

Exodus 18 is the passage today. To give a recap of where we've been, the Israelites have been rescued, and brought out of the smoldering furnace of Egypt. In chapters 13 through 18 there is a detailed account of their journey from Egypt to Sinai. We've been exploring a few themes, and one of the themes is what it means to leave a place physically but then have that place leave you spiritually. They've been physically released from Exodus, but there's some internal work that needs to be done. So it is with our sanctification. God has freed us but is now in the process of getting certain things out of us.

Being a slave for 400 years under oppression means that certain thought patterns need to be changed. Being a slave for 400 years changes how you view people, how you view yourself, and how you view the world—patterns, habits, and allegiances. What is beautiful to see is that though this journey is difficult, God has faithfully been providing for the people of Israel.

You see this in his provision, giving them bread, giving them meat, giving them water, and even tangibly his presence. I find it so interesting that at the beginning of the book, you have God, who is in the heavens hearing the cry of his people. Throughout the book, he begins to get closer and closer and closer. He's walking with them through the wilderness by the pillar of smoke and the pillar of fire. At the end of Exodus, what you get is God camping in a tent with the people of Israel. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing.

We start to get subtle hints that they are becoming disheartened because the wilderness is making them lose sight of why they were saved in the first place. If you think about what they are experiencing, there is the rough terrain, having to now trust God for daily provision, and then getting attacked by the Amalekites. Not only has God been providing provision, but he, in chapter 18, is giving them a glimpse of who they will become if they let the wilderness do its job.

That brings us to Jethro and chapter 18, which, at first glance, looks random. You have this action-packed, God's providing, and they get into a fight in chapter 17. And then you have this detailed account with

Jethro, the in-law, which seems random. But I've realized that the author intentionally placed this text in the position of where it's at.

Jethro and that mysterious figure Melchizedek's (Genesis 14) stories run parallel. A couple of examples are that both of these men, Melchizedek and Jethro, are priests. They're both mysterious in their own right. Melchizedek, we know, was the king of Salem, but we don't know where he came from. There's debate as to whether Jethro is a priest of the God most high or whether he gets converted in chapter 18, but we know both of these men are priests. Both of these men bring gifts after a battle. Abraham rescues his nephew Lot from a battle, and Israel just came from a battle in chapter 17.

Both Melchizedek and Jethro have the same blessing of blessing God for delivering them from their enemies. Melchizedek brings out bread and wine, and Jethro brings out bread. God makes a covenant with Abraham, and God makes a covenant with Israel. Pretty interesting. So that tells me there's an intention for this parallelism. And although Moses, in the Torah, is the main figure, Jethro, in this chapter, is who our attention and focus should be on. This is not only because of the repetition of his name that you see over and over—Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, Jethro, Jethro—but also because of this intentional parallelism.

What I believe is happening is that Jethro, for us, is a precursor of who Israel will become. He is this priest king; he is one who embodies what it means to bless God and to bless people. What it means to join God in his redemptive work and be his ambassador or representative in and through the world.

If we remember, this was the purpose of the Exodus. The purpose of the Exodus is that Israel would be set free so that they would come to worship, that they would come and be like the one who rescued them. This rubs against our contemporary view of what freedom is. It was not freedom just for freedom's sake, freedom that was autonomous, that had no boundaries, and that said, I can just do as I please. That idea is foreign in the Bible. Freedom consists not in doing

what we like but in having the right to do what we ought to do.

I love what St. Augustine once said. "To know you, God, is eternal life and to serve you is perfect freedom." So the purpose of the exodus was not that they would just be free for freedom's sake and do their own little thing with God just being distant. But, no, that they would be like Jethro. They would be like this priest king. That they would be God's representatives and ambassadors in the world.

So, in the text today, we're going to look at the mission of a priest. We're going to look at the heart of a priest, and then we're going to look at the deeds of a priest, for this is what God has called us to. In verse one, we read:

### **Heart Of A Priest**

**Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. Exodus 18:1**

So Jethro has already heard of the one true God. He already has a relational sentiment toward Moses. Moses had the revelation in the burning bush and told him why he was going to Egypt. So, there is already an understanding, and you can also argue that this is because Jethro comes from the lineage of Abraham from his second wife, Keturah. Keturah gave birth to Midian and Jethro was a Midianite priest. But now, what we see is that the deeds and the acts of God are no longer in a vacuum. It is becoming national news.

Jethro hears not only what God has done for Moses individually, he hears of how the Lord has brought Israel out of Egypt. That is a phrase used in the Torah that communicates God's saving acts and his reputation. Over and over, God is constantly telling his people, remember, remember, remember the Lord who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians.

It was God's reputation and his saving acts that brought Rahab from her life of prostitution into the family of God. When the spies come to her house, she confesses,

**"We have heard of God's reputation and his saving acts, and we have trembled. And she responds, We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear**

**and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Joshua 2:10-11**

It's God's reputation in saving acts that have brought us here together in this place. And hearing God's saving reputation and acts causes Jethro to do something. It creates action. He doesn't just hear it, and it's just, "Oh, that's good rhetoric." It moves him to do something, which we'll explore later in the passage.

### **Being a Priest Means We Unite Ourselves to God's Redemptive Work.**

This is my first point, which is that to be a priest means that we unite ourselves to God's redemptive work. This was the premise of Richard Stern's book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*. It's a pretty fantastic read. He's the CEO of World Vision, and he defines the hole in our gospel in regard to the Western Church as that we have a shiny veneer of faith. It looks good on the outside, but no depth of commitment. And until we fill that hole, ours is an empty religion and one that God despises.

The point of his book, and one of the things that he is perplexed about, is how we have divorced personal piety from righteous deeds and actions. He's perplexed that the church in America has the most money and resources available to it. But instead of being a blessing, it has checked out and is a self-absorbed religion with no concern for our neighbors.

I had to check myself the other day. I was heading to a Panera, and I wanted a dozen chocolate chip cookies. I didn't need a dozen chocolate chip cookies, but you know, when you crave cookies, you want to go get cookies. So I went and got cookies. And as I'm walking to the front of the restaurant, there is this lady who appears to be homeless. Now, I love those interactions. I love being able to serve, to offer water, to offer food, to offer money, and whatever it is.

But this particular day, I don't know what it was, but I looked at this woman, and all of a sudden, in my heart, I started grumbling. Because I was upset that this would be an awkward interaction because I didn't have any money. Why is she in the way? I had to check myself because that was the beginning indication that in my life, there was a divorce between personal piety and my scripture reading every morning and how I actually care and love for my neighbor. Eventually, I checked myself, and we had a good conversation. I was able to get her something. But it's something to be mindful of.

I heard something the other day that stuck with me. If we want to follow Jesus, we have to be where he's at, and sometimes that means leaving the safety of the confines of our routines and being where the poor in spirit are and where those who mourn are.

I think this text begs the question of whether I am just playing church at my job. Am I just going through the rote routines of creating programs for the sake of creating programs, or does the name and the reputation of God, his saving acts, and what he has done for humanity make my heartbeat? Does it still make me want to do something? Do I still want to be a representative, and do I still want to respond? Let's look at what Jethro does specifically as a priest of the Most High.

**After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, or Moses said, "I have become a foreigner in a foreign land"; and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, "My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh." Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the wilderness, where he was camped near the mountain of God. Jethro had sent word to him, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons." Exodus 18:2-6**

So somewhere along the line, something happens between Moses and his wife. We don't have enough evidence biblically, but there are a couple of theories. One theory is that Moses was just being responsible as the leader of his home. Knowing he was going to go to Egypt, stuff was going to pop off, and he wanted to protect his sons and his wife. Another theory is that people look at the verb and what it means by to send away. And that verb is only used in the context of divorce. Something happened, and he sent her away to go back to her father. That's another theory.

Another theory is at the last time we hear of Moses' family in Exodus 4 with his wife saving his life. He fails to circumcise his son and keep God's covenant and God was about to kill him. So she had to go in there and do the deed, and she threw the stuff at him, and it was messy, with that being the last time we heard about her. But regardless of why and what happened, what we see is that Jethro brings his family back as a gift to Moses, similar to Melchizedek. Melchizedek brings gifts, Jethro brings gifts, and this gift is the family.

What we have to ask is why would this have meant so much to Moses? Why would this be a gift to Moses? With nomadic people, family is everything. Your community, your family and you living off the land are all wrapped in one, which is hard for us to imagine. But what we see in Moses' kids is that they summarize his life experience. Names are huge in the Bible. Names can explain character or reputation.

An example is Jacob, the heel snatcher. He was a deceiver. He lived up to his name. But in this context, the names that are used summarize the experience of Moses, almost as if they are his legacy and a summary of his life and what he's been through. Before all of this even happened, there was a point in Moses' life where he didn't have anything. He had just run away from Egypt. He fought off these guys. Jethro, by his grace, invites Moses into the family and gives him his daughter.

Moses has a son and names him Gershom saying, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land." He was saying that he didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know where he was going. He had this hybrid Egyptian Hebrew background, and he didn't belong to either. He didn't know who he belonged to, and he was lost.

I find it interesting that we don't hear about his second son's birth until now. It's a little more hopeful. And that tells me that in his 40-year wilderness experience of trying to make sense of the brokenness of life, God showed him his grace. He came out of the wilderness experience understanding that God was his helper. Sure, things did not go the way he wanted them to, but as the song says, because he lives, I can face tomorrow. God was his helper. So, bringing his family back was a reminder of God's grace for Moses.

At this point, Moses is tired. All of these miraculous miracles had just occurred in Egypt. The same thing happened with Abram. Abram was in the desert and was depleted. Moses is still leading the people. You see in chapter 17, where he has the staff raised, his arms are getting tired, and he needs support. Later in this text, we see that he was working nonstop from sunup to sundown. The man is tired and so Jethro bringing his family was a refreshment to his soul. It was a reminder that in the midst of the wilderness and in the busyness of life, God is still with him. He was with him in the beginning, and he is with him now.

**Being a Priest Means Providing Blessings to Relationships Around Us**

What this tells me and what we see from Jethro is my second point that being a priest means we provide blessings to the relationships around us. Blessing is more than just the accumulation of things that puts us in a state of being blessed. I try to bless myself twice a week with Amazon, but I still do not feel blessed. Blessing biblically is the pronouncement of goodwill to an individual that has the efficacy to make them flourish. Blessing is always tied to flourishing. So, this gift to Moses was an act to help him flourish in his relationships and in his soul.

We might not be reconciling families as extreme as this, but it does force us to ask, who are the people in my sphere of influence that I can help flourish, that I can bless? It makes me even ask the question of whether I am helping people flourish or if I am taking away from their flourishing. So, we see the mission. We unite ourselves to God's redemptive work. It causes us to move and to do something. We provide blessings to the relationships around us. Now, I want to move to what it means to have the heart of a priest.

**So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent. Moses told his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the Lord had saved them.**

**Jethro was delighted to hear about all the good things the Lord had done for Israel in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians. He said, "Praise be to the Lord, who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who rescued the people from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God. Exodus 18:7-12**

This is the main text. Jethro arrives, Moses comes and meets him and chats with the in-laws, catching up and checking in with each other about what's happened. Moses is relaying to Jethro everything that the Lord has done. He's relaying to him the hardships and the struggles, and Jethro is taking this in. It says he was delighted to hear about God's saving acts and his

reputation. There is this joy, so much so that it causes Jethro to burst out into active worship, where he brings a burnt offering, and he eats a feast with the elders.

### **The Heart Of A Priest Is the Heart Of Worship**

What is the heart of worship? I think Jonathan Edwards has a lot to say about this. He was an 18th-century American preacher, and was caught in the euphoria of the great revival in the 1730s and 40s. Edwards wrote a document addressing what distinguishes true religion and true worship from emotional sentimentalism. He would argue in this document that there are many who hear about the power, holiness, and wisdom of God and about Christ and the great things that he's done for them, along with his gracious invitation for them. And yet they remain exactly as they are in life and in practice.

This might be controversial, but I think he's onto something. He says that no one is ever changed either by doctrine, hearing the word, or by preaching or teaching of another unless the affections are moved by these things. So what he's getting at is that genuine, true worship is a matter of the affections. It is the ability to acknowledge that outside of my life, whether I am struggling with sin, whether I have suffered loss, whether I've just got in a fight with my wife in the parking lot, whether things are going right, there is someone who's saving acts and reputation take me outside of myself.

There is a story outside of my story that I can adopt as my own and get into the slipstream of. Jethro exemplifies this. He is delighted to hear all the things that God has done. That is why we attend every Sunday as worshipers: because of God's saving acts and his reputation. We make that our own. We carry that story with us, and we're delighted to hear it every single Sunday.

### **Deeds Of A Priest**

So moving on to the deeds of a priest, and this is typically what Jethro is known for.

**The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening. When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?" Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek**



God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and instructions."

Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them his decrees and instructions, and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." Exodus 18:13-23

A lot of leadership talks, seminars, conferences, and churches use this model. So, let's picture the scene. It's the next day. They have this big worship moment. Jethro's on vacation and doesn't have work the next day. He says, "Let me go see what my son-in-law is doing." He follows Moses, who is working sunup to sundown, making judgments between the people. Jethro knows this is not good. So he asked him, "What is this that I see that you're doing?"

Moses' reply is pretty innocent. He says that the people have problems, they come to me, and I fix it—pretty straightforward. So Jethro gives him advice to pick some people who are worthy and who fear the Lord and delegate the small matters to them. Then Moses will take the more important ones. And Moses obeys. We can speak a lot about that, but we don't have time. He then sends Jethro on his way. This is the crux of the story.

### **Being A Priest Means Doing Deeds In Humility**

What are we to do with this? What we see in this passage is that for Jethro, being a priest means doing deeds in humility. Being an image bearer, part of God's covenant community is that our deeds are done in humility. Jethro did not come to steal the show. He didn't come to bully Moses. He didn't come to dictate

to him or stay around to try to take credit and get his face on the employee of the month wall. Jethro was a man who had power, who had influence, and was a priest in that priest-king role.

### **Being A Priest Means Knowing Your Limitations**

What does he do with that? He serves others and seeks the good for others. What that tells me is, which I think is hugely important, Jethro knows his limitations. At times, when we think of what it means to be God's representative, this is what it means. This is a priestly role. I sometimes interpret this as meaning I have to fix every problem, I have to know every answer, and I have to be everything to everybody in order to essentially be the savior of the world. We're constantly driven to be more than what we can handle. But that's not what Jethro does.

It's even interesting that in Numbers, he has this conversation with Moses. Moses is asking Jethro to stay. But he's said, "I'm going back to my own town." He knows his limitations. I remember that in a seminary in my first semester, we had this prep class to prepare for the long haul of school. There was even a book we had to read about how to read a book. It was pretty interesting. However, one of the lessons I learned that will stick with me for the rest of my life was when our seminary professor told us a story.

It was a little short story called *Leaf By Niggle* by J. R. R. Tolkien. Long story short, it's an allegorical work written by Tolkien as he was finishing *The Lord of the Rings*. It was about a painter who lived in a society that didn't value art, but he loved art. He dedicated all of his time and effort to creating and sketching out this large canvas of this tree. He obsessed over all the little details, and he started with the leaves. But the irony is that throughout the whole story, he never has enough time to finish the painting because there are always these little demands that are asked of him.

His neighbor is probably one of the most annoying characters because he needs assistance every two seconds. But the protagonist feels obligated. He feels wrong that he would rather paint, but at the same time, he wants to paint, so he reluctantly always helps his neighbor. Nigle has this trip coming up; again, it is an allegory; the trip that he has to take is death. And once this trip comes, there's no going back. It's the end, and he can't finish the painting. So, long story short, he gets to the end, and he has to take the trip and is never able to complete the painting.

The painting gets used to patch a roof. The only fragment that's left is a leaf, which was left in a museum. As he gets to the other side, he enters into this large forest with this cabin, and he realizes that this is the true realization of his vision. It was not the flawed and incomplete version of his painting, but what his painting had become was this full forest that other people could enjoy.

I think this speaks to where we are today. I remember our seminary professor looked at us and said, "You know, there's a lot of people who come through these doors and think that they're going to be the next Billy Graham. We have the drive and ambition to reach these super high unattainable goals. But what if God has just called you to the leaf? Are you satisfied with that? Are you content with that? And can you believe that in all of your efforts, God can do more with your little effort?"

I see that in Jethro. He comes and blesses relationships. He comes and blesses the community, and he walks away. It's the role of a priest to which God has called us. Deeds done in humility. This is a great reminder that if we let the wilderness do its work, we can become and have this precursor of who God has called us to be—his image bearers—his representatives in and through the world to bless relationships, to unite ourselves to God's redeeming work, and to allow that to move us to action.

All of that is great, but I want to focus on our central text today—the heart of worship. Because when we carry the heart of worship, everything else flows from that. We get outside of ourselves and enter into a story of God's saving acts in his reputation and a reminder of his undeserving grace towards us. A reminder of who he has called us to be. We are free, not just for freedom's sake, but that we may belong to the one who has redeemed us so that we can be a blessing to the world.

I want you to read this hymn as a reminder of who God has called you to be.

### **A Kingdom of Priest**

**Then you shall be my personal treasure from among all peoples, then you shall be my personal treasure for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a**

**kingdom of priests and a holy nation. to me a kingdom of priests. And he made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and might forever and ever. Amen.**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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