

The God of the nations

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Date: 03 March 2019

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[0 : 0 0] I thought as we look at this chapter, it would be worth keeping that open in your Bibles in front of you. As we begin, I'm just going to, I suppose, give us a bit of a recap of the book of Exodus so far.

This chapter, as I mentioned earlier, marks a bit of a turning point in the book. If you remember back, I don't know what it was, seven or eight weeks ago when we started, I mentioned that the book of Exodus kind of comes in two halves.

The first section is this great rescue, we called it. And then the second section is the great relationship. And what we're looking at here in chapter 18 really is a kind of a bridge, I suppose, between those two sections.

It's kind of the climax of this first section, this great rescue, and then moves us on into what's to come. So let me kind of tell you and remind you of the story so far. We've seen this great rescue.

Remember the very opening chapters of Exodus. God's people, the Israelites, were enslaved in Egypt. It says life was hard, life was bitter for them.

[1 : 0 4] And as we've worked our way through the book, we've seen God raise up Moses as this rescuer. We've seen all the way through that actually, while Moses has been the kind of the human face, it's been God who's at work.

And God has been showing the people who he is by what he does. And so we've seen here his great might as he's defeated Egypt, the superpower of the day.

He's delivered his people through the plagues, through the Passover, through the Red Sea. And then a couple of weeks ago, how he continued to provide for them with the manna from heaven now that they're out of Egypt.

And so a whole lot has happened in this great rescue. Incredible things. It really is an epic tale, a true tale, but an incredible tale. And so perhaps if I say, well, this chapter here is kind of the climax to that, it seems a bit strange, doesn't it?

Because it's perhaps actually a bit of an anti-climax. It's Moses meeting his father-in-law, and then he just proceeds to get kind of what seems to be advice on delegation and organization.

[2 : 0 8] There's not many kind of blockbuster films where that is the big crescendo. So I've not seen the latest Mission Impossible, but I'm pretty sure it doesn't all build up to Tom Cruise telling you how to manage your email inbox or whatever like that.

You know, we look at this stuff, we think, well, you know, where's the excitement there? Where's the drama there? And so what is going on here? Why does the author put this chapter at this vital stage in the book?

Why is it so important? Well, it's important because of this. What we're seeing here is kind of the outsider being brought in. The outsider being brought in.

So that's who this guy Jephro is. That's what this passage is all about. It's the people of the nations, all the nations, hearing about the greatness of God because of what he's done, because of his great rescue, and coming to recognize him because of that, coming to worship him because of that.

And so we're going to look through this chapter now. As we look at it, I say it's kind of almost like a hinge. It links what's happened with what's going to follow. We're going to look at it in two sections, which in some ways kind of sum up the whole of the book of Exodus.

[3 : 18] Firstly, that God's rescue brings these outsiders in. And then secondly, that God's law teaches his people how to live. So first of all, God's rescue brings outsiders in.

And we said that's who Jephro, this guy, is. We haven't seen him since Exodus chapter 4. He's Moses' father-in-law. And yet more importantly here, he's introduced right at the start of the chapter as the priest of Midian.

The priest of Midian. What does that mean? Well, Midian was a foreign land. So Jephro is not an Israelite. He's not one of God's kind of people in that ethnic sense.

Not only that, we read he's a priest of Midian. That means he would have been leading the people there in worship of foreign gods, of other gods, Midianite gods. And yet what happens?

Well, he comes in verse 8. Moses tells him all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake. All the hardships that had come upon them in the way.

[4 : 24] And how the Lord had delivered them. Pharaoh gives, sorry, Moses gives Jephro this kind of recap of everything that's been happening in the book so far.

And notice how Moses tells this. He doesn't put himself at the heart of the story. He's done some pretty amazing things. But he doesn't say, oh, did I tell you about this time when I parted the Red Sea?

Or let me tell you about this time that I did this or that. No. Moses tells Jephro about what the Lord has done, it says. Moses tells Jephro about how the Lord had delivered them.

And what's the response to that? Well, verse 9, Jephro rejoices. Verse 10, he blesses the Lord. Verse 11, he says, now he knows that the Lord is greater than all gods, that he is the true God.

And so verse 12, Jephro worships. He brings this offering to God and worships him. Along with Moses and his brothers. Along with God's people.

[5 : 24] And so it's incredible, really, this idol worshiper, this pagan priest. But when he hears about God's deliverance, and that word is used again and again in those verses, when he hears about what God's done in rescuing his people, well, his natural reaction is to join them in worshipping God.

And so on the one hand, Jephro, we could say, is a kind of surprising convert. He's this outsider to God's people. And yet he's brought in. And yet actually, when we think of the big story, the big picture of the Bible, we shouldn't be too surprised.

Because right from the beginning, the Bible talks about how God is committed to bringing all people in to know him and worship him. People from every tribe and tongue and nation.

People from every background. God, right from the beginning, is interested in the whole world coming to know who he is. In the book of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, well, God chooses the people of Israel to be his special people.

But not just for their benefit. He says that it's so through them the whole world might be blessed and come to know him. In the book of Exodus, as we've been making our way through, God again has said that this rescue is not just for the benefit of the people of Israel, but that everyone will know and everyone will see who God is by what he does.

[6 : 49] Verse 16 of chapter 9, God says it, so his name may be proclaimed in all the earth. He's not just a local God for kind of a small number of people.

I watched a program a while ago, I'm not really sure why I watched it, but it was about a restaurant in Sweden. I don't normally watch programs about restaurants in Sweden, but this one was literally in the middle of nowhere.

It was miles away from the nearest village. It was in a kind of a converted farm building. And the point was, in some ways, this was a terrible place to start a business. It was about a kind of a handful of people who lived nearby.

How is a restaurant there ever going to work? And yet apparently the food is so amazing, it's so unique, that people from all over the world are drawn in, fly in, to experience this incredible place.

It did say that one of the dishes was diced cubes of raw beef hearts. I'm not sure if I'm going to go myself, but you know, people do from every kind of country on the globe.

[7 : 53] They come in to experience this incredible thing. And that's kind of a similar picture to what the Bible says about God and the people of Israel. They're not the biggest and best.

They're not kind of the obvious choice. God kind of picks these nobodies from nowhere, and yet he says what he's going to do with them and what he's going to do for them.

It is so amazing that people will be drawn in from all over the earth to see what God is doing and through that to come to know God.

So this is kind of a roundabout way of saying that actually what we're seeing here in these verses, it is really exciting because it's the proof of that happening. It's the proof that it's happening just as God had said it would.

It's Jethro, someone from the outside, recognizing how great God is, and not only recognizing that but worshipping him because they have heard all about what he's done, that he is the universal God.

[8 : 56] It's just as Jethro says here, this great rescue shows that he is the God above all gods, that he is the true God. And so that's what we're seeing in this chapter.

One of the things that we've said time and time again about the book of Exodus, one of the reasons it's so good for us to look at it as a church together, is that the book of Exodus is like this kind of scale model of the even greater rescue that God carries out through Jesus.

And so actually the Bible talks about all of us being slaves. Not slavery in Egypt, but slavery the Bible says to sin.

Slavery to a constant desire to elevate ourselves above God, a constant desire to kind of live our way and not even have God in the picture.

A constant desire to do things not as God would like them, but as we would like them. And that breaks our relationship with God. We go away from God. The Bible says actually that's not freedom.

[10 : 00] The Bible calls that slavery. We end up stuck and tangled up and enslaved to sin and these patterns of life that we choose for ourselves. And just as in the Exodus, the Bible says we're helpless to do anything about that.

We can't deal with that problem ourselves, but just like in the Exodus, God has acted to bring us deliverance. Just like in the Exodus, he sent a rescuer, not Moses, but Jesus himself.

As we've already spoken about this morning, Jesus who lived this perfect life, who died this sacrificial death, and who now because of that, if we trust in him, well, we are delivered from this slavery to sin that no longer has any authority over us.

We have the freedom to live the lives we were designed to live, lives lived in a relationship with the God who made us. And so all the way through Exodus, we've been seeing it's a picture on a kind of local scale of this even greater deliverance that God has carried out through Jesus.

And the encouragement in this chapter is that when we speak about that, when we speak about that amazing deliverance that we call the gospel, that we call the good news of Jesus, well, as we speak about that, that people are drawn in.

[11 : 21] As we speak about all that God's done, it enables people to see how incredible God is, just like Moses did. We tell people all about God and this deliverance. Just like Moses, we're not telling people, look how great I am, look how I've kind of sorted myself out.

And we're not even saying, look how great are our churches, look how nice all the people are. What we're here to say is what God has done, that message that Jesus has come to rescue, that deliverance that God has made available for all people.

And it's as we share that, that we see people respond in that way that Jethro did, to rejoice, to bless the Lord, to recognize that God is above everything else, and to come and worship him, to become part of his people, wherever they're from, whatever our background.

And so this is something we're able to do, speaking about this rescue kind of individually, with the people that we meet and come into contact with day by day, what God has done in our lives. It's also really the purpose of why we gather here on a Sunday morning.

Again, we're not here to say, look at us. We're here to say, look at God. You know, we celebrate what he's done by singing, by praying, by speaking about it. If you're here this morning and you're not really convinced about that, if you're not really sure about God, you're not really sure what you think about all that, you're still kind of asking questions, well, that means that the church is the perfect place to be.

[12 : 45] Church isn't just a place for Christians. Church is a place where people come and celebrate what God has done. And as people do that, it means that other people are able to come in and listen to those celebrations about what God has done.

Listen to what that reveals about God. And our hope and our prayer is to, is that people would then accept that rescue, would accept that good news and would join in that celebration.

And so wherever you find yourself, I suppose, on that kind of spectrum this morning, really kind of not sure about Christianity, kind of dragged along here, or, you know, really keen, really kind of full of the joys of the Lord, wherever you find yourself on that spectrum this morning, I'm really keen to say that you're really welcome and this church is for you and this church is exactly the right place for you to be.

And we gather to celebrate God's deliverance. And as we do that, that in itself holds out that invitation for everyone to draw other people in. And so that's the first half of the passage.

It runs up to verse 12, and this meal that the people have together in the presence of God, really a picture, I suppose, of the friendship and the fellowship which comes as people join together in following and worshiping God, a fellowship which crosses kind of every boundary as God's rescue crosses every boundary and brings the outsider in.

[14 : 10] So that's the first half. Let's move on to the second half of the passage, verse 13 down. And here we get to this section that we're talking about where Jethro kind of gets to work in helping Moses organize what's going on.

This is kind of Jethro's chance to show his kind of delegational and management skills. I was reading this thinking I could really do with a Jethro to come and sort my life out. But really, what is this passage all about?

It's not a kind of a business management textbook. The big picture of Exodus, this passage is preparing us for what's to come. And that's all about how God's law teaches God's people how to live.

So have a look at what's happening in verse 13. The next day, after all this celebration, after all this feast, it's kind of back down to earth with a bump. The next day, Moses sat to judge the people and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening.

And then as we read on, we see basically every dispute that people have, every situation they're not sure about, every question they'd like answered, they come to Moses and they say, Moses, what do we do with this?

[15 : 20] It's from morning until night. It's kind of like having small children constantly asking what they should do, except apparently there are like 600,000 of them. So just put yourself in that position.

Everyone's problem becomes Moses' problem. It's miserable. And actually, we're supposed to think that. It's the kind of description of a chaotic picture, a really messy scene.

Moses is knackered. We're supposed to read it and think, that sounds awful. And that's what Jethro says, isn't it? What you're doing is not good. You'll wear yourself out. You can't carry this load.

And so he sets about organizing things. And again, in the big picture of Exodus, really this passage is a sign that shows us that where we're at now, this kind of middle kind of climactic point, the people have crossed the Red Sea, the people have got freedom.

Well, this is to show us actually that can't be the end of the story. You know, the people might be out of Egypt, and yet they're still not a functioning society. But what God has done in delivering these people has been amazing, and yet there's still work to do before they're formed into this nation.

[16 : 35] Who again are supposed to represent God well, are supposed to live as his people, are supposed to share who he is with the world around him. This great drama and rescue has happened, and yet now the question comes, well, what's the day-to-day life going to look like?

Because clearly having Moses answer every question and make every decision isn't the solution. And really that's what we're going to move on to next week. We'll be looking at the Ten Commandments, among other things, these kind of laws and rules which help the people organize and govern their lives.

This week kind of sets the scene for that, but it's showing us this, I think, which is really important. It's that when we get to the idea of God's commandments, and when we turn next week to God's law, and we were speaking about it earlier as well, when we start talking about a lot of these words that maybe kind of instantly you've got flags in the back of your head saying, oh, it's a typical church, it rules, and it's telling me what to do, and it's just trying to control us.

Well, actually, I hope this passage shows that that is not what God's law is all about. God's law is about forming people into a society that works, into making a kind of a random bunch of people who are all inherently kind of selfish and want the best for themselves into a group that will function well.

That will represent him well. And here in Exodus, that society is the nation of Israel. That's what's kind of being created as God gives his laws to his people. And yet for us, as we think kind of the other side of the cross, as we live after Jesus was born, that society is the church.

[18 : 15] It's the church who are God's rescued and delivered people. It's the church who, like Israel, are supposed to live in a way that honors God, that points people towards him. And what we see as we look at this passage here is that to do that, we need God's law.

We need God's help. We need God to show us how to do that. And so again, this law of God, it's not restrictive, it's not to kind of squash us and make sure we don't have any fun, but rather it's to show us what God is like and what he wants his people to be like so that they can live life to the full.

And Jethro really gives this brilliant picture of how God's law shapes God's people. I want to kind of finish just quickly looking at this because I think there's so much that we can learn as a church.

And really the foundation is verse 20. What does it say? What does Jethro kind of task Moses with? He says he's to teach the people God's law. He's to teach the people God's law.

And that word that's translated law here, it's perhaps bigger than what we might think. It's not just a list of rules on a kind of a case-by-case basis, but it's a more kind of general sense, a more overarching sense, teaching the people how to think in a godly way so that they can make these wise decisions for themselves, not always be relying on Moses so that they can grow in their knowledge of God.

[19 : 38] And yet also there's a recognition, I think that's not always easy, is it? We don't always know what the right path forward is. And so kind of intertwined with this, we have these trustworthy people, people who wouldn't take a bribe, people who fear God, who are kind of set up to help with the more complex cases.

So it's not just a free-for-all where everyone just does whatever they like, but it's a community which is kind of interlinked as people help each other live out this teaching from God that Moses gives to the people.

I just think it's a great picture of the church. Why is it that we come together to look at God's word, the Bible, week by week? It's not because it's going to give us a kind of a specific instruction into every possible situation we find ourselves in.

You know, there's no verse for, you know, how are you supposed to react when the person in front of you at the traffic light stalls and you miss your whole go on green. There's no verse that says, you know, thou shalt not toot the horn repeatedly.

But actually, as we look at the Bible, you know, it shapes how we think, how we act, how we understand God and what pleases Him in like a much bigger way, which we're then able to apply to the various situations that we live in, that we experience day by day.

[20 : 58] That's what God's law is. That's what God's law enables us to do. And yet also, we do that, as in Exodus here, we do that as part of a community. We're here to help each other.

We're here to kind of speak into each other's lives. We're here to share our problems and think what the kind of the godly solutions to those would be. You know, throughout the Bible, the picture of the church, it is not just a kind of a thing that happens for an hour or two hours once a week.

The picture of a church is always a community of people joined together, people built up by listening to God's word, the Bible, and then going out and helping each other live that out.

And I think that's the great picture that Jethro's advice gives us. It's this individual growth in wisdom and people hearing God's law taught to them and then that kind of communal support network as we look to live that out.

Now, one of the things I've learned in the last year is that probably the hardest part of starting a new church is choosing a name. If there's, you know, one thing that is going to kind of stop a church in its tracks is trying to pick what it's going to be called.

[22 : 09] There seems to be like a limitless number of options. We're probably not plumped for the most kind of radical or original church names that you could find. But the reason that eventually we settled on Haddington Community Church ultimately was to do with this, that we really want community to be right at the heart of church.

We really think that kind of biblically speaking, community is right at the heart of church. And so we want to be a church that serves our community, but also a church that is a community and which serves one another.

And perhaps the biggest way we can do that is by this helping each other live the Christian life. Helping each other grow in a way that means we live in a way that pleases God because that's not easy.

We can't just do that by ourselves. We can't just think, well, I'll just read my Bible and I'll get everything right. God puts us in a church because he wants us to learn, but he also wants us to help one another.

And so it's as we do that that we're then able to live these lives that glorify God, which reflect his love for other people, which share about this great deliverance that he's made possible. And again, as that deliverance is shown that God's great rescue brings outsiders in.

[23 : 25] Other people are drawn in by our lives, by what we speak about, to put their trust in God, to worship him. As we've seen from this chapter, that's not the end of the story. We come in, God rescues us, he brings us in, and yet that is not the end of the story.

Following on from that rescue, we're shown through God's law how to live lives that please him, how to live good lives in response to all that he's done for us.

That's not a burden or a drag. It's joyful. It's how life works best. It's what the Bible calls life and life to the full. And that's what we're brought together as a church, as a community, to help one another with.

Let me pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.