

Prayer

It is wonderful, heavenly Father, to know that You have surrounded us with thousands of witnesses to Your faithfulness and Your love. You have given us thousands of angels who stand guard to protect us, and thousands of fellow believers with a testimony of Your love and grace to inspire us and motivate us. Heavenly Father, You have given us all we need for fellowship, support and protection, and we praise You! ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give thanks to God for the people who are an important part of your life, whether you find them difficult or easy. Bless them in Jesus' name.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the homeless.** *Come before the Lord, and ask Him if He has anything to say to you about the plight of those who are homeless*
- *Pray about the way that advertising affects people's lives today*
- *Give thanks for the Lord's help in each part of your daily living*

Meditation

As we begin our work today;

Give us a heart to seek peace with each other;
Give us a mind to seek the truth with each other;
Give us the strength to work well with each other;
Give us the hope to have confidence in each other;
Give us such love that is ready to forgive one another;
Give us a desire to share fully with one another;
Give us compassion to care properly for one another;
Give us the emotions to truly feel for each other;

And so may we honour You this day.

Bible passage – Exodus 18:13-27

¹³ The next day Moses took his seat to act as a judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening.

¹⁴ When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit by yourself, with all the people standing around you from morning until evening?'

¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to consult God. ¹⁶ When they have some issue to be decided, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I apply the statutes of God and His laws.'

¹⁷ Moses' father-in-law then said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸ You will most certainly wear out both yourself and these people with you. For the work is too much for you; you cannot do it alone. ¹⁹ Now listen to what I say. I will advise you, and God will be with you! You must represent the people before God, and you must bring their concerns to God; ²⁰ teach them the statutes and laws and direct them on the path they must travel and the work they must do. ²¹ You must also select capable men from all the people, who fear God, are trustworthy, and who hate bribery; set these over the people as officials over thousands,

hundreds, fifties and tens. ²² Let them sit as judges for the people at all times, but they must bring every important matter to you and decide every minor case themselves. In this way it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³ If you do this, and God directs you, then you will bear the strain, and all these people will go to their homes contented.'

²⁴ Moses listened to the words of his father-in-law and did everything he said. ²⁵ He chose capable men from all Israel and made them as leaders over the people, as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. ²⁶ And they sat in judgment over the people at all times; they brought hard cases to Moses but dealt with minor cases themselves. ²⁷ Then Moses let his father-in-law go on his way, and he went off to his own land.

Bible Study

Review

This is a fascinating passage of Scripture! Moses had been reunified with his family, especially his wife Zipporah and his father in law Jethro, and the people of Israel were encamped at the foot of 'the mountain of God' (18:5). This was probably the foothills of the Sinai mountain range, and as we read this story, we must bear in mind the coming events, at which the Lord God would give His people moral and practical guidance for living as God wanted. Today, we remember this passage principally because of Jethro's famous advice to Moses concerning leadership, but it is important to see that this advice is part of a range of things said by Jethro. All of them have been important for God's people from that day to this.

As Israel came through their times of testing, they were in need of guidance, and it is good for us to remember that Moses needed guidance as well as the people of Israel. Jethro was able to look at what had happened with the benefit of godly wisdom, and his advice helped to stabilise God's people at a critical time in their development.

Moses was a great leader, but we have already seen that he needed support when directing the armies of Israel (17:12). After military victory against Amalek and the spiritual victories of God's provision of food and water in the desert (16:1-17:7), Moses was unchallenged as the supreme leader of Israel and his power was arguably at its zenith. Jethro, however, perceived with wisdom that when one person held this amount of power and authority it would wear out not just the leader, but the people as well (18:18). He saw the long queues of people seeking wise counsel from their leader, and came up with the obvious solution. A series of measures was required, and it was important that Moses accepted this important advice.

The first thing Jethro told Moses was that he should stand firm as the one representative of the people to God (18:19). This connection between leadership and representing the people is interesting, for Jethro's godly advice is that the autocratic leadership expected of people like Pharaoh is not God's will. In this model, leaders should know the limits of their power and be willing to serve the people, that is, to 'represent' them.

Jethro's next advice was this. Moses should teach the people the principles behind the judgements that he gave; this is what is meant by 'statutes and laws' in this passage (18:20). Clearly, the people came to Moses because they did not understand what was right or wrong for them to do. The experience of the Exodus had thrown them all close together for the first time, and they had no clear moral compass by which to manage their affairs. No wonder there were queues before Moses (18:13,14)! Jethro correctly perceived that unless the people were given moral guidance (18:20) they were lost. Of course, this advice sets us up in readiness for God's great 'law-giving', barely more than a chapter away.

Only after this important advice did Jethro tell Moses to set up a leadership structure for the giving of justice, advice that has become well known to this day. Obviously, this could not work unless Moses retained his authority and taught the leaders what was required of them; and neither would it work unless the people chosen were of quality (18:21) and understood the limits of their authority (18:22). Leaders were appointed of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (18:21,25), and interestingly, this is a military model (see Deut 1:15, 1 Sam 22:7, 1 Chron 27:1 etc.). In this way, Moses would be quickly able to transform the nation into a fighting force, as necessary for all that ahead.

Having advised Moses well, Jethro left. He was an important figure, and was used by God to prepare the people spiritually and structurally for the giving of the law (see Exodus 20). Jethro's advice is important for God's people even to this day, because it touches on issues of leadership, representation, teaching, organisation and structure. We should be ready to receive and apply these principles as worthy Scriptural advice.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Social structure and law within Israel
- The qualities of Moses as a leader (18:14-17,19,20,23,24)
- Principles of leadership (18:21,25)
- Qualities of leaders (18:22,26)

Notes on the text and translation

- V13** ***‘took his seat to act as a judge for the people’** The Hebrew says ‘Moses sat to judge the people’. The translation I have given offers a broader interpretation of each Hebrew word to ensure that we picture the grand and formal nature of what happened.*
- V15** ***‘to consult God’** The Hebrew word for ‘consult’ has a range of meanings, and most Bible versions translate this as ‘to inquire of God’. The word can mean ‘to seek out, consult, inquire or resort to’. The very broad nature of the word indicates that people came to Moses with almost anything for which they wished to find God’s opinion or wisdom.*
- V16** ***‘when they have some issue to be decided’** The Hebrew word here is ‘deber’ which is usually translated ‘dispute or ‘difficulty’. However, ‘deber’ is another entirely general word that usually means simply ‘word’ or ‘deed’. I reckon that here in this context, it is best translated as some event or ‘issue’ that is unresolved and needs a decision. The Hebrew uses this very general word to indicate to us the impossibly large range of issues brought before Moses.*
- V16** ***‘I apply the statutes of God and His laws.’** This is a fascinating phrase, but the verb ‘I apply’ is important. It comes from the Hebrew word for ‘to know’, but it is in the form of the verb, which indicates that the action is put into effect. Most Bible versions have ‘I make known to them the statutes ...’. Firstly, the words ‘to them’ are not present, and the phrase I have used, ‘I apply the statutes ...’ seems to me to make more sense both grammatically and logically.*
- V18** ***‘You will most certainly wear out ...’** The Hebrew here is interesting. The sentence begins with a double use of the same word, meaning ‘to sink, drop down, languish or fade’! This is an emphatic form of Hebrew, a grammatical structure often used in the Old Testament that indicates certainty; hence the translation.*
- V19** ***‘you must bring their concerns to God’** Note that the word for ‘concerns’ comes from the same Hebrew word used in verse 16 for the ‘issues’ to be decided.*
- V21** ***‘who hate bribery’** Here, ‘bribery’ is my way of expressing the Hebrew ‘who hate dishonest gain’. Moses is to select leaders, so the form of dishonest gain referred to is bribery, and it is best to name it as such.*
- V23** ***‘... will go to their homes contented’** The Hebrew word for ‘contented’ is ‘shalom’. In other words, the people will be at peace and the community made whole.*

Going Deeper

Social structure and law within Israel (18:13-27)

The reading today begins by describing Moses as a ‘judge’, helping people decide how to live their lives (18:13)! Moreover, it is clear that Moses was required to pronounce on any matter brought to him, mostly involving disagreements between people (see 18:16,22,26). This was entirely natural, for without any other form of legal redress the people came to the man who had led them in the desert and pleaded with God for them, for their food and water. The whole passage strongly implies that the people needed not simply a leader to give judgement, but a proper code of ‘laws and statutes’ that would give social cohesion.

This, of course, is what Jethro spotted, and it is why he told Moses to teach the people what he knew about God’s ‘statutes and laws’ (18:20). These two words are themselves significant. The word for law in Hebrew is ‘Torah’, and it is the word used to describe God’s Word as ‘Law’, that is, the first five books of the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. More generally, ‘Torah’ means God’s ‘ground rules’ for life within Creation, and refers to the principles upon which all other social norms and legal matters are built. The word ‘statute’ is different; it refers to something prescribed, like a rule or regulation derived from the fundamental principles of the law. An example of a statute is the rule about inheritance given by Moses after some women brought him a case that was outside existing law (see Moses’ pronouncement concerning the daughters of Zelophehad; Numbers 26:33f.).

The mention of 'statutes and laws' here is interesting, because when, later on, Moses began to tell the people of Israel what God had revealed to him on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20f.), he used these words exactly to describe what God had given. Some of what God said was indeed 'law', meaning the basic principles of living in God's world, and the rest was clearly 'statutes' which interpreted the law (for example, statutes about the ordination of priests, or how to live in an agricultural society – Exodus 21-23). The difference between law and statute is important, because of how we interpret them today. God's laws are valid for all time. The statutes however are dependent upon the circumstance of life in which we live.

In our passage today, Jethro clearly saw that Israel needed 'statutes and laws'. He did not know where they would come from, but God did not intend that they should come from Moses, and He was about to deliver them Himself!

The qualities of Moses as a leader (18:14-17,19,23,24)

It is interesting to look at Moses' qualities as a leader. Clearly, Moses was an established leader but one who was experiencing the stress and pressure of his position. Nevertheless, he was able to accept the advice of an older man, Jethro. On the face of it, Jethro was able to speak to Moses with strong criticism, saying for example, '*what is this you are doing?*' (18:14). He also offered his solution to Moses with a straight yet correct assessment of the situation; '*what you are doing is not good*' (18:17). Moses was humble enough to act immediately on the advice he was given (18:24-26).

In Numbers 12:3 there is a famous verse which says '*now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth*'. This verse has come in for ridicule from some, largely due to the extraordinary power and influence wielded by Moses over many years. Certainly, people find it hard to see how the Biblical record of Moses could describe him as a 'humble' man. However, the passage we have read today demonstrates that Moses was indeed a humble man who was willing to listen to truth, accept that he had been doing things wrong, and correct it. For a great man, this was true humility.

Moses was indeed humble, but he continued to handle high office, and worked to apply '*the statutes of God and His laws*' (18:16) before they were formally given by God (in Exodus 20). Although Moses was not privy to what God would do and say in coming days, he was still able to discern the things of God and apply them. This was the quality Jethro observed when he said that Moses' knowledge of God's statutes and laws needed to be taught to others (18:20). Moses was therefore spiritual enough to perceive the things of God for himself, yet he was also able to perceive them when explained to him by others. His prompt action to put Jethro's recommendations into practice (18:24) may well have saved Israel much grief and turmoil. It certainly prepared them for their coming encounter with God (Exodus 19).

Principles of leadership (18:21,26)

I have given above a few references to places in the Bible where leaders of 'thousands and hundreds', and in some cases 'fifties and tens' as well are mentioned. The suggestion by Jethro that this structure of leadership be adopted was certainly wise, but may not have been an original idea. It is almost certain that this was a military mode of leadership, because remarkably similar structures are found in Greek and Roman armies, quite apart from the armies of Israel, especially those of David (2 Sam 18:1f.). Ultimately, the exact division of thousands and hundreds (etc.) are not very important because there is virtually no record in the Old Testament of this leadership structure being used in Israel in later times, outside of the army. The only other significant reference is found in the Deuterocanonical book 1 Maccabees 3:55, where the leader Judas Maccabeus appoints leaders exactly as Moses does here, in defence of Jewish life both socially and militarily.

Nowhere else in the whole Bible are there any other instructions about the size of a group of people that should be overseen. However, few would argue with the idea that a small group should consist of around ten people, that a medium sized 'congregation' of God's people is best somewhere between fifty and a hundred people, and beyond that, a large group of a thousand people represents a quite different challenge for leadership. In writing this, I have mimicked the theories of 'cell church', which have been popular in recent years and still offer valid scriptural principles about church leadership and structure for our consideration. If God's people are led in numbers of this size, it does appear that a Godly cohesion can be maintained. Certainly, those who first researched and came up with 'cell church' theory used this passage of scripture as evidence of God's blessing on this structure of leadership for the church.

Qualities of leaders (18:21,22,25)

Within this passage, there are some useful comments from Jethro about the people who should be given leadership in Israel. The original purpose of the 'leaders' was that they should be judges, offering guidance about 'cases' (18:26), but just as Moses acted as a judge and leader, it was inevitable that those he appointed as judges would themselves be seen as community 'leaders' in their own right.

We might well think that Jethro, who was a 'priest of Midian' would know little of the spiritual needs of God's people, and nothing about true Godliness. Nevertheless, he was a man of vision who knew the qualities of humanity that would make for good management and guidance, and although his guidance on leadership could be regarded as general and light on spirituality, there is profound wisdom in his advice. He suggested that the leaders appointed by Moses should be capable people, who were God-fearing, trustworthy and incorruptible (18:21). This is an interesting collection of qualities that should be used today!

The first quality is that of being 'capable'. It is a pity that our view of education today means that people who are awarded Phd's in highly specialised subjects, but who know little of other subjects and other things are given a title 'doctor', which is equated in people's eyes with being 'very wise people'. Without wishing to belittle the immense achievements of academics, there is a vast difference between specialised knowledge and true all round capability. Leaders need to be people who can apply themselves to a range of situations and be effective. The word 'capable' in Hebrew and English refers to the idea of being 'able' to do things, and those who are capable are the real treasures of a community.

It is unsurprising that we find 'God-fearing' in Jethro's list (18:21), though the term could be used of belief in any 'god'. Moses, of course, applied this to the people of Israel, for whom a leader needed to be someone who was committed to God. I mention this because this passage has been used by some to justify including people of various beliefs in the leadership of church institutions. Whatever the reasons for this, I suggest this is not a proper use of scripture.

The next quality is that of being 'trustworthy'. This sounds relatively straightforward, but the Hebrew word 'emet', means 'firm, faithful, true, reliable, sure, stable'. This is an impressive array of qualifications, and most of us can quickly assess whether someone possesses such solidity, whether in their own personal character or in leadership. The last quality is 'one who hates bribery', or who is 'incorruptible', and this is discussed in the review above.

Application

There are a number of important issues to identify within Jethro's suggestions about leadership. However, I will mention briefly one small point raised within our passage, which is often forgotten. Moses says that a leader must be someone who does not accept bribes (18:21). Most of this passage describes the characteristics of good leadership, but here, it identifies the characteristics of bad leadership. Bribery begins as a generous expression of friendship, but can end with large scale corruption and if things go bad, can create the conditions for blackmail. Bribery can take many forms, for example, when leaders succumb to the temptation to offer benefits in exchange for favours; at its worst, some purport to offer spiritual blessings in exchange for money. Martin Luther broke away from the Catholic Church because of such things, and we should be equally vociferous about the appalling sight of pastors offering blessings for cash on supposed Christian TV channels, freely available today.

Leadership within the church is a contentious issue, but what this passage tells us is that the Bible has a great deal to offer us if we are prepared to look. Here, we have suggestions about leadership of different sized groups of people, and a good indication of the nature of those people who are fit for leadership amongst God's people. Probably the most important feature of leadership is summed up in the role of the 'judge', that is the task of providing judgement concerning what is right or wrong, based on the laws and statutes of God. People need leaders who can pronounce on issues with authority, not because they have charisma or natural leadership skills, but because they know the mind of God, and they know God's Word.

In addition to this, leaders amongst God's people need to be people who are decisive and clear, but also ready to accept that they have failings. In this passage, Moses accepted that his own leadership style was wrong and was willing to replace it with the model given him by Jethro. Too often, the church is compromised by leadership that is either too autocratic and demanding of others, or it is too sensitive and ineffective. We have all seen how leadership cannot function, for example, when people tiptoe around delicate issues in the name of being 'loving', when wrong's need to be addressed and dealt with. Leadership in the church must be based on wisdom, discernment and a knowledge of God's moral law, and the more our leaders are willing to be discerning and apply God's moral law to the life of the church, the better for all.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. How does the leadership within your own church measure up to what is described in this text?
2. Discuss what we can learn about Moses within this passage of scripture.

3. How can we be helped by understanding the division of people into tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands? What can this mean to us today, and how can we apply this?

Topics covered by this text

- *Godly roles of leadership*
- *The importance of rules and regulations*
- *The importance of delegation*

Personal comments by author

There is far more in this passage of scripture than I anticipated before I wrote this study, just as I found in yesterday's piece from the same chapter. Frankly, I feel that I have only touched the surface of what the text has for us. There is much more here about the nature of judgement as well as leadership, for example. My prayer is that all who read this will be inspired to look further into this passage of scripture.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Where do you see yourself within this passage of Scripture? As one like Moses? Jethro? As a potential leader? As one who is to be led? Read this passage with these questions in mind and see where the Lord leads you.*
- *Pray for those who need good leaders, whether in the church or in the world, and pray for the good qualities identified within this text to be used as a guide, again, both within the church and also in the world.*

Final Prayer

We praise You and we bless You, Lord God most High. You are our all sufficient means of grace, our all-powerful ally in times of trial, You are our all knowing guide on the journey of life, and You are our all-important guest at every meal and special family event. We praise You and we bless You; AMEN
