

Mentor from God

(Exodus 18: 1-27)

I Exodus 18 teaches us two good lessons for Christian living. (First, we see that God sent Jethro along just at the time Moses needed some good advice. Second, we see that Moses was smart enough to accept the advice. A mentor is like a teacher. As we noted when we studied Exodus 2 and 3, Moses grew up in the Palace of Pharaoh and probably did not know a lot about the God of the Hebrews when he first fled Egypt. Jethro was high priest in Midian, and he also was a descendant of Abraham, through a different line. We speculated that Jethro taught Moses most, if not all, he knew about the God of his fathers. Now a mentor is more than just a teacher. A teacher has responsibility for a student for a little while, but then after a while the student moves on to new teachers, and other students take his place. In the case of a mentor, we have a teacher who will always help his student, in all aspects of life, even after graduation. Jethro was a mentor like this, for Moses.)

A Jethro saw a problem and redressed it tactfully. (We should not wonder at the visit by Jethro. In those days nomadic shepherds roamed everywhere. The approach of such a large group of people as the Israelites were could not have gone unnoticed or unreported. People had to wonder how such a large group could find food and water for themselves and their animals in the desert. Then there was this confrontation with the Amalekites. We ought to notice that the day-long battle in Chapter 17 was the day after they attacked the stragglers behind the Israelite camp. No soldier stays in camp all the time, so doubtlessly, many of the Amalekites bragged about their exploits—and grumbled about their defeat—in taverns and trading posts wherever they went. For his part, Moses apparently sent his wife and children to Jethro, either to keep them out of harm's way when another problem arose, or, since they were close by, he could have sent them on a

social kind of errand. In any case, the eyewitness account of Zippora would have made Jethro want to go and see the Israelite camp for himself. Jethro's arrival at the Israelite camp began as a social call; the next day as he was observing the diligence of Moses' leadership, a very helpful insight occurred to him.)

B Moses was smart enough to listen to good advice. (As we have just noted, Jethro seems to be a concerned mentor, not a meddling busybody. For his part, Moses seems to be an open-minded and pragmatic leader, not some obsequious "Yes-man", or incompetent muddler, or its opposite: someone who is too proud of his own process to realize that it might be flawed; and there is nothing here to make us think that Moses had one of those "mind-your-own-business-old-man" attitudes either. Jethro was an experienced priest, so he knew what Moses must do spiritually; and he was the elder of a rather large family (Zippora had 6 sisters) and so chances are good that Jethro had experience dealing with petty squabbles, too. He offered Moses some good advice, and Moses was smart enough to listen.)

II The Glory of God was—and is—published by the testimonies of eye-witnesses. (This is the part of the story that should have included all of the Israelites. For us as the Church of Jesus Christ, it is the symbolic representation of our responsibility to challenge unbelievers with the Gospel message. A witness is someone who sees and hears things in the first person, not second-hand; and a testimony is when that witness reports what he saw or heard to someone else. If asked, every one of those Israelites would have said, "Moses held out his staff over the Red Sea and God opened the waters, and we crossed on dry ground; but when the Egyptians followed us the Sea closed over them and they all drowned." If asked, every one of them would say, "We go out every morning to gather manna and every evening to gather quail, except on the Sabbath; and when we needed water at Rephidim, Moses went up and struck a big rock with his staff and

water gushed out.” Every one of them would have said, “When the Amalekites attacked our camp, Joshua led some of our men out to fight them, and as long as Aaron and Hur held Moses’ hands up, our army prevailed.” We say, every one of them would have reported so if they were asked; they would have said so to any Amalekite trouble-maker they met, to any nomadic shepherd that wandered near their camp, and to any trader on any caravan that came close enough. God intended for them to say such things in Edom, Moab, Philistia, and Canaan too; and to anyone else they met in their future. Now as we have previously noted, these Children of Israel had not yet read the Sixth Chapter of John, so they might not have been able to explain that Jesus was the Bread of Life and the Living Water. But the point is, they could have testified to what they had seen and heard personally, which was God’s plan for magnifying his glory. At least Zippora did what God wanted them all to do; and Jethro came to see for himself, and that was the result which God intended to happen.

Now we say that this is also a symbolic representation of the responsibility of believers to evangelize unbelievers. So if we understand our responsibility, do we have a model to follow in the discharge of it? We do: it is the 12 Disciples of Jesus. As they went around preaching the Gospel of Salvation by Grace through faith in Jesus, what do you suppose they said? They said what they had heard Jesus say and they did what they had seen Him do; they testified of their own personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is our model. We, too, must testify of our personal knowledge of Jesus. It will mean very little if you go tell someone about my experience, and it will mean even less if you pretend to have experience that you don’t have; your testimony will ring hollow and your witness will be a reproach to the church, rather than a support of it. So, what is your experience? You have heard me say several times in the past, that all believers

experience at least one miracle: it is the miracle of their own new birth. Now if we see Jesus making other miracles then it is absolutely a good idea to magnify the glory of God by testifying to what we have seen and heard; but we must not go around seeking for miracles so that we will have something to talk about! We must seek the miracle-maker, not the miracle; and if we seek Him we shall find Him. Then we will witness a miracle of our own, to which we can testify.)

A Jethro heard the story from Zippora and her sons. (He probably heard from others, too. After all, he had six other daughters, so chances are good that he had six other sons-in-law working for him as shepherds by that time too. Nomadic shepherds get around. Trade caravans and army patrols get around. Probably, Jethro heard of the things God had done from several sources besides Zippora and her sons; but they are the ones who are important to our story. Jethro would have marveled at reports of God's intervention on Israel's behalf when anyone else told him; but he would have given more credence to Zippora's report because she had been present at the actual events, and besides, she was his daughter. Jethro might well have shook his head and said, "Well, what do you know about that!" when a Moabite trade caravan or a nomadic shepherd offered a second-hand report; but when he heard from his own daughter, he would have said, "*Now* I believe; *now* I want to go and see for myself."

And here is another point at which this symbolic representation applies to you and me. We might well marvel at how Jesus changed the Apostle Paul from an enemy of the church into one of its most important missionaries, or how Martin Luther, an obscure parish priest obsessed with redemption by his own efforts, became the champion of the Protestant Reformation and the Doctrine of Justification by Faith, or how God still makes miracle after miracle in the lives of generally unknown modern missionaries all over Africa or Latin America; we

might marvel at the stories, but like Jethro listening to second-hand reports from caravan traders, we just go away saying, “Huh! Well, what do you know about that!” But what if someone who knew that a man who was a liar, a thief, a coward, a drug addict or alcoholic, or a domestic bully who kicked your dog (or your wife or children) heard that *he* had become a responsible family man and a model citizen; would people who know *you* believe that you were capable of changing into something completely different from what they remember your being? First, we say again that this change—*of character*—is the one true miracle that every believer will experience when he is born again; and second, we note that too many people don’t like to testify to people who knew them best because we never like to expose ourselves to the ridicule and incredulity that they will surely heap upon us. Our human pride gets in the way of our testimonies, and it hinders our witness, which could otherwise magnify the glory of God. So let us learn how to testify for Jesus, by telling about the changes we witnessed in our own lives when we received Him as our Lord and our Savior.)

B Jethro came to visit Moses, and hear the story from him. (He did what God intended for the entire heathen world to do. People who did not know God were supposed to come and ask Israel, “How is it that you came to possess such a good land (flowing with milk and honey), and how did you get such a compassionate civil code, and how did you develop such a peaceable society (as the Law of God was to prescribe for them)?”

They should have answered that God had brought them up out of Egypt and taken care of them in the desert, in order to perform His Promise to the Patriarchs and make them who had been no nation into a nation, one that could and would manifest His Glory in the world by teaching the entire world about His Law and His Covenant. At least in Exodus 18 they could have done that, and the result was

that Jethro (who was not part of the Covenant relationship between God and the Children of Israel) praised God, as we read in verses 10-11, and worshipped God with burnt offerings and other sacrifices. That was what God intended to happen.

It is still what God intends to happen, though under different circumstances. Now for that to happen, you and I must testify about Jesus—not about ourselves, or our church projects—about Jesus and what He has done in our own lives. Some will marvel at the change in our character, from the sinner that we used to be into the saint God is creating; some will disbelieve and accuse us of fraud or hypocrisy, but they will not be able to dispute it if our lifestyle is equal to our testimony. Now it might well be that we challenge an unbeliever to repent and forsake his sin so that God can forgive him and give him new life, and he will tell us to mind our own business; we should expect that. We should also expect that no one will receive Jesus as his Lord and Savior until someone who knows Jesus introduces Him to them. Do you have nothing to say for Jesus? Then tell Jesus that you repent *your* sins, and ask Him to forgive *you* and change *you* into a child of God, and He will; and then you'll have plenty to say! Then when a new believer starts telling people that Jesus forgave his sins and gave him new life by the Spirit of God, then the glory of God will be magnified by the addition of his soul to the Kingdom of God too, and by the addition of those who will believe later because of his testimony. That is how we magnify the Glory of God!)

C Truth from scripture needs no embellishment or elaboration. (All we need to do is give people the Word of God and the Holy Spirit will take over from there. Now there are a couple corollaries to that axiom. First, we have to know the scriptures well enough to apply its truth to the situations we meet day by day. Here's a hint about that: Jesus said that He was the Way, the Truth, and the Life. So we need to be completely persuaded in our own minds that Jesus is these

things, and we need to know Him well enough to introduce Him to someone who doesn't know Him as the Way and the Truth and the Life for them. How can we get to know Jesus so well? It will be by reading the Bible and by praying. The second corollary is this: church attendance, sermons, and Sunday School lessons are helpful in this regard, but we should reserve judgment as to just *how* helpful they are until we know how consistent the message of the church is with the message of the scriptures. By that we mean simply that a church whose message is "Let's fill up these empty pews with warm bodies (or let's fill up that platform with people for our dedication service) so that our program looks good" or "our church treasury needs more money so we can pay the retirement pension for the former senior pastor" –that church is talking about itself as an institution and has forgotten that our Lord Jesus Christ, not their pastor or his cheerleader, died to redeem people from sin; Jesus, not the church officers, rose from the dead to justify our faith in Salvation by the Grace of God; and Jesus, not their programs and agendas, sent His Holy Spirit from Heaven to give the Church its life. We need to talk about Jesus, not about church; and the church that preaches some other message is a cult and not a church, no matter how many people or how much money it has, or which denominational label hangs on its buildings.)

III Jethro gave Moses some good advice. (We noted that Jethro visited the camp for the right reasons, and in the right spirit. Yet he has not forgotten his role as mentor in the life of Moses over the last 40 years. Jethro was still a priest in Midian; he was still the father-in-law of Moses, and he was still the mentor to whom Moses would listen.)

A God orders some things in life; He allows many more. (For example, God ordered Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to let the people go. God allowed (and let us note, He did not prevent) the grumbling and complaining, and the

attack by the Amalekite raiders. We may say that God ordered (well, at least He led) Moses to that part of the desert where they were presently encamped. We cannot know if God ordered Jethro to visit Moses; we get the sense that he decided to do that on his own. That order, or leading, is insignificant anyway: yet we ought to note that God neither ordered Jethro to advise Moses nor ordered Moses to heed Jethro's advice. These things appear to be allowed by God, they were not predestined or foreordained by Him. We ought to notice, too, that this is a general pattern that is repeated several times in the Bible. God allows people to decide for themselves what to do or not to do, and then holds us accountable for our decisions. We should never think that God has laid out some intricate moment-by-moment plan for our lives and then hid Himself to see whether we are smart enough to figure it out; similarly, we ought not to think that God is waiting out on the fringes of our lives to step in and chasten us or otherwise nudge us one way or the other, if we stray too far away from His plan. Rather, the perfect Will of God is that all should come to repentance; everyone will not, but that is His Perfect Will. His Will for our individual lives is that once we believe, we be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ by the working of the Holy Spirit; not all will be, but that is His Will. Human Will is always a big part of every interaction between men and God, because it is with our will that we surrender our will to His. God gives us a lot of opportunities to do that, and now and then, He intrudes in our lives with the requirement that we make a decision about what to do and how to proceed. The decision we make then will bring us a little closer to the fruition of the Will of God in our lives, or put us a little further from it. Here we see that Jethro decided to give Moses some advice and Moses decided to heed it; we do not see that God required either action by either man. The words of Jethro are significant here: "If you do this *and God so commands*"

implies that God had not yet commanded (or, imposed) the plan Jethro suggested; the point is that Jethro's suggestion did not impede the Will of God, but rather aided it, by freeing up some of Moses' time so that he could spend more of it with God and less of it settling petty quarrels.)

B Jethro's advice is helpful, and not meddling. (Let us recall that Jethro was a priest and so he knew the role of a priest very well. He defined it for Moses, and for us, in verse 19-20: "*You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to Him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform.*" These were God's instructions to the priests in Ezekiel 44:23 too—"Teach my people the difference between the holy and the profane and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean." The role of the priest in the Old Testament was to represent people before God when he made sacrifices on the altar, and he was to teach God's ways to the people. This is the role of Jesus as our High Priest in the New Testament too: to represent men before God in sacrificial atonement by His own Death on the Cross; and to teach believers to be children of God (since Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, He was the only One Who could teach anyone else how to be a son of God) –and it is our role, too, as *the living stones being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* (I Peter 2:5). The point here is that we need to know Jesus so well that we can teach His Ways to others, as God's representatives to them, and we must represent unbelievers before God in our prayers for their Salvation. May God send us mentors who understand this well enough to give *us* good advice in the right spirit, and for the right purposes.)

C Moses understood these two priestly responsibilities very well. (He was also very diligent in his ministry as God's prophet, and as the civic leader for the

community. He probably knew as well as anyone how old and tired he was; but he no doubt also thought that if God wanted him to do something differently, then God would say so. Let us note one more thing about Moses' work here. He knew that he had to serve as he did and that God would hold him accountable for serving. He probably also recognized that some of the matters he was judging were so trivial that they should not have been the subject of dispute at all; and Moses probably knew that there were others, just as capable of deciding such matters as he was. So why didn't Moses take the initiative and appoint junior judges without Jethro's suggestion? This hesitation on his part probably arose from his sense of responsibility. God had put him in the position he was in, and who was he to tell God that it was uncomfortable? He needed Jethro to give him permission to deviate from his habit. God had not told Moses to appoint junior judges; on the other hand, God had not told him *not* to appoint them. Jethro probably understood, as we hopefully do, that God was not part of the petty civil litigations Moses was arbitrating, and Jethro took the opportunity to teach Moses as much. It worked out well. May God grant us such wise mentors!)

IV Civil affairs and religious affairs ought to be separate matters. (By that we mean that the state, as an institution, and the church, as an institution, should never presume to exercise authority over the other's domain. It does not mean that we should make such a separation between civil and spiritual affairs that we only behave as Christians on Sunday or that we should not operate churches with business-like efficiency. When Jesus gives us new life in His name, we gain a remarkable opportunity to become *the salt of the earth* and the *light on the lamp stand*, as Jesus put it. In our individual lives, spirituality displaces and replaces secular, temporal matters, until our hearts love what God loves and our minds think what God thinks, and eventually every interaction between us and society

occurs *outside* the realm of secular concerns altogether. Civil and spiritual affairs must be separate because God is spirit and our new life in Christ is spiritual, and we cannot hope to have one foot in Heaven and the other in this world. This was what Jesus meant when He said to *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's*. Now are we God's, or are we Caesar's? *Ambassadors of Christ* (as Paul put it in II Corinthians 5:20) must *Come out from among them and be ye separate, and touch not the unclean thing* (2 Corinthians 6:17). By leaving civil affairs to junior judges, Moses could spend more time in the role of priest and prophet; we should learn to do that too.)

A Moses arranged civil affairs on an echelon model. (It was an efficient arrangement. It provided both a chain of command and an appeals process. Later, we will see Moses organizing the armies of Israel on the same model.)

B Moses would continue to be the final arbitrator. (This is an important point, because with the authority to order such an arrangement comes the responsibility for how it works. Ultimately Moses is responsible to God, Who is to be the Judge of All at the end of time. In civil affairs there was no appeal beyond Moses; and in spiritual affairs there is no appeal beyond God. And that finality should be a comfort to believers. We know that when people quarrel, they look for someone to take their side. If one is dissatisfied with the assistance that is available in any social circle, they look for other social circles where they feel more comfortable. What if *no* social circle makes us comfortable? Our Father in Heaven will always love us and accept us and take our part against the evils of the world. We can go to Him in every case; and there is no refuge outside of Him.)

C We see a similar division of responsibility in the New Testament Church, between Apostles and Deacons. (Moses delegated authority over petty squabbles to junior judges, so that he would have more time in the presence of God. We

should not think him to be selfish about that; the time he spent in prayer benefited everyone. He was God's prophet, the messenger who delivered God's Law to Israel. In the New Testament, the Apostles discovered that the time they spent at serving tables prevented them from praying and studying the scriptures. They appointed deacons and made them responsible for table-service. And we should note another aspect of the New Testament Church as well: when Peter preached about repentance on the first Day of Pentecost, 3000 people joined their church, and later we see that they added to their numbers daily such as believed. For all those people, the New Testament Church had just seven deacons, and one of them was soon to be martyred for his faith. So let's not become obsessed with how many elders or deacons or assistant piano players or third assistants to the janitors we have. The institutional churches create jobs for people so that the people will feel like they have important roles in support of the church's ministry; but we should solve problems as they arise, rather than creating enough offices and titles so that everyone who wants one can have one.)

V We can take lessons about responsibility and accountability from the story in Exodus 18. (Both Jethro and Moses understood their responsibilities before God; both of them knew that there was a better way to manage civil affairs, and both were agreeable to implementing the better solution. For this kind of amiability to work in church polity, there must be a complete absence of ego and arrogance from the decision making processes. If all parties are sufficiently humble before God, then a mentor can suggest things that will work and a leader can follow the suggestions without prejudice. May God grant that our church members will work so well together!)

A Churches should have functional offices and titles. (There is a small church in Yumchang Dong, where the pastor felt obliged to give every member over the

age of 16 some job and title, in an effort to make them feel important. They had their elders and deacons, of course, and then a humorous variety of other job titles; their pu-do-whan described such positions as “Third Assistant to the Key Custodian” whose job was to make sure the windows were closed if the Second Assistant was absent or otherwise unavailable, when it was time to close the church at the end of the day. What would be the point of such an office and job-title? It was nothing more than an effort to keep the teenage son of a deacon in church, when he would have preferred to be in a norae-bang with his friends. Ladies and Gentlemen, churches don’t need titles and offices, and programs and agendas. We need Jesus. If our church had several thousand members then we would need to organize ourselves a little more formally than we now do; but for now, let’s think of ourselves as the apostles who needed to spend more time praying and studying scriptures. That will keep us sufficiently occupied for the present, and it will prepare us for greater tasks God may assign to us later.)

B (Finally, then, let us say again that) Our testimony for Christ should be that which we personally have witnessed. (Jethro probably heard a lot of stories about the children of Israel from shepherds and caravan traders, but it was the testimony of his own daughter that made him want to see for himself. Similarly, we should not expect unbelievers to repent and forsake sin because we tell them that the power of God can change alcoholics or prostitutes into saints; but the eyewitness first-hand testimony of the alcoholic or prostitute will give glory to God, and then the sinner will be unable to gainsay and dispute it. Our responsibility is to challenge unbelievers with the Gospel message according to the Word of God; our first-hand testimony about what we know that Jesus has done in our lives is the only evidence we might offer in support of our case. Then let’s spend enough time with Jesus in prayer and Bible study that we will have something to say; and having said it, we will leave the results of our effort in the capable Hands of the Spirit of God. Amen.)