

Lesson 7
Jethro's Advice to Moses
Exodus 18:1-27

Moses was God's man to lead Israel in the wilderness and to the borders of the promised land of Canaan. Throughout the Bible it is clearly seen that when God has a work He wants done, He works through a leader. In times of crisis, God always provides a man to lead the way to deliverance. God raised up Abraham, Joshua, Saul, David, Solomon, Peter (the leader of the Twelve), and Paul (the leader of the Gentile churches). Yet, the truth that when God has a job to do He works through a man, is most clearly seen in the life of Moses. God called Moses for the gigantic task of leading Israel from Egypt to Canaan.

God's man for the hour was Moses. However, Moses did not just one day decide to become the leader of Israel. No, God prepared and trained Moses for eighty years before he was given the enormous responsibility of leading the nation of Israel. The hand of God providentially prepared this man for this position. In his first forty years, he was trained in Pharaoh's own court as his own son. He was educated in Egypt's finest schools and became grounded in Egyptian politics, culture, and values; therefore, he was skilled in diplomacy and was prepared to later stand before mighty Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go!" Moses was also trained in Egypt in military matters and administration; therefore, he was able to organize two million Jews in the desert. His training in Egypt had given him the ability to write and therefore provided a means by which these accounts would be recorded for eternity. In his second forty years, Moses was in the desert, the very desert he would later cross with the children of Israel. During this second forty years, he was given desert survival experience and the know-how of travel in this area. But, above all, he went to the "Desert Theological Seminary" those second forty years where he learned God's word and how to trust God. Eighty years Moses was in training for the one, big event of leading Israel out of Egypt into the land of Canaan. There must have been times when he was on the backside of the desert that he thought he was washed up spiritually, and God was never going to use him. Yet, one of the main things Moses learned was patience.

Moses was a genius politically, legally, economically, administratively, and sociologically. Yet, this great man had to have advice from his father-in-law, Jethro, in order to be effective in his ministry for God. Moses was not too great to take advice, and when he took this advice, it changed his whole ministry.

JETHRO'S INTRODUCTION - Exodus 18:1

"Now Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law . . ." -- The name Jethro means "excellence" or "superiority." Jethro was a priest of Midian and may have been the high priest. Apparently, he was a believer in the true God and had probably been led to the Lord by Moses himself when Moses lived with him forty years in the desert. Moses married Zipporah who was the daughter of Jethro (Exodus 3:1; 4:18). Jethro was a superior person whose excellence could be seen in every way. He must have been a great father-in-law and a great help to Moses in preparing him to be the leader of Israel.

". . . Heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt." -- Every nomad in the peninsula would have heard by now of the two million Israelites who had broken away from Egypt and their clash with Amalek. There were rumors all through the desert of miracles and supernatural phenomena. If Sinai was in the territory regularly grazed by Midians, then Israel was already on Midian's border. Jethro could not wait to see Moses, his son-in-law and find out for himself whether all these rumors were true.

JETHRO'S INTENTIONS - Exodus 18:2-7

"And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law took Moses' wife Zipporah, after he had sent her away . . ." -- When God called Moses to go back to Egypt to lead the sons of Israel out of that nation, the assignment was

too risky and dangerous for him to take his wife and two sons. Therefore, for their safety, Moses sent his family to live with Jethro. Moses had been separated from his family for over a year, but he made this sacrifice to do the will of God. However, this was the time for his family to reunite because a divided family is not the ordinary will of God.

Occasionally God calls a man to do a particular task where he must be separated from his wife and children. However, this separation must be only temporary. Great sacrifices must be made sometimes for the cause of Christ, but there is great blessing for those who make these sacrifices.

“And He said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life.’” (Luke 18:29-30)

“. . . And her two sons, of whom one was named Gershom, for he said, ‘I have been a sojourner in a foreign land.’ And the other was named Eliezer, for he said, ‘The God of my father was my help, and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.’” When Moses fled Egypt for the desert of Midian, he married Zipporah and had two sons by her. Their names tell us something of Moses’ spiritual experience in the desert. Gershom means “sojourner”, “stranger”, or “banished one.” Apparently, Moses was bitter at first because he had been banished from Egypt. He was bitter because he thought God had dealt unfairly with him. Moses had to work through this bitterness before he could be effectively used by the Lord. Bitterness comes from an attitude that challenges God’s sovereignty over one’s life and says, “You gave me a raw deal God!” When this happens a person becomes miserable and totally unable to be a positive testimony for Christ. Moses at first could not understand why a great genius like himself was set out in the middle of a barren desert. He had absolutely no divine viewpoint on this situation. Between the birth of his first son and second son, Moses’ mental attitude completely changed. Eliezer means “God is my help.” After two or three years or more of fighting with bitterness, Moses finally whipped the problem. He began to see God’s hand in his life and came to the place where he saw his banishment from Israel was a definite part of God’s plan for him. Perhaps he came to the place where he was ready to stay in the desert and die there if this was what God wanted. However, when he came to this place, God then began to train and prepare him for the task of leading Israel. Another one of the major spiritual lessons Moses learned in the desert was victory over a negative mental attitude.

“Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped, at the mount of God. And he sent word to Moses, ‘I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.’ Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him, and they asked each other of their welfare, and went into the tent.” Moses, the mighty prophet of Israel, the leader of millions, bowed down and kissed Jethro. Moses obviously respected Jethro’s position as priest, a man older in age, and the fact that he was his father-in-law. There was affection between these two men. We are not told so, but surely Moses was glad to see his wife and sons. Notice that they chit-chatted about family things with each other before they got down to talking about spiritual matters.

JETHRO’S ILLUMINATION - Exodus 18:8-12

“And 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 befallen them on the journey, and how the LORD had delivered them.” Moses did not speak of himself, but he told about God and His mighty wonders. He boasted on God’s grace and not on man’s attainments. Moses clearly understood he was but an instrument, and it was the LORD who had delivered the sons of Israel.

“And Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians. So Jethro said, ‘Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they

dealt proudly against the people.” Jethro rejoiced in the news of what God had done for Israel. He was not jealous because God had not done the same thing for Midian. Jethro learned to rejoice with other believers in their blessings, which is often a very difficult thing to do. Jethro lived in Midian, a pagan nation, and, as a believer, probably had doubts at times about the true God. However, when he heard about God’s deliverance of Israel, he concluded that the true God was greater than all the Egyptian gods put together. They were nothing, and God was everything. Any lingering doubt was erased from Jethro’s mind. He saw the incomparable might and majesty of Jehovah-God.

Christians need fellowship with Christians so they can share spiritual experiences and realize that God is at work in the lives of his people. Christians who work all week in the world sometimes have doubts because the pull of the world is so strong. Fellowship with other Christians can erase any doubt that God is alive and at work in His people.

“Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law before God.” Jethro worshipped the true God by offering a sacrifice. This gives us a hint that there was a sacrifice system in force before the Mosaic Law was enacted, and true worshippers offered these sacrifices.

When Jethro heard about the mighty working and miracles of God, it caused him to worship. Only a mind occupied with God and His wonders can truly worship God.

JETHRO’S INSIGHT - Exodus 18:13-18

“And it came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.” Moses was not only charged with the responsibility for caring for the spiritual and military needs of the nation of Israel, but also for their civil problems as well. Moses was both the law-giver and judge among the people. There were many people with all kinds of legal and personal problems, and they needed help. From morning until evening, day after day, Moses listened to the disputes, grievances and problems of the troubled in Israel. Dealing with people and their problems taxed all of Moses’ abilities and energies, for the hardest work in the world is to deal with people and their problems.

Where did Moses learn these skills in handling people? He learned the diplomacy the first forty years in Egypt, and he learned patience the second forty years in the desert. Moses, for forty years in the desert, also learned God’s Word and how to apply it. God taught him all he needed to know about handling people, and yet it was eighty years before he had opportunity to put it all into practice. What is the lesson for us? All doctrine we learn today and store up in our minds may not be used today. It may be one, or five, or ten, or even forty years before we will have occasion to use it, but we will use it. All the doctrine that Moses had learned in eighty previous years he was now applying. Moses must have said to himself while forty years in the “Desert Theological Seminary”, “Now how is this doctrine going to apply to my life? This doctrine just doesn’t seem to relate to my needs right now! I don’t need irrelevant doctrine; I just need to live life!” Yet what Moses did not understand then is that all that God was teaching him would be relevant in the future. Therefore, Moses had to study and saturate himself with God’s truth whether he saw any immediate application to his present situation or not. Out there in that lonely desert, while Moses was watching Jethro’s sheep, God probably taught Moses the doctrine of human relations and how to settle disputes between people. Moses probably yawned and said, “How does this relate to me, for I am a sheep herder, not a lawyer, counselor or social worker?” What Moses did not understand is that God had a long range plan for Moses, and He was preparing him for the time he would be handling the problems of the sons of Israel from sunup to sundown.

“Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?’” Jethro saw that Moses was trying to carry the whole load and do all the judging among the sons of Israel. Moses was too valuable to Israel to have him bogged down in the handling of petty problems of people.

“And Moses said to his father-in-law, ‘Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor, and make known the statutes of God and His laws.’” This verse tells us that Moses had already, to some degree, organized the people socially with laws over them. There was a legal system of sorts, with Moses calling all of the shots. Perhaps Moses thought he was indispensable, and Israel could not be judged well unless he had his hand directly in all the civil and spiritual decisions in Israel. Maybe Moses was thinking, “If I’m not involved in everything in this congregation, this place will fall apart!” Moses wanted to hold on to responsibility rather than delegate it.

Notice also that Moses was trying to teach these Jews God’s laws through one-to-one, face-to-face counseling sessions. He was trying to be a counselor to a few when God had called him to be a teacher of God’s law to the masses in his congregation. Moses wanted the more personal touch, but this was not the best use of his spiritual gifts.

“And Moses’ father-in-law said to him, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.’” Jethro gave Moses some kind criticism about being a one-man show and not delegating responsibility. He also saw the people were not getting their needs met. In fact, they were wearing out with weariness, waiting for Moses to make legal judgments. These Jews were getting restless and unhappy with Moses and perhaps were on the edge of revolt because of a lack of proper attention to their legitimate needs. We see here how even Moses had to be rebuked at times, but notice how kind Jethro was in his rebuke of Moses. Jethro was not like the Israelites who came to Moses with a griping and complaining spirit, but Jethro came to Moses with a loving spirit, pointing out an obvious flaw in the way Moses was running things. Jethro was a good public relations man. Jethro was concerned for Moses’ health, for he thought he would “wear out” or, to put it in more modern terms, “crack up” or “break down.” Jethro knew that if Moses did not change his own life style and the way he was doing things, he would have a nervous breakdown. Moses had to give up his martyr complex and stop being a workaholic as he was operating under the guilt and pressure of the ministry.

No local church or any Christian organization should ever be a one-man show. Moses had to learn to delegate responsibility. Moses had to find a way he could be the final authority, but that others would take up some of his workload. Moses had to learn to delegate much responsibility and some authority while he himself had the final say on all laws and principles that affected Israel’s welfare.

Dealing with people is one of the occupational hazards of the ministry. People have genuine needs, but one man cannot meet all their needs. Counseling takes so much time (there is a legitimate place for counseling), but the pastor cannot meet all the counseling needs of all the people. A pastor who is always trying to meet needs will find himself worked to a frenzy, frustrated and neglecting the study and teaching of the Word of God. In fact, he just may crack up, as many do, because people are constantly seeking his advice. A pastor must also be careful that counseling and need meeting does not become an ego trip whereby individuals in a congregation get dependent upon him, seeking all their solutions from him rather than from God and His Word. Any pastor who is only a need-meeter will soon burn out.

JETHRO’S INSTRUCTION - Exodus 18: 19-23

“Now listen to me: I shall give you counsel and God be with you.” Jethro gave advice to Moses and it was excellent advice. Some Bible commentators have suggested that Jethro’s advice was of the flesh and but a human solution to the problem. However, there is no evidence that this advice was of the flesh. It should be pointed out that Jethro told Moses he should not accept these suggestions until it was determined that they were the Lord’s will. When he said, “God be with you,” that was his way of saying, “God lead or direct you.” Advice can be misleading, and only through prayer and meditation on the facts can a person know whether the advice given to him is good or bad.

Not all advice is to be accepted, but all advice is to be considered. However, all advice should be prayed over so as to determine whether it is from the Lord.

“You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk, and the work they are to do.” Moses apparently was to teach the people *en masse*. His task was to give them God’s law. He was to shepherd the flock by teaching them the Word of God.

The pastor’s primary task is not to be a counselor but to be an instructor of God’s law as it is found in the Bible. God’s people must have God’s Word, and God calls the pastor to teach the Bible to His people. He is to shepherd God’s people primarily through the teaching of the Scriptures.

According to the New Testament, even the Apostles had to learn that their primary task in life was to pray and teach the Word.

“And the Twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’”(Acts 6:2-4)

“Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them, as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.” Jethro suggested that Moses pick out certain men and train them for leadership positions. Apparently the people had something to say in the choosing of these leaders.

““Choose wise and discerning and experienced men from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads.’ And you answered me and said, ‘The thing which you have said to do is good.’ So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and appointed them heads over you, leaders of thousands, and of hundreds, of fifties and of tens, and officers for your tribes. Then I charged your judges at that time saying, ‘Hear the cases between your fellow-countrymen, and judge righteously between a man and his fellow-countryman, or the alien who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not fear man, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’” (Deut. 1:13-17)

Moses was not to be a one-man show, but he was to put around him qualified leaders and to these leaders he would delegate much responsibility and some authority. Moses was to break down two million Jews into groups of different sizes. Each group was to have a leader and the leader reported back to Moses. These leaders had to be qualified. They were to be men of sound judgment and common sense who were bold and would not compromise convictions when frowned upon by the people. They also had to fear God in that they knew they would have to give an account to God for their leadership. They were also to be men of the truth; that is, men of integrity and honesty who based their moral values on God’s law, not on the changing opinions of men. Lastly, they could not be leaders if they were in it for the money or took bribes under the table.

In every local church, there must be an authority structure, and there must also be a delegating of responsibility. God sends one man, the pastor, to do a work in a congregation, and then God places around the pastor elders who are of equal authority with the pastor and who bear the burden of the ministry with the pastor. The pastor is the leader of the elders, but the final authority in the local church does not rest in the pastor, but in the elders, who are responsible for the spiritual welfare of the flock. Then God has deacons who are servants and helpers of God, the elders, and the congregation, and the deacons are responsible for the physical aspects of the ministry in the local church. Still further, God has gifted each person in the local church with at least one spiritual gift, and he is to use it in that congregation for the building up of that local body and for the glory of God. The elders must delegate much responsibility and some authority in order to get all the members of the local church functioning as a body.

Certainly this verse gives some precedence to break down a local congregation into small groups of believers who will be ministered to by an elder or by a leader chosen by the elders. The only way a large church can stay personal and meet the needs of all the people is to break into small groups during the week and to meet as a total body on Sunday. This plan, of course, takes the pressure off the pastor and the elders and causes the saints to minister and use their spiritual gifts.

“And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.” Trained leadership would handle all the minor problems in Israel and the tough problems would then be given to Moses. With this system, probably ninety percent of Moses’ burden was lifted. Moses could not be an effective leader unless he had those who stood with him and shared the burden of the ministry with him.

No pastor can be effective in the ministry unless he has those in leadership who stand with him and share the burden of the ministry with him.

People in a congregation who have counseling needs should seek to get those needs met by asking brothers and sisters in Christ who demonstrate some spiritual maturity but are not necessarily elders. If they cannot satisfy the person with an adequate solution to the problem, then the person should go to an elder. If an elder cannot solve the problem, then it should be brought to the pastor. The pastor, then, must deal with the problem but seek as quickly as possible to get that person off any dependence upon him. The pastor must always seek to get the counselee to depend upon God for his solutions to problems.

“If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people shall go to their place in peace.” Jethro told Moses if he would follow this plan, he would not crack up. What is the plan? Train leadership, delegate responsibility, break up the congregation into small groups and handle only the weighty counseling problems. What will be the result? Moses will have time to study and teach the Bible; the people will be at peace and will not revolt; and Israel will get to the Promised Land.

JETHRO’S INFLUENCE - Exodus 18:24-26

“So Moses listened to his father-in-law, and did all that he had said.” Moses took all Jethro’s advice. Moses was a great man because he knew how to take advice. Moses was also a humble man because he took advice from a man who was probably his own convert to the Lord.

A man who cannot take criticism, or who refuses to listen to advice, or thinks he is always right, can never be a great man. Great men listen to advice, pray over it, and do it if it is the Lord’s will, setting aside all human pride.

“And Moses chose able men out of Israel, and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And they judged the people at all times; the difficult disputes they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.” Solid administration, delegation of authority to some degree, and the sharing of responsibility kept Moses from a mental breakdown and the people from revolt.

Every local church must find the right administrative means for meeting the needs of its people.

JETHRO’S ITINERARY - Exodus 18:27

“Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell . . .” What a parting that must have been! Jethro revolutionized Moses’ life and ministry, and Moses was so grateful. He did not want to see his father-in-law go.

“ . . . And he went his way into his own land.” Jethro just passes out of the picture for us in this verse, but he was truly a great man. He touched Moses’ life at an administrative level that absolutely kept Moses from cracking up and kept the sons of Israel from revolting. This man Jethro did his part in guaranteeing that Israel would also make it into the land.

CONCLUSION

What really made Moses and Jethro great? Was it their brains, their skills, their personalities, their positions, their money, or their leadership ability? No! They knew God, and because they knew God, they were committed to Him and wanted to do His will. They were humble men who were sharp in every way! Why? They knew God.

Do you know God? How can you know Him? You can know God personally by believing in Jesus Christ, God’s own dear Son. Jesus Christ takes a person to the Heavenly Father. **“Jesus said to him, ‘ I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.’”** (John 14:6). Jesus said, **“Believe in God, believe also in Me.”** (John 14:1)