



**MT. ROSE REFORMED**  
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

# A Sanctuary in the Wilderness

*Reverend Scott Johnson | September 7, 2025 | Exodus 18:1-12*

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## Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 18, verses 1 through 12. And this is the word of God.

Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel, his people, how the Lord had brought Israel out of Egypt. Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom, for he said, I have been a sojourner in a foreign land. And the name of the other, Eliezer, for he said, the God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. And when he sent word to Moses, I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her, Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other for their welfare and went into the tent. Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. Jethro said, Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people. And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and

sacrifices to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

## **New Testament Reading**

And now let's turn to 1 John 4 for our New Testament reading. We will turn back to Exodus after we hear from 1 John. 1 John 4, verses 7 through 12. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. And whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever. We can turn back to Exodus chapter 18.

Last week in Exodus, we heard about the battle that took place between Israel and the Amalekites. It was a very real battle, very physical battle with actual swords and spears and so on. But even more fundamentally, that battle was a spiritual battle. It was a spiritual struggle between the people of God and those who are the enemies of God and therefore enemies of the people of God. and we considered how that battle was a type or picture of the spiritual struggle that you and I are engaged in as Christians. We are in a spiritual war. Our battle is against spiritual enemies and we fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And the weapons of our warfare, the scriptures tell us, are spiritual, not physical.

Well, after that battle with Amalek in our passage this morning, Moses describes for us a completely different kind of scene. Here is a family reunion, and we can assume safely that it was a joyful family reunion between Moses and his wife and sons. And not only that, but Moses describes for us in our passage here the wonderful fellowship that he enjoyed with his father-in-law, Jethro. Moses tells us how they worshiped together, how they shared a meal together in the presence of God. In this scene, in this passage that we just heard, it stands in stark contrast to so much that we have read in the previous chapters in Exodus. There are no enemies here who are threatening to destroy the Israelites. There are no difficult tests of faith in this passage. There is no murmuring and complaining on the part of the people of Israel. There is no talk of stoning Moses.

Instead, here's a picture of harmony, of concord, joy, and friendship. And all of that is centered upon a shared faith in the Lord, the God of Israel. And so if the struggles of the Israelites in the desert that we have seen, if those struggles are a picture of the spiritual warfare that you and I are engaged in as Christians, then this passage that we have just read gives us a picture of spiritual refuge. And according to this passage, our spiritual refuge is found in this. It is in the communion that we have with one another's fellow members of the body of Christ. And in this Christian fellowship or communion of saints that we enjoy with one another, we find, or at least we should find, a true refuge from the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged in so much of our lives.

## **A Sanctuary in the Wilderness**

And the word that I've chosen to describe this spiritual refuge that this passage really presents to us is the word sanctuary. And so I gave the title to the sermon, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness". Of course, later we'll learn about the tabernacle and how that is a sanctuary, but this is a different kind of sanctuary. But the word sanctuary I thought was very fitting to use here because it involves two ideas. First of all, a sanctuary is a place of safety from danger. For example, a wildlife sanctuary is a place where animals can be free from the danger of hunting or fishing or other dangers. And so as a sanctuary, our fellowship in Christ is a safe place. Spiritually it is a safe place.

But a sanctuary is also a holy place. For example, we call this room a sanctuary. We do so not because there is something intrinsically holy about this room itself, but because this is where we meet with God. This is where we worship the Lord, which is a holy activity. And so as a sanctuary, our fellowship in Christ is a holy place. And that's because our fellowship with one another, in that fellowship with one another, God is present with us. And so our fellowship in Christ is both a safe place and a holy place. It is a sanctuary, spiritual refuge.

And we'll consider our passage this morning from those two perspectives. So first of all, our sanctuary, our fellowship in Christ, is a safe place. For us to understand this passage better, it's helpful, I think, to review the history of Moses. If you remember way back in chapter 2, when Moses had to flee from Egypt because he killed an Egyptian man, he went to the place or the country of Midian. And in Midian, he met the future Mrs. Moses, that is Zipporah, and he also, of

course, met her father Jethro. Exodus tells us that Jethro was a priest of Midian, and so he led his people in the worship and service of whatever god or gods that the Midianites served. As we'll see next week after Jethro's conversion, which is described for us in this passage, Jethro not only became a true believer in the Lord, but he also became a solid Presbyterian. But you'll have to come back next week to hear how that worked out.

We know from the book of Acts that Moses ended up living in Midian 40 years. And during that time, Moses and his wife, Zipporah, had two sons. One of them was named Gershom, which means sojourner. And that was because Moses was a sojourner in Midian while he was away from Egypt. And the other son's name was Eliezer, which means my God is help. And Moses chose that name for his son because God was his help who saved him from Pharaoh when Pharaoh was out to kill him for killing the Egyptian. And during those 40 years, Moses was employed while in Midian as a shepherd. He worked for his father-in-law Jethro. And it was while he was shepherding Jethro's flocks that he was out in the wilderness. He came across the burning bush. And in that burning bush, the Lord commanded Moses to return to Egypt in order to lead his people out of their bondage to Pharaoh.

And so Moses, out of obedience to the Lord's call, after spending 40 years in Midian, he leaves there. He returns to Egypt and to his people, the Israelites. And apparently at some point, either on the way to Egypt or after he had gotten to Egypt, he sent his wife and his two sons back home to Midian. And most likely he did that for their own safety. Moses had dangerous work to do in Egypt. And so for their own good, he sent them back to Midian. And then, after all that took place in the Exodus, after some of the wilderness wanderings that we have seen, after the battle that the Israelites had with the Amalekites, finally Moses is reunited with Zipporah and his two sons, as well as with his father-in-law, and that's the reunion that is described for us here in this passage.

We learn from verse 1 that somehow Jethro had heard the news that the Lord had done great things for Israel, that he had delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt. And somehow Jethro also found out that Moses was encamped at what is called, in verse 5, the mountain of God. And of course, the mountain of God, that is Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb. And that will play a very prominent place as we continue in Exodus. But Jethro took with him Zipporah and the two sons and he went out to Mount Sinai to meet Moses. And when Moses heard that Jethro and his wife and his two sons were on their way to see him, we read in verse 7 that Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down to him and kissed him. This was a very respectful greeting

that the son-in-law gives to his father-in-law, but it's also a very affectionate greeting. And the impression that it gives us is that this was a happy reunion between the son-in-law and his father-in-law.

And that impression that this was a joyful reunion is reinforced in what is said next in verse 7, and they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent. Here are two men who clearly care for one another. They're glad to be together again. And we have to assume, although the text doesn't say so explicitly, that the reunion with Zipporah and her two sons, and Moses and his two sons, that this was an even happier reunion. and then later in the passage after Jethro learns from Moses all that God has done for Israel they worship the Lord together they eat a sacred meal together before God and in that they are joined by Moses' brother Aaron and the elders of Israel and the whole atmosphere that is pictured for us here is one of peace of mutual encouragement of joyfully being in the presence of one another and in the presence of God What a contrast this is when we compare it to so much of what we have read so far, almost everything that we have read so far, the book of Exodus.

Because up till now, it seems that Moses has just been dealing with one very difficult struggle after another. He had his confrontation with Pharaoh. He then led a faithless, complaining, bitter people out into the wilderness. And then, as if that was not enough, the Amalekites, out of nowhere seemingly, attacked the Israelites. But finally, Moses has found a place of peace. Here is safety. Here was a sanctuary from the continual conflict and strife. And in this sanctuary, Moses was among friends. He is with his wife, reunited with her, his two sons, His father-in-law, his brother Aaron, the elders of Israel.

## **A Safe Place: Our Fellowship in Christ**

And in the same way, what makes our sanctuary, our fellowship in Christ, a safe place is that we are among friends. Unlike your enemies, your friends are on your side. Your friends look after you. Your friends care for you. Your enemies seek your hurts. Your friends seek your good, your welfare. And one thing that should characterize our fellowship in Christ is that we know that here at church we are among friends. The Quakers, they were really onto something when they named their church the Society of Friends. There is a good biblical reason for such a name. 3 John 15, John says, Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them. That's how John characterized the congregation of Jesus Christ. They were friends.

Now, what is it that makes us friends? Well, to answer that question, let's see what made Moses and Jethro friends. Well, they had a lot in common, of course. They were in-laws. Now, being in-laws isn't always a great recipe for great friendships, we know, but they also had other bonds that kept them together. They knew each other for 40 years. They worked together. They shared much in common for that reason. But most importantly of all, and this is the true reason, the real reason that they were friends, was that they shared a common faith in the Lord. We know that was true of Moses. Moses was a servant of the Lord. But in this passage, we learn how Jethro, how he comes to faith in the Lord as well.

And Jethro's conversion was through the witness of Moses. After they greeted one another, Moses says this in verse 8, Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the Lord had delivered them. You can imagine Moses had a lot to say. I wonder how much detail did he get into. Did he describe the detail of every single plague? Did he describe all that happened in the wilderness? He must have done so to some degree, and it made quite an impression on Jethro because when he finished, Jethro, this pagan priest, became a true believer in God. Verse 9 says, And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. So Jethro did not just nod his head in agreement politely to what Moses had said about what the Lord had done for the people of Israel, but he rejoiced in that.

It gladdened his heart and then verse 10 tells us that Jethro blessed the Lord that is he praised God and he praised him for the salvation that the Lord had accomplished for his people and in verse 11 it says now I know and this is Jethro speaking now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people and this is Jethro's profession of faith here After all that he's heard about the saving power, the saving grace of the Lord towards his people of Israel, he believes. Now I know, he says. And then for the first time in his life, Jethro offers sacrifices and worship, not to the idols of his people, but to the true God, the God of Israel, the God of Moses, the God who led his people out of Egypt.

And so whatever natural reasons or natural affinity Moses and Jethro had for being friends, what really knit their hearts together, what really brought them together in a bond of love and affection was their common faith and love for the Lord. We can even put it this way. The friendship between Moses and Jethro was grounded in the spiritual reality that by the grace of God, they had each become friends of God. And we can put it that way because that's the way that the

New Testament tells us about, or that's what the New Testament says about us as Christians, that in the gospel of Jesus Christ, God has made us his friends. Because by nature, you and I are not friends of God. By birth, we are enemies of God. Because of the sin that is in us, because we are, by nature, sinful, we are rebels against God. We are anything but His friends. We are His enemies. And God is our enemy.

But through the work of redemption, through what Jesus Christ did when He came into our world, in offering himself upon the cross as a sacrifice to atone for our sins. He has reconciled God to you. He has reconciled you to God. Romans 5.10 says, if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Have you believed in Jesus Christ? Have you repented? of your sin. Are you resting in Him by faith? If so, then know this, that your sins are forgiven. You are at peace with God. You are no longer His enemy, but God is your friend. He has made you His friend through Jesus Christ. And so in the Bible, Jesus calls us His friends. Jesus said to His disciples in John 15, 15, no longer do I call you servants, but I've called you friends. And so by faith in Jesus Christ, most of all, our friendship is with the Lord. He has become our friend.

But whoever is a friend of Jesus must also be a friend of the friends of Jesus. Because when Christ in his work of salvation, when he brought you to God, when he reconciled God to you and you to God, he also brought you into the communion and fellowship of all those that he has saved. And for this reason, the scriptures tell us that the litmus test, the test that tells us if we truly do love God, if we truly do belong to him is this, if we love those whom God has loved. 1 John 4, 20, if anyone says, "I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

And so for that reason, because God has brought us to himself and brought us together to belong to one another as members of the body of Christ, as those who have been reconciled to him and to one another, our fellowship in Jesus Christ This is a sanctuary because we are truly among friends, true friends. Your best friends will be Christians. Now, of course, you will have friends, even good friends, who are not believers, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that, but your best friends, friends who have your deepest interests at heart, friends who want you to know Christ better, they will be Christians. We're living in a time when many people do not have close friends or perhaps no friends at all. One sociologist said that we are in the midst of a major friendship recession. And ironically, despite all of our interconnectedness on social media, Despite the fact we are constantly in touch with one another online, nevertheless, there

are more people who are lonely today than there have ever been. As one author described the strange situation we're in, in which we are more connected to one another than ever before, and yet more isolated from one another than ever before, she said, we are alone together.

But as Christians, we ought to have close and encouraging friendships. Friendships with others who share our hope and our faith in Christ. And historically, Christians have highly valued deep friendships with other believers. This is something when you study church history, this was a great concern for many of our forefathers in the faith, that we cultivate Christian friendships for our good, to help us in our walk with Christ. The fourth century theologian Gregory of Nazianzus said, if anyone were to ask me what is the best thing in life, I would answer friends. John Calvin, he kept up correspondence with several friends in the letters that he shared with them. He encouraged them, he confided in them. Sometimes he even chided his friends. In one letter to his fellow reformer, Guillaume Ferrel, Calvin said that he really should think about lengthening or shortening the length of his sermons. And some of you may be thinking, I know a pastor who could really use a friend like that.

But let me ask you, do you have friends? Do you have friends? And I don't mean your 950 friends on Facebook, but do you have a friend you can confide in? A friend that you can be honest with, to share your fears, your failures, struggles that you had in your walk with the Lord, a friend that you can count on for counsel and encouragement, a friend that you know not only likes you for who you are and likes to be with you, but who is truly concerned for your soul. Now, in saying all this, I'm not ignoring the fact that what should be true in the church is often far from the case of what is actually true. There may be times when we just struggle to make friends or find friends. And there are times too often that in the church, there are those who should be our friends, but who sometimes deal with us as though we were their enemies. And that is extremely painful and difficult. Moses experienced that. At one point, the Israelites were ready to stone him. They thought he was their enemy.

And the truth is, when we're in conflict with a brother or sister in Christ, we are all tempted to start thinking this way, that this is not a brother or sister in Christ, a friend that I've had a falling out with, but this is now my enemy. We are tempted to think that way. But in the body of Christ, in the church, what should be true is that in the fellowship that we have with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, in the love and concern that we have for one another, in the way that we seek to build up and serve one another, that we have here in our fellowship a sanctuary where we know that we are among friends.

## A Holy Place: Our Fellowship in Christ

And so our fellowship with one another in Christ is a sanctuary, it is a safe place because we are among friends, but it is also a holy place. Going back to our passage, after Jethro hears the story of God's saving work on behalf of the people of Israel, in other words, after Jethro hears the gospel according to Moses, he rejoices, he blesses the Lord, he confesses that he knows now that this God is greater than all gods, including the ones that he once served as a priest. And finally, at the end of the passage, he worships the Lord, and he shares in this holy meal with Moses and Aaron and the elders. Verse 12 says, And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

Jethro has come to know the Lord truly and this is before the Lord has given the Israelites through Moses all the laws concerning the sacrifices and his worship and so on and yet already Jethro understood that God was holy and that he was a sinner and that therefore the only way that he could approach God in worship was through sacrifice through some kind of atonement. And I wonder, did Moses tell Jethro about the promise that the Lord made in the Garden of Eden that the seed of the woman one day would crush the head of the seed of the serpents? Perhaps. But in any case, Jethro had put his hope in the Lord. And Moses says in verse 12 that Aaron and the elders of Israel, that they came and ate bread with Jethro, quote, before God. they ate in his presence and his family, and Aaron, and the elders of Israel, that this communion that they had, this fellowship that they enjoyed, was not only based upon the fact that they shared a common faith in the Lord, but it was also based even more deeply on the spiritual reality that in that fellowship, the Lord himself was there with them.

This holy meal that they shared, they shared with each other and with God himself. And there is a sense in which the greatest expression that there is of the communion that you and I have with one another as fellow members of the body of Christ. The greatest expression of that fellowship takes part in what we will do today when we come to the Lord's table. Because we share this meal together in the presence of Christ himself. It is the Lord Jesus who sets this table. And it is Jesus himself who is the feast he gives to us, his body, his blood, his spiritual food and drink. And this is what makes our fellowship a holy fellowship. We commune together with the Holy One.

In 1 John, John said this about his fellowship with the readers of his letter indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ and for this reason because our fellowship is a holy fellowship we always need to make sure that in our fellowship in our communion with one another that Christ Christ is the center of it that He is what binds us together. Now that's not to say that every time we get together with one another it has to turn into a prayer meeting or a Bible study or some kind of super spiritual activity. It's fine just to spend time, to hang out together, to shoot the breeze, to talk about guns or sports or whatever. But it's not fine only to hang out and talk about guns and sports.

The goal of our fellowship is to encourage one another, to encourage one another to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, to stir up in each other holy affections and desires, to urge one another on in love and good works, to build up one another in our faith and hope in Christ. That is the purpose, that is the goal of our communion with one another. How do you do that? Well, you can ask a brother or sister in Christ, how can I pray for you? Or perhaps you can affirm. What you see is something admirable, noteworthy in their faith, in their service to the Lord. I really appreciate the sacrifices you've made for your children. I can see that you do that out of love of Christ. And I just want to say, keep it up. Or something like that.

Like I said last week, you can make a priority of times that we have set to spend together in prayer meetings or Bible study. Those are times in which we are purposeful in which Christ will be the subject of our praying, our gathering today. The point is, is that we must never forget that our fellowship is in Jesus Christ. in any way that you can lovingly point another to Jesus and encourage him in his walk with Christ. This is the way for you and me to maintain the holiness of this sanctuary and this fellowship that we have with one another.

Will you be a friend to those who are sitting in this room today? Will you be the instrument that God will use for the encouragement, the comfort, the blessing of a brother or sister in Christ? If by the grace of God, You and I pursue this kind of fellowship, then our fellowship in Christ will be for us a true sanctuary. It will be a spiritual refuge where we know we are among friends, and it will be a place where our greatest friends, the Lord Jesus himself, will make himself known to us in all of his grace and in his love for us. Let's pray.