

Rejoicing Over the Rescue Exodus 18:1-12

You've heard the nickname "Doubting Thomas" drawn from the Gospels about a disciple who just had to see it to believe it. And Jesus humored Thomas, didn't He? Mostly out of love for His friend, I imagine. But He didn't fail to teach Thomas, or us, a lesson on the kind of trust that was genuine and necessary going forward.¹ John writes in chapter 20:26–29, "*...His disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' [27] Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.' [28] Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' [29] Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'*"

One such unseeing man lives on in the pages of Exodus. And though dead, he still speaks. He didn't see a bloody Nile, the fire and ice storm, or the deep darkness. Nor did he live in the fear of the promise of a death angel passing over bloody doorposts, or witness the walls of water tumbling to destroy the militant purveyors of destruction itself. Nonetheless, the truth of God's *goodness* would harvest faith in this man's soul. The goodness of God would be the reality which would draw a Gentile priest into the commonwealth of Israel, attended by one blessing on top of another.

I. Who Jethro was

The connection of our text with last week's text centers on the LORD making Himself known, echoing the title of the whole of this sermon series. Our refrain each week is the book's. God's self-disclosure lies at the heart of the textured melodies ringing out from the book of Exodus. But to whom did this Sovereign Yahweh aim to teach this lesson? Last week we considered the Amalekites who attacked Israel with cowardice, exploiting their rear guard—the most vulnerable, the weakest.² Moses, arms held up by Aaron and Hur, all and each showed themselves prayerful and dependent. Joshua and the soldiers swung their swords with resilience. Battling in Godward dependence, Israel tasted victory. The Amalekites came to know, in a demonstrative way, Israel's LORD that day.

Yet, God was hitting more than one bullseye in His longstanding purposes. Decades prior, a flawed, absconding vigilante took off his sandals and stood on holy ground. It would take him a minute to gain solid footing as God gave him instructions on how to proceed in the release of His prized possession from slavery. He initially responded to I AM with self-centeredness, unbelief, and irreverent accusations. After all, who was Moses at root? A fugitive. One who abandoned his people. Could he do what the God of His fathers was asking? He was a nobody-shepherd-nomad who had settled down into family life with family concerns. But sitting down

¹ Since Jesus was soon to go away, sending Another, the invisible Holy Spirit, to dwell within them.

² In fact, the Amalekites would continue to live in the shadow of God's displeasure for generations, as evidenced by the last verse of chapter 17. We see it play out much later in 1 Samuel 15:1-2, and some scholars even connect Haman in the book of Esther to this people group, since he was an "Agagite" (Agag was king of the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:9). God is a defender of the weak. See Psalm 72:4, 1 Cor. 1:27.

by a well one seemingly random day proved to be no random act. The chivalry Moses' displayed in protecting a few, young Midianite ladies brought him before a man of some stature, **Jethro, the priest of Midian**. And from this relationship, which began at least 40 years prior to our text today, we learn that God had bigger, long-term things in mind *beyond* the life of Moses and Israel.

The picture painted for us concerning Midian and Midianite culture in the Old Testament is not pretty. And by that, I mean that Yahweh was far from their knowledge and affection. In Numbers 25, we learn that the people of Midian were devotees to Baal, a major deity of ancient Near East cultures. We know that the Midianites would feature notably in the history of Israel, being a thorn in their side religiously and militarily.³ So we can devise, from who the Midianites were as a people, that priests of Midian were idolatrous in their religious orientation and practices. Though possessing the common grace of hospitality in welcoming Moses in those early years, Jethro was far from one who knew and feared the LORD for most of his life. At this point in Exodus Moses is eighty years of age, and so we can safely assume that Jethro is older, steeped in and a leading figure inside of Midianite religious practices for decades.

However, Jethro shows himself the caring, father-in-law of God's prophet, and a caring father to his wife. He **took in...Zipporah, after Moses had sent her away**, and he took in **her two sons** as well and brought them back. We're not told why or when this separation happened. Perhaps it's plausible that they were sent away before the battle with the Amalekites as a matter of protection. Whatever Moses' reason for sending them away, Jethro delivers them safely back to Moses and Moses greets him as well as a son-in-law could, **Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other about their welfare, and went into the tent.**⁴

This powerful moment of honor perhaps pointed the way to something more. Yes, Jethro likely had a longstanding allegiance to false gods and false worship, but Moses would still love and honor him. The thing being unmasked in this exchange? A small slice of God's heart for those who were strangers of His grace and power and glory. This is who Jethro was, and Yahweh's plan all along was coming to life in these moments. The kindness from Moses was simply the firstfruits.

II. What Jethro heard

Verse one is an overview statement of these first 12 verses of chapter 18. And it tells us that Jethro caught wind of the incredible. He **heard about everything that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt**. He was privy, maybe through his daughter. Maybe from nomadic messengers. But we know that the names of Moses' sons were themselves a type of testimony to Jethro. Not only do these two names **Gershom** and **Eliezer** encapsule the life of Moses, who was a stranger in a land not his own—Midian, and who was helped by God to establish a family and to escape from Egypt's clutches.

³ Think Gideon's trumpets blowing in the middle of the night, sending the idolatrous Midianites into a fleeing panic (Judges 6-7).

⁴ This is the scene that I completely expect to experience after my daughter is married in less than two weeks. You men with grown, married daughters, I'll look forward to hearing all the glowing stories from you on this front.

But we'd be remiss to miss the significance of these names for the whole nation of Israel. Israel, enslaved in Egypt was freed by God's providential mercies. Every time Jethro called Gershom's name to pass the salt at a meal, or when he called "Eliezer!" to help with chopping the fire wood, the grace and power of Yahweh would be reinforced.

As Jethro delivered Moses' family back to him, and after the moments of honor were bestowed upon Jethro, they made their way into the tent. In there, Jethro heard the breathtaking specifics about another delivery. Verse 8, ***Moses told his father-in-law everything that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had confronted them on the journey, and how the LORD had rescued them.*** In distinction to much of the news of our day, this was a balanced news report! Of course, the conclusion of the matter was that Jethro heard of the victory Yahweh won on behalf of Israel. But lest Jethro get the idea that to be devoted to Yahweh by faith is one experience of joyful ease after another, Moses peppers his testimony to the Midian priest with the truth of providential ***hardship*** as well.⁵

It's the testimony of all who belong to this great God. However we might understand God's hand in our lives, reading the Bible is ever an exercise in correcting our assumptions of what a good life consists of. A lone Bible verse will point us in this direction, but the whole corpus of scripture is shouting vigorously to us all that troubles will dot the path of the righteous, and sometimes it will do more than that. In the past three weeks of Exodus, Israel has walked the path of hunger, of thirst, and of war. Before that, a snake's deception, a dead brother, a flood, a lengthy wait for a promised son, deception in brotherhood, centuries of cruel subjugation of a nation, a baby in a basket in the all too dangerous Nile River, to name a few. The scent of hardship never leaves the air of life in this world. Sometimes pungent, sometimes faint, sometimes somewhere in between. It's an omnipresent aroma, at least until we hear the great trumpet of God sound off.⁶

Jethro heard the bad news before the good news rang out in this tent of meeting. ***Everything the Lord had done.*** I've wondered how long it took for Moses to lay out the plague details, and the danger by the Red Sea, and the journey through it on dry ground, and the swallowing of the army, and the song sang with such fervor and faith. I'd like to think multiple cups of Pete's strong brew would have been enjoyed.

What was happening? We could share the valuation of those who believe that this encounter is nothing short of Moses persuasively winning over his father-in-law into the faith of Yahweh.⁷ That, essentially, this was evangelism taking place in the Old Testament. And this is hard to argue considering the content of Moses' message. In verses 8-10, we see a form of the word ***rescue*** four times. This underscores the salvation dimension of God's actions.⁸ So I asked, "What was happening here?" God was at work to reveal His name and show His saving mercy to the surrounding nations, in this case to a Midianite priest. Thus the LORD, wielding Moses' message and experience, is following through on His Word. The Psalmist would later codify

⁵ Douglas Stuart, *NAC: Exodus*, 411.

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 4:16

⁷ Alec Motyer, *The Message of Exodus*, 170; Douglas Stuart calls this Jethro's "conversion," 401-402.

⁸ T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, 350.

Yahweh working in this way. Psalm 67:7, “*God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear Him!*” Israel is rescued and blessed, and since that is so, the ends of the earth will come to know this blessing and rescue!⁹ And this is exactly what Jethro expresses next.

III. How Jethro responded

Verse 9, *And Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done for Israel, in rescuing them from the hand of the Egyptians.* He first, rejoiced. He’s not an indifferent, head-nodder, more interested in the tea being served in the tent. He didn’t respond to this good news of God’s *goodness* with rejection, because, after all, he didn’t actually see the things described to him unfold. To be clear, Jethro was surrounded by an impressive cloud of witnesses to what God had done. He was rubbing shoulders with a million-plus people who could all testify that they were indeed recipients of the wonders told by Moses. But to those wonders, not with eyes did Jethro believe, but by faith he trusted the news Moses’ bore! The arm of the LORD had been revealed to Jethro. Moses described God’s work, and by a spiritual work within, Jethro had faith. His dry bones came to life. Joy filled him; not unbelief, cynicism, or a buttoned-up defense rooted in his Midianite priestly beliefs.

And this joy spilled over into verbal praise and public acts of worship. Jethro professed the LORD to Moses in verse 10, *Blessed be the LORD who rescued you...and who rescued the people from under the hand of the Egyptians.* What Pharaoh and the Amalekites refused to do Jethro from Midian gladly did: give Yahweh His due praise.¹⁰ And it’s as if Jethro had been mulling things over at some point, asking Himself, “Is Moses’ God truly who He claims to be?” At least that’s how I processed verse 11, *Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods...* From wavering to a confident assertion, *now I know.*

But this praise was the penultimate expression of his faith. Verse 12 adds to his rich expression of trust, *Then Jethro...took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God...* The initial, all-important encounter with God at the burning bush was the first occasion of God mentioning His requirement of sacrifices in the wilderness. And since He would repeat Himself¹¹ as a matter for Moses to repeatedly tell Pharaoh, it’s clear that sacrificing would stand front and center in the worship of God’s people. Jethro, this renewed, formerly pagan priest was in some sense, leading the way for Israel. This was a genuine expression of thanksgiving and praise to God, Jethro’s new LORD, who, as he confessed, *is greater than all the gods.* And the response of Israel’s leadership showed that Jethro was welcomed into the faith he had freshly professed, as *Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law before God.*¹²

When the apostle Paul explained this work of sovereign mercy to the nations, he wrote, “*For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised [that is, to the Jews] to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, [9] and in order that the*

⁹ W. Ross Blackburn, *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*, 77.

¹⁰ Peter Enns, *NIV Application Commentary: Exodus*, 369.

¹¹ Exodus 3:18, 5:3, 8, 17; 8:8, 25, 27, 29; 10:25.

¹² Motyer, 170.

Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” This was and to a large degree remains the divine order—save a people and through their community of worship and holy living, they’ll give witness to God’s greatness in Christ. Our light in the LORD signals to the ends of the earth that the wells of God’s salvation are open for the drinking!

What we are doing in this sanctuary each Sunday—our gatherings, our unity, our worship—these are the high-water marks of our witness. And these unified gatherings of glorification bear witness in two powerful ways. First, they testify simply by existing. In a fractured and divided world, the church gathered in love and unity is itself a declaration of the gospel’s power. Second, an hour like this sends us back out into the world strengthened, sharpened, and stimulated with fresh desire for others to taste and see that the Lord is good. Week after week, we gather here to feast upon the Bread of Life, and then we go out longing for starving souls to come and eat with us.

Conclusion

Jethro didn’t need to see God’s glory, or touch those water walls, or witness fiery ice demolishing the Nile Delta and its inhabitants. He heard. He believed. He worshiped. And he knew the blessing of Moses’ LORD, now the LORD of his own life.

God saving people like me and you through His Son was His plan from the beginning. He brought an idolatrous priest to declare His excellencies, and His grace and power have not abated one, tiny bit. You see, part of what can be learned in a text like this is that God had people in mind *beyond* the life of Moses and Israel.

Brothers and sisters, Gentiles though we are, we are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.¹³ And we join the multiple, millennia-long celebration, heard and relished by Jethro. We, too, have changed hands. From darkness to light. From death to life. From downcast to delighted.

¹³ Ephesians 3:6