

Miriam, the Sister of Moses

(Exodus 2, 15:20-21; Numbers 12)

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The Bible tells us that a long, long time ago, about 3,500 years ago, there lived a little girl in the land of Egypt whose name was Miriam. Miriam's father was Amram, and Miriam's mother was Jochebed. Miriam and her family were Jews, but they lived in Egypt. But why did they live in Egypt if they were Jews? Well, the whole family of her father Amram had all gone to Egypt before Amram was born.

But why had they gone to Egypt? Why hadn't they stayed in the land of Canaan where they had lived before? Well, Genesis, the first book in the Bible, tells us why. You see, before Amram was born, Amram's father and all of his father's family had been living in the land of Canaan. (Canaan was later called the land of Israel.) But then a terrible famine had come to Canaan and other countries, so they'd had no food. And the only place there was food was in Egypt.

Now, some years before this famine had come, one of Amram's great-uncles had been sold by his jealous brothers as a slave to Egypt. How terrible! But Amram's great-uncle had loved the Lord, and the Lord had been good to him, and he had become almost the most important man in Egypt, and the king of Egypt (called the Pharaoh) liked him very much. So when the famine came, this very important great-uncle told his own father and his 11 brothers and their families to all come down to Egypt to live, and he took good care of them there. You see, his brothers were sorry for what they had done to him, and he had forgiven them. So they were in Egypt then, and that's how it came to be that Amram was born in Egypt. So then Amram grew up in Egypt, and he married Jochebed, and they had this little girl named Miriam.

Now, I'm sure this story sounds familiar to you by now, doesn't it?! Who was the nice great-uncle who had his family go to Egypt so he could take care of them during the famine? Yes, it was Joseph!! The same Joseph who had had the coat of many colors! And who was Amram's great-grandfather? Yes, it was Jacob! And Amram's grandfather was Levi, one of Joseph's brothers!

But we're not going to be talking about Jacob or Levi or even Joseph today. No, we're going to be talking about Levi's great- granddaughter Miriam today.

Okay then, so let's go to the second book in the Bible, the book of Exodus. As our story about Miriam begins, Miriam and her parents are living in Egypt with lots and lots of aunts and uncles and cousins. And then when Miriam was maybe 3 or 4 years old (we don't know how old she was for sure), Amram and Jochebed had a little baby boy, and they named him Aaron. So now Miriam had a little brother. We call Miriam and all of her relatives Jews now, but at the time of our story here they were called Hebrews or the children of Israel. You see, their great-grandfather Jacob's other name was Israel, so they were all children or descendants of Israel, weren't, they?

Well, the Hebrews, the Jews there, had lots and lots of children. Now, Amram's good great-uncle Joseph had been dead a while, and there got to be a Pharaoh (the king of Egypt) who hadn't known Joseph. This Pharaoh got very worried when he saw how many of the Hebrews there were. "Why," he said, "if an enemy were to attack us, all of these many Hebrews might decide to help our enemy." So the Pharaoh decided to make the Hebrews to be slaves. And he wasn't nice to them, either. They had to work very hard for him, and they had to build cities for Pharaoh.

Well, the Hebrews kept having lots of babies. And finally Pharaoh told the women who helped the mothers have their babies, "When a baby is born to one of the Hebrew women if the baby is a boy, you're to kill him! But if it's a girl, let her live."

How wicked!! That evil Pharaoh didn't want the boy babies to grow up into strong men, because then they might become soldiers and fight against him.

So what do you think the women did? Well, these women knew God, and they knew that would be very wrong to do what Pharaoh told them to do, and that God wouldn't like it, so they didn't do it! Well, after a while the king called the women to him and asked them, "Why haven't you been killing the boy babies?"

The women told the king, "Well, the Hebrew women are strong and they have their babies before we get there." This wasn't the truth, but they knew that the Lord would not like for them to do what the king had told them to do, so they weren't going to do it. And God blessed these women for not killing the baby boys.

Well, the Hebrews kept having lots of babies. Finally Pharaoh gave an order. He told everyone, "Every Hebrew boy baby is to be thrown into the river and drowned, but let the girl babies live!" What a very wicked man Pharaoh was! Imagine anyone wanting to kill a baby!

Well, about that time Miriam and Aaron's parents, Amram and Jochebed, had another baby. And it was a beautiful little baby -- but it was a baby boy! Oh, dear! What were they going to do?! Well, at first Jochebed hid their dear little baby boy. But when he was 3 months old, she knew she couldn't hide him any longer. What was she to do?!

Ah! An idea! Jochebed got a box made out of bulrushes, the plants that grew down by the river. Then she put tar all over this box so water couldn't get inside of it. Then she put her dear little baby boy into the box and some way she covered him. Then Jochebed went down to the river and carefully set the box in among the plants that grew by the edge of the river. That way the box wouldn't float away.

Now Miriam was probably about 6 or 7 years old at that time, though the Bible doesn't say exactly how old she was. I don't know if her mother Jochebed had told her to do this or if it were her own idea (the Bible doesn't tell us), but Miriam stood a ways away from where the box with her baby brother was by the edge of the river. And Miriam watched to see what would happen to her sweet little brother.

Now Pharaoh had a daughter, and she would go down to the river and wash herself. And after Jochebed had put the box with her baby at the edge of the river and Miriam was off standing there watching, here came the princess, Pharaoh's daughter! And she had some of her maids with her. They were walking along the edge of the river, and suddenly the princess saw the box there among the plants by the river's edge. She said to one of her maids, "Oh, go get that box."

So while Miriam stood quite a ways away watching, the maid got the box and brought it to the princess. The princess opened the box, and she saw this beautiful little baby! And then the little baby started to cry. Oh, the princess felt so sorry for the little baby! And she said, "This is one of the Hebrew babies."

Well, Miriam saw this. So then Miriam went up to the princess, and she said, "Shall I go and get a Hebrew woman to come and nurse the baby for you?"

Pharaoh's daughter said to Miriam, "Yes, go."

So what do you think Miriam did? Why, she went right home and told her mother Jochebed! Well, of course Jochebed went right away to where the princess was, and the princess said to Jochebed, "Take this baby with you. You nurse him for me, and I will pay you."

So Jochebed took her own dear baby boy home with her and nursed him and took care of him and raised him for several years! And Miriam would then be able to play with him, wouldn't she? And Jochebed was paid to take care of her own baby! Wasn't the Lord good to Jochebed?! So Jochebed was able to raise her baby, and though the Bible doesn't say, she probably taught him about the Lord and that he was actually a Jew and about his family. (At least we know that later he knew he was a Jew.)

Anyway, when Jochebed's baby was big enough (probably about 5 years old, though we don't know for sure), Jochebed took her little boy back to the princess, and he grew up there as the son of the princess -- as the grandson of the Pharaoh who had wanted to kill the Hebrew baby boys!

And what was the name of Miriam's baby brother, that baby boy who was taken out of the river? Yes, it was Moses. "Moses" means "drawn out or pulled out". The princess said, "His name is Moses, because I drew him out of the water."

So Moses then lived with Pharaoh's daughter, but Miriam and Aaron lived with their parents Amram and Jochebed. The Bible doesn't tell whether or not Moses was able to go visit them.

Well, Moses lived in the land of Egypt for 40 years, then he went to another land. He was there for another 40 years, and when Moses was 80 years old, the Lord spoke to Moses and had Moses go back to Egypt. There the Lord had Moses and his older brother Aaron take all the children of Israel out of Egypt. So they were no longer slaves, were they? Miriam was probably in her late 80s. Then the Lord led the children of Israel in a pillar of cloud in the daytime and a pillar of fire in the nighttime. And the Lord let Moses be able to do miracles as he led them out.

Well, Pharaoh's army was chasing after them, but the Lord had Moses be able to make the Red Sea open and make a dry path for all of the children of Israel to escape from Pharaoh's army! Then Moses (by the power of God) had the Red Sea close over Pharaoh's army, drowning the bad Pharaoh and his army.

As the children of Israel looked at the drowned Egyptian army, Moses and the people sang a song praising the Lord for protecting them and saying how wonderful God is. And Moses' older sister Miriam took a tambourine, and the other women also took tambourines, and they danced and sang praises to the Lord. Miriam sang, "Sing you to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously! The horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea!"

And a little later the Lord talked with Moses and gave him many good rules for the people. The Lord said that Moses was His friend. We can read about this in the second book of the Bible, the book of Exodus. And the Bible says that Moses' big sister Miriam was a prophetess.

We don't hear much more about Miriam except that one time she did something she shouldn't have done. Sometimes all of us do things we shouldn't, don't we? But we need to be sorry then and ask God to forgive us. And that is what happened with Miriam. Why don't I tell you about it?

All right then. We read about this in the book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Bible. The children of Israel were in the wilderness as the Lord was leading them to the land that He had promised them, back to the land of Canaan where their great-grandfathers had lived way before the famine had taken them down into Egypt. So they were in the wilderness, and Moses was the leader.

But Miriam and her brother Aaron didn't like Moses' wife, so they spoke out against Moses. And Miriam and Aaron said, "Does the Lord only speak through Moses? Doesn't the Lord also speak through us?" (Remember, Moses was a prophet; Miriam was a prophetess; and Aaron was the high priest and perhaps also a prophet.)

Well, the Lord hears everything we say, doesn't He? So, of course, He heard these proud words of Miriam and Aaron. And the Lord didn't like it! And the Lord suddenly spoke to Moses and Aaron and Miriam! He said to them, "You three come out by the Tabernacle."

So they went over to the Tabernacle. And the Lord came down in the pillar of cloud, and the cloud stood right there in the door of the Tabernacle. And the Lord called Aaron and Miriam. Ooohh!! I'll bet they were scared! And I bet they wished they'd never spoken against their younger brother Moses! Anyway, Aaron and Miriam stepped forward.

Then the Lord said to them, "Now listen to what I'm saying! If there is a prophet, I talk to him in a vision or a dream. But that isn't the way with my servant Moses! He is very faithful in everything. I talk to Moses face to face! He actually sees my likeness! Then why weren't you afraid to speak against my servant Moses?!"

The Lord was angry with Miriam and Aaron. Then the cloud left the doorway of the Tabernacle. And Aaron looked at Miriam, and what do you think he saw?! Why, suddenly, Miriam

had leprosy, a terrible skin disease! Oh, dear! Their poor sister!

And Aaron realized that he had been very wrong, and he said to Moses, "Oh please, sir, I beg you, don't hold this sin against us! We have been so foolish!" And Aaron said to Moses, "Don't let Miriam be like this!"

And Moses was upset, too. After all, Miriam was his sister, too! So Moses cried out to the Lord, "Please, God, I beg you, heal her now, O God!"

And the Lord said to Moses, "She should be ashamed! Let her stay outside the camp for 7 days, then she can come back in."

So the Lord healed the leprosy from Miriam. It was gone. And Miriam stayed outside the camp for 7 days as the Lord had told her to do.

Now, you may be wondering why only Miriam was punished with leprosy for speaking against Moses and why Aaron wasn't punished with leprosy, too. The Bible doesn't really say why not. But I noticed that when the Bible tells about this, Miriam's name is first, so it sounds as if perhaps Miriam had been the one who first started speaking against Moses, and that then Aaron went along with it. Also, the Lord had made Aaron to be the high priest, and if Aaron got leprosy, he couldn't be high priest, and that might have been a problem for all of the children of Israel. But I don't really know about that. What I do know, though, is that both Miriam and Aaron had done wrong, but that then afterwards they both were very sorry, and the Lord forgave them. (And if we've done something wrong and are sorry for it and ask the Lord to forgive us, He will forgive us, too, won't He?)

The Bible doesn't tell us for sure whether Miriam ever got married or whether she had children. Also, we really don't hear much about Moses' children. But the Bible tells us a lot about Aaron's children. Miriam would have been their aunt, wouldn't she? But do you know why we hear a lot about Aaron's children and grandchildren and his other descendants? Well, you see, the Lord had Aaron to be His high priest, and the Lord said that only Aaron's descendants were ever to be His priests. So after that whenever we read in the Bible about a priest of the Lord, that man is a descendant of Aaron, isn't he? And he would also be a nephew, great-nephew, or great-great-nephew of Miriam, too, wouldn't he?

Now, about 1,500 years after this, there was one of Aaron's descendants who was a priest, and his name was Zacharias, and he was married to Elizabeth. Do you remember the name of Zacharias and Elizabeth's son? Yes, it was John, and we call him John the Baptist. Just think! John the Baptist would have been the great-great-great-great-nephew of Miriam!!

Do you remember whom John the Baptist told people about? That's right, about Jesus. Yes, John the Baptist told people about how they should turn away from their sins and that Jesus would save them from their sins. And how did Jesus make a way for people to be saved from their sins? Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. And God loves us so much that Jesus came to earth, and here He died on the cross for our sins.

But did Jesus stay dead? No, of course not! Three days after He died on the cross for our sins, Jesus was alive again, and hundreds of people saw Him alive. Then after a while Jesus went back to heaven. Of course, someday the Lord Jesus is coming back to earth, and then He will be King of everything and everyone.

Now, Jesus had never done any sins Himself, had He? But we have all sinned, even when we don't mean to. But if we trust in Jesus to forgive our sins, He will forgive our sins, and someday we can be with God forever. Isn't that wonderful?! And when the Lord Jesus comes back to be the King of the whole world, then if we have trusted Him to forgive our sins, we will be with Him then, too!

But we were talking about Miriam, weren't we? Miriam, the little girl who watched over her baby brother Moses as he lay in the box by the edge of the river. Miriam, who led the women in singing praises to the Lord. Miriam who became a prophetess, and though she was once proud and jealous of Moses, afterwards she was sorry and the Lord healed her. The only other thing the Bible tells us about Miriam is that she got to be a very old woman, probably a little over 120 years old! And then she died in the wilderness a while before the Lord God led the children of Israel back into the promised land of Canaan. The Lord had promised to take the nation of Israel back there, and He did. Of course, whatever God says He will do, He always does. We can trust Him to keep His promises, can't we? And what is the most important promise? That if we trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, He will forgive our sins, and then someday we can be with Him forever.

Oh, one more thing about Miriam, and this is about her name. Did you know that there are other names that come from the name "Miriam"? Yes, there are. Marie, Maria, and Mary all are different forms of the name "Miriam". In fact, if we look at some of the places in the Bible where it talks about Mary, the Greek word is actually "Mariam". So we could say that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was named Miriam!

I hope you enjoyed hearing about Miriam, the big sister of Aaron and Moses.