

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 18:13-27

To understand more about Jethro's advice to Moses for leadership delegation.

Read the Text:

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." 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. (Exodus 18:13-27, ESV)

Study the Text:

A Leadership Masterclass

The second half of Exodus 18 is one of the foremost biblical visions for Godly and wise leadership. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, sees the load that Moses carries as the prophet of Israel, and gives advice to him on how to delegate authority for lesser important issues so that he only has to intervene when absolutely necessary in order to avoid burn out. Below is a breakdown of Jethro's basic leadership advice with special attention given to key details throughout the passage.

BURNOUT

The primary concern of Jethro's advice to Moses is *burnout*. Moses' wisdom and intercession became widely sought after by the people of Israel, such that he would "judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening" (Ex. 18:13). When Jethro saw this happening, he questioned Moses: "Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" (Ex. 18:14). Jethro's question probably was not rhetorical but genuine. Being the priest of Midian (and not an Israelite who had journeyed with Moses and witnessed the miracles performed through him), he was unclear about what set Moses apart from other people. His question was likely in good faith, to try and understand the dynamics of the situation. Moses' response to Jethro gives clarity to his role as the prophet of Israel: "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; 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" (Ex. 18:15-16). It is not that Moses was a particularly wise or shrewd individual, but that he had access to God in a way that no one else did (Deut. 34:10-12).

Moses, the prophet of God, could take matters to the LORD and make judgments that were true and right. The issue that Jethro identifies is not whether Moses is a capable prophet, but whether or not he is capable of enduring such an arduous and never-ending task: “Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “What you are doing is not good. 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” (Ex. 18:17-18). Jethro sees the potential for burnout and warns Moses that the demands of his role as a prophet for the entire nation of Israel are too many, and that he cannot possibly do what needs to be done by himself.

Jethro’s Advice

This leads to Jethro’s advice, and it’s actually broken down into two categories.

PROACTIVE TEACHING

The first aspect of his advice is often overlooked. He says, first: “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, 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” (Ex. 18:19-20). Moses’ role as the prophet remains intact, with an additional task of teaching proactively the people of God “the statutes and the laws” of God. One way to minimize the number of issues that might potentially arise within a congregation of people is to instruct them on the way God would have them live from the outset. This is a proactive approach to reducing the number of potential cases over which Moses would need to mediate.

DELEGATION OF LEADERSHIP

The more prominently discussed feature of Jethro’s advice centers on the practice of delegating lesser important responsibilities to well qualified and capable people, thus reducing the workload on the top guy. In this case, Jethro tells Moses to “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.” The qualifications are diversity, that all people might be well represented. Moreover, they would need to be trustworthy and unable to “be bought.” Most importantly, they must “fear God.” The qualifications for Godly leadership are paramount to Moses’ success in his delegation of responsibilities. If Moses were to place untrustworthy and ungodly individuals into leadership, the entire nation would eventually suffer an erosion of holiness. Verses 24 through 27 indicate that Moses follows Jethro’s advice and establishes a succession of leaders that will oversee groupings of individuals as “chiefs” in order to take pressure off of Moses in the smaller matters.

An Important Detail to Consider

While the advice from Jethro has several components that are commendable, relevant, and practical for both Moses and even leaders today, there is a notable detail that should be mentioned: the advice doesn’t come from God, but from a man. While there isn’t really any reason to think that this passage is intended to be understood negatively, it is worth noting that God never tells Moses to do this. This is *Jethro’s* wisdom (Ex. 18:19). And remember, Jethro isn’t an Israelite, but a *Midianite*, and a priest, nonetheless. It would be equivalent to a Christian pastor taking leadership advice from an Imam or a Rabbi today. Is it wrong? Not necessarily, given that leadership principles are generally intended to be more practical than theological, but it would need to be qualified through several filters (e.g. “It is it biblical?”, “What does wise counsel say?”, “Does it violate any theological presuppositions?”, etc.). So how do we interpret this? There are a few details to consider.

NO COMMANDMENT FOR OR AGAINST

While the advice Jethro gives is not commanded by God, neither is there any evidence of a commandment by God for Moses to be the sole provider of wisdom in all matters throughout the entire nation of Israel. It seems as if Moses has made the decision to be the sole judge over the people.

MOSES' CHARACTER

Moses' own character also plays a pivotal role in how we understand this passage. Up to this point, Moses has been extremely careful to counsel with God over every circumstance they face. Obedience seems to be an important objective for Moses. It would make no sense, then, to assume this is no longer a prerogative for him in chapter 18.

WHAT'S THE FOCUS OF THE STORY?

We've also seen several instances where Exodus does not necessarily explicitly give details to a situation simply because those details are not the focus of the story being told at the time (think: the lack of detail between Moses and Zipporah in last week's passage, not because they were divorced, but because the emphasis of the story was on Moses and Jethro, not Moses and his wife). It's not unreasonable to assume that the same is true here. It is likely understood that Moses sought the wisdom of God before implementing this strategy. After all, all truth is God's truth and as the saying goes: "Even a blind squirrel finds a nut every now and again."

WISDOM IS CONSISTENT WITH TRUTH

Finally, Jethro's wisdom is consistent with godly wisdom. A plan that includes one man being responsible for the matters of every human being in a nation is inconsistent with how God has operated up to this point, and certainly well after this point. There are times when God gives supernatural strength to accomplish feats no normal human being is capable of, but in general, God doesn't seem to be interested in making everything run through one man, unless "that one man" is a reference to "the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

What About Now?

One takeaway is the importance of delegation. Delegation makes any organization run more smoothly while preventing burnout. Another important takeaway is the reality of burnout. If Moses, the prophet of God, can burn out, so can you. Take wise steps to avoid it. Finally, this passage expresses the importance of godliness as a characteristic for trustworthy leaders. Character qualifications matter in the kingdom!

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 18:13. What did Moses do each day? For how long?

2. Read Exodus 18:14. How did Jethro respond when he saw Moses doing this?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 18:15-16. In your own words, summarize Moses' words to Jethro.

2. Read Exodus 18:17-20. In your own words, summarize Jethro's advice to Moses.

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 18:21-22. What qualifications does Jethro recommend for the leaders that Moses selects?

2. Read Exodus 18:23. What does Jethro say will happen if Moses follows his advice?

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 18:24-26. What did Moses do?

2. Read Exodus 18:27. How does this story end? Where does Jethro go?

Discuss the Text!

Week 44 Discussion: Burnout is Real

Jethro warns Moses of the potential for burnout and then gives advice on how to delegate responsibility without abdicating his call. Talk as a group about how burnout has affected you, and what things you've had to delegate to prolong your ability to do what God has called you to do.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever experienced burnout before? Share your story with your group, if so.
2. Why is delegation so hard for some people?
3. When can delegation be counterproductive?
4. Why does character matter in the people to whom you choose to delegate responsibility?
5. What things do you need to delegate? It could be responsibilities at work, in the family, or in the ministry.
6. How does the structure of the church stand against burnout?

Takeaways:

1. Jethro warns Moses that he will suffer burnout if he keeps doing everything he's doing.
2. Jethro advises a plan of delegation to relieve Moses from having to deal with smaller issues.