

Text: Exod. 18:1-12

Title: "Jethro, the encouraging listener"

Time: 2/7/2021 am

Place: NBBC

Introduction: Listening is one of those skills that is undervalued and often missing in our world today. I read recently about the format of the famous Lincoln/Douglas debates, the first of which took place on August 21, 1858 in Ottawa, IL. Douglas spoke first for one hour; Lincoln gave a rebuttal for an hour and a half; and then Douglas finished with a half hour.

The funny thing about this 3-hour debate format was that it was a condensed version of what was typical in public discourse. On October 16, 1854, the two men had met in opposition in Peoria, IL. Douglas gave a three-hour address with the agreement that Lincoln would get the same amount of time to reply. They would still not be done after Lincoln, awaiting another reply from Douglas. In the middle of this session, Lincoln suggested that they all take a break for supper, which they did, and remarkably they all returned for the finish. Citizens in Ottawa and Peoria in the 19th century lived in a culture that understood the importance of listening to a lot of content, and they could listen well. Today, our political debates are staged visual extravaganzas with each participant hoping to utter the one-liner that will entertain the audience the most. We have lost much of an ability to listen we once had.

One of the best listeners I ever knew personally was my mother. Mom's kitchen table was known to be a place where sisters-in-Christ could come and have someone listen to them over a cup of coffee. I never enjoyed those sessions, because I was kind of shy and introverted and would

go hide in my room while Mom's friends were over. They always stayed much longer than I wanted to be stuck in my room. When Mom listened for these hours on end, she desired to minister encouragement to those in need of it through this simple ministry of listening.

Jethro reminds me a lot of my mom in this regard. The very first Hebrew word in our chapter is the word translated *heard* in verse 1. The main point of the passage is that Jethro heard; he listened. The first twelve verses of this chapter very simply show us how God can use a good listener like Jethro to be an encouragement. Our title this morning is "Jethro: the encouraging listener," and I want us to listen to four things that Jethro took the time to hear in this passage.

I. Jethro heard that God had redeemed His people (v. 1).

Application: We are told not only that Jethro is Moses's father-in-law, but also that he was a priest in Midian. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through his wife Keturah, whom he had married after Sarah's death. Some years later, the Midianites would become enemies of Israel in league with Moab in the sin of Peor. Phineas would kill an Israelite and a Midian woman who were part of that sin and in so doing halt a fatal plague that the Lord had brought on Israel (Num. 25:6f).

So, Jethro's devotion to the Lord, in the tradition of his ancestor Abraham, was likely rare in the idolatrous culture in which he lived. As a priest in Midian, he was known to have been appointed by the Lord to pray for his countrymen, teach them about the ways of the Lord, and offer sacrifices in their behalf. And then one day, Jethro's daughters came home excited about an Egyptian man who had saved their flocks from other shepherds who wanted their water.

The man was Moses, of course, and Jethro would give his oldest daughter, Zipporah, to be Moses's wife.

It was while shepherding Jethro's flocks that God called Moses on Mount Horeb/Sinai to deliver his people Israel. Before leaving, Moses undoubtedly shared with Jethro the nature of that call and the promise that God had given him related to it: "Certainly, I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: when thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain" (Exod. 3:12).

News of the mighty salvation that God had wrought for His people had reached Jethro, so he made his way down to that mountain of promise. He wanted to be part of its fulfilment, worshipping the Lord in thanksgiving for all that God had done to save His people. It must have been especially encouraging to Moses to have the one who was with him before any of this started worship with him the God who had fulfilled His promise of salvation.

We gather week after week in part to hear that God has redeemed His people, that He has fulfilled His promise to us in Christ, our Moses, and brought us up out of the bondage of our slavery to sin. Our taskmaster shall never rule over us again, and how it must thrill our hearts each week to remember and to hear what God has done to save us. Jethro's thrill over what he heard reminds me of the last verse of Catherine Hankey's "I Love to Tell the Story":

"I love to tell the story, for those who know it best,
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when, in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
'Twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long."

Are we those who know the story best that seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest? Jethro was. The old, old, story reaches that far back. God redeems His people from their sins. Perhaps we must admit our sinful lack of hunger and thirst for this old, old story this morning, repent, and become renewed in thankfulness for the true miracle of our salvation. Jethro heard that God redeemed His people. We need ears that can hear this truth that way too.

II. Jethro heard that God's people had a need he could help meet (vv. 2-7).

Application: Whereas verse 1 of this chapter takes us back to Exodus 3, these verses remind us of some events in chapter 4 (vv. 21-26). Moses had set off for Egypt with his wife Zipporah and his young son Gershom. Gershom had not yet been circumcised, evidently due to some opposition from Zipporah about the procedure, and consequently the Lord threatens to kill Moses. Zipporah finally agrees to the procedure to save Moses, but does so with the protest, "Surely a bloody husband art thou to me."

I believe that it is at this point that the event described at the end of verse 2 happened: "after he had sent her back." The Hebrew grammar there can be take one of two ways, either that Moses actively sent Zipporah away, or that he allowed Zipporah to leave. The first understanding of this terminology normally refers to divorce. I think the second is closer to the right interpretation. Zipporah wants to go home, she wants to take her son with her, and by the way, she is pregnant with their second son whom Moses meets for the first time in this passage, more than a year later.

So, the family of God's servant has a serious need. At minimum, Zipporah and the two little boys are going to have

some physical needs. More critically, there must have been some serious spiritual needs here as well.

Jethro would have heard of these needs. He must have had some listening to do. He receives his daughter and grandchildren, giving them not only the financial support they need to eat and be warm, but also the spiritual support they need to be willing to return to Moses, this time with the newborn along for the trip. When Moses sees this new little one, he names him Eliezer, meaning "My God is a help," and he does so as he says, "for the God of my father . . . was mine help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh" (v. 4). When Moses named Eliezer that for that reason, I think he may have thought about his father-in-law's faithfulness to his God. Perhaps my *father* means *father-in-law*.

Jethro is an example to us this morning. Are we hearing the needs of God's people in an encouraging way? Obviously, our lives must be well-connected as brothers and sisters in the covenantal love of our Savior in order to minister to one another in this way. We have committed to pray for missionaries who send us letters so that we can hear their needs. Are we listening? Are we praying? Perhaps Jethro's example exposes our sin and need for cleansing this morning when it comes to hearing the needs of God's people over which we can pray and with which we can help.

III. Jethro heard that God is good to His people (vv. 8-9).

Illustration: Last month I was encouraged at the annual Arch Ministries pastors' fellowship. One of the highlights of our time together each year is an opportunity we take to share the good news about the Good News with one another. One church planter in Houston, TX told a story about a couple whom they had over for a fellowship at their home. The ladies had migrated to one room in the house and the

men in another, and in both cases the conversation became a discussion about the Lord. The church planter rejoiced to see the Lord save the husband of the couple that day. As the couple left to go home, this newly saved husband stopped his wife and told her that he had something he needed to share with her. She responded that she had something for him too. That's right, both had been saved that afternoon in those separate rooms, and now they got to not only tell their good news about the Good News, but also hear the same from their spouse.

Application: Jethro sits down with Moses and just drinks in the good news about the Good News. He responds with great joy to all he hears (v. 9). But I want us to notice that the cause for rejoicing came from Moses's description of how the Lord used two opposite experiences for His glory: (1) all the trouble that God had done to the enemy; and (2) all the trouble that the Lord had allowed them to go through themselves. Both are sources of God's goodness – our victories and His chastening trials in our lives.

God's goodness is a reality in the lives of His people when Pharaoh drowns in too much water and when Israel thirsts for lack of water. Many Israelites failed to receive the blessing of joy Jethro received. Jethro had the advantage of viewing it all from a distance and with 20/20 hindsight. But even without our enjoying that perspective, we can trust that God is good to us all the time. Jethro heard that God is good to His people, and we need to be able to hear that too.

IV. Jethro heard that God is greater than any other gods (vv. 10-12).

Application: What is amazing to Jethro about the greatness of the true God in this passage is that in His dealings with

Pharaoh He demonstrated His ability to use the wrath and pride of man to praise Him. In the person of Jesus Christ, God is still demonstrating His greatness in this way today. Remember what he told the man born blind whom He had healed: "For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind" (John 9:39).

When the blindman understood the greatness of Christ, he bowed before Him in humble worship and confession of faith. Because Jethro understood the greatness of God over all other gods, Jethro worshipped the Lord the way that had been passed down to his people from Abraham, and he does so with Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel. What will it take for our world to see that our God is greater than all the other gods that keep people out of a Bible-believing, gospel-preaching church on Sunday morning? It will take the judgment of the One who can make blindmen know they are blind, and then give them sight.

Conclusion: This reunion of Moses with his wife Zipporah is a joyous event that reminds us of a joy we find in the pages of Scripture over the future of the nation of Israel. When we remember that Christ is our Moses, we can see how Israel rejected Him for a time, like Zipporah left Moses, but also that the promise of Scripture is that Israel shall be brought back to their Redeemer some day. That will be a day of great rejoicing. Listen to one such promise:

Isaiah 41:8-14, "But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away. Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am

thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. Behold, all they that were incensed against thee shall be ashamed and confounded: they shall be as nothing; and they that strive with thee shall perish. Thou shalt seek them, and shalt not find them, even them that contended with thee: they that war against thee shall be as nothing, and as a thing of nought. For I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not; I will help thee. Fear not, thou worm Jacob, and ye men of Israel; I will help thee, saith the Lord, and thy redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."

God's promise to us about our future is true because His promise to Israel about theirs is true. Let's be encouraged and encouraging listeners.

"A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction—the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching