

Sermon 51, The Hinge of Exodus: Deliverance & Dwelling, Exodus 18

Proposition: God reveals Himself in Exodus as Deliverer and Dweller — and Exodus 18 shows the same truth in miniature.

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I. Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to what is essentially the halfway point in the book of Exodus. And at this halfway point come two stories which, at first glance, seem to have very little to do either with the exodus from Egypt that occupies the first half of the book, or with the information about building the tabernacle that occupies the second half of the book. What does this visit from Jethro, and the appointment of judges over Israel, have to do with the rest of Exodus? Why on earth is it important enough to be stuck at the hinge point of the book? (Yes, the Ten Commandments are at the literal center; we don't have to wonder why they are there.) Here is the answer: The two stories involving Jethro here at the center of Exodus present in summary form the major themes of each half of the book. Remember, Exodus as a whole is the book of the knowledge of God. The part of the book that

deals with leaving Egypt is specifically about the knowledge of God through deliverance. And the second part is about the knowledge of God through dwelling. In the first part, God brings His people out of Egypt. In the second part, He comes to dwell among them in the tabernacle that they build for Him. Do you see how those exact two themes show up in this chapter? The first part of it is about how Jethro came to know Yahweh through His deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The second part of it is about how Jethro helped Israel become a place where God could dwell by giving advice about the correct way to set up the judicial system. Thus, the two stories here represent smaller versions of the larger story of Exodus. One is amazing, filled with God's mighty deeds. The other seems tedious, concerned with small details of liturgy, clothing, administration, and more. But both are facets of knowing God. Both are important, because both reveal God as the one who delivers His people so that He can dwell among them and they can worship and obey Him.

II. Exodus 18: A Summary of the Knowledge of God

So let's dive into this chapter. We are going to look at each story in more detail in the next couple of weeks, but I want us to have an overview of the chapter's main points in our minds before we do that.

A. Knowing God through His Deliverance, vv. 1-8

First of all, we see in this chapter the knowledge of God through His deliverance. He brought Israel out of Egypt, and that is how they got to know who He was. He took the initiative; He came and saved them when they were not even thinking about Him. Yes, they cried to the LORD, says ch. 2 — but only after the Pharaoh of the original oppression died! And by that time, God had already begun sending a deliverer to save them.

So as we have already noted in our study of this book, God first saves the people and then gives them the law. If obedience to the law had been a condition for leaving Egypt, they never would have left! So God's deliverance comes first. Salvation is God's work and He does it unilaterally. Here in Exodus 18, the deliverance is not the same as the deliverance in the early part of the book — Jethro is not delivered from Pharaoh, but rather from the darkness of his own sin. But it is the same kind of deliverance. It is still God reaching down to save someone.

1. He Brings in Gentiles, vv. 1-12

So here, at the hinge point in the book of the knowledge of God, we see God's work of deliverance replayed. This time He's not delivering millions from slavery. He is delivering one particular man, a Midianite, from pagan darkness. This Midianite was indeed of the family of Abraham, but through Keturah. He was not from the line of promise. Already here, a mere 450 years or so after the death of Abraham, the distinction between Jew and Gentile had become something of a reality. Some Gentiles are hostile — see the Amalekites of the previous chapter, who assault God's Kingdom relentlessly. But some Gentiles are susceptible to the truth, willing to listen and be converted. God brings in those people, with Jethro as Exhibit A for the conversion of the Gentiles. He was not delivered through the Exodus directly, in that he did not walk through the Red Sea and come out of slavery. But indirectly, he was indeed delivered

through the Exodus because he heard what God had done in the Exodus and that's what drew him to come and profess faith in the God of Israel and worship with the people of Israel.

In other words, the God who brought the children of Israel through the Red Sea does not confine His favorable attention strictly to the descendants of Jacob. He is willing and able to save outsiders.

2. He Brings His People through Exile, v. 3

But the chapter contains additional reminders of the character of the God who delivers. The next reminder presented is here, in the name of Gershom and the rationale for it, repeated verbatim from ch. 2. In other words, here in the middle we are reminded of the book's beginning. In both places we read that Moses' son was named "Stranger there." Moses further states each time that he had lived as a stranger in a strange land. As Calvin comments, this name would have been quite offensive to Jethro and his whole family, because it was Moses' extremely pointed way of saying "This ain't my home." He did not belong in Midian. He had also been evicted from Egypt. Thus, I think it's safe to say that he named his firstborn son in hope of someday finding a home. Egypt could no longer be that home. Midian was never that home. The first 80 years of Moses' life were spent in exile, far from a permanent home. And then, (though Moses didn't yet know it), the final forty years of his life would also be spent homeless, wandering through the desert. Yet rather than give up and settle, saying "I don't need a forever home," Moses clung to his identity as a stranger and pilgrim on the earth. He was one who sought a better country, that is, a Heavenly one. That's why Gershom had to be named "Stranger there." The point is this: no earthly place is the Christian's forever home, no matter how many years we or our families may live there. Midian, Egypt, Canaan — it's all the wilderness of this world. And God is going to deliver us from it. Precisely because we hope for a future in Christ at a place where we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, we can know God as the one who brings His people through exile. We don't have to rage against Him as the one who left us/made us homeless here on earth. Instead, in faith we can acknowledge the pain of homelessness and yet also live in hope for our future home that God is building.

3. He Brings His People Through Pharaoh's Attacks, v. 4

Moses' second son is named Eliezer, "God is my help." If that name doesn't apply to the action of Exodus 1-17, I'll eat a Torah scroll. Obviously God helped His people by sending Moses, by saving him from Pharaoh's genocide, by plaguing Egypt and bringing the people through the Red Sea and across the desert. The God who saved Moses from Pharaoh's arrest warrant at the beginning of the book is the God whose name is invoked here in the center of the book. And of course, all Israel was just saved from the sword of Pharaoh at the Red Sea.

4. He Brings His People out of Slavery, v. 8

Finally, Moses relates everything that God has done. Again, at the halfway point of the book, God is described as a deliverer. What He did to bring Israel out of Egypt gets recounted to Jethro in the (hopefully comfortable) surroundings of Mose's tent. And there, of course, we are told explicitly that the burden of Moses' account is "how the LORD delivered them." God delivers! That is the first thing you need to know about Him. Jesus saves. Yahweh brought His people out

of Egypt. Both of these are core, fundamental truths about who our God is. He is savior. He is deliverer. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but out of them all the LORD delivers him.

Do you know God's deliverance? Are you a Christian today? If you are a Christian and have been one for a long time, do you know God's deliverance from sin? Do you know Him as the one who rescues from life-dominating, soul-destroying sin? Or are you still in bondage to your desires, your addictions, your besetting sins? The existence of habitual sin doesn't show that God is a failure; no, it shows that you have not yet been delivered. Maybe that is partly your fault; maybe God is waiting on His own time to deliver you. He does not deliver some of us completely until Heaven. But if you are stuck in sin, do what you can to be free. Seek God's deliverance through prayer, counsel, and wise erection of boundaries and habits. But at the end of the day, recognize that deliverance is His gift. He let Israel live in slavery four hundred years. If you have been dealing with your besetting sins for less time than that, you have no business concluding that God has forgotten you.

B. Knowing God through His Dwelling, vv. 9-27

Well, the second half of the chapter, like the second half of Exodus, is about knowing God through His dwelling. That is what we will see from Chapter 19 onward: God coming to dwell in the midst of His people. The twin consequences of the Almighty moving in are worship and obedience. The obedience is seen most clearly in the Ten Commandments and the other laws in the "book of the covenant" (Ex. 19-24). And the worship is seen from ch. 25 onward as the people erect the tabernacle and prepare its furniture and personnel so that they can come into God's presence in worship. The order is reversed here in ch. 18. We see Jethro learn to worship, and then we see him instruct Israel in the ways of obedience.

1. Worship, vv. 9-12

What dominates Jethro's response to God's deliverance is first of all worship.

a) He Brings His People to Joy in His Salvation, v. 9

The first part of worship that's noted here is joy. Jethro just sat there in Moses' tent and rejoiced over the story he was hearing. The rabbis revocalized the Hebrew word so that it said not that he "rejoiced" but that he was "sliced," emphasizing his pain in hearing about how other pagans (the Egyptians) had been discomfited and overthrown by God. That's ridiculous. Jethro was glad. He was thrilled that Israel had been delivered. Just think: for forty-some years, ever since he had met Moses, Jethro had been aware of the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt. There was nothing he could do about it, but he knew about it.

Do you know that pain? I trust you do. We know that Christians are suffering in Saudi Arabia, in many states of India, in China and in various parts of Africa. And there is little we can do about it. But when we hear that God has delivered them, how we rejoice! That is how Jethro felt. He rejoiced greatly over everything the Lord had done to deliver Israel.

b) He Brings His People to Bless His Name, v. 10

Jethro's joy sets us an example; so does his verbal blessing of the Lord. He opens his mouth to praise God. Do you? If I listened to your discourse all day long, would I hear lots of complaints,

lots of outrage, lots of bother, lots of gossip? Or would I hear lots of gratitude, lots of praise, lots of exclamations of delight over what God had done? Jethro blessed God's name. Will you?

c) He Brings His People to Confess His Greatness, v. 11

God also brought Jethro to confess His superlative greatness. Jethro had spent his life in the pagan religious system of Midian. He was a priest there, maybe *the* priest depending on how you read the evidence in the text. And yet, though he had served the gods of Midian, now, at his advanced age, he admits that Yahweh is greater than any God of Midian. Do you believe this? That God is greater than the 'almighty dollar,' that He is greater than worldly prestige, that he is greater than machines and technology? That He is greater than physical pleasure or any other god you're tempted to worship?

The true God is greater than all gods. That's easy to say, but hard to implement. But when God dwells among you and you come before him for worship, you realize that it's true.

d) He Brings His People to Feast in His Presence, v. 12

Indeed, he brings His people to feast in His presence. Jethro was so moved by what he heard that he provided out of his own pocket a sacrificial animal or so. He offered a burnt offering and also a peace offering, which he ate with the elders (including Aaron, the future high priest of Israel). Presumably Moses was there too. I don't think the text says that Jethro himself slaughtered this sacrifice beyond what any lay Israelite was allowed to do; regardless of what view you take of that question, though, it is certainly true that God accepted this sacrifice and that Jethro was welcomed to sit and feast before Him.

When God dwells with you, you want to come and eat before Him. That's why we pray before our ordinary meals. It's also why we eat the Lord's supper. We still partake of the sacrificial feast that Jesus died to give us.

Do you know this God who dwells in our midst and calls us to feast before Him? Feasting with God and His people is one way that Jethro got to know the Lord. It is also one way, a very important way, that you and I will get to know the Lord.

2. Obedience, vv. 13-27

Finally, this hinge chapter shows us how we come to know God through obedience.

a) He Brings His People to Know His Statutes, v. 20

The whole story of how Moses appointed judges at Jethro's instigation highlights the need for Israel to know God by obeying Him. Judges presuppose a standard; they are people who authoritatively declare who meets the standard and who doesn't. In other words, a society that needs judges is a society that is trying in some fashion to obey God's law, and also failing in some fashion. A perfect society would not need judges. But a society of sinners needs them.

You can't know God without obedience. The deliverance from Egypt is important. But it would never have been enough to constitute a people or even to make a real, permanent difference in the life of enslaved Israel without the material in the second half of Exodus. If you take a bunch of slaves and get them across the border into the desert, then leave them, you have

not created a free society. You have created a slow-motion disaster that will quickly become a rapid-motion disaster.

So God in His mercy didn't end Exodus at ch. 17. He gave us the back half too — the Ten Commandments, the Tabernacle, and all the rest of it. That, of course, is what Jethro says to Moses here. You have to teach them what to do. You have make them into a nation that can live on its own, that has shed the slave mentality as well as legal slavery.

Brothers and sisters, this literally what God's law is about. It is about teaching us how to walk and how to work as free people. No longer do we have to be enslaved to sin and Satan, doing whatever the flesh demands. Now we are free to obey God using our full human ability to judge, choose, and decide. That happens only when we obey. That can only happen when we know the law and keep the law.

b) He Brings His People to Submit to His Judgments, v. 26

But not only do we have to know the law; we have to submit to God's judgments. Those are sometimes delivered directly by God Himself, but oftentimes they come through human judges appointed by human methods. The decisions of a properly constituted court of law should be taken as signals from God Himself. Brothers and sisters, courts can be wrong. But courts should be respected because they are God's ministers, standing in His place. If you take issue with the court, you are on extremely thin ice.

In other words, deliverance from Egypt was *not* deliverance from rules, from civil government, or even from bureaucracy. The rabbis calculated that if there really was an official for every ten Israelites, plus one for every hundred Israelites, and so on, then there would be 78,600 bureaucrats created by this sweeping judiciary reform. Obviously, most of them would not be working full time (how much could a judge of ten really have to do, even if the Israelites were some really quarrelsome people? Maybe a lot, I guess!). But they were all ministers of God, created by human wisdom but allowed and approved by divine authority.

c) He Brings His People to a Place of Peace, v. 23

Well, I want to end this section on the God who dwells with Jethro's words: When you learn to know God's will and submit to His judgments, you will go to your place in peace. That is, you will arrive in Heaven spotless and at peace. That's a mighty promise.

Exodus is not a book that's full of peace. The word only appears 3 times in 40 chapters. Yet every time Jethro shows up, peace is mentioned. And here, though he may mostly be talking about the people standing around Moses being able to go home and get justice a lot more conveniently after the reforms are implemented, his words have a deeper meaning too. Israel's "Place" is not the wilderness, nor even ultimately the promised land. Israel's place is Heaven, the house of the Lord.

And when you know God as deliverer and dweller, when He has rescued you from sin and lives with you on earth, you can be certain that you will live with Him in Heaven. Brothers and sisters, whatever sin is eating at you today, believe that. Know that. God is deliverer. God is dweller. And He will lead you to your place in peace. That's the centerpiece of this book of the knowledge of God. Amen.