

## The God Who Provides (Part 6 of 6)

### Available and Teachable: Two Indispensable Qualities for God-Centered, Gospel-Driven People

Exodus 18

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*"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. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." 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. The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. 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?" And Moses said to his father-in-law, "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." 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. 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. 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. 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. 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." So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 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. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country." (Exodus 18:10–27, ESV)*

The God Who Hears. The God Who Delivers. The God Who Provides. Since the beginning of our study of Exodus, we have seen the way God has revealed Himself to His people. The book of Exodus is a theological treatise about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Through each section we learn something new about God.

Next week will begin a four-week look at the commands of God. Moses will ascend to the top of Mt. Sinai, and God will give Moses and His people specific laws which are designed to capture the

heart of what God wants for His people. Having redeemed His people, God will instruct them in how they are to live. We will learn about the God who commands.

From the beginning I've tried to make it clear that this book is about God. I think that has become fairly obvious. There is another aspect of Exodus which is not as important as the focus on God but which is a sub-plot nonetheless. Part of the message of Exodus is the story of God's work *through* Moses. In other words, an important feature of Exodus is the lessons that God teaches through the life of Moses. He is certainly not a perfect man, but he and Elijah are regarded as God's premier prophets.

So part of the beauty of this book is that we see the work of God *in* and *through* the life of a real human being. And through *his* experience of God we are able to learn how *we* should walk. 1 Corinthians tells us that we have Old Testament stories "as examples for us" (1 Cor. 10:6).

What we find in Exodus 18 is a story about Moses' interaction with his father-in-law Jethro. And we see Moses, who is available and teachable. He doesn't waste the story of God's work in his life, and he doesn't let his position make him unteachable. So let's look at how these two God-centered qualities are demonstrated in his life, and then let's think about the implications for us.

### **Available: Ready for God's Mission**

Our text gives us a window into an important family moment for Moses. We are reintroduced to his father-in-law, Jethro, who is called a priest of Midian (v 1). Let me remind you who this man is. After Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster, he had to flee for his life. As a member of Pharaoh's household, the act of aiding an Israelite would have been seen as a fomenting a rebellion. Therefore, Moses fled into the wilderness of Midian, where he came upon a well. And it was at this well that Moses came to the rescue of Jethro's daughters who were being harassed by the local shepherds (remember the video: "Stranger is wise and strong"). Moses was welcomed into this family, married Zipporah, bore a son named Gershom, and became a shepherd for his father-in-law (Exodus 2:16-3:1).

While tending sheep for Jethro, Moses encountered the burning bush, where God spoke with him and commissioned him for the task of delivering the people of Israel from slavery (Exodus 3). And after Moses received this calling, he asked permission from his father-in-law to leave the family. Jethro blessed Moses' mission, and Moses left for Egypt with his new family (Exodus 4).

Now it is important for you to know that Jethro was not a believer in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, he was a secular Midianite priest. He was a man of influence and stature within his people, but he was not a follower of Yahweh.

This is important because of what we read in verse one:

*"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." (Exodus 18:1, ESV)*

Word had traveled about what had happened to Israel. Remember, this was part of God's goal in the first place. God raised up Pharaoh and delivered His people so that His name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:16). And apparently people had heard about God's deliverance of Israel. Jethro was among those who had heard this amazing news.

Verses 2-6 tells us that Jethro was coming, with Moses' wife Zipporah and their sons, to see Moses. Apparently Moses had previously sent them back home, and we can assume it was for their own safety.<sup>1</sup> We also see that Moses gave us the meaning of his son's names, which have historic significance for him. Gershom meant "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" and Eliezer meant "My God is help." However Moses added what he meant: "The God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." Finally, we learn that Moses was camped at the mountain of God, the place where God had met him in the burning bush and where God will give His Law. Jethro sent word ahead of time about his arrival.

When Jethro arrives there was a bit of a family reunion, and they spent some time together. However, all of this is context for what comes next. Moses seizes on the opportunity to share the story of what God has done for Israel with his unbelieving father-in-law. For those of you with family members who do not share your religious views, you know how significant this moment is.

Sharing with a close family member is hard for a number of reasons. First, they know us better than anyone else, so there is always a sense that we might not have the credibility to talk about spiritual things. Second, you care deeply for family, and you do not want to needlessly offend them. Third, family usually stays family. Reunions and Christmas and Thanksgiving are not completely avoidable. Family relationships are long-term.

But Moses seizes the opportunity. And one of the things here you need to notice is that Moses' passion for what God had done for His people eclipsed any understandable fear that he might have had about sharing the story of God's work with his father-in-law. What's more, Moses told Jethro not only about the good things but also the hard things. He simply told the story – the good and the bad – about what God had done.

*"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. 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." (Exodus 18:8-9, ESV)*

This is one of the first examples we have of evangelism happening in the Bible, and it is important to remember that Israel's deliverance was not just to end their slavery. The ultimate goal is for the glory of God to be seen in them. In other words, Moses' life and the deliverance of Israel were divinely designed platforms upon which God could be glorified. Moses didn't only relish in the

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<sup>1</sup> Some commentators surprisingly see this reunion as restoration of the relationship between Moses and Zipporah, suggesting that Moses had "sent away" Zipporah as in a divorce. However, the evidence to support that view is not substantial, and it is based on a fair amount of conjecture. For an exhaustive discussion of this issue see Doug Stuart's comments on Exodus 18 in *The New American Commentary Series*.

deliverance; he revealed in what it said about God. In Deuteronomy 4, Moses gives the people the following commentary:

*“For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of. Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.” (Deuteronomy 4:32–35, ESV)*

Everything that happened to them was designed to say something about God. As glad as Israel was about having been delivered, it would always be important to remember why God had done these things. He rescued them to declare His glory.

Being available means that you are aware and ready to be a part of God’s mission on the earth. It means that you celebrate God’s deliverance and the victories He brings, but you do so because of what they say about God. You could think of it this way: “Are you excited because you were delivered or are you excited about your deliverance *and* what it says about God?”

It could have been easy for Moses to make the story about himself or even about all the amazing things God had done for him. But Moses seems to have clearly known that there is a bigger story to be told here. Again, Exodus is not about Israel, about Pharaoh, or about Moses; it is about God! And Moses seized this opportunity to talk about what God had done. He was available to make much of God’s glory – to tell His story.

Notice what happened:

*“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. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.” 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.” (Exodus 18:10–12, ESV)*

Jethro praised God and acknowledged God’s superiority over all other “gods” – even his own. And then he, along with the leadership of Israel, offered a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. The offering of sacrifices had been a part of worship for many years, the most famous example being the sacrifice of Abraham in Genesis 22. By this time the connection between sacrifice and acceptance to God was well established.

Therefore, Jethro was embracing the elements connected to conversion to faith in Yahweh. Jethro confessed the supremacy of God, sacrificed, and ate a covenantal meal with other worshippers of

Yahweh.<sup>2</sup> God had not yet established the specifics regarding worship, but we have an early example of what responding to God looked like.

As far as I can tell, Jethro was the first convert after the Exodus. Here was an unbelieving Midian priest who heard the story of God's mercy, confessed God's supremacy, and embraced his need for atonement. And it was Moses' testimony that made it all possible. He seized the divinely-given moment, and he was available for God's mission. Moses was a man who understood the glory of God and His place in his life. He seemed to understand that he was part of a much bigger story that God was writing.

Do you see yourself through this lens? Are you so enamored with the glory and beauty of God that you see the connection between the events of your life and what God is doing? Or are you just glad that you are "out of Egypt"? Are you available for God to use for His purposes and to declare His name even if it means difficulty? Or are you so self-absorbed that it never occurs to you that maybe God has something in mind here that is bigger than just you? Do you see that God is on a mission, that it is about Him, and that He might want to use you?

Availability is the first mark of those who are God-centered. There's another one that we see here.

### **Teachable: Ready To Learn**

Exodus 18 continues with another interesting window into Moses' and Jethro's relationship and the heart of Moses as the leader of the Israelite people. We discover that Moses needs the wisdom of his father-in-law in order to give him some practical help.

Verse 13 tells us that the next day Moses heard the cases of the people "from morning until evening." As you can imagine, this newly formed nation had "issues." People are people, and Moses needed to help maintain unity and peace, so he heard their cases and helped them understand what should be done.

Jethro observed this set-up and asks Moses why he is leading the people this way. Moses responded with the following explanation:

*"And Moses said to his father-in-law, "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."" (Exodus 18:15–16, ESV)*

At one level this is legitimate and commendable. The newly formed nation did not know the heart of God on practical matters, and Moses was the prophet upon whom the mantle of leadership had been divinely placed. And it is commendable because Moses was working really hard – so hard that it was deeply concerning to his father-in-law.

Jethro, despite his newly found faith, has some important wisdom for Moses. Look at what he said:

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart, D. K. (2006). Vol. 2: Exodus. The New American Commentary (413). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

*“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. 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. 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. 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. 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.”” (Exodus 18:17–23, ESV)*

Now there are many points here which are loaded with wisdom: 1) It was unwise and unsustainable for Moses to carry this burden alone. 2) Moses needed to prioritize the way in which he could be most helpful to the people, but he could not do everything. 3) He needed to look for men of character and empower them to serve the people as assistant “judges.” 4) A shared leadership model would create the harmony and justice Moses was longing for.

This was an important moment for Moses, and I’m sure it was not easy. Moses was encountering what most leaders face: when the mission and my abilities don’t line up, am I willing to change? Moses wanted justice for his people, but the need had eclipsed his ability, so he would have to decide if he was willing to release some of his authority. What’s more (and this is often a huge issue!), Moses had to be willing to uncouple his sense of identity and value from his role as the only judge.

I’m sure you’ve seen it and probably felt it at one time or another in your life. There is something affirming and encouraging about seeing a long line of people who need you. As hard as the days were, I can imagine that Moses saw the role as valuable and personally meaningful. And it would take a fair amount of courage and a fair amount of humility to release his exclusive claim to the role of judge. Not every person is able to do this. It takes a great sense of humility, security, and belief in the bigger picture.

I can think of a number of reasons why Moses could have rejected Jethro’s advice:

- “You’ve only been here a day. You have no idea what you are talking about.”
- “You are not an Israelite and only yesterday you were an outsider.”
- “You don’t know God’s law or how complicated the issues are.”
- “The people are not ready. They are scared, and they need to hear from me.”

There are a number of reasons – good ones! – as to why Jethro’s advice could have been rejected. But Moses didn’t allow those reasons to prevent him from listening to some really wise advice. He didn’t allow any number of self-centered objections to hinder him from considering a better path for himself and for the people of Israel.

Verse 24 is beautiful, and it is followed with a great solution.

*“So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 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. And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.” (Exodus 18:24–27, ESV)*

I can think of many examples in my own life and in the lives of others where I wished that there were a better ability to listen. I heard a friend recently say that “a lack of teachability creates a ceiling of growth in your life.” Proverbs 12:5 makes the point even stronger:

*“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” (Proverbs 12:15, ESV)*

Here are a few other texts in Proverbs that I think are really helpful:

- *“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” (Proverbs 11:14, ESV)*
- *“Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.” (Proverbs 19:20, NLT)*

Over the course of my brief life, I’ve had the opportunity to interact with a lot of different people, and it is remarkable to me that the people whom God seems to use mightily and powerfully have a teachable heart. They are really wise, but they do not think they are. In fact, they are scared of themselves. As a result, they never stop learning. They never stop growing. And I’ve also seen the tragic effects of the opposite perspective play out. I’ve seen people make a disaster of their lives, and it is a tragedy because it could have been prevented. If only they had listened.

Moses gives us a great example here to consider. Here is a man who has met with God, has controlled plagues and parted the Red Sea, has struck rocks and had water come out, and who empowers victories in battle. But he still listens. He is still teachable. It is no wonder that he was so greatly used of God. Moses was not only ready for God’s mission; he was ready to learn.

#### **Four Pastoral Cautions**

Let me try to draw Exodus 18 into a few personal applications that relate directly to the gospel and how God wants us to live. The apostle Paul tells us that these stories are here for our instruction. So let me give you a few pastoral cautions.

##### **1) Beware of a small view of God and a big view of self**

I think one of the reasons why Moses responds the way that he does is because of his understanding of God and of himself. Moses knew what God was like, and I have to believe that it gave him clarity as to his place in the world. This is what the gospel does. By coming back to the

simple message that we have been saved by “grace through faith . . . not of ourselves” (Eph. 2:8-9), it frames our understanding of who we really are. The antidote for a self-focus is a Godward passion.

## **2) Beware of editing brokenness out of your life**

I love the fact that Moses tells Jethro about “*all the hardship that had come upon them along the way*” (Ex. 18:8). Moses did not present a picture of their journey as though it was a raving success. And neither should we. People who are enamored with God’s grace view their past through the lens of God’s deliverance. They don’t glory in the past, but they don’t deny it either. Brokenness and failure are not the whole story, but they are part of the story.

## **3) Beware when the mission becomes about “me”**

When I think of some of the nasty issues that I’ve had to deal with in church ministry, and when I think of some of the casualties that I’ve seen, there is a consistent theme. Somewhere along the line God’s mission became a “me-mission.” It happens easily and subtly. Just be aware and be warned that anything, including ministry leadership, can develop “me-mission creep.”

## **4) Beware of an absence of counsel**

Moses was well served, and so are we, with good friends who will give us helpful and direct counsel. You ought to have some people in your life who are willing to speak honest words with you. You ought to have some older people in your life who can help you by using their history as the context for your growth. And if no one has shared anything with you recently, you ought to start asking for advice.

Do you see how God-centered and other-centered this way of thinking is? Do you see how dangerous pride and self-regard can be? The people whom God used greatly in history and the people whom He is using now are those who are available; they know that there’s a bigger mission at stake here. And they are teachable; they know that there is much to learn.

And so, College Park, for the glory of God, and in light of the gospel, may the Spirit of Christ give us hearts that long to be available and teachable.

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