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Exodus 18:1-12

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WITNESS OF A FATHER-IN-LAW: POWER OF THE GREAT STORY

SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

Recently, many of us on the pastoral staff here at PBCC had the privilege of studying with Bruce Waltke for three days. Many of you know that Bruce is one of the finest biblical scholars of our time and a gifted teacher as well. We delighted in plumbing the depths of several of the psalms of David. It was a rich feast. But I have to confess, the highlight of our time for me was Wednesday night, sitting around the dinner table hearing stories from Bruce and his wife Elaine of their 55-year history together. Their story is a delightful tale of love, struggle and a lot of humor. But most striking to me was that as they shared, God's hand and loyal love shone through in every episode, every anecdote and every scene from their history. Their story is handcrafted by God and his work is woven throughout their lives.

I love stories like that, stories that are so much more than initially meets the eye. Scripture especially is full of stories that reward with greater depth and meaning as you ponder the way they are crafted—how characters develop, how structure and repetition emphasize and clarify, how statements are made and then remade with nuanced differences that deepen understanding. I especially enjoy when a storyteller suddenly changes the tenor or pacing of the action, or makes grammatical or structural changes that give pause to the reader. It is satisfying to stop, think, and then discern why that was done. I get excited at these. Maybe I'm a little odd this way. But they take the observant reader deeper into the story and enhance intrigue. Where is this story going? What does this mean? What pearl of truth does the teller want us to grasp?

Today, we come to a significant break in the pattern and tenor of the Exodus story. For several weeks now, Brian Morgan has been taking us through the fascinating and often wrenching events of Israel's journey away from Egypt, deeper into the wilderness. Last time, we hit a crescendo, with the furious battle against the Amalekites. Now suddenly, the action slows and we are given two short and relatively calm scenes, focused upon, oddly enough, an old priest from the pagan peoples of Midian. I call today's scene, Witness of a Father-in-Law: Power of the Great Story. Let's look at Exodus 18:1-12. This scene, despite its differences to what has come before, continues our basic training and helps to prepare not just Israel, but us as well for the enormous events to come on Mt Sinai.

So sit back, take a deep breath, and let's look as the first of these two vignettes from Exodus chapter 18.

I. Stories From Afar: Jethro Hears and Reacts (1-6)

Now Jethro, 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. (Exod 18:1 NASB)

Once again, the people of Israel are to encounter a pagan nation. This time it's in the form of the priest of Midian. Not only that, it's Moses' father-in-law Jethro. Will there be war again? Why not? He's an in-law! Notice how the narrator packs the first few words of this

scene with three names for this character: Jethro, priest of Midian, and Moses' father-in-law. Who will he be? Will he come as Jethro, friend to Moses? Will he come as exalted priest of Midian to challenge Moses? Will he come as Moses' father-in-law for a family visit, perhaps with unwanted advice?

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Moses' wife Zipporah, after he had sent her away, and her two sons, of whom one was named Gershom, for Moses said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land." The other was named Eliezer, for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was camped, at the mount of God. He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her." (18:2-6)

Immediately, one question is answered. Note that in these verses the priest of Midian is now referred to only as Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. In fact, his designation as priest is now gone from the narrative altogether. This will be a family visit. Jethro gets word through the Sinai Peninsula grapevine that the God of the Israelites has done an incredible work for his son-in-law's people. So Jethro gathers his daughter Zipporah, whom he had given to Moses when Moses fled Egypt in his younger days, and his grandsons. Apparently, at some point Moses sent his wife and sons home to Midian, likely for their own protection. Whatever the reason, we find that Jethro gathers them together and sets out toward the wilderness near Mount Sinai, where Israel is camped.

The story slows to give us details about Moses' sons. The older was named Gershom, literally "Resident Alien,"¹ and the younger Eliezer, literally "God was my helper."² Moses' children are living testimonies to God's work—and they are living in Jethro's house. Like the early church, scattered by persecution, they become the infiltrating presence of God in the unlikeliest of places. In this case, it's the very home of the priest of Midian. It's so like God to place his presence in the presence of pagans through his people: Jacob with Laban, Joseph in the courts of Pharaoh, Moses in the courts of Pharaoh, Daniel with Nebuchadnezzar, Nehemiah with Artaxerxes, Esther with Ahasuerus, Paul in the presence of Caesar.

So Jethro, priest of Midian, yearns to know more. How could this beleaguered and enslaved people possibly have been delivered from the most powerful hand on earth?

Note too that Moses' two sons encapsulate not only Moses' life, but also what it means to be Israel, the people of God: neither they, nor we, are citizens of this world. We are resident aliens here. Not only that, it is only by the hand of God that we are delivered from the sword of the evil one and given life in the eternal kingdom of God. These sons are history and theological lessons, all wrapped up in one little family.

And note that the emphasis here is squarely on family. Reference to Moses' wife and sons have now been repeated three times. Jethro's name has been mentioned four times already, and the fact that he is Moses' father-in-law another four times. The fact that Jethro is the priest of Midian has now been completely subsumed by family ties.

II. Stories in the Home: Moses Welcomes and Tells (7-8)

Then Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. 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 befallen them on the journey, and how the LORD had delivered them. (18:7-8)

Moses welcomes his father-in-law with tremendous respect. There seems to be a sincere warmth between these two, and Moses invites Jethro into his home, his tent. It is here that they settle in. There is a sense of focus, of anticipation as Moses begins to recount the great deeds of YHWH. You can just see Jethro, eyes fixed on Moses, attention galvanized by these fantastic stories. Unbelievable they are were it not for the overwhelming evidence that resides just outside the tent, the nation of Israel, free and thriving under the care of God.

Moses recounts what God had done to the most powerful man on the planet. Then he segues into the hardships that Israel encountered immediately upon deliverance from Egypt. They entered intensive training in how to depend fully on God. Generations of Jews are now learning to live free in dependence on their Lord God who has freed them, rather than under the tyrannical rule of Egyptian slave masters. On the surface, it would seem to be an easy transition, but in reality, exchanging what has been known generation after generation for the unknown can be terrifying, particularly when the unknown is fraught with dangers and struggle. How could *this* possibly be better? At least in Egypt there was food and water. We have learned, Jethro, that it is God who truly provides all we need.

So Moses concludes his fascinating tales by recounting how God provided for Israel's needs in every situation. In reality, God has delivered them twice. How could they doubt his goodness now? He has met every need, addressed every concern and made every promise to give them the great hope of a land to come and a future in the very presence of God.

So Moses becomes the first to bear witness of God's great works and character to another individual and another people. For the very first time, barely out of the gates of Egypt, Israel is functioning as she was created. As the stories of God's goodness and deliverance spread, the curiosity of the people of the nations is aroused, and they want to know more. Or else they want to attack. Note that God does not speak or act directly in this entire scene. But the stories of his great work stand as powerful testimony to his loyal-love.

Where has God placed us to tell the stories? To arouse curiosity? To give testimony when God opens the door and sets the stage? Are we afraid people will react negatively and persecute us? They will indeed! But there are also those whose hearts have been prepared by the Spirit to hear the testimony and respond. If we will not tell them, who will? We are not responsible for conversion, we are responsible to plant the seed.

Years ago, shortly out of college and early on in my business career, I met a young man named Darrel. Darrel trained me on many of the systems and methods I needed to do my job. Frankly, he saved my bacon! Without Darrel, I would have drowned. Through all of

this we became good friends, and I had the chance to share my faith with him. We had long talks at lunch and sometimes after hours, and we even began to study scripture together. However, it was difficult to tell just where Darrel was inside. He kept things pretty close but loved to study with me, so we kept going. One winter, I invited Darrel to join me at the PBC men's retreat. The first night, the host asked if any of the men had given their lives to Jesus within the last month or two. To my delight, Darrel stood up! The guys who stood were invited to the front to the thunderous applause of 300 men. I stood there shaking my head at the delight of seeing my friend become a worshipper of Jesus Christ. Later, I asked him why he hadn't told me. "You didn't ask." Men, and our communication skills... Today, Darrell and his entire family are walking with the Lord.

Now, what about Jethro? How does he respond to the stories of God? Will he scoff? Will he react with bemused indifference? Will he embrace the God of Israel?

III. The Impact of Story: Jethro Responds (9-12)

Jethro rejoiced over all the goodness which the LORD had done to Israel, in delivering them from the hand of the Egyptians. So Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, and who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; indeed, it was proven when they dealt proudly against the people." (18:9-11)

Jethro is thrilled! He rejoices in what YHWH has accomplished. He responds with wonder and expresses great delight in beautiful fashion:

"Blessed be the Lord who delivered you (pl)	from (<i>min</i>) from (<i>min</i>)	the <i>hand</i> of the Egyptians the <i>hand</i> of Pharaoh,
who delivered the people	from (<i>min</i>) <i>under</i>	the <i>hand</i> of the Egyptians.
Now I know		
that (<i>ki</i>) the Lord is greater	than (<i>min</i>) all the gods;	
indeed, it was proven		
when (<i>ki</i>) they dealt proudly against the people."		

Jan Fokklemann helped me to see that Jethro's response is deeply considered and carefully represents the truths he has discovered. The first portion expresses reality and gratitude that YHWH separated the oppressed from the oppressor. The One true God trumps the weighty, oppressive hand of great nations and rulers. The second portion uses hymnic language to express the incomparability and uniqueness of YHWH. It all adds up to Jethro's confession of faith and desire to join the chosen people of God!³

No gods, not even those of all-powerful Egypt, could compete with the God of Israel. Notice one of the key words here: the Hebrew *yad*, meaning "hand" or "strength," is used three times by Jethro, stressing the earthly power of Egypt and Pharaoh and thereby magnifying God to even greater heights in his deliverance. The third hand is found in combination with *tachat* (under), expressing a strong, painful and constant suppression of Israel. Her deliverance is big news on the world scene. CNN, Fox, CBS, NBC, ABC, MSNBC, PBCC, all the major news organizations would be broadcasting 24 by 7 on location were they around in that day. This is big stuff!

And Jethro does not stop here. Not only does he give public praise to YHWH, but he becomes a worshipper and follower of God and enters into the community of faith.

Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses' father-in-law before God. (18:12)

Identified for the seventh time as Moses' father-in-law, we see why Jethro's old identity has been consumed within the story. We have the privilege of witnessing his transformation from priest of Midian to a worshiper of YHWH. He is so overwhelmed by these stories of God's faithfulness and deliverance that he responds with worship. The story then crescendos with Jethro feasting with the Elders of Israel. This pagan priest has entered the community of YHWH!

Israel is functioning as Israel should: tell of God's goodness and the nations will be drawn to the family and desire to enter in. What a feast this must have been, a time of pure celebration as an outsider reflects back to Israel the greatness of God. The simplicity of the scene is remarkable. God is so great that simply telling the stories of his *hesed*, his loyal-love, creates a winsome and fragrant aura that is irresistible to Jethro.

Now, there's another twist to the story upon which we haven't yet touched. It turns out that Jethro is a descendent of Keturah, Abraham's wife at the end of his life (Gen 25). Just before he died, Abraham left his inheritance with Isaac, God's chosen seed. To his other sons, including Midian, who was born by Keturah, he gave gifts and then sent them away eastward, to the land of the east. Anytime we see this motif in scripture it is symbolic of one moving away from the promise, away from God's blessing, just as Adam and Eve were banished from the garden to the east in Genesis 3. What's exciting about this passage is that we are seeing that even the sons of Abraham who were not included in the covenant are now fully welcomed to enter in. Now that Israel has been formed and birthed by God, they are to throw open the doors to all who will come to worship YHWH. Far from being exclusionary, the Covenant is open to all who will enter.

In the fall of 2003 I attended my 20th year college reunion. The campus was beautiful and fully festooned with banners, balloons and tents. Everywhere you looked, there were tents full of people eating good food, reconnecting with old friends and enjoying sweet fellowship. The whole scene was so inviting. I wanted to stop at every tent. But I couldn't. I was only welcomed at one tent, the one for my class. And even at that, I was only welcomed if I had a ticket, for which I had to pay quite a bit. With that ticket though, I was able to enter in. The kingdom of God is like that tent. Its joys are so sweet. You do need a ticket, but it's free to you and me. The cost is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But anybody can have one. It's a gift! The tent of the Covenant is open to all who will accept it.

Israel now stands on the threshold of receiving the law from God; Moses is soon to ascend Mt Sinai to meet with God. It is important to note that before the law is given to Israel, as Terence Fretheim says, the basic confessional identity of the community of faith is made clear: the law will come out of the context of an already existing community of faith in which God's redemptive acts are central.⁴ The nation's purpose is played out well prior to the law; good news and redemption come before law. The law then comes to help the people understand how to live as the people and community of God.

The scene ends with Jethro feasting, literally "*eating bread*," with the elders of Israel. What a banquet that must have been. What a celebration, as they experienced first hand the amazing grace of YHWH spreading to other peoples and nations. I can't help but think of another feast that occurred on the eve of a world-changing event. I'm reminded of Jesus, celebrating the Passover Feast with his disciples.

They ate the Passover meal together, and like Jethro and the elders of Israel, celebrated Israel's deliverance. Then Jesus broke bread and took his community of followers to a whole new level: This is my body, this is my blood. This is the feast of the Kingdom. Embrace the broken body of Christ, accept the cleansing blood of the lamb. If you've never entered the feast, what's holding you back? It's free. Come on inside the tent of life. And for those of us who have entered in, may God grant us the privilege of feasting in celebration with those who have come anew and entered the banquet of life.

Before we close, let's reflect on a few points from this passage that I think God has for us today.

The Great Story changes lives, communities and nations

There's a reason the Gospel is called the gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is the greatest story ever told and has the power to change lives, communities and even nations. Tell the story and let the story be the story. It is the story God has crafted to bring the nations to himself. Tell Jesus' story and tell your story—how the love of Jesus Christ redeemed you and gave you life. In all of us is the desire to be a part of something greater, something larger than our own stories as individuals. That story is the one being crafted by our heavenly Father. When you tell of the Great Story and the role in that story your Father has given you, you open up a world to others that transcends everyday existence. When you tell the story, you step outside of time and partake of a higher purpose that has eternal meaning and lasting impact. As Jr High pastor here at PBC, I have no desire to produce kids who look, act and speak like Christian kids. Frankly, that would not be very hard to do, and perhaps one of the most damaging things I could do. I long far more to help our kids enter the story and shepherd these young people into a living, vibrant and meaningful relationship with the Savior, that they would become worshippers of YHWH, dwelling under his tent of life!

When you tell the stories of God's redemption, you will likely get one of three responses: 1) people will want to go to war with you, 2) they will react with indifference, 3) they will rejoice with you and want to enter in. You never know which it will be until you tell the stories. Oh that we weren't so fearful of the former so that we might experience the joy of the latter as we help people discover life! In Acts, Peter told the great stories and thousands came to faith. Stephen told the great stories and he was stoned. But, that's where we meet Saul of Tarsus, who became Paul the apostle, and you know the rest of the story, the story that took the gospel to the Gentiles and changed the world.

A few years ago on a Sunday morning upstairs in the Jr. High room, we had an old leather couch. There was a particular group of boys who loved that couch and would stake out their territory nearly every week. One Sunday, several girls came to me saying that they thought they should get the couch for once. I had to agree and went over to cast out the demons, uh, boys, and clear the couch for the girls. The boys folded their arms and looked at me with that great look—"make us." I nodded and looked over at my friend Dan Barcsi. Running into Dan is like running into a brick wall; this man is solid. Dan and I proceeded to throw several jr high boys off the couch, only to have them jump back on. What ensued was not pretty, but it was a whole lot of fun—arms, legs and bodies flying in every direction. At one point, as I'm removing yet another jr high boy, I have another on my back and still another wrapped around my legs. As I am tackled to the couch, I look up and see a woman I've never met before.

Turns out there is a jr high girl who was very shy and rather intimidated by the group. So, her mother came with her in order to help her make the transition to the group. About the time my eyes met the mom's eyes, I had a boy sitting on my head. I was looking into the face of horror. In that moment I remember thinking to myself, "this is *not* working for this woman." Later, as I taught the parable of the sower and the seeds and I'm throwing weeds and seed at the kids in illustration, I looked at that poor girl and wondered if she would enjoy her new church the following week.

To my bewilderment, later that week her mom called me and told me she loved the group and really enjoyed the teaching. Go figure!

So tell the story. Be ready at all times. Our calling is to plant seeds. It's the Spirit's job to make them take root and grow.

People discover the reality of God through stories: theory becomes reality

Stories resurrect the past and give perspective and hope for the future. When my kids were younger, they loved it when I would tell stories from my youth. We spent many evenings around the table laughing at the foibles and goofy exploits of Dad, and they often would beg me to tell more. They were great reminders to me of my childhood, the emotions and insecurities I felt and reminders that God carried me through many tough times. The stories not only gave hope to my kids and a sense of their heritage, but communicated that God is faithful through the smallest of details in our lives. He carried us then, he will carry us in the future. Why would he do any different? Stories of his loyal-love give us a rudder, a sure anchor in life. Remember the names of Moses' sons? "Alien" is a reminder that the community of faith is not at home in any nation or culture, and "help" a reminder that we as God's people are neither self-sufficient nor abandoned.⁵

The stories of God stand without justification, proof or rationalization

The stories of God stand without justification, proof or rationalization.⁶ God calls us to tell the stories—our stories and what he has done for us, our families and the community of Christ. Sometimes we hesitate because there is no logical explanation, no way to fit it into a grid that is reasonable and manageable on a human scale, no way to tell it without some people looking more than a little suspect and wondering what was in our cereal that morning. But I have great news...it doesn't matter! Just tell the stories, about Jesus and what he did and then about what he has done in your life. As Walter Brueggemann says: "Israel was never to forget that its life consisted of being utterly amazed that it was given life in a context where there was no real life on the horizon. Israel's mode of faith was simply to tell (*sapar*) without justification, proof, or rationalization. There are no larger criteria of categories that make this odd turn of affairs any more credible or palatable."⁷

It was the stories that Jesus told, the parables, that delighted, challenged, instructed and convicted. In Acts 2, Peter tells the stories, going back to the prophet Joel, the words of King David, finally landing the story in the resurrection of Jesus. The response?

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself." And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!" So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:37-41)

Oh that God would grant us the stage and the courage to tell the stories. Enter the great story. Tell of his great works. You may feel that your story is inconsequential. Don't believe the lie! The evil one would have you silenced. He knows, as does your Lord who gave you the story, that by the Holy Spirit, your story has eternal importance. Share your stories, plant the seeds and enter the Great Story. Amen.

1. Bruce K. Waltke, *An Exegetical Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming).

2. Waltke, *Exegetical Old Testament Theology*.

3. Adapted / quoted from conversations with Jan P. Fokkelman, June 2005.

4. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 197.

5. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:825.

6. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 826.

7. Brueggemann, "Exodus," 826.