

September 15, 2024 (Lesson 3)

## JETHRO: MOSES' COUNSELOR AND FATHER-IN-LAW

1. **Jethro Provides Sanctuary for Moses** (Exodus 2:11-22)
2. **Jethro Blesses the Mission** (Exodus 3:1-10; 4:18-20)
3. **Jethro Gives Leadership Advice** (Exodus 18:7-27)

**Central Truth:** Identify God-honoring relationships and listen to wise counsel.

**Focus:** Highlight the significance of accepting wise counsel as we take steps to follow God's directives.

**Evangelism Emphasis:** Godly relationships are a witness to our life in God.

**Golden Text:** "So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father-in-law, and did all that he had said" (Exodus 18:24).

Today's lesson begins with the period of Moses' life when he lived in Midian (forty years before the events of lesson 2). We will then move forward and pick up the story after the Exodus. We will learn about Jethro, a little-known figure in the Bible. Jethro was Moses' father-in-law and a man who became a wise counselor for the great Law-giver of Israel.

Moses' life can be divided into three periods, each lasting forty years. For the first forty years of his life, he lived as a prince of Egypt (Ex. 2:10; Acts 7:23). Next, he lived as an exile in Midian (vv. 29-30). His final forty years spanned the time from the Exodus to his death in Moab at the age of 120 (Deut. 34:7). Various writers ascribe different meanings to these three stages of his life. We would simply offer the following: For forty years, Moses experienced natural development, both physically and mentally. For forty years, he developed spiritually, learning humility and the value of hard work. For forty years, he developed as a leader and the prophet of the Lord.

As we will see, Jethro was an instrument in God's hands to further Moses's abilities and effectiveness as a leader. From Moses' relationship with his father-in-law, we will discover the value of having sage counselors in our lives. We learn and grow as we interact with others and draw on their experiences and wisdom.

### 1. JETHRO PROVIDES SANCTUARY FOR MOSES

#### A. Moses Helps Jethro's Daughters (Exodus 2:11-17)

<sup>15</sup> Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian: and he sat down by a well. <sup>16</sup> Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. <sup>17</sup> And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

After Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster (vv. 11-12), he became a target of the wrath of Pharaoh. So he fled for his life, traveling hundreds of miles to the land of Midian. According to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, this was an area at the northern end of the Red Sea, near the Gulf of Aqaba. The Midianite people were descendants of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2). Thus, they were distant cousins of Moses. Although related to the Israelites, they became enemies of the Hebrew people. The Midianites oppressed Israel during the period of the Judges, only to be defeated by Gideon (Judg. 6—7). Once in Midian, Moses encountered the family of a man named Reuel (Ex. 2:18), also known as Jethro (3:1).

It is uncertain to what extent the Midianites were followers of the true God. Some were idolaters. (In Num. 25:1-6, Midianite women led Israel into the worship of the god Baal-Peor.) Yet, since the Midianites were descendants of Abraham, it is reasonable to believe the faith of the patriarch had been passed down through the generations to some degree. This was apparently the case with Reuel, whose name means “friend of God.” This seems to indicate Reuel was a follower of the one God. He was also a priest among the Midianites (Ex. 2:16). As noted above, Reuel was also known as *Jethro*, which means “excellence.” Rather than a personal name, “Jethro” may have been an honorary title as a leader of his people. In many ancient cultures, the rulers were also priests (such as Melchizedek in Gen. 14:18). This seems likely to have been the case with Reuel/Jethro.

When Moses arrived in Midian, he sat down by a well. There he met Reuel's seven daughters, who had come to water their flocks. However, certain shepherds came along. They shoved the women aside, unwilling to wait their turn, as would have been the custom. The women may have

already drawn some water, and the selfish shepherds wanted to take advantage of this. Moses saw it happen. As with witnessing the Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew, there arose within Moses a sense of righteous anger at seeing such an injustice. He stood up to defend the women. His fury was apparent enough that he had no trouble driving away the shepherds.

### **Women at Wells**

Consider other occasions when women at wells figured in the Biblical story. This includes the accounts of Hagar (Gen. 21:17-20), Rebekah (24:10-20), Rachel (29:1-10), and the Samaritan woman (John 4:5-7). In Scripture, *wells* represent life. Here God caused people to encounter the Life-giver and discover His plan for them.

#### **B. Moses Marries and Becomes a Father (Exodus 2:18-22)**

<sup>18</sup> And when they came to Reuel their father, he said, How is it that ye are come so soon to day? <sup>19</sup> And they said, An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and also drew water enough for us, and watered the flock. <sup>20</sup> And he said unto his daughters, And where is he? why is it that ye have left the man? call him, that he may eat bread. <sup>21</sup> And Moses was content to dwell with the man: and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter. <sup>22</sup> And she bare him a son, and he called his name Gershom: for he said, I have been a stranger in a strange land.

This act of courageous kindness gave Moses favor in the eyes of Jethro. As a result, he gave one of his daughters, Zipporah, to Moses as his bride. Moses then settled into a new life tending sheep for his father-in-law. For Moses, his ambition to deliver Israel must have seemed a passing dream. His life's path had reached a destination far from Egypt and the Hebrew people.

Moses settled down and began to raise a family. He saw his lot as a stranger living in a foreign land for the rest of his life. Indeed, he named his firstborn son, born in Midian, "Gershom" (v. 22), which basically means "a stranger there." It is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to drive out" or "to cast out." Moses believed he would live in exile for the rest of his life.

As the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses had lived in luxury and splendor. He was honored by the Egyptian people. He was educated "in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds" (Acts 7:22). Now, he had fallen from a position of glory and power to be a shepherd in a wilderness land among a foreign people. Moses had tried to act as a deliverer of the Hebrews in his own strength and wisdom—which was an utter failure. Before becoming the Law-giver and liberator of Israel, he had to be humbled—learning to depend on God instead of himself.

But God had a training program to prepare Moses for his ministry. For forty years, he served his father-in-law as a shepherd (Ex. 3:1; Acts 7:30). We often see God's servants maturing and learning to lead by serving as shepherds. This was the case with Jacob (Gen. 30:31), Joseph (37:2), David (1 Sam. 16:11), and Amos (Amos 1:1). It is fitting that the Great Shepherd taught future leaders of God's flock by first learning to lead sheep.

—*In what sense do all Christians today live as "stranger[s] in a strange land" (Ex. 2:22; see 1 Peter 2:11)?*

## **2. JETHRO BLESSES THE MISSION**

### **A. God Calls Moses (Exodus 3:1-10)**

<sup>1</sup> Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. <sup>2</sup> And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. <sup>4</sup> And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. <sup>5</sup> And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.

<sup>9</sup> Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. <sup>10</sup> Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Shepherds would wander from place to place, sometimes over great distances, to find pasture for their sheep. This is why Moses moved his flock around the Midianite wilderness in faithfully tending Jethro's sheep. Seemingly by chance (but according to God's plan), Moses arrived at the foot of "Horeb" (v. 1), also called Sinai. At the foot of the mountain he saw a bush on fire. This was probably an acacia plant—a thorny shrub common in this desert area. To see a bush on fire was not unknown. A spark from a campfire or a bolt of lightning could ignite an acacia. But this bush burned in a different way. Its branches and leaves were not consumed by the fire, so Moses "turned aside" to see what was going on (v. 3).

Moses discovered God's glory was present in this bush; the fire was divine and supernatural. Fire is commonly seen in the Bible as representing God's presence. For example, a "burning lamp" appeared in Abraham's vision (Gen. 15:17); a "pillar of fire" led Israel (Ex. 13:21-22; 14:24); Sinai burned with fire when God established His covenant with Israel (Deut. 4:11-13); and John saw a heavenly "sea of glass mingled with fire" (Rev. 15:2). No wonder God is called "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29).

As he approached the bush, Moses heard the voice of the Lord speak to him (Ex. 3:4). Verse 2 (NKJV) says "the Angel of the Lord" was speaking. The Angel of the Lord appears a number of times in the Old Testament, and is often acknowledged as God himself (see Gen. 16:7-13; 22:11-18; Judg. 2:1-4). Indeed, Moses recognized this Angel as God (Ex. 3:6). In all likelihood, the Angel of the Lord [the Messenger of *Yahweh*] was a pre-incarnate manifestation of Jesus Christ.

Since the burning bush was a divine manifestation of God's glory, the ground around the bush was "holy ground" (v. 5). That is why Moses was commanded to take off his shoes—to show worshipful respect to the presence of the Almighty. The Lord revealed Himself as the God of the patriarchs (v. 6). He declared He had seen the plight of the children of Israel, and He intended to

respond (vv. 7-8). He would bring deliverance to Israel, freeing them from captivity. He would then take them to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants (Ex. 3:8; cf. Gen. 15:13-14).

He also declared His personal name *Yahweh*, or Jehovah (Ex. 3:14)—a name derived from the verb *to be*, and essentially meaning “He who is” or “the One who exists.” This is the name Moses would invoke for Israel’s deliverance from bondage (vv. 16-17). It is also the covenant name of God in His relationship with Israel (v. 15; 6:2-4).

God said to Moses, “I will send you to Pharaoh to deliver My people” (see 3:10). What was Moses’ reaction? Perhaps he wondered, *Why would God send me? I am a failure. I am a nobody. I am a poor shepherd living in exile.* What a lesson for us! God often uses the weak, humble, and outcast to accomplish His mighty works.

We do know Moses had doubts about all of this (4:1). In response, God gave him miraculous signs to use (vv. 2-9), assured Moses of His lordship (vv. 10-12), and then called Aaron to come alongside Moses to help him in his task (vv. 14-16).

—*How did Moses’ tending Jethro’s sheep play an important role in this narrative?*

## **B. Moses Returns to Egypt (Exodus 4:18-20)**

<sup>18</sup> And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace. <sup>19</sup> And the Lord said unto Moses in Midian, Go, return into Egypt: for all the men are dead which sought thy life. <sup>20</sup> And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon an ass, and he returned to the land of Egypt: and Moses took the rod of God in his hand.

After his encounter with Almighty God, Moses returned to his father-in-law. He must have explained God’s call on his life as the reason for his intention to return to his people in Egypt. Being a follower of God, we may wonder if Jethro was expecting this turn of events, for he did not hesitate in his response. He blessed Moses, telling him, “Go in peace” (v. 18). In the culture of the

day, for Moses to hear these words from Jethro would have meant a great deal. A blessing from a person in authority, someone respected and esteemed, indicated not only a human blessing but also the favor of God.

Moses had fled Egypt in fear for his life. God now informed him that the pharaoh (and any others) who had wanted him dead were now themselves dead. Moses gathered his belongings and his family and set out to return to Egypt. Along the way, he would meet Aaron. Together they would confront Pharaoh and declare the Word of God to him.

Moses carried his staff in his hand. This ordinary walking stick had now become the “rod of God” (v. 20). Through this rod, the Lord would perform miracles. It also represented the presence of the Lord constantly present with Moses.

—*What does this passage reveal about Moses’ relationship with his father-in-law?*

### **3. JETHRO GIVES LEADERSHIP ADVICE**

#### **A. Jethro Identifies the Problem (Exodus 18:7-18)**

<sup>12</sup> And Jethro, Moses’ father in law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God: and Aaron came, and all the elders of Israel, to eat bread with Moses’ father in law before God. <sup>13</sup> And it came to pass on the morrow, that Moses sat to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening.

<sup>17</sup> And Moses’ father in law said unto him, The thing that thou doest is not good. <sup>18</sup> Thou wilt surely wear away, both thou, and this people that is with thee: for this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone. In Exodus 18, Moses and the Israelites traveled from the Red Sea toward Sinai. Along the way, they encountered Jethro. The Midianite priest had heard of all the Lord had done in Egypt, so he went out to meet Moses (v. 1). The Bible doesn’t record when it happened, but Moses apparently had sent his family back to Midian, probably for their safety. When Jethro came to meet Moses, he brought them with him (vv. 2-6). After what must have been a joyful family reunion, Moses recounted to Jethro all that happened to Israel (v. 8).

Here we gain more insight into the character of Jethro. He was a man who feared and honored God, and he rejoiced at the news of Israel's deliverance and the many miracles the Lord had done (v. 9). He worshiped the Lord (v. 10) and declared Yahweh is superior to all other gods (v. 11). Jethro lived in a society that was largely pagan. If he had any doubts about the status of the Lord compared with any other gods, the report of the Exodus removed them completely: "Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all gods, because He did wonders when the Egyptians acted arrogantly against Israel" (v. 11 HCSB). He then worshiped God in his priestly role by offering sacrifices on an altar (v. 12). Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel then ate a ceremonial meal in honor of the Lord.

Jethro was also a man of insight and wisdom, as is evident from what happened next. The day after the worship experience, Moses went back to his job as the leader of Israel. He sat down to judge the people (v. 13). In the early history of Israel, acting as a judge was an essential part of a ruler's responsibility. Indeed, a "judge" was a leader in Israel. (The word is used this way in the Book of Judges.) So Moses sat as a judge. This probably involved listening to complaints, settling interpersonal disputes, giving guidance, and offering advice. Moses did this from first thing in the morning until evening, for there were thousands of thousands of Israelites. After leaving Egypt, a count was made of the number of men who were able to go to war. This number was over 600,000 (Num. 1:44-46). If there were that many men of military age, the total population of men, women, and children might have been about 2.5 million.

Jethro watched Moses sitting as judge, and was astounded at the sight. He asked him what he was doing, and why was he doing it alone (Ex. 18:14). Moses replied he did it because the people came to him to seek God's will (v. 15). He could not see any other way. He was the leader of the people, called of God to fulfill this ministry. Obviously Moses was a faithful servant leader. But he had not learned to involve others in ministry through delegation. As Christian motivational speaker



John Maxwell says, “You can either work hard or work smart.” Moses knew how to work hard, but he was not working smart. Jethro rebuked Moses, telling him what he was doing was “not good” (v. 17). The result of this would be total exhaustion—he would “wear away” (v. 18). In modern terms, he would experience burnout.

### **We Need Each Other**

One of the common New Testament images for the church is a body. Each part of the body has a necessary role. And it is each part, working together, that ensures both the health of the body and its effectiveness. We corporately need each other. We individually need each person. Through working together, we are the strongest.

#### **B. Moses Follows Jethro’s Advice (Exodus 18:19-27)**

<sup>19</sup> Hearken now unto my voice, I will give thee counsel, and God shall be with thee: Be thou for the people to Godward, that thou mayest bring the causes unto God: <sup>20</sup> And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do. <sup>21</sup> Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: <sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee. <sup>23</sup> If thou shalt do this thing, and God command thee so, then thou shalt be able to endure, and all this people shall also go to their place in peace. <sup>24</sup> So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father in law, and did all that he had said.

Jethro’s wisdom was now evident in a brilliant plan. He told Moses to continue to seek God for the people, and to instruct them in the word of the Lord (vv. 19-20). But Moses needed to understand it was unwise for him to personally attempt to solve every issue the people sought counsel about. Many items were not that significant. Instead of handling every request, Jethro counseled Moses to share the responsibility. He should select men who were known for their integrity and wisdom and install them as judges. Then he should let them handle the majority of

matters the people brought up. If there were serious causes these men could not handle, they could come to Moses, and he would seek God for an answer. Moses immediately saw the wisdom of this advice. However, before acting, we may assume he accepted Jethro's advice to seek God's direction in this matter (v. 23).

Following Jethro's advice, Moses developed a structured hierarchy of leadership. Some men were very capable, so they were made leaders over groups of a thousand Israelites. Each group of a thousand was divided into ten groups of one hundred people, each with a leader. Under each leader of a hundred were leaders of fifty people, and under them were leaders of ten people. Most of the Israelites' concerns could be handled by the leaders of ten people. However, when a difficult case arose, it could be passed up the line as needed. Moses then only had to deal with the most difficult situations.

What a marvelous solution to a serious problem, and what a relief to Moses! Jethro told Moses it would be "easier for [thee]" to follow this plan (v. 22). The Hebrew word for *easier* literally refers to taking cargo off a ship. In other words, a great burden was being lifted from Moses' shoulders. He would later complain to God that the task of leading the people was too great a burden (Num. 11:14). Imagine what he would have felt if he had failed to follow Jethro's advice. Moses learned how to work smart, not just hard. Dwight L. Moody said, "I would rather put ten men to work than do the work of ten men."

—*How does Jesus' teaching in Matthew 25:14-15 reflect Jethro's plan in Exodus 18:21?*

## **WORKING WITH GOD AND EACH OTHER**

One of the challenges of working for God is to fall into the trap of thinking we do our task alone. The reality is, we need each other. We all need help. Yes, we work for God in response to His call. We labor *for* and *with* God (1 Cor. 3:9), but we do this as part of a body, a community.

Jethro's advice made a huge difference in Moses' life. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses reviewed the history of Israel and the commands of God for His people. Near the beginning of his account, he spoke of what happened in Exodus 18. He did not mention Jethro by name, but he described the problem of leading the large number of people and the solution his father-in-law provided. It was a lesson he could not forget, and it is a lesson from which we all can benefit.

#### **Daily Devotions**

- M. Abraham's Servant Obeys (Genesis 24:1-10)
- T. Jonathan's Armorbearer Willingly Follows (1 Samuel 14:6-14)
- W. The People Respond to Haggai's Word (Haggai 1:12-15)
- T. Nathanael Follows Philip to Jesus (John 1:43-51)
- F. The Holy Spirit Gives Counsel (John 14:23-27)
- S. Mutual Respect and Submission Commended (Ephesians 5:19-21)