

Lesson 3 | September 15, 2024

Jethro: Moses' Counselor and Father-in-Law

Study Text: Exodus 2:11–22; 3:1–10; 4:18–20; 18:1–27

Central Truth: Value God-honoring relationships and listen to wise counsel.

Key Verse: Exodus 18:24

So Moses hearkened to the voice of his father in law, and did all that he had said (KJV).

Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize the dangers of rash actions.
- Students will learn the value of seeking wise counsel and how it leads to success in God's service.
- Students will accept and seek wise counsel instead of rejecting or feeling threatened by it.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: Have you ever found yourself in a situation where things kept going wrong—even though you thought you were following God? Moses knew what it was like to be overwhelmed like this. Just like us, he needed advice, encouragement, and support.

Discussion Starter—Wise Words

Say: What are some examples of good advice you have received?

Say: The Book of Proverbs tells us, “If you reject discipline, you only harm yourself; but if you listen to correction, you grow in understanding” (15:32). It can be difficult to admit we need other people's advice, but having a trusted counselor is a biblical model. Wise advisers can keep us from making shortsighted decisions that negatively impact our ability to be effective for God. In today's lesson, we'll look at several points in Moses' life when he needed a godly counselor and the man God used to fill that role.

Moses was called to deliver God's people from slavery in Egypt. But after killing an Egyptian official and fleeing from Pharaoh, he had become an exile in the wilderness. Moses had a lot to learn before he was ready to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. He desperately needed a wise counselor. In today's lesson, we will look closely at some key events in Moses' life through the lens of his father-in-law, Jethro (also called Reuel). He joins the narrative first as an outside witness to God's miraculous deliverance. Then he moves into the role of counselor during a critical time of Moses' leadership.

Part 1—Jethro Provides Sanctuary for Moses

Moses Flees from Pharaoh

Exodus 2:11–14

Say: Even though Moses had grown up in the Egyptian court, he recognized the Israelite slaves were “his own people” (Exodus 2:11). The writer of Hebrews puts it this way: “It was by faith that Moses, when he grew up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to share the oppression of God’s people instead of enjoying the fleeting pleasures of sin” (11:24–25). This choice would separate him from Egypt, bind him to the Israelite people, and eventually lead to their deliverance.

The phrase “his brethren” (KJV) is repeated twice in Exodus 2:11 to emphasize Moses’ connection with the Israelites. The original language leaves room for interpretation as to Moses’ intent in killing the Egyptian. But regardless of whether he was acting righteously or rashly, it resulted in consequences that followed Moses for decades.

The next day, Moses intervened in a fight between two Israelite men, one of whom was clearly in the wrong (verse 13). The aggressor, attempting to deflect attention from his own wrongdoing, pointed out Moses’ actions. How often do we dismiss other people’s criticism with a quick retort about their own shortcomings?

The Israelite not only declared Moses’ guilt but questioned whether Moses had any authority to settle their dispute. Moses had no title or position among the Israelites yet. With his leadership rejected and a death sentence hanging over him, Moses became an exile far from his former home in the Egyptian palace. How could he ever serve as God’s instrument of deliverance?

Discuss

- Why do you think Moses got involved in the lives of his fellow Israelites?
- Do you think Moses’ actions in this passage would have been different if he had sought wise counsel? Explain.

Moses Meets Jethro

Exodus 2:15–22

Say: Moses’ choices removed him from his position of influence and seemed to limit his ability to help his fellow Israelites. Exiled in Midian, he could not advocate for them from within the Egyptian government. He could not even visit them any longer. At this low point in Moses’ life, God connected him with a wise leader named Jethro. With his support, the next phase of Moses’ life was about to begin.

Fleeing Egypt, Moses ended up in Midian (Exodus 2:15). The Midianites are thought by some to be seminomadic people who were descendants of Abraham and his wife Keturah (*Keh-TYOO-ruh*; Genesis 25:2). The significance of Moses’ time with the Midianites is twofold:

1. *Moses' New Station.* The man raised in a palace became a hired shepherd tending someone else's flock (Exodus 3:1). Not only did he lose his position, but his new occupation was considered shameful in the Egyptian culture in which he was raised (Genesis 46:34).
2. *Moses' New Location.* No longer a city dweller, Moses was now part of a tribe. He would have spent most of his days outdoors, in all kinds of weather, fending off wild animals and hunting for good grazing land.

God was expanding Moses' skillset so he would be equipped to lead the Israelites out of Egypt at the right time. During this precarious and vulnerable time in Moses' life, the high priest of Midian provided him with shelter, a wife, a home, and an essential education in wilderness living. Exodus 2:16 tells us Jethro was the priest of Midian and had seven daughters. Beyond those details, Scripture includes little information about his life story or what kind of man he was. However, it seems clear that he either knew or came to know God. Since Exodus was written to honor the one true God, it would be surprising for its author to celebrate a priest unless he worshipped that God. Although Exodus strictly forbids idolatry (20:4), Jethro was not condemned as an idolatrous pagan. Furthermore, in Exodus 18, Jethro praised Yahweh and offered Him sacrifices (verses 10–12; see Part 3 for more on this passage).

In his characteristic role as deliverer, Moses fought off the shepherds who were blocking Jethro's daughters from watering their flocks (2:17). This time he was successful in bringing about justice. (By including this account, the author might have been foreshadowing Moses' eventual success in delivering the Israelites.) Because of Moses' intervention at the well, Jethro's daughters surprised their father by returning from their watering chore much sooner than usual (verse 18). The young women identified Moses as an Egyptian (verse 19), perhaps because of his accent or clothing, and reported what he had done. Jethro replied in a characteristic Near Eastern pattern of speech with repeated questions ending with a hospitable invitation: "Then where is he? . . . Why did you leave him there? Invite him to come and eat with us" (verse 20). The dialogue allows the reader to feel the animation and excitement of the moment.

Moses' deliverance of the Israelites had been delayed, but as one scholar aptly points out, "God is never in any great hurry to prepare his servants to do his will, especially when he has some great work for them to accomplish. There is no better example of this than the prophet Moses, who spent four decades in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry."¹ (See Acts 7:29–30.)

Resource Packet Item 1: Caring for the Vulnerable

When Moses arrived in Midian, he was alone and friendless. Jethro, the priest of Midian, took him in and sheltered him, eventually making him part of the family. This handout will prompt students to list the most vulnerable people in their lives and come up with practical ways to care for them in the coming week.

1. Philip Graham Ryken and R. Kent Hughes, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 71.

Discuss

- What leadership lessons do you think Moses learned during his time with the Midianites?

Part 2—Jethro Blesses the Mission

God Calls Moses

Exodus 3:1–10

Say: In the middle of Moses' normal workday, God showed up with a totally different plan. No matter where we are or how we got there, God can find us and send us on a special assignment.

Moses had lost his position of influence . . . or had he? Sometimes, God pulls His people out of active service for extra leadership training. Scripture includes few details of Moses' season in the wilderness of Midian, but we can be certain that he learned humility. Compare his behavior in Exodus 2:13 with the description in Numbers 12:3: "Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth."

The end of this season in Moses' life was marked by a unique encounter with God. Tending Jethro's sheep in the wilderness—a rugged, rocky place more than a sand-filled desert—Moses reached Mt. Sinai, a location that would be vitally important later in Exodus. He was amazed when he noticed a bush that was on fire but was not being consumed (Exodus 3:2–3). Speaking to Moses out of the flames, God called him to deliver the Israelites, identifying himself for the first time as Yahweh (verse 15).

It is not surprising that God chose the medium of fire when appearing to Moses. Later in Exodus, God led His people "in a pillar of fire" (13:21). At the consecration of Aaron and his sons, "fire blazed forth from the Lord's presence and consumed the burnt offering" (Leviticus 9:24). At the dedication of Solomon's temple, "fire flashed down from heaven" (2 Chronicles 7:1). Hundreds of years later, God sent tongues of fire to signify the manifest presence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3).

From the burning bush, God called himself "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6), connecting Moses' mission of deliverance with the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1–3). God was about to free His people from slavery, clearing the path for them to return to the land He had promised—and Moses was the one tasked with this mission (Exodus 3:10).

Discuss

- Has God ever interrupted your normal routine to give you a new assignment or teach you something new about himself? If so, share the story with the class.

Resource Packet Item 2: Meeting with God

Moses' encounter with the burning bush is one of the Scripture's best-known theophanies, or visible manifestations of God to a person. Students will read about

other theophanies in the Bible and reflect on our ability to experience God's glory freely through Jesus.

Moses' Character Development

Exodus 4:18–20

Say: One of the biggest challenges missionaries face is leaving family and familiarity behind to follow God's call wherever He leads. Likewise, after forty years of security and hospitality among the Midianites, it was probably difficult for Moses to begin the journey back to Egypt. But despite his doubts, his mandate from God was clear: "Now go! I will be with you as you speak, and I will instruct you in what to say" (Exodus 4:12).

If Moses told Jethro about his encounter with God, the Bible does not record the conversation. It can be tempting to speculate and supply facts when the Bible is silent, but the truth is, we simply do not know all the details. Moses simply asked Jethro to allow him to return to Egypt—presumably to check on his fellow Israelites—and admitted, "I don't even know if they are still alive" (Exodus 3:18). The text might be contrasting Moses' departure from Jethro with Jacob's departure from his own father-in-law Laban (Genesis 31), although Laban was not as honest and honorable as Jethro appears. Additionally, the text is possibly comparing this episode to Moses' flight from Pharaoh forty years earlier, when he certainly did not leave in peace. What is the point? Moses had matured. He could make calculated, measured decisions, securing the blessing of an authority figure while also following the Lord's direction. He was ready to carry out God's mission of deliverance.

As a leader of the Midianites, Jethro understood the importance of tribal bonds. He sent Moses on his way with the words, "Go in peace" (Exodus 4:18). He appears to have had no assurance that Moses was on a mission from God or that he intended to return, but he clearly had enough respect for his son-in-law to give a simple, trusting assent.

God reassured Moses that "all those who wanted to kill you have died" (verse 19), likely to calm some of the apprehension Moses may have been feeling about returning to Egypt. Moses took along his wife Zipporah and their two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Following God's direction, they journeyed toward Egypt to undertake the mission Moses had been given. Moses carried "the staff of God" (verse 20) with which he would "perform the miraculous signs" of God (verse 17).

Discuss

- Why do you think Jethro was so quick to give Moses permission to leave?
- Have you ever given someone permission without requiring a full explanation of their intentions? What made that level of trust possible?

Part 3—Jethro Gives Leadership Advice

Moses and Jethro Are Reunited

Exodus 18:7–12

Say: At this point in our lesson, we skip forward several months—past the plagues, the first Passover, and the parting of the Red Sea. The Israelites are no longer slaves in Egypt. They have eaten manna, drunk water from a rock, and witnessed a miraculous victory over the Amalekites. They have now reached Mt. Sinai, where God would reveal himself to them in the same location Moses had first encountered Him. But first, Moses was about to have a family reunion.

During Moses' conflict with Pharaoh, his wife and two sons had been sent back to live with Jethro, possibly to keep them safe (Exodus 18:2). Now that the Israelites were no longer in Egypt, Jethro brought Zipporah, Gershom, and Eliezer back to Moses at the Israelite campsite near Mt. Sinai (verse 5).

The family greeted one another, exchanging kisses and asking about one another's health. Then Moses recounted the miraculous ways God had delivered Israel from Egypt and rescued them from trouble along their journey. Jethro responded with faith and rejoicing: "Praise the Lord! . . . He has rescued Israel from the powerful hand of Egypt! I know now that the Lord is greater than all other gods" (verses 10–11).

Jethro's statement of faith summarized the events of the previous chapters, providing an outside witness that these amazing accounts were true (see Joshua 2:8–11). Then he took it a step further and "brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God" (Exodus 18:12). Notably, verse 12 uses Elohim, the universal name for God, rather than Yahweh. Some believe this is because Jethro was relating to God as an outsider rather than an Israelite, although he is not condemned for this. In fact, "Aaron and all the elders of Israel came out and joined him in a sacrificial meal in God's presence."

Discuss

- How do you (and your family) celebrate the good things God is doing?
- In what ways is the author establishing Jethro's character as someone who can advise Moses?

Jethro's Advice

Exodus 18:13–27

Say: The Book of Proverbs is full of sayings about seeking wise counsel: "Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life" (19:20) and "Fools think their own way is right, but the wise listen to others" (12:15). But long before these bits of wisdom were collected for us, Moses had already learned the value of listening to good advice.

Observing the Israelite camp, Jethro could see the inefficiency of Moses' system of leadership. People were tired and cranky after waiting around all day for Moses to settle their disputes. Something needed to change. Presumably, Jethro had experience with such matters as a leader of the Midianites, so the advice he gave Moses had likely been tried and proven.

Jethro offered his advice with the caveat that Moses should only follow it at God's command (Exodus 18:19, 23). Godly counselors today should do the same, pointing others to seek God's wisdom above any kind of earthly wisdom (see James 3:13–18). Jethro also suggested the qualities Moses should look for in his delegates: "capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes" (Exodus 18:21). These requirements call to mind Paul's lists of qualifications for church leaders (see 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:6–9).

When Moses had asked permission to return to Egypt, Jethro had simply responded, "Go in peace" (Exodus 4:18). And when Jethro offered leadership advice, Moses displayed the same level of trust, humbly following his father-in-law's suggestions (18:24). He selected leaders to judge the people. They brought only the most difficult cases to Moses (verse 26; Deuteronomy 1:9–18).

Wise, effective leaders today are certainly familiar with the concept of delegation, but there is a larger lesson to be learned from this passage. Like Moses, the best leaders are open to advice from others—especially those with experience and proven effectiveness like Jethro.

Resource Packet Item 3: Good Advice vs. Bad Advice

Students will divide into four groups and discuss excerpts from Proverbs about giving and receiving advice.

Discuss

- How have you seen delegation work in your career? Your family? Your church?
- Are you open to godly counsel? Why or why not?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Even though God handpicked him to lead Israel, Moses still benefited from the advice of an experienced leader—who wasn't even an Israelite! Most leaders receive advice—solicited or not—but Moses was humble enough to listen carefully, recognize wise and godly counsel when he heard it, and put it into practice.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Make conscious choices to honor and obey God in such a way that those in authority over you can bless you and rejoice.
- With God's guidance, seek out people who are willing to give you godly advice. Then prayerfully listen to what they say.
- Are you struggling with unsustainable demands on your time and energy? Strategize ways to delegate your tasks and avoid burnout.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Abraham's Servant Obeys.

Genesis 24:1–10

Tuesday:

Jonathan's Armorbearer Follows.

1 Samuel 14:6–14

Wednesday:

The People Respond to Haggai's Words.

Haggai 1:12–15

Thursday:

Nathanael Follows Philip to Jesus.

John 1:43–51

Friday:

The Holy Spirit Gives Counsel.

John 14:23–27

Saturday:

Mutual Respect.

Ephesians 5:19–21