

Help Needed, Help Received

Exodus: Revelation and Redemption

Exodus 18:1-27

Pastor Dominick Wong

October 6, 2019

So for those of you who are keeping count, our preaching team has referenced *The Lord of the Rings* franchise four times in our Exodus series alone. So... that'll make today's sermon number five. Some of us reference these books and movies out of a loving obsession (looking at you, Jordan Green). But I think the real reason we've been quoting *The Lord of the Rings* so much in Exodus is that both stories are just so epic. Both feel right at home on the big screen: *The Ten Commandments*, *The Prince of Egypt*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

As a kid, I would watch and re-watch all of these movies over and over again precisely because they were so epic. For eight-year-old me, few things felt as big as those massive battle scenes in *The Lord of the Rings*. Nothing else compared. Good vs. evil on a war-torn battlefield. You can't beat that. I loved it. So much so that, in order to get to the "good" parts, I would watch with remote in hand, fast forwarding through the slower scenes. Frodo or Sam's face would pop up on screen and, click, fast forward. I mean, yeah, sometimes they'd do something cool, but most of the time it was just talking, talking, talking. Not enough fighting. Eight-year-old Dominick just didn't have the patience for it. Let's move on to the good stuff.

I'm older now (though not by much) and when I revisit *The Lord of the Rings* I'm struck by how wrong I was. The story of Frodo, the "boring parts", are actually the most interesting. The heart of *The Lord of the Rings* is really, at its core, captured in those scenes with Frodo and Sam. Frodo's struggle with the ring. Its consuming effects on him, the way it changes who he trusts. But most of all, those scenes center on Frodo and Sam's friendship. How much they depended on each other all the way to the very end. Because when it comes down to it, *The Lord of the Rings* is a story about how we need help in a world broken by sin. And it just so happens that this central theme—our need for help—is what Scripture has for us today.

If you need help, if you're lonely, if you're here today feeling like you're doing life on your own, like no one else is in this with you, today's word has good news for you.

Chapter 18 lies smack dab in the middle of Exodus. Between part one—God's miraculous wonders in the exodus from Egypt—and part two—the stunning drama of God's presence coming to dwell with his people. Compared to those events, what happens in today's passage might seem ordinary, boring. There are no pharaohs, no pillars of fire, no golden calves, no tabernacles. No one's making any movies about chapter 18. But don't fast forward, the message this passage has for us is anything but boring.

Chapter 18 is composed of two acts with one unifying message: you are not alone. There's help. This help comes in two different, but connected, ways. Each act will highlight one of these two ways, and then show us how we should respond. Let's begin by reading Act One.

Exodus 18:1-12¹

¹Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. ²Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, ³along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), ⁴and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). ⁵Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. ⁶And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," ⁷Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. ⁸Then 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 come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. ⁹And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians.

¹⁰Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. ¹¹Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." ¹²And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

This is the Word of the Lord.

ACT ONE

Our story begins with good news. It's been less than a month since the events of the Exodus. But when the Red Sea split, it made waves. There was no way of keeping things quiet. Imagine caravan traders going from town to town, and the first thing they say to everyone they meet is, "you're never gonna believe what happened down in Egypt!"

The news reaches Jethro that not only is his son-in-law alive, but the crazy impossible mission he set out to do has somehow been accomplished. The Israelites are free! In verse 1 Jethro, "heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt." Now he's come to hear about it from the man himself.

And he's not coming alone. At some point during Moses' return to Egypt, he had sent his wife Zipporah and his two sons home to grandpa Jethro, out of the way of plagues and angry pharaohs. But now all that's done, and it's time for a family reunion. We're told twice in verses 5 and 6 that, Jethro went with his sons and his wife to Moses. In verse 7 when Moses saw them he, "went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent." You can see from the passage that Moses and Jethro have a warm relationship. They care about each other. They show affection to each other. Julie Ege pointed out to me that in many ways, Jethro's the closest thing Moses has to a father. Growing up in the house of Pharaoh's daughter, and then fleeing to Midian as a fugitive, Jethro was the only one to take him in. He gave him a job, a wife, a home. These two are family and this is a family reunion. And so it's only natural that as soon as everyone's settled in, Moses turns to his father-in-law and says, "I have

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

to tell you this. You're never gonna believe what God did." He's so excited to tell Jethro. He can't help himself.

This passage is, in part, a picture of what evangelism looks like. Because evangelism literally means to "spread the good news." As this story shows us, good news spreads not because you're "supposed" to spread it. When someone has good news it just comes out naturally. It can't be contained. When your news is just that good, don't you automatically want people to know? Your grandchild was just born so what do you do? You call up all your friends just to tell them how excited you are, and you stop the cashier at Dillon's to show them pictures on your phone. It almost feels like it's the only thing you talk about, but who can blame you? It's good news.

Over and over again, this passage highlights the good news that God is our help. We see this in verse 8: "Then 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 come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them."

Now this isn't the first time Jethro is hearing about God's deliverance. Moses had personally been brought out of Egypt twice, once on his own, and now once with his people, and both times it was only because the Lord had been watching over him. In fact we're told that Eliezer, Moses' son, was named in memory of that first time Moses left Egypt. In verse 4, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."

Moses knew of God's help first-hand. Since being drawn out of the water, since day one, Moses has known that the Lord has been his very-present help in times of trouble. And if this was true for Moses, how much more so for us? Maybe you haven't seen a burning bush, or the Nile turn to blood, or the Red Sea part. But if you have saving faith in Jesus Christ, then brothers and sisters you have seen wonders beyond even these!

Those of us who are now in Christ once had hearts like Pharaoh's, hard and cold and turned against God. But unlike Pharaoh, our hearts were made new. God worked a miracle far greater than anything the Israelites had seen. He brought some of *us* out of the darkness and into his glorious light. Yes, Moses spoke with God, and got to stand in his presence at the burning bush, but brothers and sisters we have the majesty of God's holy presence dwelling within *us*. *Now*.

And so if we who are in Christ have been blessed beyond even Moses and the Israelites, what does that mean for us today?

In this first story, we're told again and again that there is good news. God is our help. And in Jethro we see the proper response to that good news. Because God is our help, we give God praise. "And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. Jethro said, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people.' And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God" (vv. 9-12).

What a stunning picture. Here we have an outsider, a Gentile, someone who wasn't even saved from Egypt, rejoicing in the Lord, blessing him, praising him, and sitting down with other believers to

break bread before God. In Jethro's statement that, "the Lord is greater than all gods," we see the fulfillment of God's purpose that he gives in chapter 9:16 that, "[his] name may be proclaimed in all the earth." Jethro isn't worshipping because he think he's supposed to worship, but because this is a God worth worshipping.

Just like with evangelism, worship should come out naturally. It can't be contained. When you have good news, when you have help, does anyone have to tell you to be happy? If someone has helped you, does anyone need to remind you to thank them? Imagine...your battery's dead in an empty parking lot. You're running late as it is, when a stranger pulls up, gets out his jumper cables and has your car up and running again in a minute. And not only are you overjoyed, but you can't stop saying thank you, thank you, thank you. And that night you tell everyone about how this stranger was your help. It's only natural. Act One starts with a truth—God is our help—and shows us how to respond: by praising his name. Because God is our help, we give God praise.

ACT TWO

Similarly, Act Two reveals an unexpected truth, and asks us to respond accordingly.

Exodus 18:13-27

¹³The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. ¹⁴When 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 alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" ¹⁵And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; ¹⁶when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws." ¹⁷Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. ¹⁸You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. ¹⁹Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, ²⁰and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. ²¹Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²²And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. ²³If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

²⁴So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. ²⁵Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. ²⁶And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. ²⁷Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

Now I'm about to tell you something that hopefully isn't too shocking, but based on a careful reading of the text, and hours of study, I think I can confidently say that the character of Jethro is, in fact Moses'... father-in-law. I say that jokingly because, as some of you may have noticed, the text has been trying to make this point abundantly clear. The word "father-in-law" appears fourteen times in this passage. That's about half of the verses in this twenty-seven-verse chapter.

Maybe it was unintentional, or maybe the topic was just too risky for the other pastors, but I find it really funny that of all the guys on the preaching team, we chose the only one of us without a father-in-law to preach this week's passage about a father-in-law who goes to visit his daughter's husband,

points out what he's doing wrong, gives him advice he didn't ask for, and then watches as the younger man does exactly what he tells him to do. Some of you husbands might be worried about where I'm going with this. You'll be happy to know that the message of Act Two is not: "listen to your father-in-law." Moses doesn't follow Jethro's advice because he's his father-in-law. He follows Jethro's advice because Jethro happens to be right. Moses' approach is just not going to work.

You might be thinking, "Well, that's obvious, Dominick." I mean, look at Moses' set-up. I called my own father recently and he pointed out that at this period in time, some scholars estimate that the total population of the Israelite camp—men, women, and children—would have been somewhere around 2.4 million people. Moses thinks one guy should be leading 2.4 million people by himself? One guy? Uh-uh. I could've told Moses that was a dumb idea.

Then, is this passage just giving us an obvious solution to an obviously flawed situation? Is the story at its heart really just good management techniques: "work smart, make sure you delegate"? If it is, then what is it doing in Exodus, much less the Bible? The answer is that 1) the problem is much deeper than we realize and therefore 2) the solution is much greater than we could have hoped for.

To get at the real problem, listen to how Moses responds when Jethro asks him why he's doing this alone: "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws" (vv. 15-16). Do you hear that? They come to me. They come to me. I decide. I make them know. For so long, Moses has felt like it's all on him, like the world rests on his shoulders. Like he's the only one who can help his people. Like he's all alone.

One of First Free's many schoolteachers taught *me* a lesson when she insightfully pointed out that Moses has changed quite a bit since the story of the burning bush. In chapter 4, Moses gives excuse after excuse to try to get out of leading this people. "God, I'm not your guy. I don't know what to say, God. What if they don't believe me? Send someone else." And in response we see God become angry with Moses and give him Aaron as a mouthpiece. But here in chapter 18, instead of trying to get *out* of a position of leadership, Moses is taking on *too much* leadership. It's almost as if the lesson he took away from the burning bush was, "If I have God, then I shouldn't need anyone else. If I'm supposed to lead this people, then God will make it possible for me to lead them on my own."

Now what's so wrong with that? I mean, he's got a point right? Moses has God on his side. Our first story today proved that. God is his help. Shouldn't that be enough? God could have given Moses the strength to lead God's people on his own. After splitting the red Sea, giving Moses supernatural wisdom, discernment, and energy would have been a minor miracle, right?

As I said earlier, the problem goes much deeper than just a foolish leadership situation. The real problem this passage asks is: why should we need each other? Why do I need you? Why would you need me? If God is my help, then why should I depend on other people? Fortunately, this passage has a solution. We see it in verses 17-19: "Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you!'"

Sometimes, when I can't figure something out I'll walk down the hallway and I'll bother Jordan Green. And Jordan's great because even if he's trying to focus really hard on something, he'll take

one look at me, have pity, and help me out. Well we've been talking about this passage for a while, and one day Jordan pointed out that today's text reads just like wisdom literature. Now what do I mean by that? I mean that it looks almost like something from the book of Proverbs: an older father figure telling a younger guy to listen to his wisdom and live it out practically.

But wisdom in the Bible is never *just* practical. Yes, wisdom shows us how to live our lives. But it does this by showing us the very structure of creation. It reveals to us how God originally intended things to be, and only then does it urge us to live that way. For example: God made us so that working hard produces fruit. Live that way. That's wisdom. God made us so that deceit brings us to ruin. Live that way. That's wisdom. So if Jordan and I are right, and Jethro is giving Moses wisdom, what is this wisdom saying about how God created us?

Well, it's right there in the passage: "Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.'" What you are doing is *not good*. You are not able to do it *alone*. What you are doing is *not good*. You are not able to do it *alone*. It is not good. To do it alone. Not good. Alone.

Now where have we heard this before? That it is "not good that we should be alone?" That's right, Genesis 2, the creation of Adam and Eve. As Chris said in our first sermon on Exodus, Exodus is meant to be read with Genesis. There are intentional parallels all throughout, and it just so happens that our passage today is meant to be read with Genesis 2. With the story of creation. In fact, Genesis 2 and Exodus 18 are the only two places in the whole Bible where we're told that it's "not good" that we should be "alone."

So if we're wondering what this passage is saying about *how* God created us, then we need to look back to *when* God created us. Genesis 2:18: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.'" Helper. We've seen that word before. Helper. Help. Maybe you remember...in Act One. The name Eliezer means "the God of my father was my help." Eve is given to Adam as a helper.

Now, sometimes when we hear the word helper, we think of a little assistant. Like when you ask your five-year-old to take the forks and *help* Mommy set the table now, okay? But the Bible uses the word "help" to refer to when someone powerful comes to the aid of someone in need. Less like a sidekick, and more like a superhero. In fact, "help" in the Bible is most often talking about what *God* gives his people. The God of my father was my help.

Act One highlighted the help that comes directly from God. The kind of help that Israel saw at the Red Sea. The kind of help that we have because of Christ's death and resurrection. God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt. But here in Act Two, we're reminded that God gave Eve to deliver Adam from being alone. And note that we're not talking about marriage right now. Exodus 18 doesn't bring up Eve to talk about marriage at all. Marriage is not the only, or even the main way that God delivers us from *most* of our loneliness. When God created Eve she was not just the first wife. She was the first family member, and co-worker, and conversation partner. She was the first friend.

If God is our help, then why do we need people? We need people because God helps us through his people. Moses was never really doing it on his own. He always had help. From God yes, but also

from people. Jethro took him in when no one else would. Zipporah literally saved his life in that bizarre circumcision story. And even Aaron, who God gave Moses in his anger, was still a gift. Given to comfort Moses' insecurity. A help. The text tells us over and over again that that these characters are connected to Moses. Moses' wife. Moses' sons, Moses' father-in-law, his father-in-law, his father-in-law.

That's *why* this is all happening in the context of a family reunion. It's why the first thing we read about in this chapter is Jethro coming to Moses with his wife and two sons, as if he's saying: "You got out of Egypt, Moses. Well done. But here's your family. Remember them? You need them."

Because God helps us through his people, we seek his people's help. It's that simple.

Conclusion

See, God created us to need each other's help. Yes, God often helps us directly, but God also chooses to help us by means of his people. His beautiful, flawed people. It's because of this incredible fact, that we see Jethro making unbelievable statements to Moses that, in verse 19, "if you heed my advice, God will be with you." I mean, at first glance, that's crazy. Ask for help from *others*, and *God* will be with you? How does that work? But Jethro says again in verses 22-23, "it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you."

This passage is clear. God did not make us to be alone. We need help. As Act One shows us, God is with us. He *is* our help. And he has been our help in an incomparable way through Christ; God with us. But as Act Two highlights, God is with us also through his people. Christ's body is our help too. And we need the body.

Some of us today might be telling ourselves, "my faith is between me and God. I'll read my Bible, and I'll go to church on Sunday, but I don't want to get into anyone else's business and I don't want anyone else getting into mine." But this is not good. You will not endure, and you certainly will not thrive as a Christian. The Bible is clear on this point. We were not *made* to be alone and we were not *saved* to be alone. Yes, we are saved through a "personal" relationship with God. But while it is a *personal* relationship, it is by *no* means meant to be a *private* relationship.

The Israelites were not saved from slavery so they could each go and live independent lives in the Promised Land. No, they were saved to become God's people. When you were saved, you were saved *into* Christ's body. That is an intentional image. A body isn't a just a bunch of organs that meet every week for an hour. A body is a single unit where every part is intimately connected to each other. A body is united. A body builds itself up.

And we all have an important role to play in building up this body. Like Moses we have all been commissioned to serve God's people. Not just pastors and elders. All of us. We all have different gifts and those gifts were given so that we could *use* them to serve one another. But how can we help others when *we* won't accept each others help?

That's why here at First Free we keep talking about community groups, about getting plugged in, about membership, about serving, about how deep church requires deep connections. Because we know that our natural tendency is to not want to be dependent on other people. It makes us feel weak. It exposes us, and lets others see that we're not perfect. And because of this, so many of us end up trying to do the Christian life on our own. I mean just ask yourself this: in this past week,

were you able to be truly open with at least one person in this church? Is there someone praying about the things that weigh heavy on your heart? Have you reached out to a brother or sister and asked them to walk alongside you? To encourage you to become more like Christ? To rebuke you when you aren't? For many of us, the answer to these questions is no.

So it's no wonder that we have an epidemic of loneliness infecting our schools, our homes, and yes, even our churches. Satan is trying to separate us, to sever our bonds. And First Free, it's working. There are people *here* who have been Christians for decades, and who have never known true Christian fellowship. But it is not good that we should be alone.

Our passage today reminds us that none of us need to live life on our own. God has provided help. Help from his mighty hand, and help from his people. And so we have been given a tremendous gift. God has given us each other. So that if we lean on one another, "it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure." Brothers and sisters, this is good news.