

Moses and the Kindness of God

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[0 : 0 0] Okay, so we're thinking about Moses and the kindness of God, and perhaps you're thinking, well, why are we talking about kindness? I want to suggest this is God's kindness as we see God's wonderful timing, because here, by God's providence, Jethro and the family of Moses are brought to Moses, and there's a wonderful gift of family, of friendship.

As St. Augustine wrote a long time ago, two things are essential in this world, life and friendship. Both must be prized highly and not undervalued. They are nature's gifts. It's a wisdom that's captured in the Toy Story movies. I can quote this one much more easily. You know the song, the title song, when the road is rough ahead, and you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed, you just remember what your old pal said, boy, you've got a friend in me. It's the wisdom of Proverbs, the wisdom of Proverbs 17, 17, a friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity. Friendship is a gift from God. Jethro coming is a gift, a kindness from God.

We need to recognize our own context as well. Right now, we're in Edinburgh, and Edinburgh is, according to recent studies, one of the loneliest places in the United Kingdom. 33% of respondents in a recent survey said they were not involved in any real community within the city. There is a rise of people going to talk to their GPs about loneliness. Social isolation is increasing. More people are living alone and being lonely. As Christians, we can be profoundly thankful that one of God's kindnesses to us is one another. You know, when you move to a new city, you move location, you have a place to belong. People who welcome you, people to come alongside so we can serve together, we can share life together. And friendship as well, to go back to this morning's sermon, it is part of the good that we offer as we devote ourselves to doing good. One of those goods is the gift of friendship. Just to remind ourselves, and if you've not been around, Moses has known more than a few tough times in these last few months. So, over the last couple of months, he's had to live with the people often grumbling, the people of God grumbling against him, testing God. They have been largely for him a source of discouragement. So, in that setting,

Jethro's friendship, well, it's like another oasis in the desert. And Jethro, I think, gives us a model of godly friendship. So, we're going to notice together that Jethro comes to Moses, and they share withness—kind of made-up word—worship and wisdom.

And I hope as we go through this, we're going to learn together what it means to be a friend friend for others, but also it'll help us to think about the friend above all that we really need ourselves. But let's go to the first eight verses and think about friendship and with-ness.

[3 : 4 0] Another proverb, Proverbs 25, 25. Like cold water to a weary soul is good news from a distant land.

We get that. You know, you're feeling a bit flat. Life is hard. But then the phone rings, or the letter comes in. Or, best yet, we get a visit from an old friend. You share time. You share your heart together. There is refreshing in those hours. What's been happening to Moses is that all that's recorded here, when the people are talking to Moses, they're grumbling, they're complaining, they're testing God. What about the people who've been visiting Moses? Well, Pharaoh's army has come to visit, intent on destruction. The Amalekites have come to visit, intent on destruction. And whenever the Israelites come to chap on Moses' door, they're asking the question, what are you doing? Why did you bring us here? Does God know what he's doing? And into that setting, what does God provide? He provides that visit from a distant land. For the first time in eighteen months, Moses is reunited with his family. You imagine, you know, here's verse six, the relief. Jethro sent word to him, I, your father-in-law, Jethro, I'm coming to you with your wife and her two sons. Moses, you've got a visitor. He said, this time, it's Jethro, it's your father-in-law, and he's bringing his wife and your kids. It's interesting, isn't it, that the focus falls on Jethro? Really interesting character. In verse one, we discover priest of Midian, father-in-law of Moses. What motivates his journey? He hears of God's work. He hears what God has done in rescuing his people. In verse nine, we have him clearly delighted by God's work. We have him praising the

Lord. Bear in mind that he's not an Israelite, but he's now become a believer in Israel's God, and he comes to bring encouragement. J.C. Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool in the 19th century, wrote this, the brightest sunbeam in the world is a friend. Friendship halves our troubles and doubles our joys. That's what Moses has in Jethro in these moments. The scene that we're presented in verses seven and eight is a very touching scene. We see Moses honor his father. He bows down. He kisses him.

They greet each other. There's affection, and it gives Moses an opportunity to talk about all that God has been doing. He gets to share what's in his heart of God's work.

I think one of the things that this story reminds us of is that Moses is no Superman. You know, sometimes we can paint the heroes of the Bible as if they were somehow different from us.

[7 : 13] But just like all of us, he too needed encouragement. He too needed his family. He needed friendship. And that shouldn't be a surprise because that's by God's design. You know, we go all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1, Genesis 2. There is a perfect garden. There is the perfect man made, Adam. But God can say in that perfection something is not good. What's not good? Adam is alone.

People have been made for community and for friendship. And that shouldn't surprise us because we're made in God's image, and this is God's pattern. God exists, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in an eternal fellowship of perfect love and friendship. This is part of the uniqueness of the God of the Bible. He has never been alone. He is never lonely. He is an eternal fellowship of perfect love. And making us in his image, then, we are made for friendship, for fellowship, for community.

So Moses has been given this calling from God to lead his people, to act as a mediator, to represent the people before God. But we saw last week as well that God is providing others to come alongside him and to help. So last week, it was his brother Aaron and her, and they're literally lifting his arms up to help him to pray. And this week, it's the visit of Jethro and the wisdom and the worship that he brings that help him to serve. We need one another. Tolkien captured it so well in Lord of the Rings.

It was Frodo, the hobbit, who had the task of destroying the ring in Mordor. But as the story progresses, it becomes abundantly clear that he needs the fellowship of the ring, especially he needs his old friend Samwise Gamgee. In our journey of faith, in our pilgrimage of faith, we need the fellowship of the church. We need one another. Now, before we move on from there, it seems so very fitting in God's providence that we are speaking about fathers-in-law, we're thinking about family, because we've got a wedding tomorrow, and we give thanks for that wedding. But here is something that's really important to recognize. A godly father-in-law, and indeed a godly mother-in-law, is a kindness from God. And here we see a family that shares faith. And that's a wonderful thing, that you're a part of a family of faith is a wonderful gift. So let me encourage you from day one, to find ways to use that, to grow in your love for one another, your love for God, and to use the maturity and the wisdom of your in-laws as part of that. Because a godly father-in-law and a mother-in-law is a kindness from God. And to go more general, a godly friend is a wonderful kindness from God.

To have someone like Jethro, someone who senses our need, someone who makes room and takes time, one who listens well, one who asks good questions, one who wants to build us in our faith, that's a good gift. If we want this kind of friend, and I hope if we're Christians we all want this kind of friend, friend, maybe the first thing we need to do is to pray, but also to aim to be that kind of friend to others. As we recognize what a goodness it is that we would desire to show that goodness to others, that we'd be reaching out within our church to build connections. Because friendship is a kindness from God. And most importantly, we're invited to enjoy the wonderful kindness of friendship with our God through His Son, the Lord Jesus. That's what we read in John 15. We read of the great love, the greatest demonstration of love from Jesus. Jesus who came to be with us, leaving glory to become one of us, ultimately to die for us.

[11 : 51] to turn God's enemies into God's friends by making peace through His blood shed on the cross. Jesus, the Son of God, welcomes us, invites us into friendship, coming to live in our hearts by faith.

That is the greatest witness of all. And as the people of God, we get to enjoy that. Well, that's friendship and witness. Let's move on and think about friendship and worship. Turn with me to verses 9 to 12. First of all, another proverb, Proverbs 12, 25. We read there, anxiety weighs down the heart, but a kind word cheers it up. I want to think of Jethro's words as a cheering alternative to what Moses has had to put up with for the past number of months. Just to dip into these last chapters to get a sense of what Moses has been listening to. Exodus 15, 24, the people grumbled against Moses saying, what are we to drink? Chapter 16, verse 3, the Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, if only we died by the Lord's hand in Egypt. There we sat round pots of meat, but you've brought us out into the desert to starve this assembly to death. Or chapter 17, verse 7, the place where they were was called Massa and Maribah because the Israelites quarreled and they tested the Lord, saying, is the Lord among us or not? These are not encouraging conversations.

But Jethro comes with a very different voice, which is wonderful. It's a very particular kind of friendship, Christian friendship that's in focus here when we think about Jethro and Moses, because the focus falls on their shared faith and their shared worship. So look at verse 8. We find Moses tell his father-in-law about everything the Lord had done, how he saved them through hardships. And then look at verses 9 to 11.

Jethro is delighted, and he praises God. And why does he praise God? There's two reasons here. He praises God because of his rescue of his people, and he praises God as he appreciates God's greater glory, his supremacy. He is God above all. And then Jethro worships. Verse 12, Jethro 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. Here is a pattern that God sets, and it's a wonderful pattern.

A sacrifice is made. Sin is covered. Sin is cleansed. And once that happens, they enter into God's presence.

[15 : 01] They enjoy fellowship, communion with God. In the New Testament, we think about Jesus' death on the cross as the way for our sin to be covered, as the way for us to be cleansed from all unrighteousness.

And we remember that at the same time as Jesus died down in the temple, the curtain, the no access sign was torn in two. Through Jesus' death, we're invited all the way in to fellowship with our God.

So this family reunion then becomes a celebration, a celebration of God's faithfulness, a celebration of the faith that they share. Often this happens when we get together with old friends, or we get together for a family reunion. What happens? We spend happy hours telling stories, often stories from the past, maybe the last time everyone got together, activities that we shared, and fun and laughter that happened, memories that are shared. Why is that? Why do we always go back as much as we go forward? Because those stories in our past, they link us together with our friends or with our family. They're part of our shared identity. It becomes the foundation that our relationship is built on. And to think about that, doesn't that become a great model for how we think about Christian friendship and fellowship? Because for everybody who's a believer in Jesus, we share in a story, don't we? We share in the great story of God's salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we share our particular place within that story, but we know we are part of God's people in all times, in all places. And what binds us together? The activities that we share. Our times of worship together. Our times of sharing fellowship as we share the sacraments together, they create a sense of shared identity. As we serve together, as we share hospitality together, as we share the Word of God, as we share prayer with one another, we're building this foundation of faith.

How can we build these Christian friendships? As we recognize the value of friendship and Christian friendship, how can we build and develop? As we recognize how important it is to have that shared sense of identity and belonging, to have a place and a people to share our joys and sorrows with, to have those who will help us to grow in faith. Just like Jonathan did for David in the Old Testament.

[18 : 07] David, who was promised by God that he would be king after Saul. And Saul hated David because of that reality and spent years hunting him down. Well, there's what... The story's recorded in one place where David is on the run, has been on the run for a long time, and he's feeling low. And Jonathan, the son of Saul, at great risks to himself, comes to visit David. And we're told that he came to strengthen his hand in the Lord. What a wonderful example of what Christian friends do.

We help one another to keep going in the journey of faith as we remind ourselves that we are in the hands of our good God. So, how can we build our Christian friendship? Some suggestions to think about, perhaps. For some of us, it'll look like reading a Christian book, reading the Bible together with someone regularly. And maybe it'll be to work on how do we start spiritual conversations, to move from those surface-level conversations that we often have, maybe to fight through the pain barrier. Perhaps it'll be to write to someone, share a portion of God's Word, how it spoke to you, to encourage them. Maybe it'll begin with making room in our calendar so we're not so busy that we don't have time for our friends. Maybe it'll look like coming to church a little bit earlier, staying a little bit later, so that we get time within the time that we have together to build relationships. Christian friendship involves worship. But here's the last thing for us to think about friendship and wisdom. So, we've already said that Moses has been surrounded by a host of different voices, most of them profoundly discouraging. But here is Jethro coming. We find ourselves, I guess, surrounded by a whole host of different voices, lots of people perhaps offering advice, people we know well, people we don't know well, people on the internet. Who do we listen to? And who do we trust? I think the story of Jethro and Moses reminds us of the importance of seeking out wise, godly friends and family members. Because we see the wisdom of Jethro's advice as it's received by Moses. And again, if we're looking around, we're thinking about our own life, and we think, you know, I don't think I have one of those friends. Then it's the time to start praying for one and aiming to be one for others. Another proverb, Proverbs 27 verse 6, especially the first half, wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. Jethro brings a hard word in some senses to Moses, because Jethro identifies a problem. Verses 13 to 18, he sees how Moses is functioning as leader. And he will say to him, in verse 17, what you're doing is not good.

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. By Moses being the sole judge for all cases, simple and complex, he's creating a bottleneck, and he's wearing himself and the people out. That's a hard word to deliver, but the wounds of a friend can be trusted. Jethro then proposes the solution in verses 19 to 23.

3. Importantly, he says to Moses, here's your priority. You must be the people's representative before God. So he must continue with that primary calling to represent the people before God in prayer, bringing the needs to God, and he must teach them God's decrees and instructions.

Must keep bringing God's Word to show how the people of God are to live for Him. It's interesting to think about that pattern. Then go to Acts chapter 6, and to hear the apostles say to the church with multiple needs, we must devote ourselves to word and prayer.

[22 : 39] And then they establish the role of deacons, who will then continue to care at a different level, in a different way. It sounds very much like Jethro's advice here. He tells Moses to learn to delegate.

Not just to anybody. He gives those important qualifications. You're looking for people who are capable, people who worship God, who fear God, people who can be trusted, people who are not corrupt. And he says, Moses, if you do that, think about the impact. If you appoint people to smaller groups, then it's going to allow the Word of God to reach all the way down through society.

Gifted people are going to be enabled to use their gifts. The burden is going to be shared, and people are going to be satisfied. So before, there was only one cue. Everybody had to come to Moses. But now there's a whole multitude of capable leaders being established. So everybody is more likely, when they're seeking wisdom, to get wisdom from God in His Word.

How does Moses respond? Verse 24, he shows his humility. He receives the wisdom. Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said. He's really humble. You know, he's like, hang on, Jethro, who are you to tell me how to run this show? I'm the one who's been appointed as Israel's leader.

You know, he's not sulking because he didn't think of the idea first. No, he receives it as wisdom from God, which in this case comes via Jethro, his godly father-in-law. And this tells us something about God's design. By God's design, Christian friends, Christian family are used to bring God's Word and God's wisdom in just the way, in just the time that His people need.

[24 : 48] Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this in his book, Life Together. He made the point that we need Christian brothers and sisters to speak God's Word to us. He recognized that reality that we can become discouraged, that our faith, our trust, our sight of Christ and His promises can grow weak.

Bonhoeffer said, the Christ in his own heart is weaker than the Christ in the Word of his brother. His own heart is uncertain. His brother's is sure. Sometimes we need people to remind us God can be trusted. He is our Father to speak the truth of His Word and His promise to our hearts.

John Bunyan, he got that. When he wrote Pilgrim's Progress, he paired Christian with hopeful. So, there's that time where they're captured, they're in doubting castle, full of that sense of despair. But then hopeful begins to speak. Hopeful reminds Christian of things that are true. Hopeful begins to pray. And with the words of hopeful comes Christian's reminder, I have the key, the key that unlocks the doors of doubting castle. And it brings to us that reality that there will be times where we need the words of a friend to turn the key for the sake of faith. To turn the key so we remember and we grow in trust in God's promise and God's Son again. Friendship and wisdom.

One last thing to say as we close. To be a good friend, to be a good godly friend, it begins by recognizing we need the greatest friend. As we recognize that friendship is one of God's great gifts. As we recognize it as a great privilege and indeed a great responsibility within God's church to establish and to establish and to build healthy friendships. As we understand that call to be a friend who comes alongside and to share faith and to bring God's wisdom, often we feel how unable we are.

Often we feel our own limitations and we are reminded that first and foremost we need in our life Jesus, Jesus, the greatest friend, the greatest friend, Jesus, the one who is greater than Jethro.

[27 : 31] Because as we think about the storyline of the Bible and the gospel, we have in Jesus the friend who came to be with us. And what a friend he is. He is a friend of deep love. Do we see that in John chapter 11 as he weeps at the grave of his friend Lazarus, even as he knows he's going to raise him?

We meet in Jesus a friend of persevering love as he prepares to wash his disciples' feet, preparing them for the reality that he will die for them on the cross.

He loved them to the end. And as he was departing, he promised that he would never leave or forsake.

He would be with his friends always. As we read in John 15, he is a friend with open-hearted love.

Not calling us servants. He calls us friends. For everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you. Jesus is the friend who invites us all the way in. Inviting us in to know the reality of God's love. He is a friend who leads us in worship as the one we worship.

[28 : 58] He is the Lord. He is the great rescuer. He rescued us by his death on the cross. He has revealed his superior greatness and glory in defeating all his enemies. And the proof is his resurrection.

And it's by his great sacrifice that we are able to draw near, to enjoy fellowship with God, to call him friend. And he is the friend who is God's wisdom for us. If we want to be wise, if we want to be a wise friend, it stands to reason that the first thing we need to know is wisdom.

Where do we find wisdom? Well, the New Testament tells us we find wisdom as we find Jesus, because Jesus is God's wisdom personified. 1 Corinthians 1.30, Christ has become for us wisdom from God. That is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

As John begins his gospel, he begins talking about Jesus as the Logos, which is a wisdom word. And so, as we read the beginning of John's gospel, we're invited again to recognize in the beginning was wisdom, and the wisdom was with God, and the wisdom was God. That in Jesus, wisdom became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory. So, the way of wisdom involves coming to know Jesus, to be brought into the life and the love of our triune God, to have Christ, who is altogether wise, dwell in our hearts through faith, drawing our hearts to him, moving us towards him, moving us to be wise, to a life centered on God's truth and God's love. As we know and enjoy friendship with Jesus, he will teach us, he will teach us, he will help us to be a godly friend for the sake of others, as we enjoy friendship from him. Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank you for the reality that Jesus doesn't call us.