

Exodus 18
Psalm 72
1 Timothy 5

“Elders and Judges”

April 23, 2017

We often speak of Exodus 18 as the place where elders were first appointed.
But of course, we have seen elders all through the first part of Exodus.
Moses and Aaron went to the *elders* at the end of chapter 4,
when they first told Israel of the coming salvation.
Likewise, we see the elders of Israel here in chapter 18
before the appointment of chiefs and judges.

This is because the term “elder” can be used in two different ways.
In Exodus 4 and 18, “elder” is used to speak of the “older men of the community.”
Perhaps it would be best to call them “tribal elders.”

Here in Exodus 18, the tribal elders do not have a role in deciding cases.
And when you listen to Jethro's advice,
Jethro does not tell Moses simply to give the tribal elders more authority.
Certainly I would imagine that *many* of the tribal elders
would have been selected as chiefs and heads in Exodus 18 –
but the criteria that Jethro uses focuses more on *character*.

In Numbers 11, we will hear Moses complain that the burden of carrying Israel is too great.
But his objection *there* is not that it is too time-consuming to do all the judging
(Jethro's advice has taken care of that!),
rather, Moses' complaint is that *he alone* is speaking the word of the LORD.
Indeed, in Exodus 18, Jethro had said:
“you shall make them know the way in which they must walk...”
But in Numbers 11, Moses says, I can't do this alone!!

And so in Numbers 11:16, the LORD said to Moses,
“Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel,
whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them,
and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.
And I will come down and talk with you there.
And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them,
and they shall bear the burden of the people with you,
so that you may not bear it yourself alone.”

And when the Spirit of the LORD came upon the 70 elders,
they prophesied.
They *spoke* the word of the LORD.

Of course, verse 25 says that “the did not continue doing it.”
The day had not yet come when “all of the LORD's people were prophets” -
that would await the Day of Pentecost,
when “the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” (v29)

So in Exodus 18 and Numbers 11 we see two different uses of the word elder:
one refers simply to the “older men” -
while the other refers to an office – those who share in the government of God's people.

We'll see the same thing in our NT reading as well.

Our Psalm of response applies the principles of Exodus 18 to the King.
The King is called to defend the cause the of the poor –
to establish righteousness and bring the blessing of Abraham to the nations.

Sing Psalm 72
1 Timothy 5

You can see here the same distinction in Paul between the two different uses of the word “elder.”
The word “older man” in verse 1 is the same Greek word as the word “elder” in verse 17.
But they plainly refer to two different groups of people.

In verses 1-2, Paul contrasts older men, younger men, older women, younger women
as the four basic groups of people in the church.

But then in verse 17, Paul refers to “the elders who rule well,”
speaking of those who govern and also of those who preach.

You also see here the sort of honor that Moses showed to Jethro:
Paul urges Timothy to show honor to the older men and older women – as fathers and mothers –
and indeed to treat younger men and women as brothers and sisters.
Because that is where our story starts in Exodus 18 –
with Moses, the great hero of the Exodus,
showing honor to a foreign priest!

1. Jethro, the Priest (18:1-12)

a. The Story of Salvation (v1-9)

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[a] in a foreign land”), 4 and the name of the other, Eliezer[b] (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,[c] 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.

Notice how the story slows down!

The whole story of the battle with Amalek took six verses -

and focused entirely on Moses' hands!
Now we read six verses that focus on Jethro's approach!

Ziporah and the boys had left Midian to go back to Egypt with Moses,
but at some point, Moses had sent them back
(probably for their safety).

There are no accidents in Scripture.
There are no throw-away comments.
God has put everything here for a reason.

What do you notice about these opening verses?
Did you hear how *ordinary* they are?
“And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.”
Here we are in the midst of the greatest events in world history,
and the story pauses to tell us that Moses and Jethro made small talk
and inquired about each other's health and well-being.

You *always* have time to be kind and polite.
Those little things that Mrs. Mould and Mrs. Rowley do and teach –
they are *important* to maintaining a good and pleasant community.

Think about it:
Here is Moses – the great Moses, the one of whom the LORD said,
“I will make you *God* to Pharaoh,”
bowing before a desert nomad!
This is his father-in-law.
And in the ancient world, this is how you show honor to your father-in-law.
I don't care who you are!
You still give honor to those to whom honor is due.

It would have been so easy for Moses to say,
“I am the deliverer of Israel –
I am now greater than Jethro – therefore he should bow to me!”
Or at least, “I am his equal – I will not bow!”

When it comes to “who is the greatest man in the OT,”
you could have a debate between Abraham and Moses.
All Israel – for all generations – was supposed to obey Moses.
Moses may have been *God* to Pharaoh.
But Moses himself bowed to Jethro – because Moses understood
that no matter who he was to Pharaoh,
to Jethro, he was “son.”
And a son bows to his father.
If you love his daughter, you will honor the one who begat her –
as well as the one who bore her!

This is a good reminder to us all that we have a complex web of relationships!

For instance, while I am your pastor –
many of you are *my elders* in terms of age.

So, as Paul says to Timothy:

“Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father,
younger men as brothers,
older women as mothers,
younger women as sisters, in all purity.”

The church is the family of Jesus – and so we need to honor one another in that way.

I am reminded of the story that the Venerable Bede tells
of the time that Pope Gregory sent a monk named Augustine to Briton around the year 600
to convince the British church to submit to Rome.

The British clergy were wavering,
and so they asked an old hermit whether they should trust the Romans.

The hermit replied,

“The Lord said: Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,
for I am meek and lowly of heart.

If this Augustine is meek and lowly of heart,
it is to be supposed that he himself bears the yoke of Christ
and is offering it to you to bear;

but if he is harsh and proud,

it follows that he is not from God and we have no need to regard his words.”

When they asked, “how shall we know?” He replied,

“if he rises on your approach,

you will know that he is a servant of Christ and will listen to him obediently,
but if he despises you and is not willing to rise...

you should despise him in return.”

When the British delegation approached the Augustine, he remain seated –
and thus they refused to listen to him!

The irony of that story is that Augustine had been sent by Pope Gregory the Great –
the author of the “Book of Pastoral Rule.”

In that book, Gregory urges bishops to show *honor* to the people and *not* to exalt themselves.

If Augustine had learned from Gregory, he would have conducted himself differently!

Because no matter who you are – even if you are as great as Moses –

there will always be those to whom you must bow – to whom you must show honor.

But then in verses 8-9 we get to the heart of the matter.

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.

Moses recites the story of the Exodus – the crossing of the Red Sea –

the bread from heaven, the water from the rock, and the defeat of the Amalekites.

And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel.

It's not entirely clear how much Jethro knew about Yahweh prior to his meeting Moses.
In chapter two he was simply called "the priest of Midian"

What is clear is that Jethro responds with faith, hope, and love to the word of the LORD.

The Midianites were close relations and neighbors with the Amalekites.

And so we see a very clear contrast between these two responses to the gospel.

Amalek was the first to fight against Israel.

The priest of Midian hears and believes and rejoices in the God of Abraham.

And again we see the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham,
that all nations would be blessed through his seed.

And so Jethro said:

b. Worship: Eating Bread before God (v10-12)

10 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."

Some have referred to this as the "conversion" of Jethro.

"Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods"

(In other words – I wasn't sure before, but *now* I know).

But this is a fairly common Hebrew construction

which often means "Now we have the evidence for what we previously believed."

The point of the text is that Jethro responds to the good news with faith.

It really doesn't matter whether this is the first time or the hundredth time.

And the same is true for you!

How will you respond to the gospel?

The question is not whether you believed back then.

The question is whether you believe *today*.

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts –

like Pharaoh did in Egypt –

like Israel did in the wilderness.

Today, as you hear the good news of the gospel proclaimed,

will you believe the good news?

Will you worship the LORD and bless his holy name?

And verse 12 tells us what you do when you respond to the gospel by faith:

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.

When you respond to the gospel by faith,
you eat bread before God.

Some people have wondered, “Where did they get bread?”
After all, the people were starving – so God gave them manna!
But that does not mean that they had *no* bread.
It means that they did not have *enough* bread for everyone.

The story of salvation results in God's people breaking bread together.
Now, when you hear “brought a burnt offering and sacrifices”
this refers to a very common practice in the scriptures.
In the burnt offering, you burn the whole animal in the fire.
The point of the burnt offering is to make clear that you are here to worship *this* God.
You take an *expensive* animal and you burn the whole thing in the fire.

But if you think about the liturgy of the Old Testament,
at the end of the burnt offering, you are still at the beginning of the service –
maybe around the Confession of Sin –
the acknowledgment that we are helpless and we need a substitute
to die in our place.

But the liturgy of the Old Testament always moves from the burnt offering
to the peace offering – the sacrifice.

The sacrifices (or the peace offerings) include three parts:
the fat, the liver, and the kidneys is burned in the fire –
so God partakes of part of the sacrifice;
then the priest receives a choice portion –
since we need a priest to intercede with God for us;
and then the people partake of the rest of the sacrifice.

Notice the picture:
God, the mediator, and the people all partake of the sacrifice together.
And thus, there is *peace* with God through the sacrifice,
because in the covenant meal, we all partake of the sacrifice together.

When people proclaim the mighty deeds of God in history,
the result is that people worship the Lord!
And then, when people worship the Lord,
we begin to figure out how to live together in community.

And that's what we see in the second half of chapter 18.

2. Jethro's Advice: Appoint Elders to Judge (18:13-27)

a. “You Are Wearing Yourselves Out!” The Need for Elders (v13-23)

13 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.”

In verses 13-16 we see the situation:

Moses is serving as the sole judge of Israel.
Every dispute comes to Moses.
Moses is the one who has direct access to God,
so they come to Moses to resolve their disputes.

In one sense, you can understand why!

If you knew that you could get *God's* answer to your dispute – why not?!

And so Moses is teaching them God's statutes and laws.

But Jethro says, This is crazy!

Think back to chapter 2.

In chapter 2, Moses had come to the aid of Jethro's daughters while they were shepherding.

Now Jethro returns the favor!

And he comes to the aid of Moses while he is shepherding God's people.

Both incidents are accompanied by a meal –
and both incidents result in improved shepherding!

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.

This is fascinating.

The institution of judges/elders in Israel does not come directly from God!
It comes from the sanctified common sense of Jethro.

And that too is important for us to understand.

There are some circumstances regarding worship and government
which are to be ordered by the light of nature and common prudence.

And we can expect to find wisdom from a variety of sources.

Of course, the rules of God's word must *always* be followed –

but that does not mean that the sanctified common sense of the nations can be ignored!

Several Reformed theologians of the 16th and 17th centuries

said that *Roman law* was a better guide for organizing European societies
than the Law of Moses!

Over the next few weeks, we'll see why:

the Law of Moses was given to Israel for a particular time in redemptive history.

The principles remain true for all ages,

but the particular details were given for a particular situation.

And here at the beginning of the Law of Moses,

just before we get to the Ten Commandments,
we discover that God expects even Moses to listen to this outsider
to help him organize Israelite society!

Listen to how Jethro says this:

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.”

Jethro recognizes that Moses holds a unique position:

Moses is tasked with representing the people before God,
as well as with teaching them the statutes and laws of God.

And Jethro recognizes the goal of God's law:

“this people will go to their place in peace.”

There is a goal – an end – a future – in view.

History is going somewhere.

And the law is designed to teach Israel how to live together in peace
as they walk toward that future.

Jethro understands the importance of training up a community of wise counselors.

It's not enough to have one man who knows God's word.

You need a community of wise counselors who will be able to handle the ordinary work
of bearing the burden of dealing with conflict among the people of God.

I want you to think about this.

First, we should *expect* there to be conflict among the people of God!

We should not be surprised when Christians have disputes with each other.

There will be conflict.

The question is how will we resolve conflict?

Will we grumble and gossip?

Or will we bring our disputes to those who are able to resolve them?

And then, will we repent when we realize that we have been in the wrong?

(And will we forgive those who have wronged us?)

We need to develop a community of wise counselors

who are able to resolve disputes and help make peace.

Second, the elders (here the term used is “chiefs”)

are supposed to be responsible for handling “small matters” -

while the “great matters” are brought to Moses for adjudication.

How do you know the difference?

Well, for one, if you don't know what to do with the matter,
then it's probably one of the "great matters."
On the other hand, if you pass judgment in the case,
and both parties agree with your judgment,
then it's probably one of the "small matters."
But if you pass judgment in the case,
and there are lots of people who are saying, "No, that's not right,"
then you should probably take it to the next higher judge on appeal.

(And thus the principle of appellate courts was established!)

If you think about how Jethro's advice works,
it is very similar to the Presbyterian system of government.
Each ruling elder has his shepherding group – his "district" -
with around ten families in it.
Ordinarily, congregations have around 50 families –
with one pastor –
and larger congregations will have multiple pastors,
because there is no way that one pastor
can handle much more than 50 families.
And then a presbytery will have 10-20 churches –
around a thousand families.

(Obviously, if you think about the analogy to Presbyterianism,
these are *very* round numbers.)

If there is an elder – a "chief" - for every ten families,
then that means that this man is expected to really know these ten families.
If there are disputes within his group, he should be able to adjudicate them,
but if there is a dispute between someone in his group and someone in another group,
then the two chiefs – the two elders – should work on it together.

And that's the way a lot of disputes between Christians are handled.
Most matters never make it to the session – or the presbytery.
Most matters are "small matters" -
and they are resolved through wise counsel and mediation.

We also see that Jethro does *not* say that Moses should simply appoint the "elders of the people"
as the judges.

This is not merely a matter of seniority!
Eldership in the people of God is fundamentally about life and character:
as Jethro puts it:
"able men from all the people, men who fear God,
who are trustworthy and hate a bribe."

Think about Paul's list in 1 Timothy 3:2-5

“an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,
sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,
not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.
He must manage his own household well,
with all dignity keeping his children submissive,
for if someone does not know how to manage his own household,
how will he care for God's church?”

This is merely an expansion of Jethro's list!

“able men from all the people, men who fear God,
who are trustworthy and hate a bribe.”

b. The Origin of Presbyterianism (v24-27)

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.

The text does not tell us exactly how the chiefs were selected.

It's not clear how well Moses would have known everyone in all of Israel,
so how he would have known who to appoint is something of a mystery –
but in Acts 6, when the apostles ordain the Seven,
they ask the church to nominate them.

That's why we follow this hybrid approach:
the people nominate candidates,
then the elders train and examine them,
and those who are qualified then must be elected by the people,
and then ordained by the elders.

We have just scheduled a congregational meeting for Thursday, June 8,
in order to vote on two elder candidates, and five deacon candidates.

So as you think about these men,
think about the qualifications that Jethro gives:

Able men.

Are they competent.

Competent in what?

Two things:

do they know the word of God?

And do they know the human heart?

Are they able to take the word of God and apply it to the situations people face?

Knowing Bible content is important –
and there has to be *some* knowledge of the scriptures! -

but the competence that is required of elders (and deacons)
is to apply the word of God wisely in dealing with conflict.

And notice that they are described as “able men from all the people.”

Not just “Moses' best friends.”

The elders – the chiefs of the people – must be from *all the people*.

There are twelve tribes of Israel.

The elders must come from every tribe.

What if the tribe of Issachar just doesn't have very many able men?

Then you take the best they have.

“Ability” is a relative thing!

I have seen churches fail and falter because pastors refused to ordain competent men.

I will grant that these men would not have made “great” elders.

Indeed, these men might never have been elders in a bigger church –
in an older church – in a wiser church.

But Jethro is convinced that there are “able men” everywhere in Israel.

Not necessarily “excellent men” - “superb men” - “heroes and champions!”

We don't need those.

We need “able men” - men who are *able* to take the word of God

and apply it to the situations they face

in judging disputes between the people of God.

Look for *able* men.

But second, look for men who fear God.

Each of these qualifications is a non-negotiable standard.

Look for men who fear God.

They are more concerned with what God thinks of them -
than with what others think of them.

If you do not fear God, then you will fear something (or someone) else.

Fear of man is one of the primary alternatives!

If an elder – if a judge – is always afraid of what others think,

then his judgment will always be trying to curry favor with man.

Or, it can do the opposite!

Fear of man can *also* result in a proud, isolating stance:

“I don't need them!”

Think of our friend, Augustine of Canterbury –

the one sent by Gregory the Great to the Britons –

the one who refused to rise – and thereby alienated the English church.

That was fear of man at work.

He wanted to prove that he was Someone Important.

So he did not humble himself and follow the way of the cross.

At least in that moment, he did not fear God.

You want elders who fear God – and therefore are not afraid to tell you what you need to hear.

And finally, you want men who are trustworthy and hate a bribe.

They hate dishonest gain – which Paul uses in his list of qualifications for deacon:

“deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued,

not addicted to much wine,

not greedy for dishonest gain.” (1 Tim. 3:8)

You want trustworthy men.

Men you can trust with important things –

because you can also trust them with little things.

It's why we start our deacon interns with little things –

coming to training meetings, doing small projects for the deacons, etc.

If they are to be entrusted with big things,

then they need to start by doing the little things –

and doing the little things well.