and temptations we will face in this life, after we become Christians.
        - i. How we handle those tests will determine whether or not we receive our promised reward.
- b. Two of the five trials that Paul referred to in **1 Corinthians 10:1-13**, which led to many of the Israelites dying in the Wilderness (and are thereby warnings for us), were touched on in the previous lesson:

- i. "...we should not *lust after evil things* as they also lusted." (1 **Corinthians 10:6**, NKJV)
  - 1. The people looked back longingly on the fish, melons, leeks, onions, etc., that they enjoyed in Egypt.
  - 2. Likewise, we should not look back longingly on the sinful pleasures that the world offers us, which we may have 'enjoyed' in the past when we were spiritually enslaved (before we became Christians).
- ii. "...nor *complain*, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer." (1 **Corinthians 10:10**, NKJV)
  - 1. The people complained about the lack of variety in their food.
  - 2. The Israelites will complain about *many more things*, as we will see in the rest of **Numbers**!

## II. Miriam and Aaron Envy Moses

- a. Read **Numbers 12:1-5**.
- b. Storyline:
  - i. Miriam and Aaron (the brother and sister of Moses) are complaining about Moses.
  - ii. They complain about his wife being Ethiopian (some translations say "Cushite").
    - 1. Ethiopia is a nation and people to the south of Egypt, in the northeastern part of the continent of Africa.
  - iii. They also complain that the Lord has spoken through them as well as through Moses (apparently, they do not like the idea that Moses is getting all the attention and respect for being the one God is speaking to/through).
    - 1. However, Moses is described here as "*the meekest man on the face of the earth*".
      - a. This statement challenges my concept of what it means to be meek!
  - iv. The three are called to a meeting at the tabernacle of testimony by the Lord.
- c. **Question:** What was the underlying problem with Aaron and Miriam?

- i. Was it prejudice against Ethiopians?
  1. Ethiopians were not Jews. As a people, they were easily recognized since they had a darker skin color.
    - a. Recall the statement in Jeremiah: "*Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?*" (**Jeremiah 13:23**, NKJV)
    - b. Based on this statement, it appears to me that Ethiopian people were known (to the Jews) for having a distinctive appearance based on the (darker) color of their skin.
  2. My initial thought, when first reading this passage, was that the problem Aaron and Mariam had with Moses may have been rooted in some type of racial prejudice against the (darker skinned) Ethiopians.
- ii. Upon further consideration of the discussion with Aaron and Miriam that follows, I believe that the real underlying problem was *envy*. They did not like that Moses was the only one who was recognized as the one through whom God was speaking.
  1. Clement of Rome, in writing a letter to the Christians in Corinth at the end of the first century, points to this story as an example of the problem of envy that has always plagued God's people (and had become a big problem in Corinth as well). Many believe that this Clement was the same person Paul spoke well of as his "fellow worker" in **Philippians 4:3**. The church in Corinth was having problems of division within the church and had asked for counsel from the leaders of the church in Rome. Clement was an elder in that church. The quote that follows is from Clement's response to the Corinthian church.
    - a. "[from CHAPTER I] ...The Church of God which sojourns at Rome, to the Church of God sojourning at Corinth, to them that are called and sanctified by the will of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from Almighty God through Jesus Christ, be multiplied....
    - b. "CHAP. III.—THE SAD STATE OF THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH AFTER SEDITION AROSE IN IT FROM ENVY AND EMULATION.

- c. “Every kind of honor and happiness was bestowed upon you, and then was fulfilled that which is written, ‘My beloved did eat and drink, and was enlarged and became fat, and kicked.’ (**Deuteronomy 32:15**) Hence flowed emulation and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and disorder, war and captivity. So the worthless rose up against the honored, those of no reputation against such as were renowned, the foolish against the wise, the young against those advanced in years. For this reason righteousness and peace are now far departed from you, inasmuch as every one abandons the fear of God, and is become blind in His faith, neither walks in the ordinances of His appointment, nor acts a part becoming a Christian, but walks after his own wicked lusts, resuming the practice of an unrighteous and ungodly envy, by which death itself entered into the world (**Romans 5:12, Genesis 2**).
- d. “CHAP. IV.—MANY EVILS HAVE ALREADY FLOWED FROM THIS SOURCE IN ANCIENT TIMES.
- e. “For thus it is written: ‘And it came to pass after certain days, that Cain brought of the fruits of the earth a sacrifice unto God; and Abel also brought of the firstlings of his sheep, and of the fat thereof. And God had respect to Abel and to his offerings, but Cain and his sacrifices He did not regard. And Cain was deeply grieved, and his countenance fell. And God said to Cain, Why are you grieved, and why is your countenance fallen? If you offer rightly, but do not divide rightly, have you not sinned? Be at peace: your offering returns to yourself, and you shall again possess it. And Cain said to Abel his brother, Let us go into the field. And it came to pass, while they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him.’ (**Genesis 4:3-8, LXX**)
- f. “You see, brethren, how envy and jealousy led to the murder of a brother. Through envy, also, our father Jacob fled from the face of Esau his brother. (**Genesis 27:41+**) Envy made Joseph be persecuted unto death, and to come into bondage. Envy compelled Moses to flee from the face of Pharaoh king of Egypt, when he heard these words from his fellow-countryman, ‘Who made you a judge or a ruler over us? Will you kill me, as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ (**Exodus 2:14**)

- g. “On account of envy, Aaron and Miriam had to make their abode outside the camp (**Numbers 12**). Envy brought down Dathan and Abiram alive to Hades, through the sedition which they excited against God’s servant Moses. (**Numbers 16:33**) Through envy, David underwent the hatred not only of foreigners, but was also persecuted by Saul king of Israel (**1 Samuel 18+**).”
  - i. (Source: Clement of Rome, *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, chapters 1-4; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 5–6)
  - ii. Clement said the root problem in the Corinthian church was envy. He explained that this sin had been a plague among the people of God from the very beginning, including the incident in **Numbers 12** with Aaron and Miriam challenging Moses’ role.

### III. Regarding Moses being “the meekest man on the earth”

- a. Although Moses is the principal author of the **Five Books of Moses**, perhaps someone else added this statement afterward (similar to how someone else, like Joshua, must have added the part about what happened after Moses died, at the end of **Deuteronomy 34**).
- b. This calls into question what the term translated “meek” here means.
  - i. When I think of the term “meek”, Moses is not the first person who comes to mind. It’s not that I think of him as prideful or arrogant.
  - ii. When I think of someone being ‘meek’, my initial thought is of someone like the host of the popular children’s show ‘Mister Rodgers’, or others who have a similar mild, unthreatening personality.
    - 1. However, that is *not* how I think of Moses!
- c. **Questions:** What does this term “meek” really mean? How is it used elsewhere in the Scriptures? Does the concept hold any significance for us, in our own lives?
  - i. The same Greek word used here in the Septuagint (LXX), which was the Old Testament of the early church, appears just a few times in the New Testament. However, some of these references are rather significant.
    - 1. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the following statement:

- a. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. *Blessed are the meek*, for they shall inherit the earth." (**Matthew 5:4-5**, NKJV)
  - b. What Jesus says there is consistent with **Psalm 37:11** (designated **Psalm 36:11** in the LXX, where the same Greek word is used: "But the *gentle* shall inherit the earth...."
    - i. Read **Psalm 37:7-11** (designated **Psalm 36:7-11** in the LXX, from which we will read and where the same Greek word is used).
    - ii. The contrast (as opposed to the meek/gentle, peace-loving people) is against those who are filled with wrath and envy, and who do evil.
  - c. If Moses was held up as being the meekest man on the earth, and Jesus says the meek will inherit the earth, it strikes me as very important that we have an accurate picture of what this term "meek" means. It is only after having a proper understanding of this term that we can we strive to have that quality in our own lives!
2. An important prophecy about Jesus was fulfilled when he entered Jerusalem "meek/gentle/humble/lowly and riding on a donkey."
- a. "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (**Matthew 21:5**, NKJV)
  - b. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Proclaim it aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king comes to you: He is righteous and saving; He is gentle and mounted upon a donkey, even a young foal" (**Zechariah 9:9**, LXX, OSB)
  - c. The idea here is that the great future King is not mounted on a fancy horse that would call attention to himself and his exalted position. Rather, He will be entering in the lowly, humble manner on a common donkey, a rather humble animal typically used by the poor.
3. Wives are called to exhibit this same characteristic toward their husbands, and all of us are called to show this when defending our faith and actions to unbelievers. In both cases,

we are called to combine this with fear (of God). See **1 Peter 3:4** and **3:15**.

- a. “Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a *gentle* and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.” (**1 Peter 3:1–4**, NKJV)
- b. “And who is he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you are blessed. ‘And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled.’ But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, *with meekness* and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.” (**1 Peter 3:13–16**, NKJV)
  - i. Note the combination of meekness and fear of God, two attributes to which all Christians are called.
  - ii. Some mistakenly think that being *meek* or *gentle* means a person is non-confrontational, someone who goes to great lengths not to offend anyone. However, that is not what we see in how this word is used in the Bible, especially as applied to Moses and Jesus.
    1. Let us come to an accurate and balanced concept of what this term means as used in Scripture, so that we can recognize it in others and manifest it in our own lives!
  - iii. Jesus and the apostles also taught this concept using other words.
    1. Read **Luke 9:46-48**.
      - a. Note that even in Jesus’ inner circle, men were arguing over who would be the greatest.
      - b. “For he who is least among you all will be great.”
    2. Read **Luke 14:7-11**.

- a. Jesus calls us to “take the lowest place”.
  - b. Those who humble themselves will be exalted (by God).
3. Read **Luke 22:24-27** (after the Last Supper).
- a. This desire for the exalted position was a problem Jesus had to address over and over among His disciples.
  - b. Recall that this had been a problem for Moses, as well.
  - c. Those with Him wanted the glory and the ability to perform miracles, but did not want the same humble, gentle, meek character. They wanted to be exalted in the eyes of others.
  - d. **Challenge:** How does this apply to us?
    - i. How do you react when someone else gets the credit, praise, and attention?
    - ii. Do you want to take the lowest (least honored) seat at the table? Are you content to let God honor you (or not) as He so chooses?
    - iii. Do you compare yourself to others in a way that makes you feel better about yourself when it appears you (or your church) are ‘doing better’ than others? Do you really have the best interests of Christ at heart?
4. Read **Philippians 2:1-16**.
- a. Paul’s charge: in humility, consider others before yourself.
  - b. Look to the example of the humility of Jesus, who made Himself of no reputation.
  - c. Work these things out in your own life “with fear and trembling”.
  - d. May we purge this selfish spirit from our hearts so that we may shine like stars in the midst of a corrupt generation.
  - e. Consider all the sins (selfishness, gossip, slander, divisiveness, envy, unrighteous anger, disputing) that come from this lack of meekness/gentleness/humility!



- d. However, I am still stuck with the question raised previously: How could *Moses* be considered the *meekest/most gentle/most humble* man on the face of the earth?
  - i. I have a picture in my mind of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets, smashing them, grinding the golden calf to powder, scattering it into the water, and compelling the Israelites to drink it.
    - 1. I also see Him confronting Pharaoh, the powerful king of Egypt, and leading hundreds of thousands of people out of Egypt through the Red Sea.
  - ii. On the other hand, considering what Paul said about the humility of Jesus (giving up his royal position and becoming a servant of no reputation), consider what Stephen (in **Acts**) and the **Hebrews** writer said about Moses.
    - 1. Stephen, speaking before the Sanhedrin in **Acts 7**:
      - a. “At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father’s house for three months. But when he was set out, Pharaoh’s daughter took him away and brought him up as her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.” (**Acts 7:20–22**, NKJV)
    - 2. Read **Hebrews 11:24–27**.
      - a. Moses was not looking for an exalted position. Like Jesus, *he had that initially, but gave it up voluntarily* to serve many others.
        - i. Moses submitted himself to the will of God. Although he did not want to go back to Egypt when God called him from the burning bush, he ultimately submitted himself to God and did His will.
      - b. He was totally in submission to God and wanted to do God’s will, rather than his own. Like Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.
      - c. In all of this, he foreshadowed Jesus and provided a challenging example of what it truly means to be meek/lowly in spirit/gentle/humble.

- e. Contrast this with the attitude of Aaron and Miriam in **Numbers 12**.
  - i. They were seeking a more exalted position in the eyes of the people.
  - ii. They were envious of the position of Moses.
  - iii. They provide an example of how NOT to be.
    - 1. Recently, I was sent a link to a clip from a podcast in which Rick Allen Ross was being interviewed. Ross is an expert on religious cults. Listening to the interview, I was astonished by the large number and variety of destructive religious cults that were in some way tied to the Bible.
      - a. I was stunned by the amount of evil people were doing under the cover of the Bible and the Christian faith.
      - b. The evils included: sexual exploitation, financial corruption, physical and emotional abuse, as well as extreme levels of control and isolation.
        - i. It reminded me of what Paul warned about regarding the problems to come in the last days in **2 Timothy 3**.
    - 2. Profile of the types of people who can be attracted to religious cults: *almost anyone!*
    - 3. A typical profile of leaders of these destructive groups:
      - a. They set things up so that they are not answerable to anyone. The leaders cannot be challenged.
        - i. **Questions:** What should happen to the man (or men) who lead a church? What does the Bible say?
          - 1. Read **1 Timothy 5:19-20**.
          - 2. Paul indicated that charges against church leaders (elders) were not something to be done casually. Required two or three witnesses.
          - 3. However, those found guilty were to be publicly rebuked.
      - b. Other characteristics of leaders of destructive groups:
        - i. Selfish; seeking position and control over others.

- ii. Deceitful; taking Scriptures out of context to advance their agenda.
- iii. This is the *very opposite* of the kind of leaders Jesus wanted: servants who are taking the lowest position to meet the needs of others; humble men.
- iv. May we imitate the meekness and humility that Christ expects from His followers/leaders.

#### IV. The Lord Backs Moses, and Miriam is Struck with Leprosy

##### a. Read **Numbers 12:5-16**.

##### i. Storyline:

1. The Lord confirms that Moses is the (only) one He speaks with “face-to-face, even in visible form”.
2. The Lord refers to Moses as “my servant”, and as the one who is “faithful in all My house”.
3. Miriam is struck with leprosy. Moses prays for her healing, and she is restored and allowed back into the camp after seven days of being “unclean”.

##### b. It strikes me as ironic that Miriam was complaining about Moses’ Ethiopian wife (who would have been darker skinned), and the punishment is that she is *turned “snow white” with leprosy!*

- i. This would not be the first time that the Lord used the means of someone’s sin to punish them to reinforce the lesson. (I also think of the Ten Plagues visited upon Egypt, which made a mockery of the ‘gods’ they worshiped).
- ii. Notice that Moses, like Jesus, had the ability to cure leprosy. We also saw that as one of the signs he was given in the beginning, when the Lord spoke to him from the burning bush (**Exodus 4:6-7**).

##### c. The distinction that the Lord makes regarding Moses is that he alone spoke with the Lord “face to face...in visible form” (**Numbers 12:8**).

- i. However, in many places in Scripture, it says that no one has seen or can see God (the Father).
  1. “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.” (**John 1:18**, NKJV)

2. "...who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom be honor and everlasting power. Amen." (**1 Timothy 6:16**, NKJV)
- ii. Many early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr in Dialogue with Trypho, point to passages where someone "sees" the Lord as Theophanies (appearances of the Son of God in visible form prior to the birth of Jesus). Tertullian pointed to places where it says that the Lord appeared in visible form to Moses (such as here, in **Numbers 12**) to support the same idea. For example, in the following:
  1. Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3., p.163 (Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*)
  2. Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3., p. 385 (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*)
  3. Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3., pp. 609-610 (Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*)
- d. This passage (**Numbers 12:7-8**) also appears in the New Testament, explaining how Moses related to Jesus. Here Moses is referred to as the Lord's faithful servant in all His house.
  - i. Read **Hebrews 3:1-6**.
    1. The Greek word translated "servant" here in **Hebrews 3:5** appears only this one time in the New Testament. That word (θεράπων / therapon) is taken from **Numbers 12:7-8** in the LXX!
  - ii. Contrast with **1 Samuel 2:35**.
    1. There, we find a promise that in the future, the Lord will "raise up" a "faithful priest" who will be "over His faithful house".
    2. This is a prophecy about Christ. The Lord raised Him up (literally, from the dead); and He is the faithful high priest, as explained throughout **Hebrews**.
  - iii. Moses was the *faithful servant* in God's house. However, Jesus was the faithful priest *over* God's *faithful house*.
  - iv. **Challenge to Us (from Hebrews 3):** Will we be God's faithful house? Will we prove ourselves to be faithful by persevering to the end?
    1. Will we be like Moses, who "persevered/endured because he saw Him who is invisible"? (**Hebrews 11:27**)