

**TOUGH SKIN & A SOFT HEART**  
*The Life of Moses: Deliverance Through Faith*  
**Numbers 11:16-12:16**  
 Chadron Berean Church

If you're going to go against the grain of this world by faithfully following Jesus as one of His disciples, you're going to need two essential qualities: 1) tough skin, and 2) a soft heart. One man said, "*Maturity is moving from soft skin and a tough heart to tough skin and a soft heart.*"<sup>1</sup> That's what we're going to talk about from the life of Moses today in Numbers 11:16. We left off last week with Moses feeling defeated. He let the complaining rabble get to him and he felt like his task was too much to bear alone. In response, God provides some help.

**I. MOSES APPOINTS SEVENTY ELDERS. (11:16-30)**

*16 Yahweh therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers, and take them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. 17 Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone.*

So in response to the heavy task of shepherding all the complaining people, God has Moses appoint **seventy elders** who will help him **bear the burden** and **take their stand with him**. This isn't the first time Moses is granted help. In Exodus 4:14, God accommodated Himself to Moses' weakness by allowing Aaron to help. In Exodus 18, Jethro (father-in-law) wisely counseled Moses to appoint elders to judge the people by the Law so that Moses didn't have to do it all. Remember, all Moses was doing was sitting on a judgment seat all day handling every case that came up. Now, with the help of the elders Moses was only judging the major matters. But it seems that these seventy who will serve with Moses in a special capacity are pulled from the elders appointed in Exodus 18.

And I think this is a wise thing because for one, Moses isn't going to take all the heat from the people alone. We talked about this a few weeks ago but one reason why I think God desires for a plurality of elders like in churches is because it protects an elder/pastor/shepherd like Moses from too much praise or blame. When things are great, they love Moses! When things are tough, Moses is being blamed for everything! A team of elders working together can absorb some of that. A plurality of elders also provides more accountability, eliminates blind spots in doctrine and ministry, and enables the elders to feed on each other's faith and courage. It also enables the various leadership gifts and styles to be more fully used for the health of the body.<sup>2</sup> So I think these men will be a great blessing to Moses. His load will be lighter, and he will be encouraged. Let's pick it up in verse 24:

*So Moses went out and told the people the words of Yahweh. Also, he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and had them stand around the tent. 25 Then Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to him; and He took of the Spirit who was upon him and placed Him upon the*

*seventy elders. And when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do it again.*

So with these men standing around the **tabernacle** in full view of Israel, God's presence comes down in the **cloud** and speaks. Then He takes the **Spirit** that rested upon Moses and sovereignly places Him upon the others. And we need to be careful here not to think of the Spirit as a thing or force. The Spirit is a Person and God Himself. He's the third member of the Trinity. But this same Spirit, or maybe even the same general gifts of the Spirit that Moses had, are then given in some extent to these 70 elders for their leadership role. It's a good for us to be reminded that God sovereignly distributes spiritual gifts to each individual as He desires for the common good of the body (1 Cor. 12, esp. vv. 7, 18). We are all uniquely created with our personalities and talents and *in Christ* given spiritual gifts to serve in the body of God's people. All believers have a Spirit-empowered ability (or abilities) to serve in the body and are essential to the health of it.

And even though the Spirit sometimes operated differently in the OT (the Spirit came in a special way at Pentecost in accordance with the New Covenant; perhaps with a fuller, permanent presence in believers; cf. 1 Sam. 10:10; 16:14; John 14:17; 15:26; 16:7-8, 13) there's really nothing new here with the **prophesying**. It's kind of like we saw in Acts a few times. For example, when the Spirit of God baptized a new people group for the first time and wanted to make it known, they might break out in prophesy as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:11; 10:44-46; 19:1-7). Like the skilled musicians in 1 Chron. 25:1 who prophesied in song with instruments, Eugene Merrill thinks they were probably giving praise to God in song or speech without training (1 Sam. 10:9-11 1 Chron. 25:1).<sup>3</sup> It's a bit mysterious to us, but we see similar expressions of the Spirit happening occasionally in the OT and the NT. But often, as with this occasion, it only happens once and that at the moment they receive the Spirit (v. 25). That's because God's trying to make a point. If it happened all the time like this it wouldn't stand out at all. So it was an outward manifestation of the power of the Spirit that would be a sign to the people that God was with these men—that they had the same qualifications and authority as Moses, thus dampening their rebellious spirits against their leadership.

*26 But two men had remained in the camp; the name of one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (now they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. 27 So a young man ran and told Moses and said, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28 Then Joshua the son of Nun, the attendant of Moses from his youth, said, "Moses, my lord, restrain them." 29 But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of Yahweh were prophets, that Yahweh would put His Spirit upon them!" 30 Then Moses returned to the camp, both he and the elders of Israel.*

So two of the elders, for whatever reason, **remained in the camp** and didn't go to the tent meeting. It doesn't appear they were disobedient either, but they are found prophesying in the camp. A **young man** is concerned about it and so is **Joshua** the son of Nun who will be Moses' successor. Their jealousy for Moses' honor is understandable and instructive (cf. Mark 9:38-39). He and many others thought this quality belonged to Moses alone. It tells us the unique role Moses had. But notice this: Moses wished that all would prophesy! So Moses wasn't upset. He was grateful! People breaking out in praise to God is better than complaining any day! This tells

us a lot about Moses' thinking though. For one, he understood that the only indispensable person in Israel was God.

**God is indispensable in ministry, not us.**

Sometimes we get plugged into a ministry somewhere and we are heavily involved and we can start to think that this ministry just can't survive without me. Or this ministry really needs me. Well, I had a Bible instructor once who said that he knew it was time for him to move on when the church became too dependent upon him. The point is that leaders can come and go, and a ministry will go on. Their absence will be felt, but it's kind of like pulling your hand out of a bucket of water. It fills in. Moses didn't have it in his mind that the ministry was dependent upon him alone. He was dispensable. God was not. Moses' response also tells us that Moses was secure with who he was.

**Be secure with who God made you to be.**

He wasn't threatened by other men being given spiritual authority. He rejoiced in it! Had Moses had *soft skin* and a *tough heart*, Moses would have felt threatened and reacted pridefully to the fact that others were being used of God in a similar way. *What if people start to follow them? What if they're a better speaker or counselor than me?* Moses didn't care. He praised God for the gifted people among them. In God's wisdom, Paul says He created us as unique members of the body to minister to the body. We rejoice to see others doing well and using their gifts—and praise God that others can do some things better than we can. If we're thinking like disciple-makers, *we'll want to see God raise up others and use them too* (Mk 9:38). Now we look to another major episode in chapter 12.

## **II. MIRIAM AND AARON OPPOSE MOSES. (12:1-9)**

*12 Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had taken as a wife (for he had taken a Cushite woman); 2 and they said, "Has Yahweh indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" And Yahweh heard it. 3 (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)*

So there's an interesting verse that I want to read with this section. **Micah 6:4** says, "*I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.*" So Moses definitely has an exclusive leadership role as the main intercessor between Israel and God. However, God also allowed his siblings **Aaron and Miriam** to help. Miriam, remember, played a crucial part in saving Moses' life as a baby. Exodus 15 also reveals she was some sort of prophetess who led the Jewish women in song, praising God (Ex. 15:20-21). His brother Aaron also served in the Exodus as speaker and as high priest. But apparently that wasn't enough. They craved more recognition. They want to be first (Mark 10:31; 3 John 9).

The main cause for the controversy was **Moses' wife** who is here described as a **Cushite**. Some think Cush could have been used to refer to Arabia where his wife Zipporah is from. Others think that by this time Zipporah had died and Moses married another foreign woman from the area southeast of Egypt. That was legal. According to the Law, she just couldn't be a Canaanite (Ex. 34:16). It seems reasonable though, considering Moses' age at this time (around 80 years old)—and considering Psalm 90:10 where Moses said the average lifespan was 70—that he would need

to remarry since he had a lot of life left in him. By God's grace, he has 40 more years left in him and he won't die of old age (Dt. 34:7). Whether it was Zipporah from Midian or a new wife from Cush, **jealousy** was the cause. There may have even been some prejudice involved too. I wonder if this whispering campaign was sparked by the 70 elders being appointed too. I think with all these new face and figures in the limelight, Miriam and Aaron were feeling a bit threatened. Or maybe thinking of themselves as indispensable, they were offended that Moses didn't consult with them in taking this wife.

You know, you can be utterly disinterested in pursuing your own glory and utterly selfless, even serving in a costly manner, and there will be criticism. There will always be people envious of what God is doing through you and will misrepresent you or misunderstand you. But you know, we need to realize that many of our critics are motivated by fear and envy. People lash out when they feel threatened and they use criticism to tear others down in a power play out of selfish ambition. Sometimes they are right. Sometimes they're wrong. But many times the motives are selfish. I think that if we have skin tough enough to overlook that, and have a heart soft enough to learn from the criticism, we might just win the critic over.

And apparently Miriam is the main rabble rouser here. Her name is listed first. The verb "spoke" is in the feminine form, and she alone will be disciplined by God. She is clearly leading the charge in this whisper campaign. I don't know about you, but I also find it highly comforting to think that Moses' family life wasn't perfect and some of his greatest critics are his family. Hey, Jesus said our enemies might be those of our own household (Matt. 10:34-36; Mic. 7:6). Satan has many willing vessels among family members! I've said it many times but the hardest place to be spiritual or to accept another person's spirituality or spiritual authority is in the home. Matthew Henry said something I want us to keep in mind so that we're careful with our words with loved ones. He said, *"Sometimes the unkindness of our friends is a greater trial of our meekness than the malice of our enemies."*<sup>4</sup>

*4 Suddenly Yahweh said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, "You three come out to the tent of meeting."*

You know what that reminds me of? Getting the call to the principal's office (not that that ever happened to me!). It's almost like God said, *"You three. My office. Now."*<sup>5</sup> Miriam and Aaron started feeling a bit sick at that point don't you think? Yahweh called them into His office.

*So the three of them came out. 5 Then Yahweh came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. And then both came forward, 6 and He said,*

*"Hear now My words:  
If there is a prophet among you,  
I, Yahweh, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.  
I shall speak with him in a dream.  
7 Not so, with My servant Moses,  
He is faithful in all My household;  
8 With him I speak mouth to mouth,  
Indeed clearly, and not in riddles,*

*And he beholds the form of Yahweh.  
Why then were you not afraid  
To speak against My servant, against Moses?"*

So God speaks about how He communicates with people in various ways. God spoke to some individuals (like Joseph or Ezekiel) through dreams or visions or dark sayings (maybe like Daniel 5's writing on the wall). Sometimes during the monarchical period, He used the Urim and Thumim like with the high priest.<sup>6</sup> But with Moses, God **spoke mouth to mouth** like two friends having a conversation! How many people can say that? Not many! He had a unique relationship with God. Moses even saw His **form**. Most people at Sinai did not see His form, they only heard His voice (Dt. 4:15). We know from other texts that Moses could not have been exposed to the full glorious presence of the Lord in his natural state. No man can see God and live (Ex. 33:20, 23; Jn 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16). But maybe like some of the investigative tv shows where you see the form of the person but the face is blacked out, so Moses met with God at various times. Moses saw his outline in the cloud but did not see His full glory (Ex. 33:20). That being said, God vindicates Moses and silences Miriam and Aaron. God revealed that it was sinful for Miriam and Aaron to challenge the man God appointed. So here's another principle for having tough skin and keeping a soft heart.

**Let God defend you.**

If you go into ministry or take your walk with Christ seriously, there are going to be critics and sometimes it's best just to let God defend you. Cast it upon Him. Put it in His hands. Zip your lip and move on. You don't always have to defend yourself and He will do a better job of defending you than you can. If you have soft skin and tough heart here, you'll be tempted to fight back and get loud, take it personally or let it paralyze you. You'll forget about the dozen compliments you've received recently and let one criticism derail your entire day or week. You need tough skin and soft heart when it comes to critics.

*9 So the anger of Yahweh burned against them, and He went away. 10 But the cloud withdrew from over the tent, and behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. 11 Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not place this sin on us, in which we have acted foolishly and in which we have sinned. 12 Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother's womb!" 13 And Moses cried out to Yahweh, saying, "O God, heal her, I pray!" 14 But Yahweh said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her dishonor for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again." 15 So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not set out until Miriam was received again.*

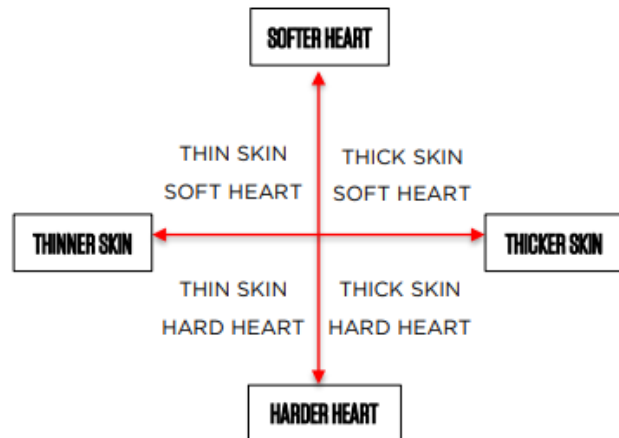
You know, if I was Moses, it would be tempting to pray for God to heal her... tomorrow. Or after a few days. Let her suffer a little while... We want justice, right? We want revenge! But Moses was humbler than that. He wasn't operating in the flesh here. He was in the Spirit. He was **meek (Gal. 5:22-23)**. He had **power, but it was under control**. So he **prayed** she would be healed immediately. It gives us another soft-hearted principle:

**Forgive and pray for your enemies.**

That's what Christians should be known for. People with *soft skin and tough hearts* take things personally. They want revenge. They refuse forgiveness. Moses shows a soft heart by praying for her and not holding a grudge against his slandering betrayer. But even though God heard Moses' prayer, He still decided against healing her immediately. She would be disciplined for **a week**. You know, sometimes we might be forgiven for our sins, but we still must face the consequences. And our sin affects others. Israel was hindered from moving forward to the promised land for a week. Bottom line, the final principle is to have a soft heart:

### Humble yourself or be humbled.

In a broken world where people hurt each other—where we experience the pain of betrayal, misunderstanding, misrepresentation, being taken advantage of, abandonment, harsh criticisms, and hatred—it's easy to let our love grow cold. Yet what are we as Christians to be known for? Our love. Our one-anothering. Our unity. Our forgiveness. Our charity. But as we go about carrying out our assignment as disciples, that will be challenged. And our natural responses will be:



1) **Thin skin and a tough heart:**

making us complain and blaming other; pointing fingers; unable to receive any criticism; maybe throwing in the towel in a fit.

2) **Thick skinned and thick hearted:** meaning we're going to be angry, dismissive, unloving; vengeful; we won't be sensitive to others at all; throw our weight around (not meek).

3) **Thin-skinned, soft-hearted:** we will be overly sensitive and weak to any criticism. Criticism will paralyze us or we'll become disengaged in self-pity. We won't be honest with people and confront them with the truth. *But if we are growing in maturity, we will be growing...*

4) **thicker skin and softer hearts.** We'll speak the truth in love. We keep sharing and serving and forgiving even when people don't respond positively because it's not about us and we understand the great need for Christ. How different would Christ-followers look in this world if they were known for being thick-skinned and soft-hearted? So I encourage you to take a look at your response this morning to an offense in your life. We all have them. And maybe re-examine your heart today. Is there a situation in your life currently where you've been hurt and the Spirit is calling you to respond in love? Take some time to sit down with **Matthew 5:43-48** this week and pray. How will praying for thick skin and a soft heart help you in that situation?

<sup>1</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Moses: A Man of Selfless Dedication* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 296.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Davis, in *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014), 317.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (eds. J. Walvoord R. Zuck; Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1985), 227.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible, Vol. 1* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company), 614.

<sup>5</sup> Swindoll, 294.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Doug Bookman and Dr. Mary Buck discuss The Urim and Thumim on the *On Script Biblical World* podcast, October 27, 2021. <https://www.podbean.com/ep/pb-yrepy-111541b>