

Best Advice for Teaching God's Word

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. It's a privilege to be here this morning. I'm pastor at Bellevue Chapel. Not very long yet. We moved here last August and are just slowly settling in.

Well, it's a great privilege to be invited here this morning. Well, I'm from the Netherlands. Sometimes when I speak somewhere, the two questions I seem to get that seem to worry people throughout the sermon are both, what accent is that?

I just try to sound cool, so I'm trying them all. Some people say I'm Canadian or Australian or Irish. I see my wife is Irish, so it's a real mixture. So just to help you with that confusion.

And the other question I often get is, so how tall are you? Well, I'm six foot eight, so you don't have to worry about that either. So hopefully then you can listen to this sermon as it is.

But it's a great privilege to be part of this series, The Great Escape. I've tried. I couldn't listen to them all, but I've tried to listen to one or two of the sermons already because I think you've had a little gap and you've just picked it up again.

[1 : 07] And the thing that struck me when I was listening was one sermon where John was explaining the fact that it's not just about the great escape because that's only the start of the journey.

And however important that is, the second half is as important. It's about getting to safety. And I think in that context, you'll and we'll together hopefully will understand what is happening here in this exchange between a father-in-law and his son-in-law.

I mean, a beautiful picture of an elderly person, not, you know, sorry, a person older than, you know, passing advice on to the younger. And how beautiful would that not be if this is a community where that happens, both where the youngers are willing to take advice from some of the older men and women who have a little bit more live experience and wisdom in that sense, but also vice versa, that you who have been around for longer will not shy away, but with grace explain the ways and the paths of God.

But let's look at this passage together. Really what we've had so far in Exodus has been a roller coaster. And what struck me about this picture in this chapter is that it's peculiarly mundane. There's nothing exciting happening. There's no seas splitting. There's no water coming out of a rock. There's none of that, but there's Moses at his work. We read in verse 13, The next day Moses took a seat to serve as judge for the people, and they stood around him from morning till evening.

[2 : 46] This is like a day in the life of Moses, a day in the office. And I wonder how Moses felt about this part, this side of his responsibility. I think every job has a side that we're not always that keen on.

Maybe it's the administration. You'd rather be out there with the people, or maybe it's vice versa. You're not that keen on working with people, but you love the administration. Well, I wonder how this would work.

You know, Moses waking up, opening up the tent. There they are, yet again, wondering what will it be today. More grumbling, more complaints.

How am I going to deal with these people? There certainly is a sense that Moses, however he felt about it, is starting to grow weary. Interestingly, though, it reminded me of the fact that actually there used to be a time that people could visit the White House in Washington.

This was stopped way before the Second World War, but the president, as the representative of the people, would have opened up, quite often on a Friday, the White House for anyone to queue up to seek wisdom or advice straight from the president.

[3 : 55] Can you imagine that now? But that's the picture we get now. People queuing to see Moses. Now, a lot of people have wondered what this chapter can teach us today.

A lot of people seem to think this has lots of lessons on leadership. Others get the impression that maybe this is the start of a court system, where you have a high court and a smaller court, and that helps to spread the load.

Well, this morning I want to borrow some words from an Old Testament expert called Alec Moutier, who wrote a commentary on this, to help us understand maybe what is underlying all of that is happening in this chapter.

This is what he says. He says, The whole tone of verse 13 to 27 sounds administrative and legalistic, but leaving it at this level is missing the point.

It's not an account of the setting up of a lower and higher courts and even a Supreme Court as such, but of making arrangements whereby the word of God was made available right down to the smallest group, the extended family, so that daily life could be ordered according to the will of God.

[5 : 15] Alec Moutier believes that this is all about arranging that the word of God would reach down to everybody, even the smallest child in the extended family.

Isn't that interesting? And for this word of God then to be what would lead and guide the people of God and mold and shape them into being the people of God. One thing that might help and why he comes to this conclusion is if we look at the wording.

Look with me to verse 16. It's not on the slide, but verse 16, we read there that Moses sees his own role as informing the people of God's decrees and laws. Or in other translations, it might say statutes of God.

That comes back in verse 20, where his role is seen as showing them the way to live. Now these words, statutes, decrees, law, that's kind of Torah language.

Torah being the first five books of Moses, which was never meant in the mind of a Jew as being exclusively about rules and laws or the Ten Commandments, but very much about the known word of God at that time.

[6 : 27] How we know that is by reading, for example, Psalm 119. Unfortunately, it doesn't get read very often because it's so long, but it's one of the most beautiful Psalms that praises God simply for his word, his word.

And we have the word in its all completeness, including the New Testament, which explains to us who the person of Jesus Christ is. We are incredibly rich. And Psalm 119 uses exactly those words, decrees and laws and rules.

And we sometimes get a little bit cringy about those words. We're not that excited about decrees and laws, but how crucial and how important. Because ultimately, if it comes to not just escaping, but also getting to safety, it is actually the word of God, which will, in their lives as well as ours, manage exactly that.

We need today the word of God more than ever before. If we've become a Christian, it's not the way to just take that step, but to continue to follow in that step and to end up in safety.

We need these decrees and laws to shape and mold us and to form our everyday life so that we continue to follow him faithfully. And that is exactly what this chapter is about.

[7 : 51] Making the word of God available to the smallest group ever. For it was and still is this word of God which will lead all of us as his people to safety.

People, we must never underestimate this. We must never take away from both the authority and the power of this word I sometimes wonder in the visual age that we live in that we think that books, you know, black and white, sheets of paper are from the past.

They can't teach us much anymore. You know, I'm a visual learner or I want to experience. And however valuable that is, ultimately God has chosen his word to explain to us how we get to safety. Unfortunately, there's a slight blip because the way that Moses was going about getting that word available to everybody wasn't working. Verse 18, Jethro says, 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. Moses, unfortunately, however much you want to desire to pass on God's directions to people's lives, the way you do it doesn't work.

[9 : 08] So in comes this person, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, and he comes in with advice on how this is to be accomplished. But listen how he does that. In verse 17, for example, he basically tells him, what you do is no good.

I mean, how are we with advice? I've been doing a little bit of research and you constantly come across this phrase where we love giving advice. It's one of the greatest pleasures in life, isn't it?

We're always ready to point out to somebody, hey, maybe you should do it this way or that way. Certainly where I'm from in the Netherlands, there's lots of what I call unsolicited advice. You know, people just speak their mind and in some ways it's nice, but in other times I'm thinking, you know, maybe you could have just kept that to yourself. We're not good at receiving advice. It can sometimes just simply be because of pride. Because of stubbornness. Because we think we know better. I mean, Moses had a right to be thinking, Jethro, who are you?

[10:13] You haven't seen the things that I've seen. You haven't experienced God the way I have. And here you come and telling me how it should be done. I came across this newspaper article about what kind of advice people value.

Well, one I found interesting. It says, if you want to be happily married, marry a happy person. And this seriously was somebody famous who thought this was the best advice he'd ever given. Or here's Gordon Ramsay, the chef. The advice he'd been given and that has helped him the most in life is, put your head down and work hard. Similarly, the tennis player, Goran Ivanevich, that one. He won Wimbledon, I think, once. He learned in his life, never give up. If you keep believing and trying, anything can happen. Or somebody else said, aim high even if you hit a cabbage. Well, let's see if that's the advice that Jethro gives. I'm glad, actually, he doesn't. He doesn't go up to Moses and say, well, just keep your head down and keep going. But you'll get there. No, this is what he says.

[11:21] And there's three things. First of all, he tells Moses, and I think it's advice to all of us, if we are serious here at Bruntsfield, to making sure that God's word is made available to each and every one so that all of us will end up reaching safety.

He says, first of all, let God be in this with you. Let God be in this with you. Verse 19, the second half. This is what Jethro says. He says, you must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him.

I wonder what Jethro meant by saying, you know, make sure that God is in it too. Seems very obvious, doesn't it? But the impression we're getting is that Moses was maybe starting to rely too much on himself.

He alone sits to judge the people. It's that idea where maybe even after all the big victories that he'd seen and seen happen right in front of his eyes, he might have started to think, you know, maybe I can do this myself.

You certainly get the idea that Moses as leader is saying, well, it's now down to me to help these people. Well, I'm their leader. Look, they're coming to see me. Maybe with that sense of pride of, you know, feeling needed, needing to be needed.

[12:45] And so Moses was maybe more self-reliant than God-reliant. And I wonder how that works with us. I mean, I can easily fall into that.

We've just started at Bellevue. We've had lots of encouragements. We had a baptismal service a couple of months ago. And all of a sudden, there's a big surprise. There's six people, six precious lives wanting to be baptized, publicly showing the world that they love Jesus.

But somehow, as a pastor, and I bet John can struggle with that too, you start thinking, okay, so now it's down to me. I need to try to orchestrate another great baptismal service.

We've got to get programs in there. We've got to, you know, have lots of structure to make it happen. But time and time again, I think this is the lesson that I need to learn the most. Making sure that God is in it with me, with us. Because ultimately, it's God that can truly make the difference in people's lives.

[13:54] It's God, through the work of His Spirit, that can truly make sure that God's Word doesn't just reach up here, but reaches down here and really starts changing lives. And yet, however obvious it seems that we should always be involved in God in whatever goes on, especially when it comes to God's Word, time and time again, somehow that human default is, actually, it's down to me.

Even think of your own spiritual growth. How many of us, even there, rely more on ourselves than on God? It's down to me. I've got to make sure I read my Bible.

I've got to pray better. I've got to spend more time with God. When do we ever pause and remember verses like Philippians 2.12 where, and 13, where Paul so eagerly reminds his readers, it is God who wills for us to serve Him, to seek Him, to work out our salvation.

We need God to be in this very much and not to be self-reliant. If not, we're going to wear ourselves out.

We're going to maybe even be making other people rely too much on ourselves as well. And you know, this should be a great relief. Maybe we're sitting here today and we've been feeling weary about our walk with Jesus.

[15:18] We've been actually wondering, you know, I know I should have a hunger and a thirst for God, but I feel tired. I feel spiritually tired. What a great relief that God is so eager if we only let Him.

If only we let Him. So that's the first thing. Let God be in this with you. Secondly, He says teach. And I would add the word teach to illuminate. Not eliminate, illuminate.

Sorry. Verse 20. He says, teach them His decrees and instructions and show them the way they are to live and how they are to behave. I find it interesting that I think there's a difference between preaching and teaching.

Now, I wouldn't say anything bad about preaching. I guess that's what I'm doing this morning. I'm preaching. I'm explaining or trying to explain God's word to you. But I think preaching should never stand on its own.

There's a wonderful picture in the book of Nehemiah where after the rebuilding of the temple and the rebuilding of the wall, the word of God gets rediscovered. I don't know if you're familiar with this, but then the great Ezra is asked to read from God's word.

[16:32] And the picture is something like this. The massive crowd is packed in this market square. They're asking Ezra to read.

And Ezra simply reads a section of God's word. And this goes on for most of the day because people are so thirsty, so hungry for God's word. I haven't heard it read for so long.

But every so often he stops reading because behind him there was a team of helpers, of Levites who would then go out into the crowd and I can only imagine what they did was basically gather smaller groups together, maybe a 40 or 50, and ask them, have you understood God's word?

And I reckon they wouldn't have moved on until all the questions were answered, until every question that somebody had, you know, I'm not sure, I heard that, but did I hear that right?

Is that what that means to me? Until everybody had understood what had been read, they would have moved on. Well, that's exactly what should happen in the makeup of any church, that there should be teaching, teaching in the sense of equipping, teaching in the sense of helping one another.

[17:44] You know, sometimes we call it discipleship, but that's, you know, maybe a technical term for basically helping one another, giving each other tools to end up being equipped to handle God's word ourselves.

I think we're growing up in a culture and a society where we're starting to become too dependent on some spectacular speaker who's got it all worked out for us and they churn out the answers and I'm not blaming them necessarily.

I think some of the blame is on us. It's easy to find, you know, this speaker on the internet. It's all out there. But I think and I wonder if it's made us lazy and I wonder what will happen in another generation if we don't keep helping each other, if we don't keep teaching in a way that equips others, the next generation, even the people around us, people who've just become a Christian, to help them to read God's word themselves.

If Moses had to learn to become less people-focused and more God-focused and more God-reliant, I think the people were challenged to be less Moses-focused and more word-focused, if that makes sense.

And I know you guys love John and I love John, but I think John would, you know, the last thing he would want to see happen is that you're just simply sitting here for him because he's got the words of wisdom.

[19:10] John eagerly wants all of us to read God's word for ourselves so that all of us aren't depending on him or his ministry or on anybody's ministry.

If you're a youth leader or any type, if you're a home group leader, it should not be dependent on you. We should always point people back to God's word. In order for people to get to safety, Moses had to do some rethinking.

And thirdly this. So Moses was challenged to let God be in this. He was to teach, to illuminate. And thirdly this. He says, But select capable men, in verse 21, 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.

In other words, multiply. Multiply. Certainly at Bellevue, we're trying to create a culture where we multiply.

Where we're looking out for people. I mean, this is very Paul, isn't it? If you're familiar with Paul writing to a certain Timothy, these are the same instructions. Find people to equip them to equip others.

[20 : 28] constantly be multiplying. Multiply rather than divide. That's why I'm so glad that Moses didn't get the advice that we read about in the newspaper about, you know, just get on with it.

Just be better organized so that you can see more people. And just see them in shorter time, you know, slots. So you can get through more people.

That would have been ridiculous. Instead, look out for people who have the capability, who fear God, who are trustworthy, who are also just in all that they do.

Interestingly though, if that's the call to multiply, that's, I guess, a call to the leadership of this church and anyone in leadership, but it also makes anyone else who's not in leadership with the challenge, are you then available?

Do we have people here who are capable and just in all they do? People who fear God. If not, can we make ourselves available? And say, I want to get involved in this work of God's word to help people get to safety.

[21 : 49] John can't do it on his own. The elders can't do it on his own, on their own. We must invest. You know, I think the big risk here is, sometimes it's easier to say, oh, I'll do it myself.

You don't, in the short term, you don't see quick changes when you envision to multiply and to train. But in the long term, God's work is going to continue long after us.

And isn't that the focus that it should be about? But again, it's almost countercultural. We're, we grew up in a world where it's all about ego. It's all about, you know, if you're a minister, your big career moves are, get that book written, get your name on there.

So you can invite lots to other churches, conference, that kind of thing. It's the upside down logic of what Jethro passes on to Moses.

Can I share one last thing? So this is the advice he gives and this is the advice we should take today if we're eager to help one another to get to safety. It is by making sure God's word is made available to each and every one.

[23 : 03] But there's a great sense of humor about God. We haven't looked at the first half yet of this chapter, but really the first half of the chapter is Jethro's conversion story.

Jethro, as far as we can tell, has only just become a Christian the day before. Chapter 17 and 18, as far as we can see, describe two days. And it's lovely to think that God, first of all, provides water from a rock, then he provides the victory over an enemy, and then he provides for Jethro, the gospel, and for Moses, Jethro, God of provision.

But if we read in verse, sorry, verse 9 through 12, we see there, we're just skipping a few verses, we see there at Jethro, after hearing all that Moses told him that God had done and how he'd rescued them, we see that Jethro was delighted.

He rejoiced. It hit him. It cut him to the heart. And then he said, praise be to the Lord who rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. But he doesn't leave it at that.

It's not your God. But then he says, now I know that the Lord is greater than all the other gods. and he responds. He brings offerings and sacrifices to God and then we see that he's even welcomed in and accepted into the covenant community of the people of Israel.

[24 : 29] Isn't that amazing? A new Christian, a new Christian who wasn't even part of the Jewish people, a Gentile, is used as part of God's redemption history in such an extraordinary way.

Well, that's God. Because when you look even through the genealogy of the birth of Jesus time and again, we see these surprising people, Rahab, Ruth, and a Jethro who God calls and uses them as part of his great work.

If you would wonder, you know, who are we in this story? Well, actually, we would be Jethro. We are also Gentiles who have had the privilege of being allowed to taste of the good news and were crafted into the people of God.

What a great privilege. What a great joy. But if that has happened in our lives, I hope we also know that God then longs to use us maybe in a very similar way to how he used Jethro in the life of his

people.

Let's pray together. Let's maybe take a moment in silence. Maybe just ask ourselves, how much do I value God's word?

[25 : 51] How much do I value your word? Heavenly Father, help us to see how crucially important your living word is to help us get to safety.

Help us to see that as a church and to take steps if that isn't already happening and making sure that your word is made available. Not just here on a Sunday, but whenever we meet, whether it's one-on-one or beside somebody's sick bed or even at the funeral this coming week.

Lord, to open up your word faithfully, to look and learn your decrees and statutes and to help each other to equip one another to be able to read it for ourselves and know that your Holy Spirit will help us to understand it.

Thank you for your goodness. How rich are we not to have your word in its completeness? And thank you for Jethro for a great reminder that this gospel is for everyone, including the outsiders, the marginalized.

And thank you that you then use this outsider not just to taste of your great escape, but to be part of your great escape and to help others get to safety.

[27 : 18] Lord, thank you so much for teaching us. And I want to pray for this church that as they continue to look through this book of Exodus, that you will continue to bring your word and bring it alive for your glory and for the sake of your people.

In Jesus' name, Amen.