

“Obedience follows Grace”  
Exodus 18  
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I know it is a well-used book and I have used it with you before, but it demonstrates quite well one purpose of the biblical text before us today.

READ the story of Billy and the Attic Adventure with the pictures projected.

“There once was a little boy named Billy.  
Billy loved to explore things.  
One day, when Billy’s father came down from the attic,  
Billy got an idea.  
Billy climbed up the ladder,  
And found all sorts of fun things to explore.  
One thing was a leather aviator cap –  
Too big, but fun.  
But when Billy tried to come down, his foot slipped.  
Billy could barely hang on.  
“Mom, Dad!” Billy screamed.  
“I’m right here, Billy,” said his dad. “Just let go, I’ll catch you.”  
But I can’t SEE you!” Billy cried. “You don’t need to,” said dad. “I can see you.”  
So Billy let go...  
And fell...

Right into his father’s arms! Billy and the Attic Adventure by Daryl Worley, Illustrated by John Daah Tyke Corporation, 1990

Billy’s obedience to his father’s command to let go was based on trust, and Billy’s trust of his father was based on his father’s prior actions.

The father had proven himself faithful before, so Billy trusted and Billy obeyed.

Life is a school - a school in which we are progressively learning those lessons of grace, then trust resulting in obedience.

For example, we know God's desire for us to be selfless and sacrificial but much within us tells us to first take care of "number one."

But do we trust God; can we trust him even when we can't see him or can't yet see the results?

Today from the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus and its context we are going to see the provision of God's grace in times of need and we will see the means he establishes to help his people grow in trust and obedience.

Stand please for the reading of Exodus 18

"May God add his blessing to the reading and hearing of his Word.

PRAY

This is the last message in Exodus until this fall, because of the summer series on the Lord's Prayer beginning next week.

It is an appropriate place to break away from Exodus because the first 18 chapters describe the experiences of Israel leaving Egypt and arriving at Mt Sinai.

The last 22 chapters of the book are set at Mt Sinai alone.

Lord willing, we will pick up there on September 11.

There are quite obviously two stories in this 18<sup>th</sup> chapter both with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as the central character.

- First there's the story of Jethro and Moses meeting again and getting caught up on all that had happened.
- Secondly, there is the advice Jethro gives Moses about how to organize to serve the people better and not wear himself out.

13 times in the text, we are reminded that Jethro is Moses' father-in-law.

If last Sunday was Fathers' Day, this Sunday is Fathers'-in-law Day – I say that mainly for the hearing of my two sons'-in-law.

But to be fair I suppose if I'm going to point out that the father-in-law got to give advice in the second story, it must be noted that he had to provide the meal in the first story.

And as I think about it, that does seem to be the pattern down through history – the “old man” can give all the advice he wants to as long as he “picks up the tab.”

But more seriously, why are these two incidents recorded for us here in Exodus?

It wasn't until I looked at the context that it began to make better sense to me.

Let's look at what precedes these stories and then later, what follows.

After Israel left Egypt we are told of five crises they faced:

- Chapter 14, the uncross-able Red Sea with the Egyptian Army closing in;
- Chapter 15, the undrinkable water in the desert at Marah;
- Chapter 16, no food in the wilderness;
- Chapter 17, no water at Rephidim;
- And also in chapter 17, the attack of the Amalekites, which we looked at last week.

We aren't told about much else in all the time from when they left Egypt until the text before us today – just five crises.

But quite obviously we are told about the crises because each time God provided.

And it is that faithfulness of God that is emphasized in the first story of chapter 18.

Evidence of that emphasis is written throughout the story:

18:1 “Now Jethro...heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people..”

18:1 “how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt.”

18:4 Moses' “other (son) was named Eliezer, for he (Moses) said, “My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

18:8 “Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.”

18:9-11 “Jethro was delighted to hear about **all the good things the LORD had done for Israel in rescuing them** from the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>10</sup> He said, "Praise be to the LORD, who **rescued you** from the hand of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh, and who **rescued the people** from the hand of the Egyptians. <sup>11</sup> Now I know that **the LORD is greater** than all other gods,

The author uses every part of the story to emphasize the point that it was God who provided every step of the way.

Back in Exodus 2 we learned that when the Hebrew-Egyptian Moses killed an Egyptian slave driver, he fled the country taking refuge in the land of the Midianites.

There he lived for 40 years, marrying a woman by the name of Zipporah who was the daughter of a Midianite priest whose two names were Reuel and Jethro.

Why a Midianite? Because God is continually demonstrating throughout the OT that God’s grace will extend to all the nations of the world.

Yes Israel was uniquely called but they were called, as is the church, to be the means by which all nations would come to know the one true God (Genesis 12:3 “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”).

Moses and Zipporah had two sons and together the whole family went to Egypt, at God’s command for Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Probably, months later, after the exodus from Egypt, after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and when they got closer to Midian, Zipporah and the two boys went home to visit her daddy.

Now in chapter 18 we find Jethro escorting his daughter (Moses’ wife) and the two sons back to the camp of the Israelites.

Now it certainly must have been a happy reunion of the family and especially for Jethro and Moses who had not seen each other for quite some time.

But, as we have already seen, that is not the emphasis of this text.

I think Jethro had heard from his daughter and grandsons about everything God had done.

He was so awed by it all that he had to come and see.

Meeting Moses again, they went into the tent and according to Exodus 18:8 “Moses told his father-in-law about everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.”

Can you imagine Moses telling about all God had done in the many months since they had last seen each other? (13:4; 16:1; 19:1)

And Jethro's response is exactly why God had done all those things:

First, Jethro was convinced of the presence and power of God.

Exodus 18:11 “Now **I know** that the LORD is greater than all other gods...”

Did Jethro become a believer at that time. We don't know for certain, but it certainly appears to be the case.

Secondly, Jethro's heart welled up with emotion.

Exodus 18:9 “Jethro was **delighted** to hear about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel...”

The truth about God, captured his heart.

And thirdly, Jethro called on everyone to worship God with him.

Exodus 18:10-12 “He said, “Praise be to the LORD, who rescued you... Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, **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.”

That is what God had meant to happen in his people.

That they would see the hand of God in their midst and they would believe God was with them and they would rejoice in him.

The next thing we are going to see in Exodus, after these two stories about Jethro, is the giving of the Law beginning in chapter 19.

The law would spell out the character of God and the will of God for his people.

But the law would seem counter-intuitive to sinful human beings.

It would call on them to be selfless rather than selfish, it would call on them to put God first in their lives instead of themselves.

And so they would never be willing to **obey** the law unless they had a trust and joy in the faithfulness of God.

Never detach law and obedience from grace, or law become tyranny and obedience becomes legalism.

God didn't give the 10 Commandments to the Israelites while they were still in Egypt, and make a deal that if they obeyed the law he would free them from Egypt.

God acted first, God redeemed them, God freed them and over the next months he showed them again and again that he could be trusted. **THEN, and only then, he gave them the law.**

But even the giving of the law was only after he gave them a means for helping each other understand and apply the law, which we will see in the next story.

But before we leave this story, have you seen its application to us?

We will never be willing and able to obey God if we don't trust him.

And we won't trust him unless we are convinced of his grace and revel in it in our worship.

What about **our** story of God's grace, yours and mine?

- God brought my father back alive from WWII.
- God saved my father from a nearly fatal accident and provided for my family during the months of my father's recovery.
- I had rheumatic fever three times in childhood and on one occasion my parents were told I was dying.

- God intervened in my middle-childhood years by causing my brother to see from a distance that I was drowning, and he ran to save me.
- In adulthood, God chose to save me from a diving accident that caused several breaks in my head but no paralysis.
- Not that many years ago, I got spinal meningitis while in the hospital and the doctor told my family that I was probably not going to live.

But God intervened!

- I had friends in my later high school and early college years that I was sorely tempted to follow in all kinds of physically and spiritually destructive ways.
- I had girl friends with whom I was infatuated but who didn't know Jesus.
- Apart from God's care, there were too many otherwise unguarded opportunities that could have forever altered my life.
- There were bad habits that could have grown into slave masters controlling my body and spirit.

But God intervened!

He altered my circumstances,  
He removed the opportunities,  
He brought mature people into my life to influence me at  
just the right times.

Early in adulthood, rather than continuing with the former girl friends, he brought a Christ-following young woman into my life and we married.

In the following years he gripped my heart with his Word, placed me in a school where I was constantly challenged with what was to be my role in God's kingdom work.

He has saved my marriage, my family, my daughters, and most recently we bear witness to the intervention of God in the life of our son.

Now looking back I can see God's hand shaping, protecting, providing, and guiding in myriad ways every year of my life.

Through the years I have seen God's hand save this church.

I can think of at least three situations where the moral failures of staff members or those who were nearly staff members could have broken the church – but God intervened and moved them out or refused to let us hire them.

John Bradish and I, among others, can testify to how God protected the church and provided for the land on which these facilities set.

He closed door after door as we sought a relocation site for the church and then he provided this land at a fraction of the cost of what it had been just a couple of years earlier.

If we would but look, we would see “everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for Israel's sake and about all the hardships they had met along the way and how the LORD had saved them.”

And that is not to even count the ways that God has provided through the centuries since Jesus was here.

It is nothing short of miraculous how God took a motley crew of 12 men and by his Spirit launched a movement that within very few years had reached out across the known world.

Then to mention nothing more of the next 1500 hundred years, how can we forget the moribund church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century following the ungodly influences of the Renaissance and how God revived his church with the Reformation – a reformation that transformed Europe and formed the setting for the beginnings of our own country?

Pastor Dan Luebcke recently led our high-schoolers through a study of church history. They saw the hand of God saving and empowering his church through the years.

How can we forget the Great Awakening and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening that awakened the church in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in America and elsewhere?

Can we not see the hand of God moving in hundreds of men and women in the years immediately following WWII when scores of ministries began reaching out around the world? Navigators, Campus Crusade, Billy Graham, and many others.

How can we deny the work of God in the Jesus People Movement during the 60s and 70s and the concurrent Charismatic movement?

Here was a revival of the church that, in spite of its excesses, has shaped us right up to the present time.

The church universal, our own denomination, this church itself and each Christian person and family in it has a story to tell of the good things the Lord has done and how he has rescued us time after time.

From such remembering comes deeper and deeper trust and greater and greater worship demonstrated in more consistent obedience.

But the second story in chapter 18 demonstrates something else God has done **before** he asks for our obedience.

Remember I said that God demonstrates his grace first, and then we move to chapter 19 where we see the law.

But the one more thing that God does before he gets to the law and the call for conformity to his character and will is that **he gives us the church.**

More specifically he establishes a way whereby his people may help each other both learn God's will and apply it to their lives.

What we are going to see is discipleship, soul-care, or spiritual formation in practice.

After the family reunion, Moses went back to work.

Like a good father-in-law, Jethro wanted to have a better understanding of what his son-in-law did.

What he observed disappointed him because he saw that his son-in-law was not only going to wear himself out but was also unable to best serve the people for whom he was responsible.

Moses would go out each day and begin meeting with the people as any had questions or disputes.

He worked all day long, day after day, and there were so many people needing to see him that they often stood around all day waiting.

So because of a good relationship with his son-in-law and/or a lot of courage, Jethro said, Exodus 18:17 “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out.”

It’s Jethro’s advice I want you to hear:

Exodus 18:19-23 “Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. <sup>20</sup> Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. <sup>21</sup> But select capable men from all the people--men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain--and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. <sup>22</sup> Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.”

Earlier Moses had said that the people want to know God’s will in the matters of their lives.

Exodus 18:15 "Because the people come to me to seek God's will.”

Jethro said, “Moses, there are three things you need to do.

You need to represent the people to God,  
you need to teach them the word of God  
and you need to demonstrate with your own life what it means to follow God.”

And there was yet another thing Moses was to do.

He was advised in Exodus 18:21 “Select capable men from all the people--men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain--and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.”

It's not surprising at all to find the same counsel given to the church in the NT.

We find it first in the book of Acts when the 12 disciples of Jesus got the other believers together and said in Acts 6:2-4 “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to **prayer** and the **ministry of the word.**”

I'm not suggesting a one-to-one correspondence between the role of Moses and the role of elders in the church or between the role of the other leaders in Israel and other leaders in the church BUT the essential comparison is fair and instructive.

In the book of Acts when churches were started, leaders, called elders, would be appointed.

Among many passages I could cite, listen to this advice from Paul to one of those elders in a church, 1 Timothy 4:16 “Watch your **life and doctrine** closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Godly living, sound teaching and prayer (as we saw in Acts 6) were the three primary responsibilities of the elders.

Important as that leadership was, the people needed more.

They needed access to each other.

They needed **not just one** person, Moses, to whom they must all go **but many** people who could help them.

Exodus 18:21 “Select capable men from all the people--men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain--and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.”

Look at the qualifications here:

**The first qualification was character:**

- “capable” – tested, competent
- “fear God” – one who reveres God, who is more interested in pleasing God than pleasing himself or others, has a passion for the kingdom of God, takes God seriously.
- “trustworthy” – has a reputation for being one who keeps his word, does what he says, acts out of a mature personality and mature faith.
- “hate dishonest gain” – is not influenced by those who would try to bribe him with gain or flattery into seeing things their way.

Again from the NT, 1 Timothy 3:8-10 “Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and **not pursuing dishonest gain**.<sup>9</sup> They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.<sup>10</sup> They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

This is virtually the same list as in Exodus 18.

**The second qualification was constituency:**

Exodus 18:21, “select capable men **from all the people**”

Moses was to select men not just from among close friends and immediate family, but to choose men so that all the people would have access.

The church needs the same.

We need godly men and women in every place of influence in the church - men and women to whom other believers can go to seek godly counsel.

Men who know and care about other men and women who know and care about other women so well that they can speak into each others’ lives, encouraging, correcting, even rebuking when necessary.

Ephesians 4:11-13 “It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the

body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

As I said earlier, it's called "soul-care," "discipleship," or "spiritual formation" and it happens in the context of spiritual community – people ministering to each other.

It happens where people who are responding to the grace of God and who desire to follow the ways of God can help each other know and obey the will of God.

- In chapters 1-17 of Exodus God demonstrated his faithfulness, his grace.
- In chapter 18 he gave the Israelites a structure for teaching and helping each other apply God's word to their lives.
- In chapter 19 and following God will show them his will for their lives.

And as I have already said, that order is very important.

Worship follows mercy and obedience follows grace!

You are not ready to obey the will of God until you know the grace of God.

- Start with the knowledge of Christ's death – for YOU!
- From there look to the OT to see his providential working in the ages before Christ.
- Then look to the past 2000 years to see how God has worked in history to allow you to hear the good news of Jesus.
- Lastly, look to your own history to see how God has preserved you to this very day - his gracious hand is on you.

How can we not worship him?

How can we not trust him?

How can we not obey him?