

A Good Father-in-Law

Exodus 18:1-17

As I have counseled any number of couples preparing to get married, the whole subject of the family into which you marry is a wise and good subject of conversation. Because like it or not, you marry into a family, and what I particularly emphasize with men getting married is that they ought to give careful attention to the relationship with their father-in-law. From our text this afternoon, it is clear that Moses was a man blessed by God with a good father-in-law. His name was Jethro, though introduced first by the name Reuel. He was a Midianite priest whom Moses met when he fled after killing an Egyptian.

Ex. 2:16 “Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. 17 The shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses stood up and saved them, and watered their flock. 18 When they came home to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come home so soon today?” 19 They said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds and even drew water for us and watered the flock.” 20 He said to his daughters, “Then where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.” 21 And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah. 22 She gave birth to a son, and he called his name Gershom, for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.”

For some reason, perhaps due to concerns for safety and the trials of living in the wilderness, Moses had sent his wife and two sons back to him.

v.2-3a

Some commentators suggest maybe she was sent back so as not to be a hindrance to Moses or because she was impatient or

upset with him, but all that seems to be unnecessary speculation. More likely, this reunion had prearranged by Moses and his father-in-law, perhaps that the family would return when they reached Mt. Horeb, which is called the “mountain of God” in verse 5.

Moses received his father-in-law with great honor and respect. He greeted him warmly as his elder and humbly received his advice and counsel. Jethro was a Midianite, also a descendant of Abraham through his second wife, Keturah.

But all of that is just background. What we see in this family reunion are things of great value and interest to us today. We see a leader of God’s people at work. We see the things necessary for that leadership. Most especially,

I. TRUSTING GOD.

Moses exemplifies that trust by the names that he gives to his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Both those names are full of meaning.

v.3b-4

We’ll look at Gershom first. Gershom comes from a Hebrew word meaning “sojourner.” Traveler, visitor, stranger. It refers to an alien, someone living among a foreign people. Remember that Gershom was born in Midian, during the 40 years of Moses’ exile there, but there was even more significance to it than that. This self-conscious identification exemplifies a trust in God because it reflects upon something which is universally true for God’s people. It was literally and geographically true for the people of God in the wilderness, and it remains true for us today.

A. We are strangers and aliens.

v.3 “The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, “I have been a sojourner in a foreign land”).”

The importance of this realization for our faith is made obvious in, Heb. 11:8 “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God...13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. 14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

“Having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” That’s faith. “By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land.” That’s what it means to trust God. And lest you think that only applies to Abraham in Old Testament history, Peter uses this same exact language when he writes to Christians,

1 Peter 2:10 “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.”

Sojourners and exiles. That’s the perspective you must have upon the Christian life in this age. We are just visitors. This is not our permanent home, not in its present state. So we ought not to cling to the riches of this world nor be enthralled by the pleasures

of this world. We are resident aliens. We’ve got green cards to last us as long as this age shall last, but our home is somewhere else.

That is the context for Jesus’ calling upon our lives,

Mat. 6:9 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also...31 Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

So we are all included under that name Gershom. We are all living by faith not by sight, trusting God as we wait to go to our own eternal home, our inheritance reserved in heaven for us. And as we do that, the name of the second son, Eliezer, comes into focus. This Hebrew name simply means,

B. Our help is in God.

v.4

This family reunion is a reminder that God has provided that help,

v.1

We need help, desperately. We live in the midst of troubles. I don’t need to convince you of that. Yet in those troubles, we have the occasion to trust God, to live by faith.

Ps. 118:5 “Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord

answered me and set me free. 6 The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? 7 The Lord is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me. 8 It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. 9 It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.”

Eliezer! God is help!

Ps. 46:1 “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. 2 Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, 3 though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.”

I could read many other psalms as well. God is your help! With this great promise,

Heb. 13:5 “...for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” 6 So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

That’s faith! Faith that is bolstered and strengthened when you are able to recognize God’s goodness, as Moses does.

II. RECOGNIZING GOD’S GOODNESS.

His father-in-law is of great encouragement in this, too. As I read in verse 1, he has heard of all that God has done for Moses and for Israel. He knows the meaning of Eliezer’s name, as I read in verse 4. And Moses filled him in all the more.

v.8-10

The key word there is the word “delivered.” All that the Lord had done to Pharaoh was for the deliverance of his people. They were delivered out of all their hardship. God had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. In verse 4, “delivered from the sword of Pharaoh.”

Delivered means redeemed. Saved. Rescued. And the faithful father-in-law puts it all in the perfect context when he rejoices “for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.”

All the good that the Lord had done to Israel. All the good that the Lord had made known to Israel. By his work of redemption.

A. God makes his goodness known by his work of redemption.

This is the beauty of what we call reformed theology, that the goodness of God gets all the attention. The goodness of God is the motivating factor behind the work of our redemption. The goodness of God is the driving force bringing about our salvation.

The pertinent question is, “Why did God save you?” Because you were good or because he was good? There can’t be the least little bit of doubt in your mind or even the slightest hesitation in answering that question correctly. Why did God save you? Because he is good!

Titus 3:4 “But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.”

In the words of the Psalmist,

Ps. 34:8 “Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!”

This is an absolutely essential necessity to have well understood in the depth of your souls, that God has made his goodness known. And not merely to embrace that doctrinal truth, but to experience it yourself, to apprehend it with your whole heart and soul. To experience it. To taste it, and see it, the goodness of God.

For when you do that, when his goodness becomes real to you, you do the same thing that Jethro did. You worship him! So...

B. We make God's goodness known by our worship.

Jethro rejoiced, verse 9.

v.10 Jethro said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians."

It is hard to know exactly what his faith is, but it seems to be genuine when he declares in,
v.11

And he follows that apparent profession of faith with an offering of sacrifice,
v.12

This seems to be a sacred and solemn feast, "before God," as it says. It was an offering of praise, an offering of thanksgiving, before God, offered up unto God. And amazingly, Moses the Jew with Jethro the Midianite Gentile!

Last week we studied the Amalekite rebellion against God, this week the Midianite worship of God, representing what one commentator suggested to be the "twofold attitude which the heathen world would assume toward the kingdom of God."

So it is for us, that the motive for our worship, the context and the content of that worship, is the apprehension of the goodness of God. We, too, bless the Lord and praise him for the goodness of his grace, whenever that might be revealed. We join with Moses and Jethro in rejoicing in all the good that the Lord has done to us, in delivering us out of the dominion of sin and death and into his own glorious kingdom.

And now for the wise advice of this father-in-law, advice about how Moses should go about,

III. LEADING GOD'S PEOPLE.

Jethro noticed a problem. It wasn't hard to see.
v.13-18

There is a clear principle of biblical church government, made clear in the New Testament, that traces its roots back to this very situation. "The thing that you do is not good....For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself."

A. God's people ought to have a plurality of leaders.

A plurality means more than one, and in the New Testament whenever there is reference to the office leadership in the church, whenever there is mention of elders, it is always that, ELDERS. Plural.

1 Tim. 5:17 "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching."

Titus 1:5 "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you."

James 5: 14 "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord."

Over and over again. Elders. In the OPC, with all churches governed as presbyterian churches, the basic, fundamental definition of the church is this rule of elders. That's when a mission work becomes a particular church--not with the arrival of a pastor, not with a level of giving necessary to be self-sufficient,

not when they have a building, but when the congregation elects elders to oversee the church as a Session. And one man is not a Session. One man, alone, cannot rule or make any official determination of governing by himself. There must be a minimum of two, and with the recognition of the pastor or minister being an elder, that means there must be at least one whom we typically call a Ruling Elder. That is one of the most foundational principles of biblical church government. Never is the leadership and authority of oversight given to a single man! Never!

So what is the advice Jethro gives his son-in-law?
v.21-27

Beloved, these words always so appropriate for us, too, for Jethro's wisdom is always timely. And it is a call for spiritual maturity among our men. Especially our young men. This is the will of God for his church, that young men grow into maturity, and become elders! Jethro is looking for trustworthy men. Able men. Honest men.

So I address all of you men, first and foremost, with this call unto maturity. And young men, even our teenage young men, let this be a very personal challenge for you. Too often, I believe we expect very little of our young men. We expect them to be immature. We expect them to be silly, and shallow, and stubborn, and rebellious. But we ought to expect something much different. I can tell you very honestly, young men, I expect more of you. Much more. I hear Jethro when he says, "...you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens."

That's who I want to look for. And that's who I expect to see, by God's grace and blessing upon the ministry of the church.

Thankfully, I am not alone on our Session, and that situation can never be. My leadership can never be alone, for if it were, I was say so very clearly, "For this thing is too much for [me]; [I am] not able to perform it by [myself]."

That goes beyond merely having elected Ruling Elders serving on a Session. It goes to all matters of leadership, formal and informal. It goes to the whole matter of each member in the body doing his or her part for the common good. Calvin writes this: "No single mortal can be sufficient to do everything, however many and various may be the endowments wherein he excels...Let, then, God's servants learn to measure carefully their powers, lest they should wear out, by ambitiously embracing too many occupations...Individuals are only endued with a certain measure of gifts."

So pray earnestly for this church, pray for the preparation of ruling elders from our own midst. From our own children. Pray that God would raise up leaders among us, from within and from without. But not just any man, qualified men, as Jethro defines, v.21 "...able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness."

Paul puts it about the same way,

1 Tim. 3:2 "A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well."

Along with that, please pray for your own ability, and eagerness, to receive that oversight with joy, to submit to that shepherding with honor given to those who are in authority so that their labors will be a joy and not a burden. Pray for the ones

whom the Holy Spirit has made “overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

People of God, beloved of Christ, learn from this passage what it is God has designed for his people, both in the church under age in the Old Testament as well as in the church of Jesus Christ now established on the earth. There are many areas of discontinuity between the old and new testaments, many differences, especially in church leadership. But there are also some very significant matters of continuity. Surely the greatest change from the Old to the New is the abolition of human, earthly priests in the line of Levi. With their end came the end of all the priestly sacrifices and external formalities surrounding the worship of God in the singular, earthly temple located in Jerusalem. The curtain of that temple is torn down and we now enter that holy place by faith, through Christ our High Priest who has offered his own body as a sacrifice for our sins once for all.

So I am not a priest. Not your priest, for the New Testament addresses us all as priests. I am not your mediator, for there is only one mediator between God and men--the man Christ Christ. But in this role of judge, in this role which Jethro describes for those men whom Moses should choose to assist him, there are some very important lessons that apply very much to the experiences of our own day and time.

v.15-16

v.20

That is a great explanation of the role I do assume as an ordained preacher--a minister of God's word. I self-consciously see myself in that role-- “I teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.” That's what it means to minister the word. That's what it means to preach. My own thoughts and ideas are

irrelevant. My own judgments have no bearing upon you and certainly no authority over you. What matters is not what I think or what I do. Rather, it is my calling to make known to you what God has said--his statutes and his laws.

This is such a clear concept for me, which drives my whole sense of what the gospel ministry is all about. This is what I am about whenever I dare to step into this pulpit,

2 Tim. 4:1 “1 I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; 4 and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. 5 But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

That is the charge given to me, and I am always very conscious of what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, a church wanting exalted wisdom and eloquence,

1 Cor. 2:1 “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

So I declare to you what God has said. And it does go the

other way as well,
v.19

“Stand before God for the people.”

B. God’s people ought to have a representative before God.

Luther expresses that verse, “Take charge of the people before God.” The Psalmist expresses that work of the shepherd representing the people before God in,

Ps. 106:21 “They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, 22 wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. 23 Therefore he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.”

So indeed it is my privilege, as it is my duty, to stand in the breach. To speak to you what God has said, and to be your shepherd even in standing before God on your behalf.

Last week we studied Moses when he did just that. Holding up his hands, in prayer to God, as the people fought with the Amalekites. While he prayed for them, the power of God was upon them. When he grew tired and let down his hands, the enemies prevailed.

So while I will strenuously reject any role of priestly mediation, yet the office to which God has called me as a shepherd obligates me to bring you into the presence of God and to be your shepherd even in that, knowing that the Chief Shepherd himself will appear in power and glory at the end of this age.

So it is my privilege, even as it is my duty, to pray for you before God. To intercede for you, to plead with God on your

behalf. To me is given the responsibilities of prayer and the ministry of the word.

Let this pattern be well established among us, a pattern of faithful leadership by a plurality of qualified men. And a pattern of faithful submission by those under that leadership which God has ordained. That, dear friends, is the vision we **MUST** have for our church. A church in which God exercises his rule and his authority by the faithful leadership of elders. A church in which that faithful leadership is honored and received by all of God’s people.