



Geography of Salvation

Preaching the Map

A Bible Study with Stan Key

THE STRESS TEST

Exodus 18:1–27

I. The Burden of Leadership

A. Things aren't always what they seem

From the *outside*, the life of a leader may appear enviable (big salary, big office, in the spotlight, perks and privileges, etc.). But from the *inside*, leadership is a **heavy** burden and responsibility. This is especially true for leadership in ministry. Describe some of the things that make ministry leadership so heavy:

1. Caring for peoples' **souls**.
2. Giving an account to **God**.
3. Few **resources**.
4. You have to be so **nice** all the time.
5. Long **hours**.
6. Your work is **never done**.
7. So many **interruptions**.
8. _____ .
9. _____ .
10. _____ .

B. Window into the soul of a leader.

The Bible gives a surprising amount of detail into the inner world of Moses, one of the greatest leaders who ever lived. Those he led **grumbled** constantly about his leadership and blamed him for their hardships (Ex. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Num. 11:1, 14:2; 16:41; 17:5; 20:3; etc.). Little wonder that Moses was often discouraged, frustrated, depressed and angry.

- When Moses “saw the calf and the dancing, his **anger** burned hot and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain” (Ex. 32:19).
- “Where am I to get meat?... I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. If you will treat me like this, **kill me** at once...” (Num. 11:13–15).
- On numerous occasions Moses falls **face down** before the Lord in desperation (Num. 14:5; 16:4; 20:6).
- “Hear now, you rebels; shall we bring water for you out of this rock?” And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his staff **twice...**” (Num. 20:10–13).

C. Warning to all ministry leaders.

Moses' level of frustration in leadership eventually led him to sin in such a way that he was denied entrance into the Promised Land (Num. 20: 1–13). Warning: leaders who fail to find grace to handle the burden of ministry risk undermining their ministry effectiveness and **finishing the race** poorly.

D. Symptoms of burnout.

“Burnout” is a secular term (dating to the 1970s) used to describe a state of emotional **exhaustion** from mental **stress**. The classic symptoms include the following:

1. Anger, irritability, quick **temper**.
2. Feelings of loneliness.
3. Depression, mood swings.
4. Fatigue, exhaustion, lack of enthusiasm, little **motivation**.
5. Difficulty in making decisions, inability to concentrate.
6. Health issues (headaches, blood pressure, over-eating, insomnia, etc.).
7. Cynicism and **doubt**.
8. Wasting time in mindless pursuits (video games, solitaire, etc.).

E. Finding a cure.

Secular approaches to dealing with burnout tend to rely on secular solutions: exercise, diet, sleep, laughter, vacation, time management, etc. While such responses certainly have their value, the Bible sees “burnout” in **spiritual** terms and therefore proposes a solution that goes much deeper:

1. Knowing **God** face to face and experiencing the rest he alone can give. “My presence [face] will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Ex. 33:14).
2. Entering Canaan (your inheritance). Though there are battles to fight, cities to build and crops to plant, it is described as a place of **rest** (Josh. 1:13; Heb. 4:1, 9–11).
3. Ultimately, Jesus is the only one who can give us rest. But this is no passive inactivity. There is work to do! But his yoke is **easy** and his burden is **light** (Matt. 11:28–30).
4. In other words, the cure for burnout is **entire sanctification!**

Finding the cure for burnout is just as essential to completing our journey as is learning the other lessons God has for us at Desert U (bitterness, hunger, thirst, enemy attacks). Until we learn how to deal with **overwork**, **fatigue**, and **stress**, we will continue doing laps in the desert.

II. Exodus 18:13–23.

A. After being reunited with his wife (Zipporah) and two sons (Gershom and Eliezer), Moses describes to his father-in-law everything the Lord had done in redeeming his people (see Ex. 18:1–12). Jethro responds: “Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods” (Ex. 18:11). John Oswalt points out that “Jethro is the first person in the history of the world who got converted because of somebody else’s **testimony**” (*Exodus: The Way Out*, Francis Asbury Press: 2013, 140).

B. After reading Exodus 18:13–23, answer the following questions:

1. What is the problem? (Read Ex. 18:13–16).

One pastor for two million people is simply unworkable. To say that the “church” was **understaffed** is a gross understatement. The organizational **structure** was simply making it impossible to move forward effectively.

2. What are the results of the problem? (Read Ex. 18:14–18).

a. Describe the results for Moses:

- Tired, fatigued.
- Frustrated.
- Feeling crushed by the load.

- _____ .
- _____ .
- _____ .

b. Describe the results for the people:

- Frustrated because their needs are unmet.
- Weary, tired.

- _____ .
- _____ .
- _____ .

c. What is the solution? (Read Ex. 18:19–23).

1) **Delegate** authority to qualified persons.

Notice that competency relates primarily to **character** (fear God, trustworthy, hate a bribe) and not to gifts and talents. This process involves selection, organization, training, holding accountable, etc. Break the congregation down into manageable groups: thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.

2) Moses should concentrate on doing what he **does best**.

For Moses to spend time on trivial disputes is a “waste” of time for the greatest lawgiver in the human history! Now he can concentrate on teaching God’s law.

d. What are the results of the solution?

1) For Moses:

- He won’t burn out; he will be able to **endure** and go the distance.
- He will be able to do what he is called and gifted to do.

- _____ .
- _____ .
- _____ .

2) For the people:

- They will have their **needs met** and thus be satisfied.
- Other leaders will be able to exercise their gifts and callings.

- _____ .
- _____ .
- _____ .

III. Lessons Learned

This is the fifth “test” at Desert U. Though this test is quite different than the previous four, it is just as important. Failure of the stress test could potentially keep God’s redeemed people doing laps in the wilderness forever.

A. Overwork and burnout are **serious** issues.

Just as deadly as lack of water and food or of being killed by the enemy, failing to **manage** time and resources can render us ineffective and unfruitful.

B. It takes more than **miracles** to get us out of the desert.

The previous four tests required divine intervention. A miracle was needed to make bitter water sweet and to provide bread and water. And it took intercessory prayer to enable Joshua to defeat the Amalakite army. But here in Exodus 18, wise human counsel encourages structural reorganization and revision of job descriptions.

Administration is more important than you think. Remember that “leadership” is a gift of the Spirit (Rom. 12:8).

C. Beware the “**messiah**” complex.

Many people in ministry begin to assume that they are indispensable and that they alone know how to do the work. Perhaps they are over-conscientious. Perhaps they are over-anxious. Perhaps they are ambitious. Regardless of the motivation, when one person tries to **do it all**... the results are not good.

D. Sometimes “pagans” have **wise counsel** for those who follow Jesus Christ.

Moses had learned how to “**plunder** the Egyptians” (Ex. 3:21–22; 11:2–3; 12:35–36). Egyptian gold is still gold! Moses was humble enough to listen and learn even from a pagan priest.

E. In leadership, Godly **character** is more important than competence.

In I Tim. 3:1–7, Paul sets forth 15 qualifications for those who serve as an elder. Thirteen relate to character; two relate to talents and abilities. Talents and skills can often be learned but character is a gift of God! (See Acts 6:1–3).

F. **Equip** the saints for ministry.

We will never make it through the desert and into the Promised Land unless everyone discovers and uses his/her spiritual gift(s). Everyone is needed. The **primary job** of leadership in the church is to ensure that the members are equipped for service. “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to **mature manhood**, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–13).

TABLE TALK

1. Think of a time when you were (or are presently) under stress and overloaded with work. How did you handle the situation? What did you learn?
2. Think of a time in your church when you saw someone on the point of burnout from too much ministry responsibilities. How did they handle it?
3. What is the main lesson you learned today?
4. Does your church equip the saints for service? If yes, how do they do it? If no, why not?
5. Have you learned how to “plunder the Egyptians”?
6. Name an area in your life where you need organization and administration. How is this hindering your journey? What is God asking you to do?

I'm Pressing On the Upward Way

By Johnson Oatman, Jr., 1898 (1856–1922)

*I'm pressing on the upward way,
New heights I'm gaining every day;
Still praying as I onward bound,
“Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.”*

Refrain:

Lord, lift me up, and let me stand
By faith on Canaan's tableland;
A higher plane than I have found,
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.

*My heart has no desire to stay
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;
Though some may dwell where these abound,
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

*I want to live above the world,
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
For faith has caught the joyful sound,
The song of saints on higher ground.*

*I want to scale the utmost height
And catch a gleam of glory bright;
But still I'll pray till rest I've found,
“Lord, lead me on to higher ground.”*