



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

WEEK 10
JETHRO, MIRIAM & AARON
MARCH 5-11, 2007

DAY	<i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i>	CHARACTER STUDY
Monday	Numbers 28-30, Psalm 46	Exodus 18:1-27; Psalm 46
Tuesday	Numbers 31-33, Psalm 47	Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-15; Psalm 47
Wednesday	Numbers 34-36, Psalm 48	Numbers 17:1-11; Psalm 48
Thursday	Joshua 20-21, Psalm 49	Leviticus 16:1-22; Psalm 49
Friday	Judges 5-8, Psalm 50	Deuteronomy 18:14-22; Acts 3:22-26; Psalm 50

READ

Exodus 18:1-27

Psalms 46

REFLECT

During this week we will look at three people that are an integral part of the story of Moses, namely, Jethro his father-in-law, Miriam his sister, and Aaron his brother.

Moses met Jethro (who is also called “Reuel” in one place) when he fled from Egypt, and sat down at a well in Midian. Helping out some women at the well, he found himself welcomed to their home as a guest, and he eventually married one of them, Zipporah (Ex 2:15-22). He remained 40 years as a shepherd of the flock of Jethro, and then one day turned aside to look more closely at a strange bush. And life changed.

Not much is said about the relationship of these two men in this passage. Jethro is a priest, a godly man, and shows wisdom in the way he sends his daughters back to invite the stranger to a meal. But we can only speculate about their relationship over the 40 years. We are helped by the later story of Jethro in Exodus 18 to understand him as a man of clear wisdom, patience, and caring. Surely we are not far off if we surmise the Lord’s aims in bringing Moses, the city-bred hot head, under the tutelage of this godly and patient man; the result was that Moses was far more ready to respond to the Lord’s agenda after those years of steadying. In our Presbyterian heritage we think of the years that the hot-headed John Calvin, kicked out of Geneva by the riled citizens, spent in Strassbourg under the more mature Martin Bucer, returning later to Geneva with better success. It looks like Moses found a discipling resource in his father-in-law.

Then after Moses brought the people out into the desert, Jethro came some distance to see what God had accomplished through him, bringing Moses’ wife and sons for a visit. Jethro first acknowledged the amazing implications of all that had happened: “Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods” (18:11). They worshipped together, and joined in a meal. But as Jethro stayed a while longer, he saw the tremendous administrative burden Moses was under, and was quick to offer frank advice. He encouraged Moses to create a shared leadership structure, based on a wide teaching of all God’s commands, and the choice of godly men as justices of first resort. Moses quickly complied.

Well, I think it’s hard not to like Jethro. He loved God, loved his daughters, and showed caring for his grandsons. He rescued Moses by giving him a life when he had none, and was there with prompt and appropriate advice when it was needed. It has been suggested, in fact, that Jethro is the antidote to Pharaoh in this story, the one who helped provide healing and restoration in the face of all the harm that Pharaoh had done to Israel and to Moses. Jethro is a great advertisement for the value of mentoring relationships, especially those that express God’s deep desire to love us and to guide us fruitfully.

RESPOND

Who are the people who have been formative for your spirituality? It’s hard to forget them. It is easier to forget the fact that there are those around us who look to us seriously for an example of the Christian life. “Freely you have received; freely give,” said Jesus (Matt 10:8). Who do we need to be there for, today?

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the people You have placed in our lives to bring Your love and care to us. Help us remember them in prayer, and in practical acts of appreciation. And make us strong today as witnesses to all around us of Your grace, in small and in big ways.

READ

Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1-15

Psalm 47

REFLECT

Miriam is the second individual we will look at this week. She is named in the Bible as Moses' sister, and credited as being one of the three important leaders of Israel in the exodus from Egypt (Micah 6:4). Tradition (not the Bible) claims she is the older sister of the infant Moses who watched over him in the bulrushes and brought his mother to be his nursemaid (Ex 2:1-10).

Miriam's leadership is something we see in small but important chunks, like the tips of icebergs. We are told she is a prophetess (Ex 15:20), but are we not told when she prophesied or what she said. We see her leading the women in singing and dancing after the deliverance at the sea, a very memorable moment that speaks volumes about the beautiful and full way we can respond appropriately to God's deep blessings. But we suspect too that there is more behind this, and that this was not just a one-time expression. Some have suggested that there were more stories circulating about Miriam that were not finally included in our Scriptures, which focused more specifically on Moses. But what we do have does point to her important and lasting service in the Lord's dealings with Israel.

The most specific story we have about Miriam concerns the time she and her other brother Aaron stood up against Moses, asking whether he in fact was the only one who could speak on behalf of God (Num 12). This story is told in context of a rush of circumstances: the 72 elders all prophesied under the Spirit's impulse (11:26-30); the quail arrived, but the greed of the people precipitated a terrible judgment (11:31-34); and Moses entered into an unpopular marriage. The sight of many

prophesying, followed by the sight of God's fierce wrath, plus family tensions concerning the marriage, come together to prompt this moment of resistance to the authority of Moses. It doesn't go well, as the Lord replies in anger that He Himself will decide who will minister His word, and Miriam is stricken with leprosy from head to foot. Still, an important lesson emerges for all, that no human (including Moses) has anything to contribute of his or her own qualities to the work of the Lord. The thing in Moses that "qualifies" him is his humility (12:3), which is to say, that he has learned to get out of the way, to lay everything of his own personal agenda aside in order to be of service to the Lord. Miriam and Aaron learn this lesson well, apparently, since they continue in the triumvirate of leadership in Israel. It was rough on Miriam that she had to learn her mistake in such a public way, namely, in seven days of very obvious isolation. But Moses too would be rebuked publicly, denied the Promised Land for his lapse of judgment. It is a comfort to me that Jesus took upon Himself not only guilt but shame as well, though I confess I have had to bear my moments of obvious shame. We serve a holy God.

RESPOND

Humility is the lesson for us today, though we are warned that the lesson can be a hard one. But the value of humility is almost impossible to overrate. Philippians 2:5-11 teaches us that sheer humility was Jesus' most important asset in winning salvation for the lot of us. Can our humility before others today help God's love be planted in some situation that needs it?

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the amazing gift of forgiveness and new life. Please help me walk in openness to Your will and ways today.

D.D.

READ

Numbers 17:1-11

Psalm 48

REFLECT

The third Biblical character we will consider this week is Aaron, the brother of Moses and of Miriam. These three are of the tribe of Levi (Ex 6:20), the tribe of the Israelite priesthood, and Aaron's family within that tribe is traditionally connected to the role of the High Priest (29:9).

Aaron comes into leadership when Moses returns to Egypt from the desert to lead Israel out. When the Lord tells Moses he is to speak before Pharaoh, Moses balks, and the Lord appoints Aaron as spokesman. It is clear that however eloquent Aaron may be, his duty is simply to repeat the words he hears from Moses, who has heard them from God (4:14-16). Aaron also performs some of the miracles Moses has been commanded to perform before Pharaoh (7:9-10). In fact his leadership strength is shown to best advantage when he sticks close to his brother and uses little imagination; otherwise, he gets into trouble.

We see it in the incident with the golden calf. Moses delays on the holy mountain, and the people ask Aaron for another god (32:1-6). He gives them something in between, as some read this passage: he allows them to create the idol, while spinning it as worship of Yahweh (32:5). But the result is chaos. When Moses returns, part of his reaction is to call for loyal Israelites to avenge the blasphemy by slaughtering the false worshippers. The tribe of Levi sides with Moses against Aaron, and does the job. Not Aaron's best day. Then there is his challenge of Moses' authority with his sister Miriam, which we looked at earlier this week. His instincts aren't perfect, but he is able to learn, and so continues in his important role.

His position as priest is bolstered later in the wilderness journey as a result of the rebellion of Korah (Num 16), the miraculous budding of the

staff of Aaron (Num 17), and the special provisions made for Aaron and his descendants (Num 18).

However, even Moses leads him astray just at the end of his life. The Lord plans to provide water for the thirsty nation at Kadesh; all Moses and Aaron have to do is speak to the rock, and water will flow. Moses at this point is angrier with the people than God is, and he loses his temper, calling them rebels, and slamming the rock with his staff. For this inappropriate tantrum – “you did not believe in Me, to uphold My holiness in the sight of the sons of Israel” – the Lord declares that both Moses and Aaron will die in the wilderness, never reaching the Land (Num 20:8-12).

We will look tomorrow at the specific job of the priesthood, and why so much of the Old Testament is invested in it. Here we note that in Aaron we have again a flawed human being who is nevertheless willing to enter the rigorous service of the Lord, and who in general is an effective minister to the people of God's will and ways. If his main flaw may be to allow himself to be pulled in wrong directions by the strong voices around him, then we must say he is certainly no worse than many of the rest of us.

RESPOND

Often the strength of a church community is found in the willingness of its members to supplement each other's efforts. The complex relationship of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, and their relationship in turn with the Lord, can remind us of the need to look for the ways others can help keep us on the right path.

PRAY

Lord, Thank you for the strength of community, and the blessings of relationship with committed Christians. Thank you for the good work You call us to do together, and for Your presence as we do it.

D.D.

READ

Leviticus 16:1-22

Psalm 49

REFLECT

Aaron was the first of Israel's high priests, and his descendents were also high priests. The relationship between the Aaronic priesthood and the tribe of Levi is not always clear-cut, and later another family, that of Zadok, is also mentioned as having privileged status in the priesthood (1 Kings 1:38-39; Ezekiel 48:11). Further, Israel was encouraged to think of itself as a nation of priests (Leviticus 19:6). There is a complicated history of development behind these references, but what is clear is that the priesthood and its duties were crucial to the theology and practice of the nation of Israel. Why was that?

The New Testament book of Hebrews gives a nice summary statement about the essential function of the priest: "Every high priest chosen from among mortals is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5:1). Let's break this down. Priests are first of all human, and they represent humans; angels or other creatures can't fulfill this function. Second, they are granted access in their role to the very presence of God. Third, there are two particular things we owe God that will remain consistent, each day, every day: we owe God our gifts of gratitude, and we owe the continual acknowledgement of our sin. Here, in these last two points, we see the great importance of the priesthood in Israel: the priests kept alive the relationship with God on behalf of the nation, in positive acts of praise, as well as sacrifices for the atonement for sin. And so in the Temple offerings, praise and gratitude are expressed in the "burnt" and "peace" offerings, and awareness of sin in the "purification" and "atonement" rituals.

With this important function at its core, the priesthood took other duties as well: teaching, counseling, pronouncing the clean and the unclean, overseeing administrative tasks, and so forth. We see Aaron in the roles of prophet, preacher, and leader of the people. But the heart of the priestly task remains the vital function of mediating the relationship with God.

For Christians, everything about the priesthood is transformed through the work of Christ. This is in fact the point of much of the book of Hebrews. In offering Himself on the cross, as both the sacrifice and the sacrificer simultaneously, Jesus presented an atonement for sin "once for all" (Heb 9:11). As the Son of *God*, He is nevertheless the perfectly *human* priest, representing in His humanity the sins of all the world.

But important priestly duties remain for us. Atonement is accomplished in Christ, but we still need daily to confess sin (1 John 1:8), and offer our "sacrifice of praise" (Heb 13:15). In our strand of the Christian tradition, we speak of our leaders as "ministers," rather than "priests," partly to affirm that every Christian has the privileges and responsibilities of priesthood. We have glorious access to the throne room of God, and assurance that He hears our songs of praise as well as our prayers of intercession for ourselves and for others we desire to represent. Each of us individually, and all of us collectively as the Church, have the call upon us to function to keep the relationship alive and vital between God and our human world (1 Peter 2:9-10).

RESPOND

We all have acquaintances in less-than-perfect situations, and our heart yearns for their betterment. We are sometimes slow to realize that these very human emotions can be God's prompting to pray for His work in their lives, to intercede for them before His throne. Who will you pray for today?

PRAY

Dear Lord, Thank you for the blood of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ, shed for the forgiveness of my sin and the sins of the world. Thank you for access this day into Your very presence and Your very heart.

D.D.

READ

Deuteronomy 18:14-22

Psalms 50

REFLECT

We have been looking at the three personalities of Jethro, Miriam, and Aaron. We have seen the ways in which their different talents and perspectives have resonated with those of Moses, and have contributed to the work of God in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and from slavery. Today we will look at the more formal community functions they represent, and perform.

We started this yesterday, with a consideration of the role of the priesthood in Israel. But earlier this week we noted another community function, namely, prophecy. Moses frequently speaks in the name of the Lord, and Miriam was known as a prophet in her own right. What does the prophetic role contribute to the community of Israel? A vivid example is the word of rebuke carried by Moses back to the camp of Israel in which the golden calf has been set up. The priesthood, represented by Aaron, has gone astray in its good intentions, and needs direct intervention by the Lord to bring it back into line. Prophecy represents the living Word of God, and, in that sense, the desire of God to remain in active dialogue with His people. The priesthood over time tended to lapse into traditionalism, and prophecy was a tool used by the Lord to get it out of its rut (1 Sam 5:22). Both were needed – the priestly foundation of relationship with God, the prophets bringing His fresh Word – to keep the community moving in the right direction.

A third important function is represented by Jethro's administrative advice to Moses: get help in the tasks of ruling over this huge mass of people. In Moses' day this was mainly a role of for the judges (Ex 18:13-14), and we will see that as Israel settles in the Land there are a series of leaders that arise, each in the role of judge (hence the name of the book

that tells this part of the story, "Judges"). Finally as life for Israel gets more complicated, they will look to appoint a king to take on these high-level tasks: to coordinate the resources and security of the people, to settle disputes, to lead and guide, in short, to rule. But this function too is one that God will insist on having under His own wing. The kings as shepherds of God's people will be chosen of God, anointed by God, and expected to demonstrate God's righteousness, with consequences if they do not.

It was John Calvin, our Presbyterian forebear, that first wrote about a three-fold leadership in Israel of prophet, priest, and king. It makes for interesting reflection. The idea is that God's work in community requires complex functioning, including continued efforts in nurturing the relationship with God and each other, in hearing the Word of God afresh, and in the numerous logistical challenges that keep the ball rolling in the right direction. Further, although none of the priests, prophets, judges, or kings in Israel were perfect, they were anointed by the Spirit for the task: the work of the Lord remained the work of the Lord. And one day someone would arise who in His own perfection would serve perfectly as The Prophet, The Priest, and The King – The Anointed One, the Christ.

RESPOND

The diverse functions of the Old Testament leadership have application in the Church, though the New Testament gives roles that are more specific to our aims: pastor, teacher, elder, deacon, administrator, etc. – yes, and presbyter. Our own church offers a huge opportunity to explore the joys of Christian service by becoming involved in its programs and ministry.

PRAY

Lord, Thank you for the faithful ones who lead our church daily and weekly in its service of Your will and ways. I pray for them now, by name

- Dave Dorman