

# Witness and Wisdom in the Wilderness

Exodus 18:1-27 | May 5, 2024

## Introduction

Exodus 18 is a story of witness and wisdom in the wilderness. It is a remarkable, intimate portrayal of the relationship between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro. Their interaction unfolds in two acts as these men serve one another. *First*, Moses witnesses about God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt and in the desert. *Then*, Jethro counsels Moses in wisdom after observing how he was seeking to care for the people as their prophet and judge.

## Act 1 - Witness: How Moses Served Jethro

A theme which comes to the centre of the stage in this text is leadership. Moses in his *relationship with and witness to Jethro exemplifies* what Israel was called to be. In God's kingdom, leaders are meant to serve as examples. They're not just appointed to get a job done but to reflect God's character and purposes in their conduct and priorities. God's plan for his people from creation all the way into eternity involves leaders. Leadership... is how God cares for communities.

Godly leaders are characterised by respectful and peaceful relationships. What we observe here in Moses is what's echoed in the New Testament. 1 Timothy 3 - elders are to be "above reproach" and "must be well thought of by outsiders". Deacons, likewise, are to be dignified. Acts 6 - the seven brothers chosen to serve... were to be "men of good repute".

Godly leaders speak about God's work, not their own accomplishments. That's because they are enamoured by God's work and not impressed by themselves. God-centred speech comes from a God-centred heart.

We must learn to speak of God's salvation and sustaining grace while we walk through hardships. Hardships are not evidence of the *absence* of God's love. They are the *arena* in which he displays his love again and again. They are a part of journeying with him.

This story gives us a helpful illustration of conversion. Conversion is a joyful change of convictions, commitments, and community.

## Act 2 - Wisdom: How Jethro Served Moses

Act 2 centres on what happened when Moses took his father-in-law with him to work the next day. God *did not* speak to Moses directly about the weaknesses and dangers in the way he was leading. Instead he provided wisdom through his father-in-law. We need to remember that the people of God have no monopoly on wisdom.

In receiving his father-in-law's advice, Moses models something tremendously important: godly leaders grow and serve through humility. Moses had *good intentions* but *bad methodology*.

Godly leaders grow and serve through humility. Humility is wisdom's everyday walking partner. Proverbs 12:15b says, "A wise man listens to advice"; and 9:9a, "Instruct a wise man, and he will be wiser still".

Being overcommitted and overextended isn't a virtue; it's foolish. And it can be the fruit of pride. Busyness whispers to our ego, "You're so important! Everybody needs you!"

Godly leaders must raise up other godly leaders to share the burden. Jethro's advice called for delegation and a division of labour that maintained Moses' unique calling. One of the ways deacons will serve your pastoral team is by carrying some of the load so they can focus on their unique roles.

In his role as deliverer and prophet, Moses foreshadows Jesus, who represents us before God, warns us about God's laws, and teaches us the way in which we should walk. Jesus was both divine and human, God and man. Yet even for him, his humanity created limits. He embraced those limits by appointing leaders to continue his work here on earth in his physical absence. Though he is not absent spiritually, he cares for his people through leaders, shepherds who he appoints. The scholar T. Desmond Alexander captures this:

*... Jethro emphasizes the importance of teaching God's decrees and instructions to the people (v. 20). Without clear guidance they will lack direction in how to live... To this end, moral teaching should be an integral part of Christian education.*

## Conclusion

In this chapter we see *godly leadership exemplified* as Moses fulfils God's purpose for his people by declaring all that the Lord had done. And we see *leadership edified* as Moses humbly embraces Jethro's advice and help from capable men in Israel.

This story speaks eloquently about God's care for us, his people. He blesses his church with leaders who are called to be examples in how they relate to and witness to outsiders. And he cares for them through the wisdom of his word so that they are able to care effectively for others and love while embracing their limits. This passage shows us God's gracious plan and provision:

**God cares for his people through leaders who exemplify his purposes and embrace help from others.**