

“Navigating Our Way Through Changes in Ministry”

Exodus 18:1-12

¹ 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. 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. (ESV)

I've done a bit of a mini-series the last couple of weeks in Tommy's absence. The first Sunday I dealt with the church as the body of Christ, with Christ being the head of the church. The second week we looked at things that may make the church unhealthy, in fact they will. Some of those are practices, some of those are sins. We looked at I Corinthians to get an idea of how messed up the church actually is at times and how far we get from the kingdom of God in how we live. But there's always correction and God never lets us go. We see that manifested in the Old Testament where the people of God were being called out of bondage with the hope of the promise of eternal life. Moses himself leads his people with all kinds of difficulties and trials and problems, and yet God never ever leaves them by themselves.

In this passage we see that God in fact sent Jethro to give Moses some very clear, simple advice about how to manage, how to lead, how to have ministry function in a way that not only would bless him but bless all of the people involved. We're looking at this for a couple of reasons. One is because we're moving toward more and more small group ministry. Just to get it on the table, there are a lot of small groups that have met for a long time here and have been very faithful in God in that and have had a wonderful ministry. Some of you are reminding me and telling me these fantastic things that God has done to encourage you in your small groups, and that's fantastic. What we want is for everybody to experience that blessing. And here in this snapshot of Jethro's visit to Moses we actually have a picture of a collective communicative God, the Old Testament assembly of God. The Greek word for “assembly” comes from this. It is the “church” – the assembly of God – coming out of the desert to be gathered at Mount Sinai to hear redemptive words from God. This old covenant community actually becomes an example of some things we can learn about church life and how to manage it. We know it's important to study our Old and New Testaments because God does work in continuity, old and new covenants. But we also know, as the apostle Paul says in Romans chapter 15, that through the testimony that's written in Old Testaments scriptures we have encouragement of what happened to them and sometimes a lesson learned of what not to do wrong. But we also have the hope of blessing as we see God blessing His people. That's one of the things we're going to see here with Jethro. He's going to very specifically tell Moses, “If you hang in there and listen to my advice, it's going to go well with you and with the people as well.”

So having said those things, let's just jump straight into looking at some of the things that arise out of Exodus chapter 18. The first thing we're going to look at is the fact that when Jethro came to see Moses, they were recounting the redemptive acts of God. Look in verse 1.

¹ Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses . . . (ESV)

Remember, he was sitting around the campfire back in Exodus chapter 4 when Moses got the commission to go and he said to his father-in-law, “I have a job to do for a time.” His wife went with him but ultimately he had to send her back with the boys (I understand what that’s like). But in the process of Moses doing his mission, doing his job, Jethro was hearing reports about what was going on. It says in verse 1 that he

. . . heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people . . . (ESV)

You couldn’t possibly keep quiet the fact that the God of Israel had devastated all of the gods of the Egyptians, which is exactly what happened – ten plagues. They were battling against the ten major gods of the Egyptians, and one after another they were all crushed until ultimately Pharaoh, who saw himself as a god, was crushed by the death of his own son. So Jethro came. He came because he had heard of the mighty acts of God, and in this ministry as in any evangelical ministry we have to keep recounting the mighty acts of redemption. That’s our starting point. It’s our continuing point. It’s our finishing point, what Christ has done on our behalf. If you want to work through change individually or you want to work through change as a family of God, you have to start, continue, and end with what God has done. As Jethro came to Moses, look what happens down in verse 8.

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. (ESV)

In essence what Moses was doing was saying to Jethro, “Let me fill in a few blanks. You’ve heard where you are from in Midian all that God has done, but let me tell you the rest of the story.” If we can put this in the context of the New Testament, it’s like the Ethiopian who’s in his chariot asking Phillip to come up and explain the rest of the story to him from Isaiah. He says, “I’m reading this stuff but I don’t quite understand. Would you mind riding for a while? Do these scripture speak about Isaiah or some other prophet?” Phillip had the opportunity to preach the Gospel to the Ethiopian, and he was brought to Christ. You and I also in this ministry need to fill in the blanks for what people know and don’t know about the Gospel. Remember last week I said only 17.8 percent of Americans are in a worship service on any given Sunday? It’s believed that virtually 80% of Americans have never heard a credible presentation of the Gospel. They still think that they can work their way to heaven and they don’t know that the only work they can do is to believe in the one who’s done the work – believe in Jesus. That’s what was happening. Moses was filling in the blanks. “You’ve heard part of the story? Let me tell you the whole thing.” As people come and they visit, or they come into small groups we have the privilege of telling people the rest of the story. They all come with different journey experiences. We have the chance to hear where they are from, what they know, and then fill in the blanks for them.

The second thing that happened was an evaluation. Look at verses 13-14.

¹³ The next day Moses sat to judge the people, . . .

Now, he was going out doing what he always did, “Good to see you, Pop. I have to go out and take care of the people, you know.”

¹³ . . . 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?” (ESV)

Jethro was giving an honest evaluation of what he saw happening in Moses’ ministry. You know, every once a while in our own personal lives we have a friend that will come along and say, “Something’s not right. Let me help you with this. What you’re doing is causing difficulty. What you’re doing is not good.” This is what Jethro did for Moses. The reason I think that Moses listened to Jethro was because he had that ongoing relationship – he married the man’s daughter. Because of that relationship he was able to hear what Jethro had to say. Otherwise he could have said, “I am the leader of 3.2 million people. Back off. I know what I’m doing.” But he didn’t do that; he listened to his father-in-law.

That brings me to the third thing. If we're going to implement things in our life or even in ministry, we have to listen to those outside the box. Look at verses 15-17. Remember that the father-in-law said, "What are you doing?"

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." (ESV)*

"Isn't it a good thing what I'm doing? I'm letting people know what God's word says, and there's nothing I can do about it. Don't you see how busy I am?" He says in verse 17,

¹⁷ *Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good." (ESV)*

That is just so cool. When somebody loves us enough and is not rocked by, in this case, Moses' power and being the leader of all these people. He just tells Moses, "What you're doing is not good." And Moses listened to him even though he had a lot of reasons perhaps not to.

What's the next thing that happened? Not only do we need to recount the mighty acts of God, evaluate honestly what's going on, listen to others outside our box, but we need to accept that the transformation is going to require change. What is the definition of insanity? You keep doing the same thing expecting a different result. In verse 18 you see,

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. (ESV)*

Here's some frank, clear advice. "You need to change what's going on." As a consequence of that, when we recount the acts of God, evaluate honestly what's going on, are prepared to listen to those outside of the box, accept that change is going to be needed, if we're willing to take advice we can finally at long last be effective in our own personal calling. Look in verses 19 and 20. Jethro said,

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 . . .*

who can help you. There were three things, three specific measures of advice that Jethro gave to Moses that helped him be effective in his own calling. Moses could not do it all. He was wearing himself out. Jethro didn't say, "You don't have a job, just kick back and relax." No, he said, "You have a job but your job is this – to intercede for the people (verse 19), be their representative before God (intercede)." Secondly, he was to instruct (verse 20). He was to teach people from God's word, tell them what they should be doing. And thirdly, he was to invest his life in the lives of other men, capable men who could help him in his ministry. He was to surround himself with godly men (verse 21).

That brings me to point number six. If change is going to happen you have to inspire others with a vision for ministry. You have to inspire others with the mighty acts of God and what God is doing, and invite them to come get a piece of this. That's what Moses did (verse 21),

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 . . .*

And here come the first small groups.

. . . as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. (ESV)

All of Israel, no matter how big it was, could be broken all the way down into groups of ten. As they got together and they prayed and they worked through things and they dealt with their conflicts with each other and they took what Moses had

taught them about the law and hammered it out—what it means about this or that—they were being knit together as a family of God in the desert. If God can teach His family how to live in the desert He can certainly continue to teach us about how to live at the mountain. And that’s what was happening. But then there had to be ownership of ministry (verse 22). Jethro said,

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. (ESV)

Here you have a complete structured ministry being set up by Jethro coming along beside Moses in the desert. You see the same kind of thing happening in Acts chapter 2 after the church was born to the evangelism of the declaration of the Lordship of Christ. One of the things they started doing was meeting in one another’s homes, sharing together, breaking bread, enjoying fellowship, and praying. Consequently after that, they started appointing deacons to help the apostles have time to do what God specifically called them to do with prayer in the ministry of the Word. You have this progression of ministry happening, very much described here in the Old Testament with the first covenant people of God. As a result of these things that were applied, look at what takes place down in verse 23. A new ministry has begun. Jethro said,

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.” (ESV)

[Rev. Broadwater started projecting photographs on the overhead screen behind him.]

God has given us His word to help us be enlightened to our path. He’s given us not only the New Testament, but the Old Testament scriptures to instruct us about how to live as a family of God, how to function one with another, how to handle structure of ministry, and how to change as it needs to come about in our lives and then into the life of the church. He does this because as He comes upon his people in the power of the Spirit, He is again asserting His authority, His power, His presence over the face of the earth so that men and women, boys and girls, can actually come and hear a credible presentation of the gospel. That’s what we’re all about: providing opportunities in corporate worship, small groups, and discipleship for people to hear what God is doing. We can be a congregation of hundreds or a congregation that touches thousands in our community through small group ministries. As women have gotten together in cottage group ministries, they come together and assemble as representatives of the family of God. We’ve also seen the men do that as God challenges us for transformation of hearts and lives. But we also have fun. Sometimes we wear reindeer antlers, and sometimes we pretend like we’re Rudolph, and sometimes we point out to people what’s obvious in their life, they’re on the wrong side of the road. They need to come to Jesus. [Photo of a car stopped at a traffic light in the first lane to the left of a double yellow centerline on a four-lane street.] I shot this down in Seattle. I looked at this for a long time trying to figure out if I was on the right side of the road or not. But it becomes pretty obvious to people when they come into the ministry of God’s word and they come to hear what God has done in Christ, it becomes real obvious how much they need Jesus. We do this because we have a heart to actually reach people with the love of God, bring in the harvest of grace, and then gather once again of all ages to worship Him, to rejoice and give thanks for the fact that God is not finished building a winning team in Seattle and beyond [photo of Seahawks football players taking the field]. Jesus said, “I am going to build my church.” He is the head; we are the body. We are to function in a way to please Him, and He’s even given us structure for how to do that. Isn’t it cool that God will not let us go?

Paradigm for Ministry Changes
Moses to Jesus to Early Church to Us
Exodus 18

- Recount – God’s mighty acts of redemption (1-12)
- Evaluate – What is happening in your life (13-14)
- Listen – To others outside the box (15-17)
- Accept – Transformation requires change (18)
- Take – Advice to be effective (19-20)
- Inspire – Others to share the mission (21)
- Ownership – Authorize them to fulfill calling (22-23)
- New Ministry – Develops as it is valued (24-27)