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Exodus 18:13-27

Twenty-seventh Message

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# WISE COUNSEL FOR WEARY LEADERS: THE LIFE OF SHALOM

*SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP*

In 1987 I was a young man with a pregnant wife, experiencing the joys of a home mortgage for the first time, and very out of work. After nearly three months I was growing quite anxious. A day of fasting, prayer and scripture finally unlocked things, as God prompted me to contact a company that a previous co-worker had suggested but I had dismissed. Within two weeks I was working there and stayed for 12 years! Not only that, I was so naïve I had no idea that Liz's pregnancy would be considered a pre-existing condition. I was told that insurance would only pay the first \$1,000 of the over \$5,000 needed for my son's birth. We didn't have \$4,000. When my son was born, I submitted the hospital statements as directed and soon received notice that \$1,000 had been paid. Then another came, and another, and before long, all our bills were paid. I went to the benefits manager, prepared to give back a lot of money. She checked around and concluded that for whatever reason, the insurance company decided to pay. That's when I learned to trust God and his loyal-love.

In 1993, my business operation melted down. I thought I was finished. Two faithful brothers here at PBCC loved me through that time, and a non-believing boss believed in me and helped pull me through. That's when I learned compassion.

Please don't misunderstand, I don't claim to have these things locked in. In fact, I have to admit that I can be very apathetic at times when it comes to truly believing God's goodness, and can find myself even more profoundly selfish and uncompassionate on occasion. Yet these were defining moments in my life when I came face to face with the essence of what Jesus calls the greatest commandments. They are touchstones that serve as reminders of what the Spirit desires to work out in me, and all of us.

Chapter 18 of Exodus, as we noted last week, embodies a significant change in tone and pacing from what has come before it in the Exodus story. The first scene, as we discovered, shows Israel functioning as she was called to, giving testimony to the stunning works and loyal love of her mighty God, with the result that people would be drawn in and desire to be a part of the chosen and redeemed community. The scene looks back on God's amazing deliverance from Egypt and a multitude of hardships in the wilderness, and becomes a touchstone reminder for Israel of God's faithfulness, while providing the ultimate motivation for the greatest commandment: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt 22:37). Now chapter 18 does an about face. It looks resolutely forward to what God is about to do and, I believe, addresses the second great commandment, "Love your neighbor." Amazingly, the text continues to focus on an old pagan priest from Midian, and God's work through this man to prepare Israel for what's ahead.

Israel's basic training is rapidly moving toward completion. She is ready to graduate and move on toward the Promised Land. Soon, Moses will ascend Mt Sinai for a climactic meeting with YHWH. But there is more preparatory work for Moses and the people.

So let's draw the curtain back on act two of this visit from Jethro, father-in-law to Moses and now worshipper of YHWH.

## I. Jethro Questions Moses' Judicial Methods (18:13-16)

**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. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" (Exod 18:13-14 NASB)**

Moses sits and begins to hear an enormous case load. In fact, the load is so great that the people of Israel are standing about him all day long. The term "morning until evening" is evocative of a couple of things. First, it functions as a merism, a verbal device expressing totality. This takes the entire day; no rest, no breaks, relentless. It is also evocative of creation language. After all, Moses is engaged in the work of God, an allusion that Jethro picks up later. There is a problem, however, and Jethro is on the case. He observes his son-in-law at work and understands that Moses' call is enormous and high. But he also recognizes that there are serious flaws in Moses' approach.

So he challenges Moses: What is this you are doing? He then elaborates: Why do you sit alone? How can one man possibly take on this entire load? And then: Why do you have all these people standing about you from morning until evening? Great questions from Jethro! Note, however, that he doesn't force advice; he stops and allows Moses to respond.

**Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because 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 and make known the statutes of God and His laws." (18:15-16)**

Moses is consumed by the judicial needs of the people, the everyday disputes that are part and parcel of life, particularly in a community learning how to live as a free people. It makes sense. Moses is Israel's direct link to God, and it is God who has delivered them, so to God through Moses they go for solutions. Moses explains his rationale:

### 1) people come to inquire of God

And by implication, Moses says, I'm the link, the mediator. The people are still in training to understand who God is, what he desires to do for them and what he requires of them.

### 2) I judge personal disputes

Between man and neighbor, where compromise or direction is needed, I serve as the arbitrator and final word. The Hebrew word here, *dabar* (*davar*), carries with it the sense of a social world in which there is a pre-conceived idea of right and wrong, and the concept of justice and the recognized need for it. So, Israel naturally had

many disputes, but they were often clueless as to what resolution should be. Justice while living under the tyrannical hand of a powerful oppressor differs greatly from that which comes within a free people following a delivering God.

Finally, Moses states:

3) **I make known the statutes of God and his laws:** things upon which there is no compromise; that which God desires and stands apart from and overarches any individual conflict or dispute. Moses understands that he must communicate the fundamental precepts of God's design for life and justice to the people. Cornelius Houtman states, "A ruling from Moses [was] tantamount to a ruling from God himself."<sup>1</sup>

So Moses, knowing that a concern for justice was not "simply political pragmatism"<sup>2</sup> but was rooted in the very character of God, dispenses not just practical judgments but insights into the character and desires of YHWH.

Jethro listens. I can picture him, hand on chin, nodding, thinking, giving a "humph" or two. Then he responds:

## II. Jethro Gives Counsel to Moses (18:17-23)

### A. Negative: Your Methods Are Not Good

Moses' father-in-law said to him, "**The thing that you are doing is not good.**" (18:17)

Jethro, again using creation language, pronounces this not good! How could this not be good? Moses desires nothing but the best for the people, desires to be faithful to his calling, faithful to teach the people the precepts of God and help them to live in peace and harmony. How could this not be good? Jethro goes on to explain:

"**You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone.**" (18:18)

You are doing this *alone* Moses. Jethro observes that Moses' heart is in the right place, but his methods and common sense in the matter are suspect. Moses is sitting alone as judge. He is supposed to sit, but sole leadership is not God's design. What did God say in Genesis 2? "It is *not good* for man to be alone." The narrator allows Jethro to speak as a mouthpiece of God in this scene. Like Adam, Moses is functioning alone, and Jethro points out that he needs community, partners, complements in order to function. Moses' work was taking him away from his priorities of leading Israel while teaching them how to live as the people of God. His activities include the right elements, but his balance was wrong.

Sound familiar? I lost track a long time ago of the number of men and women I've known through the years who are mystified at the elusive challenge of finding balance in life—that right allocation of time, resources and energy amongst work, family, play and rest. And tragically, many of our kids struggle with the same pressure.

You will wear out, says Jethro. An exhausted, worn-out leader is not a good thing, no matter how good his work and how good his intentions at work, in the home, in the church, in the community. We don't doubt Moses' intentions; his desire was to do right by the people and by God. But it took an outsider to have perspective, confront him and point out the error of his approach. Burnout in this valley is at epidemic proportions and has been for some time. Burnout in ministry is rampant. That's why at PBCC, pastors don't do it all—particularly a senior pastor. Several surveys have shown that

average time in youth ministry is three years, because young men and women are exhausted from carrying such tremendous weight. That's why we believe in relational ministry. Nearly every leader of ministry here builds a team to care for the flock and each other. We can't do it alone.

You are also going to wear out the people, Moses. An exhausted, worn-out people is not a good thing either. They will tire physically (from waiting around all day); they will tire emotionally (waiting for their dispute to be heard and reconciled); they will tire spiritually (desiring to know God's direction yet getting no answer). The longer the people have to wait, the greater the risk of anarchy. Eventually people will run out of patience and chaos will threaten to ensue. Your intentions may be good, but you are headed toward disaster.

In addition, Moses, the task is too heavy. Jethro understands that we were never meant to lead in a vacuum, apart from the community, in sole position of authority. It is too weighty, too mighty a burden to carry and does not foster *shalom* in the community.

Moses was taking it all on. His sense of responsibility was tremendous, his intentions noble, but his method unwise. The Lone Ranger makes for entertaining TV, but for lousy living. Army of One? No thanks. When I'm in the bunker getting shot at by life, I want a whole community there with me. We need Jethro today! Our culture has all but lost the notion of community: Pursue **your** dreams, be all **you** can be, have it **your** way, just do it the way **you** want to do it. Don't like your contract? Hold out! Who cares about the team?

Good news for Moses. Jethro does not stop here. He boldly presses on to propose a plan for Moses, a plan he encourages him to test before God, confident he is right.

### B. Positive: Jethro's Solution for Moses (19-20)

"**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.**" (18:19-20)

"God be with you," says Jethro. He recognizes from the start that if God is not in it, it is worthless counsel. Put it to the test with God; lay it before him. Jethro encourages Moses to first, **represent the people before God**. Go to God on behalf of the people. Lift them up to YHWH. Seek God's wisdom for the people. Time considering disputes and issues with YHWH is much better spent than hearing arguments and judging individual cases. I think of Solomon and his prayer, "So give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil," he says in 1 Kings.

Jethro presses on, encouraging Moses to **teach the people what God desires**—the way they are to live and the way they are to work. Far better to instruct them in God's word (take them to the vertical plane) than to mediate earthly disputes (reside in the horizontal). If you start from the horizontal, you won't get the richness of the vertical. This is part of the reason why at PBCC we tend to not teach topically. We expound the text, letting God's word set the agenda rather than us. Through the continual study of his word, we learn how to live, how to work. The deeper we go in God's word, the deeper we understand and are able to naturally incorporate God's design for life. In fact, as we go deeper into the scriptures, we can't help but have it show up in our lives! If you soak a sponge in water, it's going to drip water. If we soak ourselves in scripture, we are going to drip the essence of God. Stop soaking the sponge, it dries out.

Teaching precedes counsel—teaching is preventative counsel. Jethro doesn't just advise Moses to lighten his load, but to emphasize teaching. Give the people clear instruction and they will begin to function as God intends. Better to teach ahead of time than to adjudicate in arrears.

So, what to give up and how to do it? That's all well and good for Moses, to change his workload and focus on bringing the people before God and teach them of God's wisdom and desires. The fact remains, however: people need answers! How will this be addressed? Jethro continues:

### C. Positive: Jethro's Solution for the People (21-23)

**“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.” (18:21)**

Jethro suggests to Moses a judicial network that, filled out by exceptional and God-fearing men, will net tremendous benefit. He says, literally, “see,” “search” for able men, men who are capable, skilled, intelligent and strong. Choose men who fear God, men who hate bribes and extortion and will not tolerate them in others, beholden to YHWH's agenda, not human wishes. Now this is a huge job for Moses. This is a job that is likely to take weeks at minimum and probably several months. So, once chosen, what are they to do?

**“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. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 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.” (18:22-23)**

This network of leaders then, will take on the workload that Moses has been bearing. With this structure, any one man will have to wait for no more than nine others to have his dispute heard and arbitrated. And if an agreement cannot be reached or a case is too difficult, it can be taken up the ladder. Brilliant! Not only will any one man have a manageable workload, he will have more than sufficient margin to establish relationships with all of those under his care. They will be full time judges over all minor disputes, and major disputes can be brought to Moses. The essential need in such a case would be for leaders wise enough to know the precedents and understand their application, and honest enough to apply them without prejudice. A new problem would demand special wisdom and experience, and in all likelihood, the consultation of God.<sup>3</sup> Jethro calls upon Moses to trust these men—and he can because it is YHWH who is ultimately in control.

So again, Jethro freely encourages Moses to lay the matter before God. “If you do this thing and God so commands you,” he says. Put it to the test! Lay it before God; let him course-correct. If my counsel is sound and God confirms it, then it will be good. The results will be good and all will benefit. In essence, he is saying, If I'm wrong, God will course-correct, but I know I'm right! Jethro understands that not only is Moses' focus misplaced, but that he will not survive pressing on in the current manner. He also understands that Israel needs this institution in order to develop stability and a reliable method for the people to resolve disputes and learn how to live. God is a God of order, and he desires order for his chosen people.

And look at the benefits. Jethro says, if you do these things, you will be able to endure. And just as important, all these people will

go home at the end of the day in peace, in *shalom*. There will be a sense of wholeness, wellness and completeness in the community. The benefits of this are huge. Everyone benefits when leaders appoint others to share the burden of responsibility.

So, how does Moses respond?

### III. Moses Responds (18:24-27)

**So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 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. Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way into his own land. (18:24-27)**

In short, Moses does exactly as his father-in-law counsels. The fact that the details are repeated nearly verbatim demonstrates the appropriateness and wisdom of Jethro's counsel. The text tells us that Jethro advised Moses to *chazeh*, see, search for able men; and here Moses chose *bachar*, elected, even tested men for the job. This new network of able, God-fearing men went to work in Israel. The nation not only had a solution to an important challenge, but was now ready for what was ahead. In the coming weeks, Brian Morgan will be taking us up the mountain with Moses to meet with God. As God reveals more of his character, what he desires of Israel and how he expects them to live, leaders are in place to support the reception and administration of these revelations. God has used an old pagan priest and Israel's faithful leader to prepare them for the next phase of training and growth as the chosen people of God.

Early on I mentioned what I think is a direct relationship between Israel's journey thus far, the law to be given to them on Mt. Sinai, and Jesus' explanation of the greatest commandment in Matthew 22. Jesus is being challenged by a Pharisee who is an expert in the law. He says to Jesus:

**“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:36-40)**

I am convinced that this holds the key to what God is doing with Israel in the wilderness. To date, God has demonstrated his power in Egypt, delivered his people from the oppressive hand of Pharaoh, navigated his people into the wilderness, provided water, food and expansive promises to give them a hope and a future. In short, the people of Israel, as YHWH trains them in the wilderness, are learning, living and reflecting the essence of the greatest commandment, “Love the Lord your God.” Jethro now enters the picture and reflects back to Israel the greatness and loyal-love of YHWH, and becomes a worshipper of YHWH in the process. Then God uses Jethro to help Israel look forward. He helps them craft a system for the administration of justice. This lays the foundation for the companion of the great commandment, “Love your neighbor...” Israel is now ready to receive, embrace and disseminate God's law and instructions. They will learn justice and compassion and how to live as God's people on earth. So in this way, Israel begins to live out the great commandments of God before they even have language to express them. So I'd like to ask you today, Where has God been teaching you these com-

mandments? Perhaps he has and you have missed it. Pray that God would reveal these to you. For if we can become a people who are sold out to God in love, and a people who are characterized by just, compassionate love for those around us, we can not only experience the fullness and *shalom* God has for us, but also become a winsome fragrance to the world in testimony to him. Just as God has to produce those things in Israel, so he desires to do in us. We cannot make up our mind to embody these commandments on our own strength. It is a work of the Spirit in us, flowing out of us. I stand before you today as a living example that nothing good comes apart from the Spirit of God in me. I know how little I trust God. I know how little compassion I can have. Whenever I demonstrate these, you know it's coming from the Spirit. It's God working out these commandments in me, in us, as we submit ourselves to him. Love the Lord your God; love people.

What else can we glean from this passage?

First, we see that **God will build with outside help**. The community of Christ is never a closed community. He will often exhort, challenge and grow his people through unexpected people and means. To assume that a non-believer has no wisdom for Christians is misguided. All men and women contain the image of God and therefore have the capacity for right thinking and wise counsel. Like Jethro exhorts Moses, we need to test all counsel before God, but to outright dismiss wisdom and example from an outsider or non-believer could be downright foolish.

I learned a lot about compassion from my non-Christian neighbor. One morning while studying at my desk at home, I heard a loud V-8 engine rumbling down the street. Suddenly this car takes off with a roar and screeching tires. Next thing I know, there's a loud crash, a crack, and the sound of glass scattering. I jumped up and looked out the window to see that someone driving an old Firebird had missed the turn, jumped the curb, ran up an embankment, busted through a 6"x6" fence post and rammed the side of my neighbor's house, scattering his recycling all over the side yard. The damage to both car and house was significant, but fortunately the two boys in the car were not seriously injured. Turns out that the kid driving borrowed his friend's car and took another friend for a spin. When the police called the owner of the car, that young man said he never gave permission to the one driving. On top of that, the one driving didn't have a license yet, and of course, no insurance.

My neighbor had not yet left for work, so he came racing out. I'll never forget his manner with these two boys, who were very shaken up by the whole thing. My friend Blair was so gracious with them. No anger, no yelling, just care for these two young guys. Later I said to Blair, "I can't believe your calm and mercy on those guys. I would have blasted them!" You know what he said? "I've been there. I did some pretty stupid things back in high school. They are in enough trouble as it is. They don't need me to come down on them; they need someone to care." Blair was a Jethro to me that day. He's not a believer, yet he reflected God's mercy to those boys, and as he did so, the Spirit deeply convicted me of my own sin and shortfalls.

We also see that **leadership is to be shared and delegated**. God never meant for us to function as Lone Rangers. We are meant to thrive in community. The task of leadership, in the church, business, the home, community, wherever, is to come alongside people, to teach, encourage and trust. Earlier I mentioned that time years ago when my business operation experienced a massive meltdown. On Monday morning, in the aftermath, I spoke with my boss, a vice-president in the company. I really expected to be fired. What I received instead was a gentle, "What happened, Mark?" After I explained the meltdown, Bill simply said to me, "Look, I know you know what a mess this is, but I completely believe in your ability to sort it out. Go to it. I'll run interference for you with executive management. Let me know what you need and keep me updated as you make progress." To this day I look back and am so thankful for that Jethro in my life. I needed Bill, his support, encouragement, his help. He had every reason to give up, but instead trusted me and was willing to risk his reputation on me. We need to share leadership, delegate and invest in people. There is nothing admirable or spiritual about burnout. Satan has used burnout to destroy countless marriages, relationships, ministries and careers.

Finally, **teaching takes precedence over counseling**. Jethro understands that it is far more important for Moses to teach the people about God than to counsel them in their legal disputes. He needed to focus on and emphasize that which the people truly needed to know to live as God's people. Please don't misunderstand; counseling is a tremendous gift and a valuable ministry within the body. But if God's people are not being taught the word consistently, with clarity, accuracy and passion, their souls are being starved up front and no amount of counseling will restore health to the community.

God loves us so much. He loves us far too much to give us commandments and then watch us flail and fail as we try to fill them out under our own strength. That's why Jesus came, ministered, died, rose again and sent his Spirit as our helper. Deliver us from evil, cleanse us and draw us into a love relationship with you, Lord Jesus.

The deeper we go with Jesus, the more naturally will flow from us compassion, justice and love for our neighbors—all people with whom we come into contact. May God grant us the grace and mercy we need to walk worthy in these commandments to which he has called us. Amen.

1. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok, 1996), 2:415.
2. Walter Brueggemann, "Exodus," *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:827.
3. John Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1987), 251.

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