
Wise Counsel for the Work

Exodus 17:8-18:27

Introduction Bearing difficult burdens alone...

The Old Covenant is establishing categories for us to think in...

God's call to serve in the context of community...

God is constantly teaching us life's lessons...

We last left Israel at Rephidim, near Horeb and Mt. Sinai. Morning by morning, they are gathering the bread from heaven. They are going out to draw their daily water from the river flowing from the rock at Horeb. God has wonderfully met their needs. Hopefully, they are settling into an uncomplaining routine. God is at work to strengthen the leadership and to meet the needs of God's people.

Helpers in the Battle

(17:8-16)

⁸ Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. ⁹ So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." ¹⁰ So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹² But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. ¹³ And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.

Victory in the Wilderness

(v.8-13)

Now that Israel has learned some important lessons about God's providing hand, they are to learn a lesson about God's protecting hand. The quiet of life is disturbed by war. Amalek gathers up his army and moves toward the encampment of Israel. Amalek was the leader of a nomadic tribe who roamed the Sinai Peninsula trading and pillaging. They traced their ancestry back Esau, Jacob's brother (Genesis 36:12). The details of the gathering storm are hidden from us in Exodus. Moses, in Deuteronomy 25:17-18, refers to the cowardly Amalekites attack that took advantage of their weakness and struck at the stragglers.

A battle plan is formed in the war councils of Israel. Joshua is to recruit men who were trained and prepared for battle. A citizen's army is being put together. Moses would go to the top of a nearby hill with his rod in his hand. The next morning, Moses, Aaron and Hur ascend the hill as Joshua moves out through the plains, forms his battle array and sets out to attack the Amalekite army.

As the battle surges back and forth, on the hill top, Moses stands with his arms raised and the rod held out. As long as his arms are raised, Israel prevails. When they droop, Israel begins to lose. Moses is over 80 years old. It is a long and wea-

rying day. Aaron and Hur have Moses sit on a rock. Then they stand beside him and hold his arms up.

What is signified by Moses' hands being raised? Interpretations abound, from the fanciful to the foolish. Several things are evident though. Moses standing with arms raised to heaven speaks of dependence on God for victory. It is the posture for worship and prayer. It is on the hilltop where he is visible to all below. While the people of God are in battle, Moses the intercessor, publicly displays their dependence upon God.

In one of Moses' raised hands is the rod, the rod of judgment. The wicked have come out to make war on the people of God. The rod of judgment is raised high as a banner over the battle. When the rod is raised high then the battle is won. This is not some kind of spiritual magic. This is not some psychological game. The picture here points forward to a future hill where the rod of judgment fell. The intercessor greater than Moses now is seated and guarantees the final victory for those going through the pilgrimage and are engaged in the spiritual war.

Bookmark in their History

(v.14-16)

¹⁴ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." ¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD is my banner, ¹⁶ saying, and "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

After the victory is won, God instructs Moses to place a bookmark in Israel's history on this day. He is to ensure that Israel remembers this lesson by writing it down in a book. So here begins at least the notes from which the Exodus account is written. The point here is to establish the centrality of a written record of God's saving acts. God's people will read about what God has done, faith will grow and trust in God will become strong. The book contains not only the record of God's protecting power but also of God's final promise. This victory over Amalek on this day is one battle in a long war. But there will come a day when Amalek will be destroyed.

Here is one of the functions of Bible. It helps us understand why our Bible is not a systematic theology nor is it a practical how to live guide. It is largely the record of God's saving acts for His people, what those savings mean and how God will win in the end. This is why a great deal of the Bible is narrative.

Moses also builds an altar to the Lord. He calls the name of the altar (and possibly the place) Yahweh-Nissi, "The Lord, my banner." This is the first instance of that name in the Scripture. Why is it important? Banners are used in nations and armies as marks of identity. For thousands of years, nations have flown banners and flags. The identity of the United States is so strongly connected to the flag that we pledge allegiance "to the United States of America and to the flag for which it stands." Over each regiment, battalion and unit in the Marine Corps, is a banner that identifies them on the parade ground, on a base or camp and sometimes even in the battlefield.

This is what it means that the Lord is our banner. He is our identity. The banner over God's people is not a decorative piece of cloth. We do not fly a Christian

flag; the banner over God's people is *God Himself*. He is our identity. To Him we owe everything – our allegiance, our dependence, our lives. The Word of God then spotlights the banner over God's people and that banner is the majestic greatness of our sovereign and loving God.

In a very difficult sentence, Moses names the altar, “God our Banner” saying, “A hand upon the throne! The Lord will wage war against Amalek from generation to generation.” I agree with Matthew Henry that these two sentences are connected within the larger context. In other words, Amalek laid his hand on the place where God rules with the result that God has waged war against him. In attacking God's people, Amalek has attacked God. God responds, not only in the defense of God's people, but in upholding the authority of His rule.

So God is our banner. When we are beset upon by many enemies, whether spiritual or physical, God responds from His throne, His rule. He has prevailed at the cross. He will bring us, His people, safely through our pilgrimage. He will war on the enemy of our souls. One day, He will finally and decisively destroy Satan, his spiritual hosts and all the wicked. In the sure promise of that day, we rally around the Lord, our banner.

Counsel for the Burden

(18:1-27)

While we have a chapter break here, it seems to me that there is close connection between these two narratives. The connection in both is the aid and assistance Moses receives in his work of leading God's people. Aaron and Hur hold up his hands in the battle. Now, through the wise counsel of Jethro, the heavy burden of shepherding God's people is shared.

In an Example with Family

(v.1-9)

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. ² Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, ³ along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land”), ⁴ 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”). ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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,” ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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.

Moses and Jethro set an example of family relations. Jethro is identified as both a priest in Midian and as the father-in-law of Moses. When Moses had gone up to Egypt on the mission from God, he had sent his wife and two sons to live with Jethro. He had given his sons names that signified his place in this world, a sojourner and his dependence on God, God my helper. Now that Moses is traveling in the relative safety of the Israelite encampment, Jethro brings them to Moses so that the family may be reunited again.

I love the mutual respect and honor that fills the sentences of this paragraph. See Jethro's wise "heads-up" about their pending arrival. What humility and honor Moses shows as he goes out to meet his father-in-law. Then Moses catches him up on all that God has done in delivering them from Egypt and bringing them safely to the mountain of God where they are encamped. He does not gloss over the hardships either. He tells the story true.

Notice carefully Jethro's response. He rejoices in all the God has done. It would be easy, as a proud family member, to celebrate Moses' amazing deeds and stunning victories. It would be natural to praise Moses' leadership and accomplishments. But instead, Jethro rejoices in God. Jethro is waving the same banner in this family moment that Moses waved at a national moment. They both have praised the Lord.

With an Expression of Faith

(v.10-12)

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." ¹² 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.

Jethro's rejoicing is an expression of faith. He was identified as a priest of Midian, a pagan, idol worshipping place. He says, having heard Moses' testimony, that "Now I know..." This is conversion. This is a definitive declaration of faith in God.

First, it is *AN EXPRESSION OF SUBMISSION* to the sovereign authority of God. At issue here is whether or not Yahweh is one god among a pantheon, one among many rivals. Or, is He the one and only true God with all others false idols and myths? Jethro's confession is one of faith in the true God. He hears the record of God's mighty doings. He is enabled to see God for who He is. He responds with a confession that acknowledges this great God.

Jethro's confession of faith also *EVIDENCES HIS OWN NEED* of a sacrifice and his trust in God's redeeming work. He brings a burnt-offering. The burnt-offerings were for sin. They were how God's people acknowledged their need of redemption and their trust in God's provision. The necessity of sacrifice for sin as a means of acceptance by God and access to Him was as old as the Fall. While we should be careful trying to read all the book of Leviticus into this act of faith, we should also not make it less an expression of true faith.

Now they sit down to feast over bread. The family of Moses now is extended to include Aaron and the elders. This is a great feast of lively joy. Moses may simply be referring to sitting down to bread. But it seems that in the shadows there is a glimpse of a greater reality. Bowing to God, trusting in God, now brings the family of God together in fellowship around the bread.

So, Moses is clearly showing that Jethro has saving faith. Jethro expresses and evidences the faith in God that marks God's people. For Moses though, because of what follows, it is important for the readers know that Jethro is a believer, is one who knows the God of the Bible.

By an Exhortation to Delegate

(v.13-23)

¹³ The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. ¹⁴ 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?" ¹⁵ And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; ¹⁶ 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." ¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ 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."

One of Moses' major tasks as the leader of God's people was to be the intermediate between them and God. He was responsible to teach them how to obey God, to interpret the growing body of oral and written Word from God, to show what laws and ordinances applied to their questions or issues, and to arbitrate as a judge between them in disputes. So Moses is acting in this capacity long before he is given the Mosaic and Levitical Law at Sinai. God was revealing Himself to His people, not only in delivering them but also in declaring His will to them.

So, the next morning, it is *take father-in-law to work* day. But as the day wears on, Jethro is amazed. From sunup to sundown, a long line of people queues up to meet with Moses. Moses is simply taking them one at a time and carrying out his responsibility. By the end of the day, people who have stood waiting in line are turned away and told to return tomorrow.

Jethro may not know why this is going on or he is just being very careful in how he approaches Moses. But he sure has questions. So, he approaches Moses (hopefully, he didn't jump line) and asks, "What are you doing here that you sit all day long with huge crowd of people waiting to see you?" Moses explains what he is doing. I wonder if there was a sort of wry, sad smile as he looks out at frustrated people headed home who will have to do it all over again tomorrow. See, we have little experience with this. Westerners may line up and even camp out in the parking lot at the release of some *wowsie* product. But in many countries and in many cultures, first come first served is the rule; appointments are almost unknown. So people will stand for hours outside a medical clinic hoping to see a doctor or a nurse and are often turned away.

Jethro is both frank and wise. He knows this is not sustainable. He may even see the danger that people will become discouraged and will quit trying to learn and understand God's Word and God's will through Moses. So, he points out that what Moses is doing here is not good. It is not good for Moses. It is not good for the people. So he has some counsel for Moses. He is quite straightforward in pressing his case and calling on Moses to listen to him. He wants Moses to listen

to His advice. He hopes that in implementing the counsel he is to give, God will bless, will be with Him.

Now, many reliable commentators see Jethro's advice as worldly, presumptive and running ahead of God's timing. They argue that if Moses would have just waited, then God would later authorize an eldership system to assist Moses. I do not agree. The elders are already in existence here. We saw them in the last chapter and in verse 12, they fellowshiped with Moses and Jethro at the meal. The problem here is not the advice of Jethro. The trouble is the typical problem with leaders – they think they can do it all or they don't think anyone else can do what they do. It seems to me that Moses sees himself as the only one authorized and able to do this cluster of tasks. He is struggling, as many of us do, with delegating to others tasks and responsibilities he can and should.

Note again the careful insight and practical wisdom of Jethro.

He understands and reinforces *WHAT MOSES ALONE CAN AND OUGHT TO DO*. Verse 20 is simply a clear restatement of God's commission of Moses. He and He alone is the one through whom the Word of God will come. This cannot be delegated in human terms or with human power. Moses is to teach God's Word, to interpret God's will and to tell the people how to live. At this point, God has not given the prophetic gift to anyone else in Israel, except possibly for Aaron. Jethro recognizes and reinforces this unique task.

He also counsels Moses *TO IDENTIFY ABLE AND WISE MEN WHO CAN HELP* apply God's Word, discern the practical outworking of God's will in wisdom and to judge in disputes. These able men will then be assigned over groups of people that they live among and interact with. They are to take God's Word and Moses' teaching, transmit it to the people, give them wise counsel and settle disputes.

Finally, he *SHOWS THE WISDOM AND THE BENEFIT OF THIS COUNSEL*. The burden for Moses is less. He will better be able to carry out his responsibilities. The people of God will have more direct access to God's Word and will. They will be able to get their questions answered and their disputes settled more quickly. Both Moses and God's people will be better served. Through a distributed system of instruction and counsel, God's people will live in a greater measure of peace.

Jethro's wise counsel becomes the model for God's people down through the ages. While this model may be abused when ungodly men are in the positions of leadership or false prophets and leaders are in Moses' position. But for us, the One greater than Moses has come, He who is the final revelation of God, the Lord Jesus. Having ascended into heaven, He has given spiritual gifts to His people and then given spiritually gifted men to the church (Ephesians 4:7-16) so that through teaching the people of God come to full spiritual maturity and wide spiritual ministry. He has established gatherings of His people all over the world all down through history and has placed a body of able, qualified men over them. They are responsible to bring God's Word to the people, to help them understand God's will, to live pleasing to Him and to serve one another.

In an Execution of Advice

(v.24-27)

²⁴ So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵ 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. ²⁶ And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. ²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

Moses implemented the counsel he had been given. Imagine the next morning as Moses goes through the camp and begins the search for the wise, able, godly men. We do not know how long this would have taken. Given the scope and magnitude of establishing this for around a half-million households, it would have been quite a task in itself. But the principles are articulated, the men identified, the people informed and the process inaugurated. While we are not told this, it would seem that the top tier of men would have been identified with their first task to identify, approve and install those under them.

As kindly as I know how to say this, God has never implemented a democracy. God has never governed His people by the will of the people. He has always governed His people as a King. The King selects His ministers. His ministers serve to represent the King, not themselves. The King gives His Word and shows His will through the men He has appointed. They then in turn, lovingly guide, guard, equip and die, if necessary, for the people entrusted to their care.

I like this last sentence. "Then Moses let his father-in-law depart." Why say this that way? Because the task Jethro counseled is completed. Moses has kept Jethro with him to see the great change through. I wonder if Jethro helped in it? But a day comes when the system is in place. Throughout the camp the people are meeting with their leaders in small, manageable groups. Moses is teaching both the people at large, but particularly the leadership. The burden is lessened. The people are served well. Wise counsel has borne fruit.

Conclusion Able helpers for the battle and wise counsel for the burdens. How glorious the wisdom and love of God to His people. He brings about spiritual victory through both the completed provision of His saving power and through the active labors of His serving people. He relieves the burdens of His appointed leaders and His people by both giving them direct access to His throne through prayer and immediate help and hope through His teachers.

I want to draw out several thoughts in closing:

The Bible is pointing through Moses to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the greater than Moses of whom Moses is the shadow. This is maintained through the Scriptures. Thus, attempts to equate the singular pastor-teacher with Moses who was then surrounded and supported by elders are misusing the text and the type. Moses never points to us as pastors. We are not the fulfillment. Our Chief Shepherd, our senior Pastor is the Lord Jesus who is in heaven. We are under-shepherds, all of us, who serve among the flock over which God has appointed us.

Elders, deacons and leaders, be careful to properly delegate out where and what you can instead of spreading yourself thin. The wise counsel of Jethro ought to land with some force on all of us. If you find your ministry burdensome, then seek able help where you can. Every member of this gathered church ought to be serving in some capacity. There is much to do. Many leaders desire helpers. And some leaders need to hear this message and this counsel. It will be good for you and the people you serve.

May God be the banner over all our spiritual battles and victories. May the cross, the death and resurrection of Christ be the focal point for all our rejoicing. May we battle well here in anticipation of a final victory. May present effort to be pleasing to God in every area of life be expended clinging to and trusting in the promises of God. May we Yahwe-Nissi be the flag over our lives, our church, our ultimate hope. May God be our banner.