

Prayer

Dear Lord, forgive me when I have failed to live up to the standards to which I aspire. In the face of temptations, give me the courage to choose to do what is right and turn away from the tempter: and in the face of spiritual danger, give me the strength to stand firm in faith and resolve for what is good. Bless me, dear Lord, and receive the prayer I pray: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

What has aroused your feeling in the last twenty four hours, whether good or bad? Be sure to pray about these things and seek the Lord's will.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the homeless.** *Pray for those churches who run shelters, and try to reach out to the homeless with love, and with the Gospel*
- *Give thanks for the Lord's help in each part of your daily living*
- *Pray for your local rescue services and those who control them*

Meditation

Everlasting Light, shine on me in the midst of darkness;
Everlasting Goodness, deliver me from all evil;
Everlasting Strength, sustain me in my hours of need;
Everlasting Rock, inspire me to stand firm in faith;
Everlasting Wisdom, scatter the filth of my ignorance;
Everlasting Power, be my support, through all I do;
Everlasting Peace, still the fears that fill my mind;
Everlasting Love, wrap me in the strength of Your arms;
Everlasting Hope, keep me moving onwards, towards You;
Everlasting Lord, we give You thanks and praise!

Bible passage – Exodus 18:1-12

¹ Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard about all that God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. ² Now, after Moses had sent her away, Jethro had taken in Zipporah, his wife, ³ along with her two sons. The name of one was Gershom (for he said, 'I have been a sojourner in a foreign land'), ⁴ and the name of the other was Eliezer (for he said, 'The God of my father was my helper, and saved me from the sword of Pharaoh').

⁵ Jethro came to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God, with his sons and his wife. ⁶ Now, he had said to Moses, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, will come to you with your wife and her two sons.' ⁷ So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and bowed down and kissed him; each one asked after the welfare of the other, and then they went into the tent. ⁸ Moses told his father-in-law everything that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for the sake of Israel, all the hardship that had come upon them on the journey, and how the LORD had delivered them. ⁹ Jethro rejoiced because of all the good that the LORD had done for Israel in saving them from the hand of the Egyptians. ¹⁰ Jethro said, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and has delivered the people from the hand of the Egyptians.' ¹¹ Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, for He did this because in this way, the Egyptians

treated Israel with contempt.’¹² Then Jethro brought a burnt offering and other sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law in the presence of God.

Bible Study

Review

The story of Moses’ meeting with Jethro and the reunification with his family is a touching and deeply human addition to the complex story of the Exodus. Chapter 18 stands between two significant parts of the story of the Exodus, between the first part of Israel’s troubled wandering through the wilderness (chapters 16 and 17), and the meeting of Israel with her God at Mount Sinai (chapters 19 and 20). Within the text there are echoes of what has just happened with the liberation of Israel from Egypt (18:8f.), and also indications that the people of Israel were coming close to the ‘mountain of God’ (18:5). The section of chapter 18 that forms our passage for today tells us the personal story of Moses’ meeting with Jethro. The second half of the chapter (which we will read tomorrow) describes the results of this meeting as Jethro advises Moses on how to govern the people of Israel.

Earlier in Exodus (chapter 2:15f.) we read the story of Moses’ flight after his rash slaughter of an Egyptian. He fled to the desert and met ‘the Priest of Midian’, a man named Reuel (Ex 2:18), and married his daughter Zipporah. In our passage today, the name ‘Reuel’ has changed to ‘Jethro’, and there is no explanation for this change of name for the man we know as Moses’ ‘father-in-law’, the ‘priest of Midian’ (18:1,6,7,8,12).

Exodus 2 records the birth of just one son to Moses and Zipporah named ‘Gershom’ (2:22), but nothing is said there about another son. The story continues with Moses meeting God at the famous ‘burning bush’ (Ex 3:1 - 4:17), and returning to Egypt to confront Pharaoh on Israel’s behalf (Ex 5f.). We are led to believe that Zipporah travelled with Moses back to Egypt (Ex 4:24-26), but from what we read in our reading today, it seems that at some point, Moses sent her back to her father (18:2). Surprisingly, when the family comes together again (18:1f.) , we read that Moses has another son named Eliezer, which seems to reflect all that had happened to Moses since he left Zipporah (see 18:4)! Moses may have left his young wife in order to face the great task God had given him (4:26), and when he met her again, he did so as the triumphant leader of a people saved by God. Perhaps the second child had been conceived just before they spilt up, but only now was Moses able to name his new son, and Moses gave him a name that honoured God.

The rest of our passage (18:5-12) describes the formal meeting of Moses and his father in law. They were two men of great importance; Jethro was a priest and the older man, and Moses was the leader of a great nation of people who had ‘defeated’ Egypt, and the meeting was formal, yet warm (18:5-7). Once the formalities were over, Moses set about explaining the amazing story of the deliverance and salvation of Israel by Almighty God (18:8).

Today, there is a great deal of speculation about Jethro and what his role as a ‘priest of Midian’ might be. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham via his second wife Keturah (Gen 25:2) and may well have preserved some aspects of their ancestor’s faith in God, though not the Covenant faith of Isaac, Jacob and the Israelite peoples. The interesting conclusion of the story we have read today is that the evidence of all God had done was sufficient to persuade Jethro to worship the living God (18:10-12)!

In conclusion, our passage today begins with the reunification of Moses’ family, and we also learn that Moses testified about what God had done for Israel (18:8). In explaining to his father-in-law what God had done, he seems to have convinced Jethro of the divine nature of what had happened. The passage then ends with an amazing description of Moses, Jethro, Aaron and the elders of Israel eating a ‘fellowship’ meal together, in the presence of God (18:12)! God always intended that Israel should testify to the nations (Gen 12:2,3, Is. 42:6 etc.), and this passage proves that this did indeed take place from time to time, even in the Old Testament.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Details about Moses’ family in scripture (18:1-4)
- The significance of a meeting between two leaders (18:5f.)
- The story of Israel’s salvation from Egypt (18:8f.)
- The power of the story - Jethro’s ‘conversion’? (18:10,11)
- Communion offerings and meals in the Old Testament (18:12)

Notes on the text and translation

- V2** ***'Now, Jethro ...'** The Hebrew text here repeats 'Moses' father in law' retaining his formal identity as in verse 1. To repeat the phrase sounds odd in English, so I have left it out, and it does not detract from the meaning of the text.*
- V3** ***'the name of one was Gershom ... "I have been a sojourner ..."'** The word play in this name is this; the two Hebrew words that make up the name 'Gershom' are 'ger' meaning 'sojourner', and 'sham' meaning 'name'.*
- V4** ***'Eliezer ..."the God of my Father was my helper."'** The word play in this name is this; the two Hebrew words that make up the name 'Eliezer' are 'Eli' meaning 'my God', and 'ezer' meaning 'help'.*
- V6** ***'Now he had said to Moses ...'** The words here sound like a prior arrangement or promise made that was now being kept. For this reason, the second half of the verse which is usually translated as a present; 'I am coming to you with your wife', can be translated as a future; 'I will come to you' (as in my translation). There is no grammatical 'future' tense in Hebrew, and so we have to use such methods of analysis to assess how to translate a passage.*
- V9** ***'... the hand of the Egyptians'** This expression refers to the strength or the power of the Egyptians. The 'hand' is generally a symbol of strength.*
- V10** ***'from the hand of the Egyptians'** You will see that this phrase is repeated here in this verse, virtually saying the same thing twice! Some Bible versions omit the last phrase so that the verse does not sound repetitive. However, Moses is the first one who is 'saved' and then the people are 'delivered' from the hand of the Egyptians. This subtle difference is at least something that should be preserved in the text for our comment and analysis.*
- V11** ***'because in this way, the Egyptians treated Israel with contempt.'** The Hebrew says literally, 'because in this matter they were contemptuous against them.' I have filled in 'Egypt' and 'Israel' to this sentence so that it reads normally in English.*
- V12** ***'in the presence of God'** The Hebrew says, 'before the face of God', and this is a colloquial expression for doing something in the presence of someone else. This is a contentious text, because Jewish tradition says that no one could see God and live. For this reason, some translations have 'before God' at this point, so that no 'face to face' meeting is implied. However, there is no doubting what the Hebrew means, and there are a number of instances of Moses and other elders doing things or eating food in God's 'presence' (see also Ex 24:10).*

Going Deeper

Details about Moses' family in scripture (18:1-4)

It is fascinating to construct a family story out of the brief elements of what Exodus tells us about Jethro (Reuel), Moses and Zipporah and their sons from the brief texts we have in Exodus. These are Exodus 2:15-22, 4:24-26 and this passage. The one aspect of this story we have not commented upon so far is the mystery of why Zipporah and Gershom set out for Egypt with Moses (4:24), but ended up staying with Jethro whilst Moses and Aaron worked at doing God's will in Egypt.

Exodus 4:24-26 tells us that on the way to Egypt, a rather mysterious event happened in which the Lord attempted to kill Moses, and Zipporah responded by circumcising Gershom (Ex 4:24-26). The whole story leaves many unanswered questions, including the question of when Eliezer was born, but it could well be that the couple subsequently decided that the mission Moses was embarking upon was too dangerous for a family. This is relevant to our passage today because in verse 2, Exodus tells us that Moses had 'sent her (Zipporah) away' and in English we do not spot that the word used here in Hebrew for 'send away' is the one normally reserved for 'divorce' (see Deut 24:1f.). There is no indication in scripture that Moses divorced Zipporah in the way we mean it today, rather the two of them agreed and endured a separation (a 'sending away') for the sake of the work of God. It is a powerful and emotional story, even if we have to construct it from more than one text!

Clearly, the meeting described here (18:1-4) is a joyful re-union. Zipporah may not have expected to see Moses again, for who could challenge the great Pharaohs of Egypt and live! It certainly seems that whenever Eliezer was born, he was named by Moses at this point in time, their joyful first meeting after the events of the Exodus. The name means strictly, 'my God is a helper', but this passage expands this to refer to the saving power of God. Perhaps, as Moses saw his second child for the first time, he realised the truth of his own escape and salvation from Pharaoh (18:4).

The significance of a meeting between two leaders (18:5f.)

Meetings today are far less formal than those in ancient times. In days before instant communication, people would go considerable periods of time between seeing relatives, according to what was happening in their lives, and here, Jethro's meeting with Moses was clearly arranged. The meeting took place after Moses' own authority as leader of Israel had been secured by the victory over the Amalekites (17:8-16), and as they approached the awesome 'mountain of God' in the Sinai / Horeb range (18:5).

If you read the story of Moses' meeting with Jethro (18:6) you will find that a message was sent to Moses by Jethro, telling him that he was coming with his wife and two sons. This proper nomadic courtesy enabled Moses to make preparation for the greeting of his father-in-law and the home-coming of his wife and family. We would love to know more details about the meeting of Moses and his family, for example, how long it had been since Moses and Zipporah had seen each other. However, the passage continues by concentrating on what was said and what was done between Moses and Jethro. The respect afforded to Jethro by Moses proved to be vital for the next phase of the story (see 18:13-27), and this is of importance to the whole story of Exodus.

The two men met each other formally, with Moses bowing down before his father-in-law as the elder man followed by a kiss of greeting (18:7). The two shared formal enquiries about their well-being, or 'shalom' (18:7), a greeting exchanged and respected even to this day in many middle eastern cultures. These formalities being concluded, the two went into Moses' tent, where a deeper conversation took place.

The story of Israel's salvation from Egypt (18:8f.)

We read that Moses began by telling Jethro the story of what had happened. This was a 'testimony', a story of faith about God's power to save from the might of Pharaoh (18:9). In addition, however, it was also the personal testimony of Moses about the hardships of the journey through the desert, and from Moses' perspective, the story would have informed Jethro of his own difficulties in holding together a group of people who had already shown that they were rebellious. This conversation proved highly significant, because, as we will read tomorrow, Jethro was swiftly ready to advise Moses about how to lead when he began to see the problems Moses endured (18:13f.).

The highlight of the story however, was not the problems, but what is stated at the end of verse 8; 'how the Lord had delivered them'; it was this saving power of God that impressed Jethro and caused him to rejoice (18:9). In telling the story and sharing his testimony, Moses had gained a right and Godly perspective on everything that had happened. The important thing, above all the problems and complaining of Israel, was that God's people had been saved.

The power of the story - Jethro's 'conversion'? (18:10,11)

As we read through verses 10 and 11, Jethro picks up this important feature of Moses' testimony, and praises God for what he has been told. If you read carefully you will find that in verse 10 Jethro repeats almost exactly what Moses said in the previous verse. Linguistically, we might say that the story is repetitive, but realistically, Jethro was doing the right thing. To this day, students of psychology and counselling are taught that the proper way to indicate to someone else that you have heard them properly is to 'repeat back' to them (in some appropriate way) what they have said. Here, Jethro demonstrates this principle perfectly. Moses must have known he was heard!

We, too, know that Jethro has understood the testimony of Moses because in verse 11, this 'priest of Midian' makes the Old Testament equivalent of a 'statement of faith' in God; 'now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods ...' (18:11). More than this, Jethro, a descendant of Abraham by Keturah and Midian (see above), confessed the God of Jacob (Israel). This is an important reminder to us from Exodus, one of the most 'Jewish' of books of the Law, that God was concerned to demonstrate His saving power to other nations and peoples by means of His own chosen people, Israel. Jethro accepted that God had acted as He had done in sole defence of Israel (18:11).

Communion offerings and meals in the Old Testament (18:12)

The final verse of our passage is of special interest because it describes the worship of God brought by Jethro, as evidence of his faith in the God of Israel; 'then Jethro brought a burnt offering ...' (18:12). To consecrate this offering, and also to show that the meeting with Jethro had greater significance than a private discussion with Moses, Aaron came with 'all the elders of Israel ...' As we have already seen, this event happens before Jethro gave his advice to Moses about sharing leadership with the elders (18:13f.), and it reminds us that good advice often comes after good observation! Jethro had a good chance to weigh up the interaction between Moses and the rest of Israel in this meeting before giving the famous advice that forms the centre-piece of tomorrow's passage (18:13-27).

The last part of verse 12 contains a fascinating comment; Moses, Aaron and the elders of Israel 'ate bread with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God'. Too often, Christians today forget that amongst the many

descriptions of sacrificial offerings and meals within the Old Testament there is considerable and frequent reference to what may best be called 'fellowship meals' in which food is offered to God but consumed by people in an act of unity and purpose under God. Such laws are found in Leviticus 2 and 3, for example, and also illustrated both here and in Exodus 24:9-11. Although it is undoubtedly true that later generations of Israelites thought it sacrilegious to speak God's name and believed that anyone who saw God would die, it is nevertheless true that older texts of the Old Testament, mostly in the first five books of the Bible, are not ashamed to speak of God and people seeing each other. For another example, see Genesis 3, where God meets Adam and Eve, albeit under strained circumstances.

In this instance, the meeting with God is in the form of a meal, and it is not improper for Christians to see in this a Scriptural example of what became in Jesus' lifetime, the special sharing of a fellowship meal. After Jesus' life and death, this meal has become the 'Communion' or 'Lord's Supper' shared by Christians throughout history and across the world. This text should surely be one for which all Christians can rejoice, as it points towards the saving work not simply of the Exodus, but Jesus' death and resurrection. Scripture does not record these things without purpose.

Application

This text has been used to justify the separation of couples when doing missionary work for the Lord, but I am not convinced that this is the wisest approach. This passage is perhaps understood best as an example of an enforced separation (though this example starts with a hint of trouble – see 4:24f.) which is resolved by the grace of God and in His wider scheme of things. The unity of man and woman in marriage should be regarded as sacrosanct, as Jesus' teaching makes very clear (Matt 19:6), and the circumstances of life that enforce separation are part of the fallen nature of our world, and the Lord delights to overcome such difficulties!

It is remarkable that after all the trouble Moses had endured at the hands of Israel, his testimony to Jethro was of the victory and salvation of the Lord. This is a reminder to us that whatever trouble we may face within the life of the church, our testimony to others must surely be of the love and grace of God in our midst. If this is not so, then something is surely amiss. Sometimes it takes real thought and intent to ensure that we do not fall into 'church-bashing' when gossiping to others about things that happen to us. Surely, we can find ways of turning each conversation into an opportunity to give thanks to God for His love? Some of our greatest evangelists have taught us that the best witness comes from people who naturally speak of the good things of God, so that others who are not part of the Kingdom hear that God is good! Then quite naturally, like Jethro, they want more!

The very last sentence of this passage reminds us of the importance of eating together in fellowship. Of course, the church has formalised this in the celebration of the 'Lord's Supper', in response to Jesus' own command (Matthew 26:26f.). Nothing should take away from the meaning of this sacrament. However, we diminish its significance if we are unable to perceive that eating together and sharing is a true social opportunity for the sharing of the Gospel. Using meals to spread the Gospel is used successfully in the 'Alpha' programme, which has been used incredibly by God to bring people into the Kingdom of God in countries where little evangelism has been successful for many years. Much can happen in the sharing of a meal, and when we do this, God is present with us in very special ways.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group the significance of Moses' meeting his family. What can we learn from this today?
2. How important is it that we greet each other appropriately, and how do we indicate things to each other by the different ways we greet each other?
3. There is a clear story of salvation in this passage. What is your 'story of salvation'?

Topics covered by this text

- *The healing work of God in bringing people together*
- *Sharing the Good News*
- *The importance of sharing in meals*

Personal comments by author

I found it quite emotional to read about the coming together again of Moses and Zipporah. We are left in Exodus 4 with a marriage 'in the balance', not knowing what happened after a traumatic event. This passage resolves many of the doubts raised by that awkward text. However, it also raises the issue of whether it is sometimes right for a husband and wife to agree to go separate ways in order to fulfil God's calling. I am not sure there can be any 'rules' for such things, and I know that I find it impossible to countenance such separation. I am reminded by this story that it may be God's call to some, and it is certainly not without considerable cost.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *How much of your own life story is a testimony of God's grace? Think about this for a while, and offer what you think about to the Lord. He will show you how to make sense of your own life's story.*
- *Pray for those people who are married and together in the Lord, but who have been separated because of the Lord's work (missionary workers in troubled parts of the world, for example). Pray for God's love and protection.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, thank You for Your goodness and Your love, which lighten my life and give it meaning and substance. Sustain me in this same goodness and love so that I may maintain a faithful witness to You throughout the whole of my life; through Jesus Christ I pray; AMEN
