

Message #33

Exodus 18:1-12

Some of the most difficult people to reach with the truth of God are people dedicated to their religion and people who are your relatives. People get proud of their religion and some will actually cling to their church, or denomination or religion more than to the Word of God.

When it comes to relatives, almost all of us have some who are not believers and when you try to talk with them about it, sometimes they look at you as if their spiritual life is none of your business. It is very difficult to reach relatives who are all caught up in their religion and it is very unusual when someone actually responds to the truth of God. But it can happen and this is the story of a time when it did happen.

This is the story of how a false religious leader, who was a priest in a false religion, ends up believing in the true God of the Bible. This is also the story of how a father-in-law, who was caught up in a false religion, comes to true faith.

BECAUSE OF HEARING ABOUT THE TRUTH OF GOD, THE FATHER-IN-LAW OF MOSES, AND A PRIEST IN A FALSE RELIGION, CAME TO BELIEVE IN THE TRUE GOD OF THE BIBLE.

It is so interesting that at the end of chapter 17, we see God giving a great sovereign victory in destroying the Amalekites and now in chapter 18, we see God saving a Midianite. The power of God can destroy and the power of God can save. It is a person's response to the truth of God that plays a determinate role in what God will do.

The Amalekites wanted to fight the Israelites, knowing what God had done to the Egyptians, and God destroyed them. A Midianite priest wanted to unite with the Israelites, knowing what God had done to the Egyptians, and God saved him.

There are four historical facts brought out in this text:

HISTORICAL FACT #1 – What Jethro heard. 18:1

News travels. Dramatic news spreads. What had happened to the Egyptians spread like a wildfire all over the known world. People of the city were talking about it. Those in caravans were talking about it. Various messengers and business people and eye witnesses were talking about it. There had never been anything like this and we may be certain that what had happened in Egypt was the talk and gossip of the whole world.

Now this news was all connected to Moses, and since Moses had a wife and two sons and a father-in-law, they naturally would be interested to hear anything connected to him. If we use a little imaginative speculation, we may assume that when some traveler came by Jethro's house, he must have asked if he had heard anything about Moses and the Israelites.

The things they would have heard does boggle the mind. **Verse 1** says that they “heard of all that God had done for Moses and His people.” They listened to the stories of the plagues and then the dramatic story of the parting of the Red Sea and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

Just imagine listening to this. **The first point to observe here is that one of the things that starts causing people caught up in false religion to think is the truth about God.** The Apostle Paul said, “faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Whenever the truth of God is communicated, it does have the power to deliver and save.

When we first moved to Idaho, a long time missionary out in Mormon country, Ira Ransom, said one of the best things you can do when talking with a Mormon is tell them about your relationship with Jesus Christ and what you have seen God do. He said Mormons do not have a relationship with Jesus Christ and they have never seen God really do anything and your testimony speaks volumes to them.

That is what was happening to Jethro. He was hearing truth about all God was doing. He was listening to the stories of how God had used Moses and it affected him.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 – What Jethro did . 18:2-6

Now Jethro had heard that Moses and Israel were in the wilderness at Mt. Sinai and he was very much aware of that area. When Moses was shepherding Jethro’s sheep, Moses had actually taken the sheep into this area so obviously Jethro knew about it (Ex. 3:1). There were two main actions that Jethro took:

Action #1 - Jethro took Moses’ wife and sons to Moses in the wilderness. 18:2-5

Now we may recall that when Moses received his call from God to go deliver Israel, Moses sent Zipporah and the boys back to her father and did not take her with him.

Actually there is a major theological debate over whether or not Moses divorced her. We may recall that initially Moses took Zipporah and the boys with him (Ex. 4:20), but because of his wife’s temper outburst (Ex. 4:25-26), he apparently sent her back to her father.

Some have concluded based on the verb “sent her away” (**Ex. 18:2**) that Moses divorced her and sent her on her way. We do know from Numbers 12:1 that Moses married a Cushite woman and we may also observe from **Exodus 18:3** that the two sons are identified as “her sons,” not “his sons.”

On the other hand, others argue that this was not a divorce but a temporary separation. Those who argue this way say that the word “sent away” (shilluh) is not the typical word used for divorce (keri tut). They also say that having more than one wife was not uncommon in this time and was not illegal. Also, it is pointed out that the boys are called “his sons” in **verse 5** and Zipporah is called “his wife” in **verse 5**.

This debate on this issue, I am sure, will continue to go on and on and probably it is best just to leave the details of this matter to God.

But the thing we see here is that Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah and her two sons. The first was "Gershom" (**verse 3**), which means "live in a foreign land as an alien," which Moses literally did. The second son, "Eliezer" (**verse 4**), means "God of help."

When Jethro learned that Moses and the Egyptians were camped at Sinai, "the mount of God," he knew the area well and decided to take his daughter and her two sons to meet Moses. He wanted to be connected to Moses and Moses' God and he also wanted his daughter and her sons to be connected as well.

Action #2 - Jethro sent word to Moses that he was coming. **18:6**

It is clear that Jethro is not presumptuous here. He recognized that Moses had become a very powerful man of God and he did not just walk in unannounced. He sent word to Moses that he and his daughter were arriving with the two boys.

In doing this, he gave Moses an opportunity to think through what he would do. When you have been hearing about what God has done with Moses—plagues, killing first-born, parting sea, providing water and food—you don't want to go into this man's presence lightly. Even though Jethro was older, he sent word to Moses to let him know he was on his way.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 – What Moses did. **18:7-8**

When Moses learned about this he responded in two ways:

Response #1 - Moses went out to meet his father-in-law. **18:7**

It is interesting that there is no further mention of Zipporah or the two sons except for genealogical references. There is no mention here of what happened between Moses and Zipporah. What we learn here is what happened between Moses and Jethro.

Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and he bowed down and kissed him and they asked about each other's welfare and went into the tent.

Response #2 - Moses told his father-in-law all God had done for him and Israel. **18:8**

The first thing Moses talks about is all God had done for Israel. He told him what God had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians and he told him about how God provided for them in difficult times on the journey.

Now this is not some delusional fairytale that Moses is telling Jethro. Sometimes you get with some people who want you to think they have seen God do all kinds of things, which isn't true.

They talk and talk and talk and invent things that are not even real.

So what Jethro would learn is that when you are in a relationship with this God, His hand of protection and provision is on you.

HISTORICAL FACT #4 – How Jethro responded . **18:9-12**

Now keep in mind that Jethro is a Midianite priest who has never had a relationship with the true God of the Bible. It is clear from his response that he does not try to defend his false religion in any way, shape or form. Moses had told the truth and God used it.

Response #1 - Jethro rejoiced over what God had done. **18:9**

Jethro was not jealous about what God had done, he delighted in it. God had been good to Israel and had completely delivered her from the hand of the Egyptians. Now notice carefully that he rejoiced over “all the goodness which the LORD had done.” So his rejoicing is based on understanding the truth and facts about God.

It seems from **verse 11** that Jethro had been questioning things about God. There were all kinds of “gods” in existence, but the historical facts pointed to one true, powerful God and Jethro rejoiced when he heard about this God.

Response #2 - Jethro praised God for delivering Moses and the Israelites. **18:10**

Now the praise that Jethro offers to God is one that acknowledges that Moses and Israel have been blessed by God. Jethro is not praising God because God has blessed him; he is praising God because God has blessed Moses and Israel. He delivered them from Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

God had literally delivered Moses and Israel from a world superpower. God had not done that for Jethro, who was a Midianite, or for any other people and Jethro is praising God for this great deliverance.

When you talk with most people caught up in false religion, they are proud and if you tell the truth, they will, at times, try to outdo you. Jethro wants a relationship with the true God and he is not trying to outdo Moses in any way.

Response #3 - Jethro knew God proved to be greater than all gods. **18:11**

Jethro is coming to terms with the theological truth about God. There is only one God and He is Israel’s God. The Egyptians had their deities and the Midianites had their deities of which Jethro was a priest. But he came to understand that there is only one God who is exalted above all and that is the God of Israel.

Response #4 - Jethro made a sacrifice for God. **18:12**

This is an amazing moment in Jethro's life. He comes to the point where he turns his back on his false religion and gets into a relationship with God.

(Step #1) - A proper relationship with God starts with a shed blood offering and sacrifice.
18:12a

Jethro started by offering a sacrifice and burnt offering to God. The burnt offering was understood as an offering that atoned for sins and appealed to God for forgiveness. God's people knew something about the significance of the burnt offering because this had been done clear back in the days of Abraham (Gen. 22).

Certainly this offering was Jethro's way of acknowledging that there needed to be some substitutionary sin offering in order to have a relationship with this true God.

(Step #2) - A proper relationship with God includes fellowship with the leaders of God.
18:12b

This was an important moment for Jethro, because this act showed him that the Jewish religious leaders welcomed him into fellowship with them. Notice at the end of **verse 12**, it says this was done "before God."

Now the Midianites were typically a group of people who were anti-the true God and anti-Israel. But what this text shows is that even those religious leaders who have been involved in false religion may respond to truth and experience God's grace.