

Exodus 18:1-27 (1984 NIV)
Spiritual Obedience, not Spiritual Heroism

Introduction

It has been reported that seven of the 11 top-grossing movies of 2017 were superhero movies—Superman, Batman, Iron Man, Spider Man, X-Men, Aqua Man, Captain America, Black Panther, Incredible Hulk, The Avengers, Wonder Woman, etc.

We are living in an era where there seems to be a global obsession with superhero movies. One way of looking at these movies is to see them simply as “mental popcorn”, meant to be rapidly consumed and forgotten. Maybe this is precisely why so many people love them. They are harmless—Hollywood professionals get paid, millions enjoy them, and nobody gets hurt.

But even if they are not meant to be taken seriously, all stories mean something, even bad ones. The Hollywood superheroes may be our longing to be an idealized human; an empowered individual; an exalted saviour who possesses unique powers acquired either at birth or through some accident or gifting. The superhero is one who declares, “I alone can solve all your problems.”

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/06/opinion/sunday/ant-man-wasp-movies-superheroes.html>)

No wonder many admire superheroes. Some even secretly aspire to be superheroes. I am no exception. I admired a Hollywood superhero when I was a young boy. In fact, I dreamt to be like him—beat evil to pulp; save the oppressed; punish the unjust; bring a better world to people. Do you who my boyhood superhero was? It was Hercules. 😊

Today, we look at Moses again whom many would view as a spiritual hero in the Bible. And if you are still enthralled by the 1956 movie “The 10 Commandments”, starring Charlton Heston, you may even liken Moses to the superheroes of today’s Hollywood.

But as we look at Ex 18 today, I believe the Lord wants us to have a less idealistic and more realistic picture of Moses.

The structure of this chapter is simple and straightforward. The text divides evenly into two portions: verses 1-12 and verses 13-27. And there are two truths for us to take home today in Ex 18.

I. The Truth about God’s Faithfulness (vv. 1-12)

1 Now Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt.

2 After Moses had sent away his wife Zipporah, his father-in-law Jethro received her

3 and her two sons. One son was named Gershom, for Moses said, "I have become an alien in a foreign land";

4 and the other was named Eliezer, for he said, "My father's God was my helper; he saved me from the sword of Pharaoh."

5 Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, together with Moses' sons and wife, came to him in the desert, where he was camped near the mountain of God.

6 Jethro had sent word to him, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons."

7 So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. They greeted each other and then went into the tent.

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.

9 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.

10 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.

11 Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly."

12 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.

Jethro "heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people". This refrain, or something similar, appears in vv. 1, 8, 9. In each case, information is coming to Jethro about what God has done on behalf of people.

The names of Moses' sons in vv. 3-4 indicate his growth as a man of God. The first name was Gershom, which means "A Stranger There". It signifies Moses' woes as an alien in a foreign land after he had fled from Egypt. The name memorialized Moses' plight. But his second son he named Eliezer, which means "My God is Help". Though he was an alien, he came more and more to realize that God was helping him. So the second name memorialized not his plight but God, who helped him through his plight.

The arrival of Jethro and Moses' family in v. 5 was a wonderful opportunity for Moses—to tell his father-in-law what the Lord had done. Such times are also great moments in our lives—when we are given opportunities to share with an interested party what we have seen the Lord do in our lives and in the lives of the people we love.

This is also honest fellowship. Moses told Jethro of “all the hardship that had befallen them on the journey”. He told Jethro that life had been hard. We sometimes get the idea that as followers of Jesus, life shouldn’t be hard or that the joy of following Jesus should be so great that pain is no longer felt. So if we have trouble overcoming hardship, we may feel embarrassed about it. But we have the freedom to be honest with people, to tell them that life has been hard and not be embarrassed about it. To share about one’s difficulties and find a sympathetic, caring ear may be the best fellowship of all.

Yet Moses was also able to tell Jethro that “the Lord delivered them”. Invariably, at some point we shall be able testify, “Yes, it was hard, but the Lord delivered me.”

Jethro rejoiced over what the Lord had done (18:9), he praised the Lord for what He had done (18:10), he acknowledged the supremacy of the Lord (18:11), and he offered sacrifices to the Lord (18:12).

Scripture affirms these two things:

- Life is hard.
- God is good.

To us, they seem contradictory. But in a way perhaps beyond our total comprehension, hardship in no way means that God is not good. The Lord is good, and remains good through the hardship. He never stops being good.

- Jethro delighted in what the Lord had done for Israel. This was a response borne out of deep concern for Moses and his people.
- Jethro recognized God as the source of blessing. So he praised the Lord (v. 10).
- Jethro also acknowledged the supremacy of the Lord, proclaiming that he’s “greater than all gods”. This is something that Jethro now “knows”. God wants to be known. This is clearly seen in the book of Exodus, where He wants not only the Israelites to know Him but the Egyptians as well.
- Jethro then offered up a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. A burnt offering was representative of full devotion to God. Based on what he had heard the Lord had done in the lives of the Israelites, Jethro devoted himself to the Lord.

God can do great things in and through us. But when others look at these things and say “what a great person you are” instead of “what a great God you have,” I believe we have somehow given the wrong message across.

Then the Israelite leaders shared a meal with Jethro. Sharing a meal was the highest form of fellowship. And they shared the meal in the presence of God as well. So the sweet fellowship between Jethro and Moses reached its climax as others joined in and God also “pulled up a chair”.

What was it that caught Jethro's attention? It was what the Lord had done to Egypt on behalf of the Israelites. This showed Jethro not only how powerful the Lord is but how loving He is as well.

The Lord had delivered us from bondage to sin (Romans 6:6), and He continues to help and keep us. Thus, people will have the opportunity to view God's great work of deliverance in our lives, as we become less dominated by sin and be more like Jesus. And once in a while the Lord will bring a Jethro into our lives to take notice, rejoice and praise the Lord.

This also offers strong encouragement for us to be a Jethro in others' lives—to ask of another's welfare, to watch for the Lord's grace in the life of another, to rejoice with and over another, to praise the Lord in another's presence, to acknowledge the greatness of the Lord, and to enter into intimate fellowship with another in the presence of God. So the Lord will send us Jethros, and we can also be Jethros.

It is difficult for me to envision how Jethro gathered information about the well-being of Moses, but the text tells us "he heard everything God had done for Moses and for his people ..." (v. 1). Perhaps Jethro made a point to invite travellers to share a meal with him or to spend the night in his tent, enabling him to learn of events in Egypt.

The point of the passage, however, is not how Jethro learned of Moses' well-being, but of what he learned. Jethro had learned that God had protected Moses, and that He had delivered the Israelites out of Egypt.

Verses 2-6 indicate the purpose of Jethro's visit to Moses—to reunite Zipporah (who's his daughter and Moses' wife), Gershom and Eliezer (who're his grandsons and Moses' sons) with Moses.

We are not told precisely when or why Moses and his family were separated. Maybe Moses sent his family back to Jethro at a time when Moses feared for their safety.

From the information which Jethro had gathered, he concluded that the reason for the separation of Moses and his family could now be safely set aside. The purpose of Jethro's visit to Moses was quite clearly to reunite Moses with his family.

The arrival of Jethro, accompanied by Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer, was apparently a pleasant surprise for Moses. Moses went to meet Jethro, kissed him, and then went into Jethro's tent with him.

Inside the tent, Moses and Jethro went through the formalities of the reception of an honoured guest. Moses brought Jethro up to date with a detailed report of how the hand of God had delivered the Israelites and devastated the Egyptians (v. 8). Jethro heard how God had done everything for Israel, and he rejoiced, praised, and worshipped God.

When we let God do all in His will for His people, we can rejoice for God is good.

Jethro observed what the Lord had done and was delighted. But he had a far different reaction when he observed what Moses was doing. In fact, the events of vv. 13-27 serve to show the folly of Moses.

II. The Truth about Moses' Folly (vv. 13-27)

13 The next day Moses took his seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening.

14 When his father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he said, "What is this you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge, while all these people stand around you from morning till evening?"

15 Moses answered him, "Because the people come to me to seek God's will.

16 Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws."

17 Moses' father-in-law replied, "What you are doing is not good.

18 You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone.

19 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.

20 Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform.

21 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.

22 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.

23 If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied."

24 Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said.

25 He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people, officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

26 They served as judges for the people at all times. The difficult cases they brought to Moses, but the simple ones they decided themselves.

27 Then Moses sent his father-in-law on his way, and Jethro returned to his own country.

Moses acted as arbiter of every dispute that the Israelites had, and not surprisingly this activity went on "from the morning until the evening". Jethro saw all that Moses was doing for the people. This is parallel to his hearing about all that the Lord had done for the people (18:1, 8, 9).

The same words are used to describe the work of the Lord and of Moses. Both were “doing everything/all for the people”. The picture we see here is that Moses was acting just like God—doing everything/all for the people. He was trying to be God. Whereas Jethro was thrilled with what the Lord had done, he was not thrilled with what Moses was doing. He asked in v. 14, “What are you doing?” and “Why are you doing it?” In v. 17, he concluded, “What you are doing is not good.”

For us to change our old way of doing things, sometimes it takes a fresh pair of eyes. In this story, these eyes belong to Jethro. What Moses was doing immediately struck Jethro as “not good”.

Moses’ answer to Jethro’s question, “Why are you doing this?” is essentially this—“Because the people want me to.” That raises the question that the text doesn’t ask directly—“Why do the people want him to?” The answer isn’t difficult to discern. In the people’s minds, Moses was the one with the divine hotline to God. He’s the one who can solve all their problems. He’s their spiritual superhero.

The culture of Israel is not unlike our culture today. We have developed a culture of so-called “experts”. If we have a problem, we read a book by an expert or seek out the advice of an expert. Nothing is wrong with that, but often our motivation is to merely solve the problem instead of using the problem as an opportunity to know what God is teaching us.

Also, we often fail to avail ourselves of God’s greatest source of mutual help—the Body of Christ. When we fail to cultivate mutually caring fellowship in the Body, we have no one to turn to but an “expert” whom we may not even know.

Another question to ask is, “Why does Moses do what the people want?” Again, the text neither asks nor answers this question directly, but the answer isn’t difficult to discern. Moses might say, “Well, judging the people is an important task, and it’s got to be done right. I’m the only one who can do it right.”

Only God is perfect. When we are obsessed with perfection, we are trying to be like God. One main reason why people are obsessed with being perfect is their need to be in control. Therefore, they are reluctant to trust anyone with anything that might reflect poorly on them if it isn’t done to their exacting expectations.

How does vv. 13-27 here relate to the preceding vv. 1-12? The preceding vv. 1-12 is a glorious testimony and praise to the greatness of God. In vv. 13-27, we see Moses trying to be God. But if God is so great, so awesome, so powerful, that means Moses doesn’t have to be so great, so awesome, so powerful. Jethro had just told Moses how great God is. If that’s true, then Moses didn’t have to break his back from morning to night. That means we

can let go of things, let others do things. The Lord will take care of things and He is able.

Jethro's first response to what the Lord was doing was to rejoice over the Lord's "good things" (v. 9). However, his first response to what Moses was doing was to tell him that what he was doing was "not good". See the contrast? Again, the grammatical parallel is clear—the Lord does everything for people, and it's a good thing. Moses tries to do everything for people like God, and it's not a good thing.

Jethro explained why what Moses was doing was not good. If Moses was to keep up this pace, he would wear both himself and the people out, as he sat before them all day and they waited all day to see him. The task was too "heavy" for Moses. Like in the battle with Amalek, when he needed Aaron and Hur to prop up his hands because they were "heavy" (17:12), Moses needed people to lighten his load. Just like Moses, we need people too, even those who may not do things exactly the way we do the same things.

Jethro concluded his evaluation of Moses' actions with these words, "You cannot do it alone" (v. 18). Ouch!! This really hurts the ego. Many people have been educated and inculcated to be self dependent. To ask for help is a sign of weakness, supposedly.

After observing the problem, Jethro offered a two-part solution.

- First, Moses was to teach all the people "the decrees and the laws" and to "show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform" (v. 20). The application of this advice in the Body of Christ is not just to instruct people, but to tell AND model how to live out the Word and ways of God.
- The second part was to select a few. But Moses wasn't advised to select just anyone. The task was indeed important, but there were other people who could do it. Jethro told Moses to look for four qualities—"capable", "fear God", "trustworthy", and "hate dishonest gain" (v. 21)—simply put, people who not only have good competence, but also godly character. And people of godly character let their actions match their words.

Korean Air Lines flight KE007 was shot down by a Soviet fighter jet on 1 Sep 1983. On that fateful night, 240 unsuspecting passengers and crew members were shot down like an innocent sparrow in flight. The trigger-man for the Soviet Union was Major Osipovich, a pilot who wasn't originally scheduled to fly during that time.

The Major was slated to give a talk about peace at his daughter's school so he volunteered for night duty to free up enough time to speak during school hours. This adjustment in

flight time put him in the position of patrolling the eastern skies when that Korean passenger plane strayed into Soviet air space. As it happened, Major Osipovich followed orders and shot down the commercial airliner.

How tragic it was that 240 lives were lost, and world powers were pushed dangerously close to catastrophic confrontation because military missiles were fired at a civilian airplane by a pilot who was preparing to teach children in school about peace.

One's character is best demonstrated when his loud and lofty words are matched by appropriate actions.

(<http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/actions-speak-louder-than-words>)

Letting go of something that we think is important is difficult. But Jethro offered Moses an incentive to do so in v. 23—the people would be able to go home “satisfied” instead of waiting around all day for a chance to see Moses. Moses felt responsible and didn't want to disappoint the people. But if he would let others share the work with him, he would be an even greater blessing to the people.

The Lord is perfect in power, infinitely able to do more than we ask or think. Because this is so, we can be rested in Him. Because God is perfectly able, we can let go; let others do the work together; and let God watch over all things.

Two implications for us today related to working together:

- i. Each of us must recognize that we cannot do everything alone. God does not want us to do everything alone, but with Him enabling us and others complementing us.
- ii. Each of us must be willing to step up and help in what we can and whenever we can.

There is an African Proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.”

I believe Moses was completely caught off guard by Jethro's disapproval. Moses was trying to keep his head above water that he didn't have time to reflect on what he was doing. I believe Jethro, on the other hand, had already suspected a problem for some time. Perhaps, Moses had not only sent away his family to Jethro for caregiving, but he apparently had little contact with them, and he had delayed in reuniting with his family.

Moses was so engrossed with settling disputes that he became consumed by them. Jethro's advice was that Moses would need to rearrange his time so that priority would be given to teaching God's principles and precepts to the

people. This would equip the people to anticipate problems, prevent them, and apply godly guidelines to solve these problems should they arise.

Jethro had seen how Moses tried to settle every dispute among the Israelites, and he concluded that what Moses was doing was not good.

When we do not let go and try to do everything like God, we need to realize that it is not good.

Conclusion

Our text can be applied to every Christian for we all are stewards of the time, gifts, and opportunities which God has given us. In other words, we must take leadership over our own lives, and managing those things of which God has made us stewards—in our personal life, our home life, our church life, our working life, our social life.

Faith is required to trust God to enable us to do what He has called us to do. Faith is also required to enable us to let others to do their share as well.

Maybe some among us are feeling the pressure to perform—to do all things, and to do all things well. And because we are somewhat short of that benchmark, we become disappointed with ourselves, or we feel devalued and depreciated by others.

But today as we come to worship God, we are to be reminded that He has sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to do His perfect will with perfect faithfulness and perfect obedience here on earth.

And those who have believed and trusted in Jesus can come before the Father God who is the one and only true God worthy to be worshipped. Not only that, this God will find those who have believed and trusted in Jesus worthy to be loved, not because they are perfect in themselves, but they are covered in the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

So if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, God calls you to worship Him today with thanksgiving and gratitude—He loves and accepts you as a person, not as a performer. If you are not yet a believer, God calls you to seek Him in Jesus Christ, and let us share with you after the service what it means to be covered in the perfect righteousness of Jesus in a world that often values performances more than people.

God's call to faithfulness is to spiritual obedience where we keep our focus on using our gifting to do His work with others. It is not a call to spiritual heroism where we lost our focus because we act like God and try to do everything for others.

Let's be clear of the difference between spiritual obedience pleasing to God and spiritual heroism not pleasing to Him as we serve Him and one another in our ministry together. Amen!