

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Supportive Spouses: Zipporah

Good morning. Our talk this morning is about a lady called Zipporah, the second in our series of four people who were supportive spouses. Zipporah is unusual among the four because she is not of the nation of Israel. However, we must step back a little in Exodus 2 to obtain some background information as to how and why Zipporah becomes the subject for our Bible talk today.

### Introduction to Zipporah

Let us read a few verses from Exodus 2:15-22, *“When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. And they came and drew water, and they filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. Then the shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. When they came to Reuel their father, he said, ‘How is it that you have come so soon today?’ And they said, ‘An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and he also drew enough water for us and watered the flock.’ So he said to his daughters, ‘And where is he? Why is it that you have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.’ Then Moses was content to live with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses. And she bore him a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, ‘I have been a stranger in a foreign land.’”*

Before proceeding too far we should say the Reuel is sometimes referred to as Jethro. Possibly one name is connected with his role as priest and the other is his family name.

The story of Moses is probably well known by our listeners today, especially the early events that surrounded his birth. Reading Stephen’s account of the nation’s deliverance from Egypt in Acts 7:17-36, we learn that Moses was forty years old when he decided to intervene and attempted to deliver the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt (Acts 7:23). But Moses did not realise that it was not God’s time for their deliverance. Also Moses tried to cover up the murder of an Egyptian but people knew and this resulted in him fleeing for his life (Acts 7:24-29). This is where we take up the story in Exodus 2:15. The murder had become known and Pharaoh, king of Egypt, wants to apprehend Moses and kill him. This is a classic tale of taking drastic action when not being guided by God. Moses flees to the land of Midian and finds himself at a well, a place of refreshment (Exodus 2:15). For the moment he feels safe enough to rest and so sits down by the well.

At this point we are introduced to another person, Reuel, the priest of Midian (Exodus 2:16). Reuel is a family man who has seven daughters (Exodus 2:16). The daughters are shepherdesses and they care for their father’s flock. Arriving at the well they proceed to draw water for the flock. However, others arrive and they drive the women away so that they can water their own flocks, using no doubt what had been drawn out by the women. It is at this point that Moses, who saw what was happening, noticed the injustice of the situation, so he rises and helps the women (Exodus 2:17). It may have been a regular occurrence at the well because Reuel is surprised that his daughters have arrived home early. Reuel asks, *“How is it that you have come so soon today?”* (Exodus 2:18). The answer is that an Egyptian had helped them (Exodus 2:19).

We observe that Moses, who had spent the majority of his forty years in Pharaoh’s palace being taught the ways of Egypt, looked like and possibly sounded like an Egyptian. Acts 7:22 states *“Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds.”* From this we learn that Moses was thoroughly identified with Egypt’s ways and was probably being prepared for greatness. But God had other plans. The failed attempt at deliverance was God’s means of taking over the training of Moses and moving him on to a new school to learn further skills. The training would be just as long but by the end he would be a leader fit to deliver the nation from bondage and lead them to the ‘Promised Land’.

Reuel then asks his daughters, *“And where is he? Why is it that you have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread”* (Exodus 2:20). A theme that runs through Scripture is hospitality. Hospitality was offered to travellers especially those who have rendered assistance in some way; Reuel is no different. We are not told who went to fetch Moses or what conversation went on between Reuel and Moses. We may assume that the sad tale of Moses’ exile due to his crime, for the best of intentions, was no doubt conveyed. Reuel seems to understand and he welcomes Moses into his

home. Moses is very happy to stay there especially when one of the seven daughters is offered to Moses to be his wife (Exodus 2:21). Moses may well have thought that a new chapter had started in his life and for the next forty years starts learning new skills that God can use later.

Reuel might also have had an ulterior motive in seeking to keep Moses in his family. Moses as we have seen was well educated. Reuel has no sons and now here was someone who could fill that situation and deal with the shepherds who always took advantage of his daughters drawing water from the well.

### What can we learn about Zipporah so far?

We have not particularly said much in a direct way. However, we can see something of her character.

- Zipporah is a shepherdess. This implies that she was hardworking as sheep required a lot of attention;
- Zipporah is also a caring person. Looking after sheep was a 24/7 occupation;
- Zipporah, along with her sisters does not presume to invite Moses back to their home. Although their father appeared to be disappointed in them not doing so, it was not their place to act in such a way as their father was the head of the household;
- Zipporah appears to be happy, but certainly obedient to her father, with the proposed marriage, even to a foreigner, who has turned out not to be an Egyptian but an Israelite;
- Zipporah becomes a mother and we read of their first son being born in Exodus 2:22. It is Moses who names the child Gershom, which means *"I have been a stranger in a foreign land."* Naming their first child in this way would have reminded Zipporah that her husband still felt the loss of being separated from his family and nation even though welcomed into this new family. Later, Zipporah has a second son called Eliezer (see Exodus 18:4). Again his name is a reminder to both Moses and Zipporah of the God who brings help and deliverance.

### Zipporah, the silent years

There are forty silent years of Zipporah's marriage to Moses. It would seem that during those forty years Moses is with his new family changes take place in Egypt. The Pharaoh who wanted Moses dead, dies (Exodus 2:23). The bondage of the nation of Israel continues and may well have become worse because we read in Exodus 2:23-25, *"Now it happened in the process of time that the king of Egypt died. Then the children of Israel groaned because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry came up to God because of the bondage. So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And God looked upon the children of Israel, and God acknowledged them."* In the meantime, Moses is fully absorbed in the role of being a shepherd and, as Exodus 3 commences, he is in the desert at the mountain of Horeb. It is at this point Moses is visited by the 'Angel of the LORD' in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). From Exodus 3:2 until Exodus 4:7 there is a long conversation and, for part of the time, Moses seeks to make excuses highlighting his unsuitability for the task that God wants him to do. God persuades Moses so he returns to Jethro. Let us read in Exodus 4:18-20 of the change that now takes place which impacts his father-in-law and his wife and family. *"So Moses went and returned to Jethro his father-in-law, and said to him, 'Please let me go and return to my brethren who are in Egypt, and see whether they are still alive.' And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace.' And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt; for all the men who sought your life are dead.' Then Moses took his wife and his sons and set them on a donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God in his hand."*

In Exodus 4:18-20 we still see reluctance on Moses' part. It would seem that he does not relay the whole conversation and only speaks of going to see his brethren. We see that Moses values his family and he takes his wife and sons with him. This decision leads Moses into a conflict situation with God. It is Zipporah who intervenes but it would seem it also causes a family rift. From later Scriptures it appears that Zipporah returns to her father (see Exodus 18:2).

We need to read Exodus 4:24-26, *"And it came to pass on the way, at the encampment, that the LORD met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at Moses' feet, and said, 'Surely you are a husband of blood to me!' So He let him go. Then she said, 'You are a husband of blood!' - because of the circumcision."* It seems that one son was not circumcised. Was this Eliezer the second son born? It may be that there was a disagreement as to the need for circumcision with the second son. Moses was living in the land of Midian, with his father-in-law the priest of Midian and this man's daughter was his wife. But things have changed and if Moses is to be God's chosen deliverer of God's people then he and his family need to be right in God's eyes and not what Moses and Zipporah had allowed. That is why we have Exodus 4:24-26 where Moses in obedience is on his way to Egypt but is confronted by the Lord who has the intention of killing him. Moses should have known that God would want everything right. Being only half right, one son only circumcised, is not sufficient. It is in this situation that Zipporah acts and performs the circumcision on her son. Zipporah intervenes as she does not want her husband killed. But from her remarks she finds the ritual distasteful.

### What else we can learn about Zipporah?

- Zipporah is content to be with Moses in this mixed marriage situation;
- Zipporah is willing to go with her husband into an unknown situation;
- Zipporah understands what God requires;
- Zipporah intervenes on behalf of Moses to turn away God's wrath.

### Zipporah returns to Moses

Our next encounter with Zipporah is after the deliverance of the people from Egypt. Pharaoh and his armies have been defeated in the Red Sea (Exodus 14:1-31). Moses is now leading the children of Israel into the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. There is possibly only a few weeks since they left Egypt but already on this journey there have been a number of occasions when the people moaned and complained about the lack of water and food (see Exodus 16:1-36). One thing that marked the people was their poor memory. They forgot God's mighty power demonstrated time and again both in Egypt and in these first few weeks in the wilderness. So every little issue became a major problem in which to blame Moses for all their misfortune.

It is into this situation that Jethro arrives with Zipporah and her family. Let us read together Exodus 18:1-6, *"And Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people - that the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her back, with her two sons, of whom the name of one was Gershom (for he said, 'I have been a stranger in a foreign land') and the name of the other was Eliezer (for he said, 'The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh'); and 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. Now he had said to Moses, 'I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.'" It is in these verses that we discover Moses had sent his wife and family back to Jethro his father-in-law. When Jethro arrives, both he and Moses have a lot to talk about, Jethro offers sacrifices to God in thanksgiving and on the next day observes the activity of Moses.*

What, however, is most striking to me is Zipporah's silence. In fact the silence seems to shout loudly when we compare the last occasion and Zipporah's words to her husband. Those intervening weeks, possibly a few months, left Zipporah in the school of God. Zipporah has learned a lot and for her it is not the time for speaking. Moses needs her companionship and support and he needs his family, Gershom and Eliezer, to be with him. What was Zipporah observing in her husband? The man who had been hesitant to make decisions and act decisively was now the leader of millions of people. He was the mediator between the mighty God of Israel and the people. He would when necessary stand in the breach and intercede to save their lives. He made decisions great and small about every issue that the people had. No, for Zipporah it was a time to observe, reflect and remain silent. Zipporah was the wife of this great man of God and there was no need to interfere. Zipporah's sphere of control was in the home which was now with the nation of Israel.

Turning to Numbers 12 we read, *"Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman. So they said, 'Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?' And the LORD heard it. (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.) Suddenly the LORD said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, 'Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!' So the three came out. Then the LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. And they both went forward. Then He said, 'Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and He departed. And when the cloud departed from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow. Then Aaron turned toward Miriam, and there she was, a leper. So Aaron said to Moses, 'Oh, my lord! Please do not lay this sin on us, in which we have done foolishly and in which we have sinned. Please do not let her be as one dead, whose flesh is half consumed when he comes out of his mother's womb!' So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, 'Please heal her, O God, I pray!' Then the LORD said to Moses, 'If her father had but spit in her face, would she not be shamed seven days? Let her be shut out of the camp seven days, and afterward she may be received again.' So Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days, and the people did not journey till Miriam was brought in again" (Numbers 12:1-15).*

In Numbers 12 we have a rather unusual incident. It occurs not long after the Tabernacle has been constructed and put into operation. So it is still early days after leaving Egypt. It appeared that Zipporah has become the object of scorn by Miriam and we have here Miriam and Aaron speaking about this and complaining that Moses appears in their eyes to have greater prominence than themselves. In Numbers 12:1, Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses because he had married an Ethiopian. Now, it is probably only weeks since Zipporah arrived to be with Moses. We know from earlier Scriptures that Zipporah was a Midianite, a shepherdess and although married to Moses and had a family to

raise would still no doubt spend a lot of time outdoors. This would result in a dark suntan. This situation reminds me of Song of Solomon 1:5, where the Shulamite refers to herself as *"I am dark but lovely"*, but to Solomon in Song of Solomon 2:10, *"Rise up, my love, my fair one."* It is not the colour but the appreciation of the one who loves!

Many scholars believe that Moses either took a second wife or because Zipporah had died so he had married again. As mentioned earlier I believe Miriam in particular might have used the term Ethiopian because of Zipporah's dark suntanned complexion and because of jealousy. Jealousy because Zipporah would be given a place of prominence as the wife of Moses. Not necessarily sought after by Zipporah but simply because she was the wife of Moses. Moses also becomes the object of attack. Moses, in Miriam's eyes, has become a lesser person and not worthy of the exalted status as being God's servant; his wife had brought him low. I read Numbers 12:1-15 to show how God defends His servant and Miriam endures God's wrath for a short time.

In all this Zipporah is silent. There is no record that she responded to Miriam's unkind attack. Zipporah had learned to leave things with God. God has always seen a husband and wife as a single unit, *"they shall become one flesh"*, Genesis 2:24. That is why in God's sight marriage is so important.

#### **Finally, what more can we learn about Zipporah?**

- That silence can be the platform from which to observe and learn;
- That silence is often a good response to those who attack verbally;
- That in silence we can let God work for His own glory.

May the Lord bless you today and thank you for listening.

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