



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text
Exodus 18:1-27

Topic
Moses receives administrative
advice from His father-in-law, Jethro

Title
"Father-in-Law Knows Best"

About 40 years ago I was a new Christian attending a morning men's fellowship at Calvary Chapel of Lake Arrowhead. The question was asked, "Who is the Christian that has influenced you the most?"

Take a moment to think about how you would answer that question - especially early in your Christian walk.

As we went around the room, and guys gave their answers, no one said Billy Graham... Or Charles Swindoll... Or A.W. Tozer... Or C.S. Lewis.

No one mentioned any well-known Christian pastor or author. They all mentioned some ordinary believer that God had brought into their life, for a time or for a lifetime, that was an example for them, and encouraged them to make progress on the journey homeward to Heaven.

When it came to me, I said it was Loren Faulkner. He was my co-worker who converted to Jesus then, some months later, led me to faith in the Lord, and to attend Calvary Chapel.

Who is it for you? You probably have a list of several unknown, ordinary believers that God has used to be an example to you, and to encourage you, along your walk.

If Moses had been asked that question, he might have answered, "Jethro." God brought Jethro into Moses' life at certain key moments in order to influence Moses in his work and in his walk.

Chapter eighteen will be a lot more interesting and engaging if you think about who is influencing you, or how you are influencing others.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 You Influence Others In Their Worship, and #2 You Influence Others In Their Work.

#1 You Influence Others In Their Worship

(v1-12)

Any list of the most popular words of the past decade is going to have "mentor" on it. Rarely does a day go by that I don't hear it.

You might be someone's mentor... You might look to someone as your mentor.

I discovered something interesting about mentoring. The concept originates in Greek mythology. Odysseus was the king of Ithaca, a small city-state in Ancient Greece. He left his wife Penelope, and infant son Telemachus, to fight with the Greek alliance in the Trojan War. He entrusted guardianship of his son and his royal household to an old friend, whose name was Mentor. During Odysseus' long absence Mentor became Telemachus' - you guessed it - *mentor*.

It's popular to see Jethro and Moses as a biblical example of mentoring. Let's not call Jethro Moses' mentor. It would be forcing a context on the text that is foreign to it. These verses are not here to teach us the principles of modern mentoring.

Moses wasn't Jethro's disciple, either. But he was more than just his father-in-law. It's best to see him as being brought by God into Moses' life at certain key moments in order to influence him.

We've met Jethro before. When Moses fled for his life from Egypt, he encountered the daughters of Jethro at a well. After defending them against some surly shepherds, he was invited to stay with Jethro and family.

Moses married Jethro's oldest daughter, Zipporah. He became a shepherd in the household of Jethro for forty years before he spoke with God at the burning bush.

Exo 18:1 And Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people - that the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.

This will make no sense to you if you haven't seen *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 2*. There's a line of dialog where Peter Quill's father tells him that even way out on the edge of the galaxy they've heard of the man who could hold an infinity stone in his hand without dying.

With the rod of God in **his** hand, Moses had decimated the empire of Egypt. Millions of Israelis were on their way to the land promised them through Abraham several centuries earlier. However news traveled, it was the lead story for months.

What's **your** lead story? For example tomorrow when folks ask how you're doing and what you did over the weekend - Will you include going to church? Will you summarize what you experienced or learned?

On Facebook and other social media sites people like to announce "In a relationship." Is it obvious by what we post that we are in a relationship with Jesus?

Exo 18:2 Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back,
Exo 18:3 with her two sons, of whom the name of one *was* Gershom (for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land")
Exo 18:4 and the name of the other *was* Eliezer (for *he said*, "The God of my father *was* my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh");

We don't know exactly why or when Zipporah and the two boys were sent back to live with Jethro. There's no use speculating that it shows marital discord, or some other motive.

It makes more sense that Moses and Zipporah would want to protect their family from what was sure to be a fight in Egypt against Pharaoh.

In the movies, the bad guys always threaten and kidnap the family of the hero. Best to not give Pharaoh the opportunity.

The names of the two sons expressed, respectively, the despondency natural to an exile, and the gratitude of one who had just learned that by God's goodness, the term of his banishment was over.

The naming of these boys reminds me of Mr. and Mrs. Brown's two sons. One was named Mind Your Own Business & the other was named Trouble.

One day the two boys decided to play hide and seek. Trouble hid while Mind Your Own Business counted to one hundred. Mind Your Own Business began looking for his brother behind garbage cans and bushes. He started looking in and under cars until a police man approached him and asked, "What are you doing?" "Playing a game," the boy replied. "What is your name?" the officer questioned. "Mind Your Own Business." Furious the policeman inquired, "Are you looking for trouble?!" The boy replied, "Why, yes."

Exo 18:5 and 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.

Exo 18:6 Now he had said to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her."

The reference to “the mountain of God” has some commentators suggesting this story is not in chronological order, because Moses had not yet come to Mount Sinai in chapter seventeen.

That may be true; or it may be that the wilderness area of Rephidim was associated with Mount Sinai in a way that folks called the entire area by that name.

Jethro sent a message ahead to alert Moses he was coming. Apparently he knew that Moses didn’t like the pop-in.

Exo 18:7 So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, bowed down, and kissed him. And they asked each other about *their* well-being, and they went into the tent.

This was the standard meet-and-greet. Every culture has its own; along with personal customs that develop among family and friends.

Our culture is going through a fist-bump phase. For fun, check out the Wikipedia article on the fist bump. One interesting fact: Fist bumping behavior has been observed in chimpanzees (according to a book published by Margaret Power in 1991).

Exo 18:8 And 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 on the way, and *how* the LORD had delivered them.

Assuming Moses was a great storyteller, Jethro must have been captivated, hanging on every word. It was an eyewitness, behind-the-scenes commentary regarding one of history’s greatest events.

Notice Moses kept the emphasis on God. He spoke of “all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh,” and “how the Lord had delivered them.” When you tell your stories, bring the Lord into them.

Exo 18:9 Then Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the LORD had done for Israel, whom He had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians.

Of course he did. The story was too wonderful not to rejoice.

When we ask someone, “What’s going on?,” or “How are you doing?,” chances are their answer won’t be quite as exciting as Moses’ retelling of the exodus. Nevertheless we ought to be sensitive to what they are saying.

Starbucks announced it would be closing shop on May 29th to provide its 175,000 employees with sensitivity training. The article I read was critical of the training and was cleverly titled, *Let me venti about racial sensitivity training at Starbucks.*

Sometimes Christians **do** lack sensitivity. One example: Someone tells you what’s happening in their life and you answer it by talking about yourself.

Another example: You give quick, shallow answers to someone who is struggling.

We should rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep - entering in to their joy or grief as it is appropriate.

Exo 18:10 And 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* who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians.

Exo 18:11 Now I know that the LORD *is* greater than all the gods; for in the very thing in which they behaved proudly, *He was* above them."

Jethro said, "the Lord is greater than all the gods." It causes commentators to assume he was a pagan idolater until this moment. They see this as some sort of conversion to Yahweh as the one true God.

That doesn't make sense, though, in terms of the entire context. Jethro is going to take the lead in the worship of God - not something you'd expect if he just got saved.

Exo 18:12 Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and *other* sacrifices *to offer* to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

Jethro wasn't sacrificing for himself. He was acting the way a priest acts. He was acting as a kind of mediator between Moses, Aaron, and the elders with God.

In fact he took a higher place than Aaron - who was to be Israel's high priest.

And in another fact in the first verse of this chapter he is identified as a priest.

It seems that Jethro already knew the God of Israel. One scholar wrote,

If we can assume that these Midianites were descendants of Midian, son of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:2), our wonder will be lessened that among this Arabian people we should find the knowledge and worship of YHWH had been preserved, as seen in this narrative. Thus this episode may be added to other incidental proofs of the continuance of pure religion among Gentile nations.

In other words, while God was working to establish Israel as the nation through which the world's Savior would be born, **He was simultaneously working all over the world with the Gentiles who had been scattered at the Tower of Babel.** The nations had the knowledge of God preserved and passed down.

They also had the witness of the Gospel in the stars that the ancients called the Mazzaroth. Creation did (and does) “declare the glory of God.”

Bottom line: There were lots of saved Gentiles before Israel was established as a nation. We too often discount God working in these ways even though we know He has put eternity in all hearts that we might seek Him.

So what about Jethro's statement that “the Lord is greater than all the gods?”

If you consult your *Strong's Concordance* you'll see that the word for “Lord” is *YHWH*, and “gods” is a form of *elohim*. What Jethro was saying was that *YHWH* is supreme among the *elohim*.

That makes no sense to us because we've been taught that *elohim* is a name for God. Turns out, it's not. It is a description that fits God, but also fits other supernatural beings.

You know I'm no scholar; but I read them. Dr. Michael Heiser - who IS a scholar and a believer - explains *elohim*:

Several different entities are referred to as *elohim* in the Old Testament. Considering this variety provides insight as to how the term should be understood. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament refers to the following as *elohim*: YHWH, the God of Israel (over 1000 times); the members of YHWH's heavenly council (Psalm 82); the gods of foreign nations (First Kings 11:33); demons (Deuteronomy 32:17); the spirits of the human dead (First Samuel 28:13); and angels (Genesis 35:7).

This variety demonstrates that the word should not be identified with one particular set of attributes: ***elohim* is not a synonym for God.**

All beings called *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible share a certain characteristic: they all inhabit the non-human realm. By nature, *elohim* are not part of the world of humankind, the world of ordinary embodiment. *Elohim* - as a term - indicates residence, not a set of attributes; it identifies the proper domain of the entity it describes.

Dr. Heiser concludes by saying, "YHWH is an *elohim*, but no other *elohim* is YHWH. **This is what an orthodox Israelite believed about YHWH.** He was not one among equals; He was unique. YHWH is utterly and eternally unique - there is none like Him."

Jethro's statement is therefore perfectly consistent with what the Old Testament actually teaches - that YHWH is unique among the *elohim*. He is the Creator, the Almighty God - omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, omnibenevolent. He is One God existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jethro was not a recent convert. One commentator said, “Every act of Jethro indicates that he was a true believer in God.”

As Abraham’s descendant, he was surely taught from childhood what and how to sacrifice. He reminds us of another Old Testament priest - mysterious Melchizedek, who comes out of nowhere to bless Abraham as a priest of God prior to the establishing of the nation of Israel and its priesthood.

Now that we are clear on Jethro’s status, we can make application of his actions. He acted as a priest to encourage worship.

You and I are called “priests” in the New Testament:

- In the Revelation, the apostle John says Jesus has, “made us kings and priests to His God and Father” (1:6).
- The apostle Peter says, “you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light...” (First Peter 2:5&9).

William MacDonald comments, saying, “As **holy** priests, we offer spiritual sacrifices to God: our persons, our possessions, our praise, and our service. As **royal** priests, we tell forth the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

There are, then, at least two aspects to our being priests:

1. The first is that you do not need anyone else to mediate between you and God. You have direct access through Jesus Christ.
2. The second is that you constantly represent God to the world.

I like #1. Having direct, immediate access to God's throne of mercy and grace is a great thing.

I don't always like #2. It can seem restrictive to have to think about how my actions and attitudes affect others for the kingdom of God.

But I **should** like representing God. Don't people need Him? Of course they do. If I have to make some lifestyle adjustments so as to better represent Him, that's a privilege, not a burden. Jethro visited Moses and the result was a deeper worship of God. That can characterize our encounters with others - both believers and nonbelievers - as we offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

We've all had a Loren Faulkner in our Christian life. We can each be one, too.

#2 You Influence Others In Their Work

(v13-27)

D.L. Moody is quoted as saying, "It is better to set a hundred men to work than to do the work of a hundred men."

Moses found himself doing the work of many more than a hundred men. Jethro gave him some advice about his workload.

Exo 18:13 And so it was, on the next day, that Moses sat to judge the people; and the people stood before Moses from morning until evening.

After his morning coffee, Moses would take a seat outside his tent, to hear matters among the Israelites.

I wonder how early the line formed? Probably some folks camped-out beyond Moses' tent to get a good place in line.

“From morning til evening” made for long days of serving God.

Exo 18:14 So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, "What *is* this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?"

Exo 18:15 And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God.

Exo 18:16 When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws."

Moses thought of his work as falling into two categories:

1. First, he dealt with their difficulties. Think of the myriad of disputes that could arise among several million people who were tent camping in the wilderness.
2. Second, he taught them about God. I'm guessing this was his preferred activity.

Exo 18:17 So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do *is* not good.

I should tell you that commentators are split as to whether or not Jethro's advice was godly or carnal. I see it as sound wisdom from a godly man.

Exo 18:18 Both you and these people who *are* with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing *is* too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.

Besides the strain on Moses, think of the frustration of having to wait, literally, in a line all day. There was no guarantee your case would be heard, or that your question could be answered. I doubt to got your same place in line the next day.

At the end of the dark comedy, *Beetlejuice*, Michael Keaton's character is waiting in line. He is number 9,998,383,750,000 (9 trillion, nine-hundred ninety-eight billion, three-hundred eighty-three million, seven-hundred fifty thousand). The sign says, "Serving #2."

It was maybe not that extreme, but it must have felt like it to the average Israelite.

Exo 18:19 Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God.

Exo 18:20 And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.

Jethro was suggesting a better way of doing the tasks assigned to Moses. He would still be the guy tasked with standing in the gap for the people; he would still bring their difficulties before God; he would still teach them. He'd just do it more efficiently.

Exo 18:21 Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them *to be* rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

Although there were many problems among the Israelites, there were also godly individuals. These guys were probably obvious choices.

Exo 18:22 And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be *that* every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear *the burden* with you.

Lower courts and higher courts are what this amounts to. It's a great idea.

Exo 18:23 If you do this thing, and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."

"And God *so* commands you" was Jethro's way of telling Moses to consult the Lord about this plan. It made sense; it was full of wisdom; it didn't contradict anything; but it must be approved by God through prayer.

The church, we're told, is more of an organism than an organization. That being said, there's nothing wrong with be organized. While we must always be careful not to mimic the world and its methods, some things just make sense - especially when they make things easier for the people of God.

Exo 18:24 So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.

If Moses “heeded,” then he certainly did take this plan before God. Seems that God green-lighted the plan.

Exo 18:25 And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.

Exo 18:26 So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves.

Moses was like the Supreme Court. But most cases were settled in the lower courts without appeal to Moses.

Exo 18:27 Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went his way to his own land.

This is our farewell to Jethro as far as the Book of Exodus. He will appear in the Book of Numbers as a sort of guide to Moses through the wilderness (chapter 10).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul gave similar counsel to Timothy: “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (Second Timothy 2:2).

The Word of God suggests the work for God. We should constantly be seeking the Lord for vision and direction from His Word, energized by the Holy Spirit. Those entrusted with leadership ought then to encourage every believer to be a part of the work God is wanting us to do for His glory.

Invite folks to church. Encourage believers who attend to get more involved.

Get more involved yourself. We don't make a big deal here at Calvary Hanford about attendance; but I'd encourage you to attend things you don't normally attend.

For example: Come out on a Wednesday night. It doesn't mean you're committing to every Wednesday night until the rapture.

After he was used by God to lead me to Jesus, Loren Faulkner invited us to attend Calvary Chapel of Riverside. It was an invitation that totally shaped our lives. It most certainly influenced us.

Be an influencer. Better: realize you **are** an influencer and be a good one.