

A BURDEN SHARED

SERIES: EXODUS - JOURNEY TO FREEDOM



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Exodus 18
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Exodus 18

The glory days of sculpture in Florence were thought to have faded with the death of the great Donatello in 1466.

Bertoldo di Giovanni, a pupil of Donatello, never scaled the heights of his mentor. He specialized in sculpting miniatures, but one contemporary joked, “Bertoldo is not a sculptor of miniatures; he is a miniature sculptor.” Bertoldo himself admitted, “Isn’t it a bit pathetic that from your pillow you can take in with one glance my whole lifetime of work? By any measurement it is a modest contribution.”¹

Probably not many of us become as good as we’d like to be. Many of us aspire to greatness, but greatness eludes us. Maybe the best we can do seems like only a “modest contribution.” What do we do with that?

The structure of Exodus 18 mirrors that of Exodus 17. Each chapter features two stories that relate to each other and demonstrate Moses’ growth.

What God has done is good

Exodus 18:1-9:

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.

As a much younger man, Moses fled from Egypt when he made a mess of things. In Midian, he was taken in by Jethro, also called Reuel, who gave his daughter Zipporah in marriage to him (Exodus 2). At some point after the Lord called Moses to return to Egypt to participate in the deliverance of Israel, he sent his family back to Midian for reasons the narrator does not disclose.

Moses’ two names for his sons represent a progression in his relationship with the Lord, just as the names of the place and the altar in Exodus 17 represented such a progression. The first name, Gershom, which means “A Stranger There,” commemorates his sojourning. The second name, Eliezer, which means “My God Is Help,” commemorates the Lord’s deliverance of him.

Now that the Lord has rescued Israel from Egypt, Jethro, along with Moses’ family, seeks out Moses in the wilderness and finds him and the other Israelites encamped at Mount Horeb, which narrator calls “the mountain of God,” where the Lord first appeared to Moses (Exodus 3:1) and where Moses will shortly meet with the Lord again. So eager is Moses to see Jethro that he leaves the camp and goes out to meet his father-in-law.

The theme in Exodus 18:1-9 is what the God of Israel has “done.” First, the narrator reports that Jethro had “heard of all that God had done.” Second, Moses “told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done.” Finally, Jethro “rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done.”

A sweet time

What the Lord has done, he has done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Moses and the Israelites, his people. Moreover, Moses tells Jethro, the Lord has delivered the Israelites from “all the hardship” that they had endured since their departure from Egypt. Although Jethro hears of “all the hardship” that the Israelites have endured, he takes note of “all the good” that the Lord has done for them. In fact, in the narrative, “all” that the Lord has “done” for Moses and Israel becomes “all” the “good” that he has done for them.

What Jethro had heard is confirmed by Moses, which causes Jethro, a pagan priest no less, to rejoice.

Jethro is first identified as a priest of Midian, then as Moses’ father-in-law. Jethro’s family ties, however, overwhelm his pagan ties. In Exodus 18, after once identifying Jethro as a priest of Midian, the narrator twelve times identifies him as Moses’ father-in-law. Jethro’s pagan ties have been subsumed by his tie to Moses, who worships the Lord, not pagan gods.

Jethro and Moses, having parted many years ago, meet again. They each inquire of each other’s welfare, or “peace.” Moses doesn’t sugarcoat it; he’s honest about hardship. But he sees the Lord in the hardship. Moses bows low and kisses Jethro. Jethro hears Moses and rejoices. What a sweet time!

What Jethro has seen of the Lord causes him to worship the Lord.

Jethro praises the Lord

Exodus 18:10-12:

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 not only rejoices because of what the Lord has done, he also blesses, or praises, the Lord for what he has done.

In the book of Exodus, the Lord wants everyone to “know that I am the Lord.” Jethro says, “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods,” including the gods he serves (or had served?). Jethro agrees with Moses and the Israelites, who sang, “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?” (Exodus 15:11).

Finally, Jethro worships by bringing a burnt offering, which represents full devotion to the Lord, and other sacrifices. Again, this is a pagan priest. Or, should we say, this *was* a pagan priest?

Jethro is now embraced not only by Moses but also by Aaron, Moses’ brother, and the elders of Israel as they feast together and God pulls up a chair, so to speak.

Look for God

Anyplace where even two people gather to speak of what God has done becomes the mountain of God, a place where God is palpably present. Look what Moses and Jethro do for each other. Look what we can do for each other.

Share your heart, as Moses did. Don’t sugarcoat it. If you’ve gone through or are going through hardship, be honest. Also, look for God in the hardship to see what he has done in and through it. How has God delivered you, as he delivered Moses and the Israelites? If he hasn’t yet delivered you, can you see that he’s in the process of delivering you?

Yes, we are “sojourners” on earth (1 Peter 2:10-12), as Moses was in the wilderness, but can we say, even though we’ve not yet arrived at our heavenly home, that “My God Is Help”?

Do you have someone like Jethro in your life? If not, pray for one and seek one out.

Also, can you be Jethro for someone else? Listen carefully when someone opens her heart to you. Hear the pain. Hear the joy. Help her look for God in her story. When you see God in her story, do what Jethro did: rejoice.

Ask questions, as Moses and Jethro did of each other, inquiring of each other’s welfare. Most people have a lot of stuff going on, and they’d like to share it with someone, if they only knew someone wanted to listen. If you ask a question, you’re saying you’re interested.

Yes, most people have a lot of stuff going on, but they don't understand much of the stuff. When they find words for the stuff and share those words with someone who is interested, they unlock feelings and they understand the stuff a little better.

In the small groups I lead, I will sometimes ask, "Where are you seeing God? Where are you not seeing God? Where would you like to see God?"

A word to the wise, though: when you open up, don't go on and on. Give people who are listening to you the opportunity to respond. That way, you'll keep them engaged. Moses shared with Jethro, but he left room for Jethro, who "rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done" and who said, "Blessed be the Lord."

When people share honestly with each other while looking for God, they contribute to each other's faith. On the one hand, the narrative does not disclose Moses' reaction to Jethro, but we can imagine that Jethro encouraged his faith. On the other hand, look what happens to Jethro. After hearing Moses, he declares, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods."

Life is hard, as Moses' experience affirms. God is good, as Jethro's words affirm.

Be Moses: open your heart. Be Jethro too: listen when others open their hearts.

Groundbreaking psychotherapist Hans Strupp, looking back on more than fifty years of research, came to this conclusion: "The simple incontrovertible truth, it seems to me, is that if . . . you are experiencing difficulties . . . , chances are you will feel better if you talk to someone you trust."² Moses talks to Jethro, someone he trusts.

Jethro is pleased with what the Lord has done. He is not so pleased with what Moses is doing.

What Moses is doing is not good

Exodus 18:13-18:

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.

In the first part of Exodus 18, Jethro observed "all" that the Lord had done for the people and rejoiced. Now he observes "all" that Moses is doing for the people and laments.

Why does Moses sit alone before the people all day long? In so many words, Moses says, "They expect me to, and I'm qualified to mediate their disputes." The people seemingly believe Moses is the only one with a pipeline to God, and Moses seemingly believes it also.

Whereas in part one of Exodus 18 Jethro rejoiced for all the "good" that the Lord did for the people, now he laments that what Moses is doing for the people is "not good." Jethro says that the current judicial arrangement will wear everyone out, both Moses and the people.

The Lord does something for the people, and it's good. Moses does something for the people, and it's not good. Moses is acting like God but not in a good way. The Lord is God; Moses is not. The Lord is infinite. Moses is not. The Lord "does not faint or grow weary," but if Moses keeps going this way, he will wear himself out and the people also (Isaiah 40:28). In the language of our day, Moses is a micromanager.

Jethro says the task is too "heavy" for Moses to do alone. In Exodus 17, when the Israelites engaged the Amalekites, they prevailed as Moses lifted the staff of God in his hand. However, when his hands literally became "heavy," Aaron and Hur held them up (Exodus 17:11-12). Back then, Moses discovered that he couldn't do it alone. His recent experience has prepared him to listen to Jethro's advice.

The perils of perfectionism

Do you ever do things, especially *too* many things, because of what people expect? Do you ever do things, especially *too* many things, because you think you're most qualified and no one else can do them as well as you?

Certainly, expectations and qualifications shouldn't be discounted, as if they didn't matter at all. Of course they should be considered. However, do you ever wear yourself out doing too many things because people expect you to do them and because you think you're the one most qualified to do them?

Perfectionists especially fall into this way of life. They can wear themselves out and wear everyone else out also. As the saying goes, perfectionists take great pains and they give them to others.

Maybe you need to listen to Jethro. Maybe, like Moses, you've been prepared to listen to Jethro: "What you are doing is not good."

Hardly a month goes by when I don't hear someone say, either in person or in the media, something like, "I'm not perfect," to which I feel like responding, "Did you think you could be?"

Some Moroccans deliberately make rugs with imperfections, purposefully weaving mistakes into the patterns. Why? Because they believe it is audacious, even blasphemous, to attempt perfection when only God is perfect.

Because God is so great and so awesome, even perfect, as seen in Exodus 18:1-12, we don't have to be so great and so awesome. We don't have to be perfect. Things usually aren't nearly so urgent as they appear. God will take care of things. He even turns mistakes and oversights into beautiful things. Therefore, we can stop obsessing over our mistakes and oversights.

In Genesis 1, the Lord pronounced his creation "good," but he observed that it was "not good that the man should be alone" (Genesis 1-2). Back then, the Lord created the woman. What does Jethro, who observes that the current arrangement is "not good," advise in this case?

Two-step approach

Exodus 18:19-23:

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."

Jethro suggests a simple, two-step approach.

First, he advises Moses to teach the people. If he teaches them so that they "know the way in which they must walk and what they must do," more people will be less contentious and more people will be able to resolve their own disputes. Therefore, there will be less disputes to judge.

Second, Jethro advises Moses to appoint judges who can adjudicate the small matters while leaving the great matters to Moses. In this way, the judges can make it "easier" for Moses and "bear the burden" with him.

Teach all. Appoint some. Jethro suggests that both Moses and the people will benefit if he adopts the proposal.

Moses complies

Exodus 18:24-27:

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.

Jethro had seen "all" that Moses was "doing" for the people, and it was "not good." Now, the narrator reports that Moses "did all" that Jethro proposed, and it's "good."

Pass it on

Jethro's advice can be applied in many spheres, from the family, to the workplace, to the church. If you have

expertise, don't horde it. Instead, do your best to pass it on. Teach others, and give them opportunities. Allow them to fail and learn from their failures. Allow them to do things differently from you.

"You are not able to do it alone." Nor should you even try to do it alone.

In my extended family, we have a huge celebration on Christmas Eve. No one really knows when the party started. Its origins are somewhat mythical. But everyone knows it's important. It's done wonders for keeping our diverse family together. When I was growing up, my parents hosted the party. Eventually, it rotated year to year among four families.

I watched my parents host the party. I saw its importance. Eventually, I knew I had to step up. So the last few years, Karen and I have hosted the party. There's no way I can do it the way my mother did. She was the consummate hostess. But there is something I do a little differently.

Before dinner, I give a little speech on the importance of the party. I tell the five teenagers in the family about the tradition and that one day you'll be the ones to carry it on. And, just before praying, I share the gospel. My parents didn't do it that way.

When I was an intern at Cole Community Church in Boise, Idaho, two pastors entrusted me with two different ministries. The junior high pastor took a break for four months and gave the ministry, which included some one hundred and fifty kids, to me. When I signed up for a summer mission trip to Bulgaria, another pastor asked me to lead it. Each pastor believed in me and trusted me. And each act of trust impacted my confidence. I learned much, not least from my failures, which were allowed.

In Bulgaria, one of the team members didn't appreciate my leadership and he let me know about it. I couldn't make him happy no matter what I did. If I had been more experienced, I would have handled it better. But I learned. Getting experience is part of learning.

Equip the saints

Jethro's approach is echoed by the apostle Paul in the New Testament: "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry . . ." (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Paul's words are part of this church's DNA. We endeavor to equip the saints—that is, the believers in this church—especially by teaching the Scriptures, to serve the Lord. Ministry is a burden shared. David Roper, a former pastor of this church and one of my mentors, wrote a book on pastoral ministry and titled it simply *A Burden Shared*.

William Still served as pastor of the same church in Scotland for fifty-two years, all the way until his eighty-sixth birthday. He preached through the entire Bible several times. Still's little book, "*The Work of the Pastor*," has influenced the way I see my calling as a pastor. By the way, he remained single his whole life. When I first read the book, I was a single pastor. In the book, first published in 1966, Still writes:

My pastoral work of personal dealing, considerable though it is, has been greatly reduced through the years because the building up of men's faith, by the ministry of the word of God, solves so much in their lives and enables those who receive it and seek to live by it to understand and solve so much in other lives that . . . they become pastors themselves. Indeed, one of the features of such a radical and total ministry of the word is that it thrusts so many into spiritual and social work that I can hardly keep a congregation together on account of their scattering throughout the land and throughout the earth.

Encouraging pastors to preach the Scriptures, Still writes:

You will then find that in a comparatively small fellowship there will emerge a surprising range and variety of working gifts of the Spirit. From time to time I try to count how many of our folk are engaged in medical, nursing, and psychiatric work; social welfare work among babies, children, delinquents, and maladjusted adolescents; in geriatrics, health visiting, serving as Christians in law, civil service, teaching lecturing, etc.; applying their skills as Christians in the world with a witness to give and with a task to do; but there are so many that I cannot count them, and I am not going to. The true statistics are kept "upstairs," where the computers . . . are quite accurate, even though they do not publish their figures down here.³

Early on when I was trying to sort myself out as a pastor at PBC, I visited Brian Morgan, a pastor at PBC Cupertino, who invited me to his men's group. One of the men was all set to lead a Bible study, but another man was really struggling, so he shared, a few of the men commented and prayed, and they never got to the Bible study. Brian hardly said a word.

I asked him about it later. He said, “Some of these men are better shepherds than I am, so sometimes I stay in the background.”

Last Sunday we prayed for the medical team we’re sending to India. We’ve been sending teams there for about twenty years now. For the last few years, Atul and Ayrin have led the trip. Pastors and elders have gone on the trip, but not once has the trip been led by a pastor or elder.

Next Sunday we’re inviting some teenagers to help lead us in our worship services. We want them to learn to serve, even lead, the entire congregation. I have no doubt we’ll be blessed.

Like a beam of light

Jesus, of course, was the greatest expert of all. Nevertheless, he did what Jethro advised Moses to do. He taught everyone, in large settings, and he appointed some. He sent his disciples out to do what he did: preach and cast out demons (Mark 3:14-15, 6:7-13). Not surprisingly, they didn’t preach or cast out demons as well as he did (Mark 9:17-18). Even when they did it well, their attitude needed correcting (Luke 10:17-20).

Not deterred, Jesus, after he was raised from the dead, commissioned the disciples, famously telling them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus didn’t wear himself out. Nor did he wear others out.

The disciples of Jesus, who became his apostles, learned from him to preach and cast out demons but also to make disciples and commission them and trust them.

When a dispute arose about distributions to widows, the twelve apostles summoned the full number of Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” Then they trusted the full number of followers to “pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty,” much like Jethro instructed Moses to appoint men of character. The congregation selected seven men, and then the apostles prayed for them and laid hands on them.

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us what happened next: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:1-7).

Philip Yancey comments:

Jesus left few traces of himself on earth. He wrote no books or even pamphlets. A wanderer, he left no home or even belongings that could be enshrined in a museum. He did not marry, settle down, and begin a dynasty. We would, in fact, know nothing about him except for the traces he left in human beings. That was his design. The law and the prophets had focused like a beam of light on the one who was to come, and now that light, as if hitting a prism, would fracture and shoot out in a human spectrum of waves and colors.⁴

The human spectrum of waves and colors: that’s us!

Because God is perfect, we don’t have to be. Therefore, involve others and trust God to work through them.

Several years ago, when John Talbert was a pastor at Westgate Church, we had him speak at our men’s retreat. He told us that he had reached the point in his life where he realized, “I’m just average.” He spoke to the Lord about it and he felt the Lord saying to him something like, “Average. Oh, I can use you.”

John then started a ministry, Beautiful Day, that ended up involving thousands of people and blessing thousands more.

Last words

Bertoldo di Giovanni, the pupil of the great Donatello, was not considered a major artist. However, in his dying days, Lorenzo de’ Medici, the de-facto ruler of the Florentine Republic, asked him to teach sculpting to aspiring artists.

At the end of his life, Bertoldo taught some of the most significant sculptors of their time, including Baccio da Montelupo, Giovanni Francesco Rustici, and Jacopo Sansovino—and one other aspiring artist you might have heard of: Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, commonly known simply as Michelangelo.

The glory days of sculpture in Florence hadn’t passed with the death of Donatello. In fact, they hadn’t reached their peak.

Bertoldo spoke his last words to his young pupil.

“Michelangelo,” he said, “you are my heir, as I was Donatello’s.”

“Yes, Bertoldo,” Michelangelo answered. “And I am proud.”⁵

Endnotes

1. Irving Stone, *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 61, 105, 111, 178-9.
2. Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1997), 192.
3. William Still, *The Work of the Pastor* (1984), 13-14.
4. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 228.
5. Stone, 61, 105, 111, 178-9.