

A Problem, a Solution, and a Result
Exodus 18:13-27
May 31, 2026

A few years back, a couple astronauts headed into space for what was *supposed* to be an eight-day mission. However, spacecraft issues turned that eight-day trip into 286 days. I followed this story fairly closely, first, because it was interesting, but *also* because one of those astronauts graduated from Tennessee Tech, where my mother-in-law is a professor. Of further interest to me, I found out that he—Butch Wilmore—serves as an elder at a Reformed and Baptist church in Texas.

Interested in him, and the story, I recently listened to an interview he did. And the first question was this: “You’ve flown combat missions, tested advanced aircraft, and commanded spacecraft. What aspects of leadership turned out to be the *same* in all those environments?” I thought that was a great question. And I sort of expected him to say something inspiring about grit and determination and hard work and that kind of stuff. But here’s what he said, “Leadership in all those environments is predicated upon the fact that I am not the expert. And I know that in *all* those environments. Leadership entails circling yourself with individuals that can do various jobs that I’m not gifted enough to do and empowering them to do their job well without micromanaging.”

That was unexpected—and, honestly, refreshing. Butch said that leadership in *each* of those settings wasn’t about what *he* could do, all by himself. But instead about what could come about if a group of people worked toward a task together.

To put my cards on the table, I don’t think that’s a leadership principle the world came up with, nor Butch Wilmore. I think it’s truth baked into creation by God Himself. There is a way groups of people function better, conditions in which they flourish. And God came up with it.

With that in mind, maybe you heard *this* text, and it reminded you of *another* one. In Acts 6, the Apostles are spread too thin by their responsibilities. Because of that, they’re not able to do what they’re *supposed* to do. At the same time, because needs are not being met, there’s a simmering conflict within the people of God. And due to all *that*, the mission of God through His people was being hindered.

When I preached *that* text—Acts 6—years ago, my outline was *this*:

1.) A Problem; 2.) A Solution; 3.) The Result

In today’s text, note first:

1. A Problem (vv. 13–18)

Verse 13: **It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.**

I think it’s appropriate to *begin* our thinking, imagining a visit to the DMV. You’ve taken a number. They call out “7.” You’re 700. And there’s only one person working behind the glass.

There are, of course, *more* dynamics than that. Moses is doing more than renewing driver’s licenses. In verses 15 and 16 Moses says, **the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor.** I bring up the DMV because it’s a place *most* of us have been. But what’s going on here is quite heightened. It’s more akin to 201 Poplar, at least in terms of setting.

But, again, not *just* like this or that courtroom. Because of what Moses goes on to say he does in verse 16: **I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.** The waiting *might* be DMV-*esque*. The setting *might* be courtroom-*esque*. But the stakes concern making judgments on behalf of God, teaching *His* statutes and laws.

This is *not* some trifling matter. Moses is not *merely* a judge, but a prophet conveying the will of God for God's people.¹ What Moses was doing was *not* a bad thing, in essence. The problem has more to do with *how* he chose to do it.

It's not unlike the issue in Acts 6. No one said the daily distribution to the widows was unimportant. No one said it was something the church should no longer do. It wasn't even morally wrong that the Apostles had done it. It wasn't *what* they were doing; it was *how*.

Verse 14: **Now when Moses's father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge?"** The issue is *not* that he was doing it. The issue is that he was doing it *alone*.² Both verse 13 and 14 say that Moses did this, alone, from morning until evening. Which *had* to mean he could do little else.

A number of people have said over the years that *after* God led Israel out of Egypt, His next task was to get Egypt out of Israel. That will *certainly* be the case when we get to the golden calf incident. But it *also* seems to be the case here. It's commonly understood that Pharaoh would've made himself available to everyone at all times. He'd sit on his "throne" and anyone could stand in line as long as they'd like to bring their case to him. With a serpent on his head, he'd slam his Egyptian gavel and rule.

Remember where Moses grew up? He'd seen it up close. That's how things were done. That's how leaders led. Remember where the Israelites grew up? This is what they'd known. This is how decisions were made, how leaders led, how communities function.

Maybe you recognize this kind of community. Someone might say, "Pharaoh was so accessible!" Maybe you recognize this kind of leader. The one who says, "No one else can handle this. The people need *me*."

Jethro sees what's going on here. And he sees it rightly. Verse 17: **Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good."** Why? Verse 18: **You will surely wear out.** First, Jethro is concerned for his son-in-law. At the *end* of verse 18, he details that concern a bit more: **the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.**

Of course, Moses needing others is not a brand-new theme in the book of Exodus. Nor is it a new theme in the wilderness wanderings. Recall the top of the hill in Rephidim. Moses's hands were heavy, too heavy to hold up. So, for the good of Israel, and for the purposes of the Lord through them, Aaron and Hur helped Moses carry the burden. He couldn't do it alone *then*. Nor could he a mere chapter later.

Jethro told Moses it was not good for him. But it wasn't *just* Moses he was concerned for. Verse 18 again: **You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you.** Once the solution is reached, verse 23 will indicate that **these people also will go to their place in peace.** That implies a few things. First, though the people stood about Moses from morning until the evening, that did *not* mean he always got to each one of them.³ Verse 23 says that eventually they'd be able to go to their place. It seems they hadn't been able to do that, to go home. Further, it says they'd go to their place **in peace.** What's *that* imply? Their waiting had not been marked by shalom.

This is *not* hard to imagine. We know the Hebrews. To put it mildly, they possessed a propensity to grumble.⁴ And I *doubt* as those thousands upon thousands waited in line for hours upon hours concerning some injustice done to them by *another* member of the community they sang *Kumbaya*.

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 416.

² Stuart, 415.

³ Stuart, 415.

⁴ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 354.

We could go to Acts 6 once again. Because *there* too, the need was greater than the leadership could meet. Therefore, a complaint arose (Acts 6:1). The community was affected by overwhelmed leaders, trying to go at it alone.

In *that* chapter, there was a problem. Long before that chapter, in Exodus 18, there was a problem. Note secondly,

2. A Solution (vv. 19–22a)

To his credit, Jethro doesn't *just* say, "You're not doing it right." He, not being *quite* as influenced by Egypt, suggests another way to handle these matters. Verse 19: **Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.**

Now, so far it sounds as if Moses is getting the father-in-law speech. Jethro isn't *lessening* Moses's burden. It seems, instead, as if he's *adding* to it.

But actually, he's just clarifying Moses's role. There's little to no question that the round-the-clock sitting on the bench had threatened his leadership in all kinds of ways.⁵ It's a zero-sum game in our day. It was then too. If Moses did *this*, he can't do *that*.

It's important to note—based on what we'll see in verse 23—that everything Jethro says to Moses is mere counsel. By saying it's mere "counsel," I mean to emphasize that it's not heavy-handed. He's not *insisting* on it. In fact, *after* he gives the counsel, he tells Moses to take that counsel to the Lord.

I bring that up to say that both Moses and Jethro demonstrate a good bit of humility in this narrative. Moses had a pretty decent resumé. Still, he listens. Jethro seems to have a good bit of wisdom. But doesn't present his counsel as any sort of divine fiat.

He tells Moses to focus on being the people's representative before God. Of course that's how the book of Exodus repeatedly presents Moses—as something of a mediator between Yahweh and the Hebrews. Later on, he'll intercede *for* them, speaking for them *to* God (Exodus 17; Exodus 33).⁶ But he wasn't *only* to speak for them to God. He was also to speak to them *for* God. Moses mentions this back in verse 16. Jethro agrees with him, telling Moses in verse 20 to: **teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.**

Jethro isn't telling Moses to take *that* off his plate. In fact, he's reminding his son-in-law that's something he *must* do.

He must represent the people of God. And he must teach them. Moses wasn't asked to innovate. He was to teach what the Lord revealed—the statutes of God.⁷ Maybe you wonder, "But we're not to Exodus 20 yet! There's nothing to teach." Recall that back in chapter 16 the Lord told Israel they were to give heed to His voice, to do what is right in His sight, and to keep all His statutes (Ex. 16:26). So, yes, Exodus 20 is the clearest and most succinct summary of the Lord's teaching in this book. But *before* that, even during the wilderness wanderings, something of God's character—and its implications—was being taught to the people.⁸

Moses was to teach *those* statutes and *those* laws. But also, he was to, verse 20: **make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.** We'll talk about this

⁵ Stuart, 415.

⁶ Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New*, 86.

⁷ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 164.

⁸ Alexander, 351.

more when we get to the Law, but God didn't deliver the Hebrews so that they'd continue to live as they *had* been living. He delivers in order to transform. As a redeemed people, there was a way they were to live. And Moses was to instruct them in it, applying truth to their life.⁹

The question is this: could he do this task for hundreds of thousands if he *kept* on judging matters, both great and small, from morning until night? Of course not.

So, how could he do what God called him to do faithfully? Verse 21 gives a solution:

Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times. And let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge.

The suggestion was something of a system, so that *minor* disputes were handled by the men appointed over tens, fifties, and hundreds. Only *major* disputes were brought to Moses. As you might imagine, this would quickly shorten the lines. And it would allow Moses to do that which God intended for *him* to do.

The upshot is this: the Lord cares about *how* His people are led. Sometimes Christians—maybe just implicitly—contrast organization and the Christian life as if those things are diametrically opposed.¹⁰ Exodus 18, Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3, 1 Peter, Titus, and a host of other passages disagree. The church is an organism, yes, but it's an organized organism. The Lord cares about *how* His people are led.

But note as well that, even *way* back in Exodus, He cares about the character of those that lead. These phrases sound like phrases we hear in 1 Timothy 3. First, these leaders were to be **able men**. There's a certain *capability* required. However, it wasn't about *skill* alone. They were to be men who **fear God**. There's a certain *spirituality* required; it's not optional. Further, they were to be **men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain**. In short, those that were to administer justice were to be themselves just.¹¹

And it's not *just* 1 Timothy 3 that picks up on this. Acts 6, if you recall, had a solution that centered on men of a certain character: **select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom** (Acts 6:3). And with that first clause in our ear, hear again verse 21 of Exodus 18: **you shall select out of all the people**.

In *both* cases, there was a problem. In *both* cases, there was a proposed solution. And I say "proposed" because, again, this is *just* a suggestion from Jethro. Listen to verse 23: **If you do this thing and God so commands you**. Moses isn't to do these things *simply* on the advice of his father-in-law.¹² But it *was* a suggested solution. Note third,

3. The Result (vv. 22b–27)

Verse 24 indicates that Moses moved forward: **So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he said**. I assume that "all" includes Moses submitting this plan to the Lord's command.

Jethro *already* hinted at what the results would likely be. Back at the end of verse 22, after talking about placing other able and honest leaders over thousands and hundreds, he said: **So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you**. Verse 23 says a similar thing, with

⁹ Motyer, 165.

¹⁰ The opposite of organized is not organic; it's disorganized.

¹¹ Alexander, 352.

¹² Alexander, 353.

different words: **If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.**

The first result was the good of Moses. Because it's not *only* that he couldn't do it alone. It's not only that this burden was more than *he* could bear. The implication is that this burden would hinder his perseverance. In our language, what he was doing *could* lead to "burn out." However, once he did what Jethro suggested, verse 23 gives the result, **then you will be able to endure.**

This was for the good of Moses. But it's also for the good of God's people. In fact, Moses's good *was* the people's good. Verse 23 ends, **and all these people also will go to their place in peace.** When this plan was enacted, some measure of the conflict within the community would abate. And the Hebrews would finally get out of line and go home—in peace.

The Lord has plans for His people. And He's not *only* concerned with how they live as *individuals*, but with how they live as a *community*. What happened *to* the Israelites was to affect what happened *among* them. Because, to get ahead of the story a bit, what happened *among* them was key to what was to happen *through* them. If we zoom out, and consider God's purposes, Yahweh made Himself known to Israel, *so* that He might be made known *through* them to the nations. And that wasn't going to happen so long as the community was marked by conflict, so long as they were *not* being taught how to live, so long as Moses was trying to do everything alone.

Verse 25: **Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.**

There was a problem. Then there was a solution. A plan suggested by Jethro, confirmed by the LORD, and implemented by Moses. And then there was a result.

Which is also what happened in Acts 6. After the New Testament church selected men, prayed over them, and laid their hands on them, Luke writes, **The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem** (Acts 6:7). I don't think those new believers in *Jerusalem* would've been unfamiliar with Exodus 18. Nor with what the outcome of sharing leadership could bring about.

Conclusion

In that interview I mentioned earlier Butch Wilmore goes on to say, "That's the common denominator regardless of what you're doing. I can't do it all. . . Because what's *most* important? The mission. My focus from day one was mission, mission, mission."

In terms of mission, the Exodus is *not* about Moses. It's about Yahweh being known, in and through His people. And therefore, the community God created was never to center upon a single leader, what *he* could do, how necessary *he* was for the people's advance. The community of God has always been intended to center upon the One who brought them together.

What happened in Exodus 18 wasn't *just* about how Moses was to lead God's people. It's how God has chosen His people be led, in order that His leaders might better endure, that His people might be better served, and that *He* might be seen as the One who is better.

It was clear that Moses couldn't do it alone. In fact, as we keep reading, we find out that no leader ever could—not the judges ahead, nor the kings to come. The best of them would fail, fall short, and be unable to carry the burden of the people in their own strength.

Which is a theme that continues into the New Testament. Though Christ came, saved a people, and put them in churches—local churches led by *multiple* leaders—those men are *always* intended to point His people to Another. Not to what *they* can do, but to what Jesus of Nazareth has done for them, bearing the burden no other leader ever could.

He's the One *we* follow together. He went ahead of us. He is where we intend to go. And He intends to lead us there—out of the wilderness and into life eternal.