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Exodus 17:8-18:27

God's Exodus People: A Successful Beginning

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Lord willing, Cornerstone is heading towards autonomy this year. Currently, we're a ministry of Immanuel Church in Chelmsford, our parent church. They're a wonderful church but their goal for us is to one day become autonomous. That means we'll be our own non-profit. We'll have our own Elders and Deacons, By-Laws and budget, and most importantly, we'll be the ones responsible for our ministries.

As we think on this, we realize that's a lot of responsibility. We don't want to mess it up. We want to do it well. So as we approach autonomy, we should ask some questions. What do we need to do to get there? How can we succeed? What is success?

Exodus is the story of a two-million person church plant. At Cornerstone, we started with about 40 people, and we're up to about 65 on an average week. That's pretty good. Can you imagine if we started with two-million people? That's what I call a mega-church plant. Even though those initial Israelites who left slavery in Egypt for the wilderness are far more numerous than us, I think they would have had some of the same questions as us. What's going to happen next? How can we make sure we're a success?

Today, I'm breaking my message down into three ingredients of a successful church. As I'm preaching through Exodus, I've been reading a book by Tony Merida called *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Exodus*. Today, I'm breaking my sermon down like he breaks down the passage, so I want to open with his main idea for today's text. Tony writes, "A healthy community of faith relies on God's power, tells others about God, and shares the work of ministry."¹

We can take the same three ingredients from this passage and apply them to our ministry. Those ingredients are: 1) prayer, 2) mission, and 3) teamwork. Let's begin by looking at the first ingredient.

Prayer: God empower us. (Exodus 17:8-16)

Since coming out of Egypt, the Israelites faced the Egyptian army at the Red Sea and won, faced starvation and dehydration in the desert and survived by God's grace, and now they're facing their first enemy army, the **Amalekites**. The forefathers of the Israelites are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jacob is actually one of two twins. His brother's name was Esau. When they were born, in **Genesis 25:23**, God told their mother this:

The LORD said to her,
"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger." (NIV®)

The two nations God is talking about are **A)** the people of God, Jacob's descendants, and **B)** the enemies of God's people, Esau's descendants. The Amalekites are one of the biological descendants of Esau, but

¹ Merida, Tony (2014-06-01). *Exalting Jesus in Exodus (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (p. 106). Kindle Edition. All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

represent the spiritual enemies of God. Satan is using them to attack God and his plans. The Amalekites are the spiritual offspring of the Serpent in the garden, and Jacob's are of Eve (Gen 3:15). This is why in v. 15 it says their "hands were lifted up against the throne of the Lord." They are "against" God, so God is going to defeat them (v. 14). How do we win a war that is primarily spiritual, and not physical? We pray.

God empowers Joshua through the prayers of Moses.

Moses tells Joshua to choose some men and go fight the Amalekites (v. 8). The Bible tells us Joshua, the son of Nun, attended Moses from his youth (Num 11:28). So Joshua was about twenty-years old here (Josh 24:29). If you're going to win a battle, would you rather trust Joshua, the all-star quarterback who can run the ball into the end-zone, or the gray-haired Moses who is over 80 years old? You would trust Joshua. But this battle is spiritual, not physical. It's not won with Joshua on the field, but with Moses on the hill.

Moses takes his staff with him, a sign of judgment (rod) and salvation (crook), and goes to the top of the hill. Verses 11-12 tell us that as long as Moses held up this staff, Joshua and his men won, but when he lowered it, they lost. Why is this? It's because when Moses' hands lift up that staff, he's calling on God, he's showing his complete dependence on God's power. The story emphasizes it's not Moses who really wins the battle, he can't even hold up his staff without help; rather, God wins the battle.

God has been winning the spiritual battle since the start. That staff got lifted up during the plagues (7:15-19), at the Red Sea (14:6-7), and when Moses struck God at the rock of Horeb (17:5). The passage never says outright that Moses is praying, but I believe that's what he's doing, he's calling on God to fight the battle. The battle is won on the hill by God working in Moses. *God empowers Joshua through the prayers of Moses.*

God powers our church as we pray.

I remember that pre-9/11 my hometown's local power-plant hosted events in its parking-lot, like the 4th of July Car Show. But after 9/11, the parking-lot was barricaded. When my youth pastor took the guys in the youth group to go hangout by another power station in town, a police officer showed up and told us to leave. Today, power stations are guarded and protected as a national security concern. They're hard to access.

There's nothing Satan wants more than for the people of God to stop accessing God's power. We access God's power through prayer, and if Satan can cut the supply line, he can win. The closer we get to the source of our power, God himself, the more Satan will try to chase us away. As we head to autonomy, I can tell you as the Pastor of this church that **spiritual warfare** is increasing. Satan is getting more active because he doesn't want this church to succeed just like he didn't want the Israelites to succeed.

As a church, we can believe the battle is won on the field or the hill. If we believe the battle is won on the field, we will pour ourselves into our programs and ministries and we'll wear ourselves out with busyness. Now, programs and ministries matter, God uses those things, but what truly matters is what takes place behind the scenes. If we believe the battle is won on the hill, we'll prioritize prayer and dependency on God, and God will reward that. *We need to spend as much time praying for our ministries and programs as planning them.* Focusing on the field drains power, but going to the hill fills us up. If you're not signed up for the **Prayer Network**, join it. We need your prayers for our people and ministry! We need God's power.

When we stop to pray, we remember that even though we're fighting a spiritual battle today, the war was won long ago on **another hill**, Golgotha. Just outside of Jerusalem, Jesus, whose Old Testament name is "Joshua", fought a spiritual battle in another unusual way. In our story today, you and I are not Joshua or Moses or even the Israelites. We're the Amalekites. We're sinners who raise our hands "against" God with our

words, actions, and attitudes. We're saying, "God, I don't need you!" And for that, God should "**blot out**" our names from under heaven just like he promises to blot out their leader. (v. 14). But at Golgotha, God didn't blot out our names. He blotted out the name of Jesus. He forsook him. The father turned his back on the Son. All, so that we are saved. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the grave. He defeated the serpent, our sins, and the deaths we deserve. Now God will never "blot out" our names. When we pray, we're asking God to show that same kind of power, creativity, and victory in our lives and ministries.

As a way to remember my first point, I want to teach you an arm motion that goes along with remembering the first ingredient prayer... "God empower us." As we say this, let's **raise our arms, palms out**. Would you join me? Raise your hands, and say, "God empower us." Ready? 1-2-3, "God empower us!" Raising your hands is also a sign of surrender. What other ingredient do we need. Tony said, "A healthy community of faith relies on God's power" and "tells others about God." The first ingredient is prayer, the second is...

Mission: God use us. (Exodus 18:1-12)

Beginning, in Exodus chapter 18, we read what feels like an entirely different, unrelated story of Moses's father-in-law Jethro visiting him. In actuality, the story of the Amalekites and Jethro are intentionally placed next to each other to show a **contrast**. Jethro is not an Israelite, he is a **Midianite**. The Midianites are also related to the Israelites. After **Abraham's** wife Sarah died (Gen 23:1-2), he took another woman named **Keturah** who gave birth to several sons, the fifth one named Midian (Gen 25:1-6, 1 Chr 1:32). Abraham eventually sent all these boys to live with Ishmael, his first concubine Hagar's son, in the Arabian desert, where they become the ancestors of the Arab tribes (Gen 25:6).²

Jethro is a foreigner. He didn't meet Moses in Egypt, but first met him when Moses ran away from Egypt. He gave him one of his daughters in marriage, Zipporah, and now verse one says Jethro, "heard of everything God had done for Moses and for his people Israel, and how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt." We don't know why, but Zipporah was with Jethro, but now Jethro takes the opportunity to bring her up to Moses so he can hear about what God has been doing. This is all part of God's plan. During the plague of hail, back in Egypt, God told Pharaoh king of Egypt his purpose for the plagues.

Exodus 9:16 But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. (NIV®)

God sent the plagues so the ancient world would hear about him. God wants the Amalekites and Midianites to hear what he has done and believe. This reminds us of an even older promise God made to **Abraham** that his descendants would bless all the **nations** (Gen 12:1-3). The Amalekites reject God, but not Jethro.

God uses Moses to tell God's story.

First, Moses tells Jethro about how God brought them out of Egypt. Notice the theme is all about salvation.

Exodus 18:8 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. (NIV®)

Moses is telling his father-in-law how God has been faithful to the Israelites. At Cornerstone, we share stories of God's faithfulness too. We call them faith stories. We call them "You might not have a story of God

² Mark Anthony Phelps, Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, s.v. "MIDIAN," 896. [accord://read/Eerdmans_Dictionary#17216](http://read/Eerdmans_Dictionary#17216)
Romig | CornerstoneWestford.com | Page 2

rescuing you out of slavery in Egypt, but if you know Jesus, you have one of him rescuing you from slavery to sin. At Cornerstone, we share **conversion stories**, how Jesus initially sought us out, **pilgrim stories**, for those of us who grew up knowing Jesus, and **life-event stories**, so we can hear current ways God is moving. Joe was the last one to share his faith story back in December. About a dozen people logged into our Facebook LiveStream to hear how Joe came to know Jesus. If you haven't shared yours yet, I'd love to hear it and talk about sharing it with the church. What's the best that could happen? Someone could put their faith in Jesus. When Moses told his faith story, Jethro came to faith in God.

Exodus 18:9-11a 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. 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. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods..." (NIV®)

Jethro encounters the story of the living God through Moses sharing what God has done in his life and the life of the Israelites. And when Jethro hears this story, he says "I know Yahweh is greater than all other gods!" That's amazing because verse one tells us he is a **Midianite priest**. He's a leader of a false religion, but when he encounters the true God, he believes. Finally, it's through this belief that he gets an opportunity to worship and to taste the presence of God for himself at a meal with Moses and the Elders.

Exodus 18:12 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 a meal with Moses' father-in-law in the presence of God. (NIV®)

Jethro hears, believes, turns from his false gods, and turns to the one true God. It's a miracle, but it's also God's plan from the beginning. This passage is a key passage showing the initial fulfillment of Exodus 9:16, but also of Genesis 12:1-3. *God uses Moses to tell God's story.*

God uses us to tell the story of Jesus.

Just like Moses and the Israelites have a mission, we have one too. Cornerstone's mission is "To make, mature, and multiply followers of Jesus." We're trying to fulfill that same mission as the Israelites, by sharing what God has done with those around us. I already talked about faith stories, but I want to highlight another way we as a church have an opportunity to do this, the upcoming **frontline ministry weekend**.

When you think of Outreach, you probably think of the Trunk or Treat we did last fall or the Apple Blossom Parade we did last summer. These are events where we reach out to our community together. This is **gathered** outreach. The frontline ministry weekend is an opportunity to reach out together, but in different places. We call this **scattered** outreach. On **March 17th, 18th, or 19th (Fri, Sat, Sun)**, invite some coworkers, or friends, or neighbors over to your house for dinner, or a game night, and just get to know them. I'm praying about inviting some of my gym friends. If you have an opportunity, share about the story of Cornerstone, or how Jesus has changed you, but overall just pray, relax, and have fun. Pray God will use this weekend to reach people who would never walk through our doors. Talk to Mary to sign up or get a gift card to help pay for food. This is an opportunity for God to use us to tell the story of Jesus.

Let's review. The first ingredient is prayer, hands up palms out, "God empower us." I've brought another hand motion. This time **hands out, palms up**. Would you put your hands up and say "God empower us" then out and say, "God use us"? Ready. 1-2-3, "God empower us! God use us!" The first two ingredients of a successful ministry are Prayer and Mission. The third is...

Teamwork: God help us. (Exodus 8:13-27)

Verse 13 starts with Jethro telling Moses he can't lead this two-million person church plant by himself. Moses is outside all day judging the people from morning till noon. He has a direct line to God, so it makes sense to have him solve your problems, right? But Jethro actually says this is a bad thing, and that he will burn out if he doesn't change what he's doing. See, Moses needs help.

God helps Moses share his responsibilities so he can prioritize.

Just because God calls Moses to lead the Israelites, doesn't mean he needs to do it by himself. Delegation is difficult, but necessary. Jethro, in verses 20-21 tells Moses to do two things: 1) teach the people the laws and statutes of God so they know how to live and what to do; and 2) select God-fearing men who are trustworthy, hate bribes, and place them over 1000s, 100s, 50s, and 10s. Notice that God is more interested in character than ability. These judges don't have to be the smartest of men, but they should be wise.

It's as Moses delegates that he has the opportunity to do the things that matters most, teach the people about God. Moses' focus shifts from running around trying to fixing short-term problems to building a longterm culture of people who know, love, and obey God. He's not running around trying to stop the dyke from leaking. He's asking others to help him so he can build a whole new waterway. It works. Moses continues to judge the harder cases, but these judges take care of the rest, so he get's to focus on teaching. God helps Moses share his responsibility so he can prioritize. I think there's something we can take from this...

God helps us work together so we can build the kingdom of Jesus.

Although I joke about the Israelites being a mega church plant, a New Testament author named Paul, in the letter to the Galatians calls the church "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16). Old Testament Israel points forward to the New Testament church. Just like Israel came under the leadership of one man, Moses, we as the church also come under the leadership of one man, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the second Moses—he was saved from an evil king, he was taken to Egypt, he was in the wilderness for 40 days, and so much more. Colossians 1:18 says that Christ is the head of the church.

Just like Moses sets up a body of leadership to lead Israel, the judges, Jesus sets up several offices to lead the church. The first office he gives are **Elders** to lead and shepherd the church (1 Tim 3:1-7). The Pastor is the primary preaching and teaching Elder of the church. The second office is **Deacons** who care for the physical needs of the people (1 Tim 3:8-13). Just like Moses was to choose men of character, our Elders are to be men of character, and our Deacons are to be men and women of character. I challenge you to be praying for our future Elders and Deacons, that God would fill those roles with the right people. Right now those roles are filled by two interim teams, the CPMT and Trustees, but that will change as we become our own church. Pray that God would raise up the right men and women to accept this calling.

The third ingredient of a successful ministry beginning is **shared ministry**. We believe in teamwork, not because it's easy; it's actually quite difficult, but because just like Israel was to be a light to the nations, a priesthood nation, the church together is to be a light to the lost, a priesthood of believers. When you invite people into your home to love them, that honors Jesus. When you dig into your checkbook to give sacrificially, that honors Jesus. When you volunteer and serve the church, that honors Jesus. Together, we're a team. Church is not someplace we have to serve God. It's someplace **we get to serve God**.

I want to teach you the last hand motion to go with my third point. In just a moment, to remember teamwork... "God help us" I'd like us to **extend our hands to our sides, and grab a hand of a neighbor**. If

you're new here, I apologize. It's about to get awkward. We're going to close by praying through my Big Idea together...

God empower us. God use us. God help us. Amen.

I'd like us to pray this together, out-loud, with the arm motions I taught us, so arms raised/palms out for "God empower us", arms out/palms up for "God use us", and arms to your sides/hand in hand for "God help us." Would you say this prayer with me before the worship team comes up to close us? Let me join you. Ready? 1-2-3... *God empower us. God use us. God help us. Amen.*

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) wrote and preached this message for Cornerstone Congregational Church. Click [here](#) to listen to more [sermons](#) or click [here](#) to read [our story](#).