

## Father-in-Law Exodus 18:1-27

### Introduction

**Shape of Passage:** With all the difficulties the Israelites have experienced in the wilderness (e.g., Marah, Wilderness of Sin, Rephidim, etc.), we get an uplifting story #finally. We have an unlikely hero in today's story. The central organizing character in the passage is **Jethro**, Moses' Midianite Father-in-Law.

- **Anti-Amalekite:** Amalekites *came/attacked*; Jethro *comes/greets*. Men are *chosen*. Moses *sits* on a stone vs. *sits* to judge. Both happen the *next day* and last *until evening*. Moses is again *weary/tired*.
- **Two Scenes:** (1) the story of Jethro reuniting with Moses (vv. 1-12) and (2) of Jethro advising Moses on how to lead the people of Israel (vv. 13-27).

**Missing the Point:** I heard a popular (in some circles) internet personality (Jordan Peterson), self-help guru (who has a legitimate academic pedigree in psychology) but has unfortunately fallen to the trap of "I'm an expert in one thing therefore I must be an expert in everything" discuss today's famous passage.

- He took this passage to be the central innovation of Western Society, this sort of hierarchical judicial process.
  - I wouldn't say that this is unimportant but I think it might be missing a more **basic** and more **profound** theological point.
- But he's not alone, I've heard or read about this passage from various pastors and theologians on a dozen occasions and only once was it not to make a point about leadership. They often make **true** points that I feel miss the **main** point of the text.
  - A pastor decided to make a poignant visual demonstration during a particular talk. At the beginning of his message, he put four worms in four containers: one in a jar full of alcohol, another in a jar of cigarette smoke, a third in chocolate, and the last in good, clean soil. At the conclusion of the message, he announced the results. The first worm in alcohol – dead. The second worm in cigarette smoke – dead. The third worm in chocolate – dead. Only the last worm in clean soil was alive. He asks the congregation, "What can we learn from this?" One elderly lady quickly chimes in – "As long as you drink, smoke, or eat chocolate, you won't have worms!" #missingthepoint<sup>1</sup>
- When you find a truth buried in a text but miss the main point you miss the purpose.
- The point is not leadership lessons but the story and example of **Jethro** (hence why Deuteronomy doesn't mention Jethro when making the point about leadership structure). **Jethro's life was radically and unexpectedly transformed by God.**

---

<sup>1</sup> A man was sitting in a park playing checkers with a monkey. As played game after game, a crowd gathered to watch. There was a buzz in the air and most of the conversation centered around the amazing monkey who could play checkers. Finally, with a tone of exasperation the man said, "I don't know why you think he's so great, I have beaten him 7 out of 10 games." #missingthepoint

**Life Change:** Why do we miss this arguably straightforward point?

- (1) We are **trivial** about life change (e.g., latest movie; “most important election of our lifetime”). “This iPhone is literally life changing.” (not literally, not life changing, words apparently don’t matter).
- (2) We are **skeptical** about life change (e.g., deterministic obesity, addiction, etc.). **Are you always going to be like that? Or can you change?**
  - Religious beliefs (are only a product of the environment; not necessarily true). Adult religious conversion violates the norm.
  - **Procreational arms race.**
- Here’s the truth. **It is too good to be true.** It can’t be explained naturally; it must be supernatural. The laws of nature were broken. The rules of culture don’t apply. The God of heaven and earth stepped in and moved (maybe that is the most logical explanation to explain our lives).
  - Transformation isn’t a new you for a new year, a new relationship, a new fit, a new job, or a new hobby.
  - True transformation is joining today’s main character, Jethro and becoming a member in the new family that God is building.

<sup>1</sup> Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> Now Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses’ wife, after he had sent her home, <sup>3</sup> along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land”), <sup>4</sup> and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, “The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh”). <sup>5</sup> Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. <sup>6</sup> And when he sent word to Moses, “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her,” <sup>7</sup> Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. <sup>8</sup> Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel’s sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. <sup>9</sup> And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>10</sup> Jethro said, “Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>11</sup> Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.” <sup>12</sup> And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law before God. <sup>13</sup> The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. <sup>14</sup> When Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?” <sup>15</sup> And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God; <sup>16</sup> when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws.” <sup>17</sup> Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup> You and the people with you will certainly wear

yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. <sup>19</sup> Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, <sup>20</sup> and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. <sup>21</sup> Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.” <sup>24</sup> So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. <sup>25</sup> Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>26</sup> And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. <sup>27</sup> Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

## 1. The Beauty of Life Change (vv. 1-12)

**Jethro:** <sup>1</sup> Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, Welcome back **Jethro**, haven’t seen you in a whil (Ex 2-4) when Moses ran away from Egypt to Midian. Moses had married Jethro’s daughter, **Zipporah**, and had been a shepherd of his flocks when God met him through a burning bush.

- (1) **Father-in-law** (13x English, ch. 18). Fortunately, I have amazing in-laws, but we’ve all heard the jokes (e.g., Man on vacation in the Holy Land, MIL dies. \$5,000 to ship body home; \$150 to bury her there. Chooses to ship her home. Why? 2,000 years ago a man was buried and resurrected on the 3rd day: “I can’t take that chance”).
  - FIL implies a different culture, bloodline, and family (in this case ethnicity).
- (2) **Priest of Midian.**
  - We don’t know exactly the state of Midianite religion in Ex 18 but we know what it becomes later in the Pentateuch. Worship of Baal (primary false God of many Canaanites; cf. Jezebel and Elijah). Baal worship involved temple prostitution, child sacrifice, and self-mutilation.
  - The Midianites reject the God of Israel, the God of the Bible (this isn’t like Protestant vs. Catholic; it’s not even Christian vs. Muslim; it’s more than that).
  - And Jethro isn’t just a Midianite, he’s a priest, a religious leader of Midian. He’s not going along with the flow, he’s controlling the current. Midianite is central to his identity (e.g., Tell me about yourself? I’m a Priest of Midian).
- These are two major strikes against conversion (It would be more understandable for a Muslim Imam to convert than Jethro).

**Fame of God Spreading:** But he heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

- They have to hear! In the news? Notice the way this is told. It doesn’t talk about Moses’ miracles, or Joshua’s military prowess, or Aaron’s leadership it talks about **God**. What God had done. How God had saved them.

- **The hero of the story must always be God.**

**Names:** <sup>2</sup> Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, <sup>3</sup> along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), <sup>4</sup> and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh").

- More likely that Zipporah told her dad when she returned (Plagues? Red Sea? Wilderness?). Even the names of her children are testimonies of God's story.
  - (1) The sojourning nature of Israel in Egypt (compassion for the sojourner and promise of a permanent home)
  - (2) God helped his people. He rescued them.
- **Are we telling the story of God's salvation in our lives? Who are you telling?**

**Reunion:** <sup>5</sup> Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. <sup>6</sup> And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," <sup>7</sup> Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.

- You can't fake genuine love. Moses loved his father-in-law. He respected him. Moses did not share the good news of God out of a sense of superiority or self-importance but from a place of genuine love.
  - We are not better than people. We are not here to save people. We are here to love people. And the best way we can love them is to share with them our deep hope in Jesus.

**Testify:** <sup>8</sup> Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them.

- Moses testifies *again* of God's grace (not the first time Jethro has heard). He doesn't leave out the challenges (hardship) but he points out God's salvation. Again, **God is the hero of the story.**

**Conversion:** <sup>9</sup> And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>10</sup> Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>11</sup> Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people."

- Jethro rejoiced! Egyptians, Amalekites don't get it, but Jethro Midianite does The LORD is greater than all the false gods of the surrounding nations. The nations tremble at YHWH because of his victory (Ex 15:14-16) but Jethro is attracted to him. The nations run away from the people of God, but Jethro runs toward them (you can either be a Jethro or a Pharaoh).
- This is his conversion, now he now [he knows] the truth of YHWH. This isn't mere information, but transformational and experiential knowledge.

- Knowing, in the biblical sense, involves submission and trust. It's a relationship with the God who knows us and knows everything (e.g., knowing about vs. *knowing*; cf. celebrity or politician).
- He didn't just incorporate YHWH into his existing religious schema but recognized the YHWH must be alone as God. If God is going to be worthy of worship and his character worthy of following, then he can't tolerate any rivals (and we wouldn't want him to).
  - In fact, when God calls you to forsake all sin and idolatry, it is not a punishment but an invitation to experience what you were really meant to have, a relationship with the God who made you.

**Sacrifice:** <sup>12</sup> And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God;

- He brought a sacrifice, both an acknowledgment of the sin that he needs forgiven and a surrender to God.

**Family Meal:** and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

- Jethro, a non-Israelite, gathers around the table of Israel as a family member (it was never about ethnicity and always about faith; cf. 'the Israel of faith').
- He is now a member of the family of God.

**Stakes are High:** His entire life has changed. His identity has changed. 18:1 is the last time he will ever be called a priest of Midian again. He gives up his title. He risks his income. He sacrifices his reputation and status.

**Do We Believe:** People are not foregone inevitabilities. God can change the most hardened heart, the most distant relationship, the darkest situation.

- E.g., the valley of the dry bones, Ez 37. "They were very dry" (#deaddead). There is no last chance at resuscitation, no one more chance to get it right. Only the bones are left (there isn't even flesh). "Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.'"
- **We are not bad and need to be good, or sick and need to be well, but dead who need to be made alive.**
  - <sup>4</sup> But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, <sup>5</sup> even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph 2:4-9).
- Do you see yourself as beyond hope? God can resurrect you!

## 2. The Gift of Leveraging Your Life (vv. 13-27)

**Situation/Observation:** <sup>13</sup> The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. <sup>14</sup> When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?"

- We shift to a new scene but our characters stay the same (Moses and Jethro). Other Biblical passages focus on the leadership structure of Israelite judging, but Exodus focuses on the personal wisdom from Jethro to Moses.
- Jethro immediately puts his gifts to work in helping Moses lead the people of God. The purpose of our salvation is to point to God. "Missional Christians do not seek to escape earthly existence, but shape it in light of the gospel."
- He saw a problem, sought to understand it, identified its weakness, and offered a solution. It is rare to have counselors such as him.

Immediately he comes in with a **question, not an accusation**. He doesn't assume there isn't a good reason (#guilty). He seeks to understand.

**Justification:** <sup>15</sup> And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; <sup>16</sup> when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws."

- Moses suffers from good intentions but bad impact. Why does he do this? Because they keep coming (e.g., doctor broken finger; stop doing that).
- They need me! No, they don't, they need God. None of us are irreplaceable.
- Moses was judge, jury, executioner, DMV, IRS, etc.

**Problem:** <sup>17</sup> Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup> You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

- It is not good (vs. the good of creation). Why is it not good? You will wear out (weary arms in Amelikitte battle). Moses is not strong enough to be God for these people. Only God can be God.
  - Be careful that only God is God in your life. Especially be careful that you don't set yourself up as God (e.g., strength, preferences, strategy, comforts).
- We are limited. God made us that way so we would depend on him. Our weakness illuminates the need for his strength. God doesn't work just in spite of our weaknesses but through our weaknesses. Human weakness is a feature, not a bug.
- Do you feel weak? Do you feel weary? Good. This is the perfect opportunity to depend on the strength of God and the help that he has provided through other believers.

**Delegation:** <sup>19</sup> Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, <sup>20</sup> and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. <sup>21</sup> Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter

they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.

- It is good that you have a team of leaders who fear God (cf. Num 11:16; Deut 1:9-18).
- Team leadership is God's design to protect leaders and churches. It keeps leaders from becoming domineering despots and churches from celebrity worship. It teaches everyone that only Christ is the ultimate head of his church.
  - I, along with many pastors, suffer from the sin of self-importance. We think we're more important than we really are (*hence* 1 Pet 5).
  - Our culture suffers from the delusion of the **myth of the individual leader**. That one great person can solve our problems (e.g., Steve Jobs; Elon Musk; etc.).
  - Myths are often rooted in some truth. The problem isn't that we don't long for a great leader or need a great leader, it's that Jesus is the only one able to be that person and anyone else we put in that place will let us down.
- You and I are made to be part of a team. We need a team (e.g., sermon planning).
- Moses is good at some things but clearly not everything (i.e., delegating).
- Good leaders don't surround themselves with people almost as good, but people who are better

**Long Term:** <sup>23</sup> If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

- Jethro was looking for long-term success not just completing a short-term task.
- Healthy leadership will enable the people to make it where God is taking them.
- Moses is good at some things but not all things (bad at delegating)
- The Israelites might be the most complaint people of all time. If there is to be peace,
  - If he wants to truly love and help them, then he actually needs to do less of everything so he can do more of what he's supposed to do.
  - If not, he will get burned out, bitter, and cranky.

**Relinquish Control:** <sup>24</sup> So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. <sup>25</sup> Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>26</sup> And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.

- Moses surrendered the death grip of control he had. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is let go of control (e.g., I can't do it).
  - God will direct you, God will fill the gap, it will not spiral out of control. In fact, God will take his rightful place as ruler of your life.
  - As a result, you'll be able to endure, persevere, etc.
    - "It's better to burn out than rust out" (sounds like someone who has never burned out; neither is an option).

**Departure:** <sup>27</sup> Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

- In the end, this little chapter isn't even ultimately about Jethro (depart for the final time). It is about the story that God is telling and that Jethro was privileged to play a part in.

**Transformation Purpose:** God radically transformed Jethro's life and now Jethro is able to find his place in God's story with God's people. He was blessed to be a blessing. God heals us so we can help others. He saves us so he can send us.

- Every person that God brings to this church is needy and needed. They are needy of Christ and needed by his body. Each of you, with your life surrendered to God, has an opportunity to invest in the kingdom of God.
- Brandon *Forgotten Ministries* (racist tattoos).

**Stories of Life Change:** I've been privileged to watch how God has saved and sent so many people at this church.

- DeVargas
- Sean
- Grace
- Noah
  - And on and on and on.
  - A radical reorientation of why you exist. You've locked arms with your brothers and sisters for this mission.
  - God is a God of transformation and you have gifts to use for his glory.

## Conclusion

Transformation is possible. God can save the least likely people. **So we will work and pray for life change to multiplied on this block, in the neighborhood, across this city, state, nation, and around the world.**

- Are you ready to admit that you are dead in your sins and you need God to make you alive in Christ?
- Are you ready to leverage your life for the mission of God?