

9/21/25**Overwhelmed*****Exodus 18:13-26*****Kyler Barr, Brewster Baptist Church**

Good Morning. It is great to be back with you again. I have been looking forward to getting to share with you this morning, and to our gathering tonight, where we will be unpacking “The Anxious Generation” by Jonathan Haidt together, and processing some of its implications for families and churches and communities. It is going to be a fantastic evening working together — exploring some of the ways we can respond to the mental health crisis facing our youth and young adults.

This morning, the background photo for our slides is the same background photo you will see on the slides tonight. It is a photo that was used as the cover art for “The Anxious Generation”. When I look at this photo, with all the emojis surrounding this young girl on her phone, the word that jumps to mind is “overwhelmed”.

I am pretty sure most of you can relate to that feeling. It may not be for the same reasons or in the same way, but we have all experienced overwhelm. In fact, it is becoming the prevailing state of being in our society right now. There is so much going on, and so much coming at us, that it is easy to feel completely under water.

For me, it is rarely about a big huge problem. Those definitely exist, but I usually am ready to walk through each problem as it comes. But when I am dealing with ALL OF THE PROBLEMS... I can find myself overwhelmed by the smallest things. I remember a couple of years ago, we were having a particularly challenging few months as a family, when we were walking through a lot of things all at once. Most of the time, I was dealing with things pretty well, but when I was putting an AC in my boys’ window one afternoon, and dropped a screw, the AC almost went right out the window!

It wasn’t about the screw, but the screw was the “one more thing” that pushed me over the line. I was stretched beyond my capacity. I was overwhelmed.

In our passage today, we read about someone else who was overwhelmed — Moses. Moses is trying to handle everything, and it is too much. Then, he gets a visit from his father-in-law. Look with me at *Exodus 18:13-26*, and we can see what happened.

“The next day, Moses took his seat to hear the people’s disputes against each other. They waited before him from morning till evening. When Moses’ father-in-law

saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, ‘What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?’ Moses replied, ‘Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God’s decrees and give them his instructions.’

“‘This is not good!’ Moses’ father-in-law exclaimed. ‘You’re going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself. Now listen to me, and let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people’s representative before God, bringing their disputes to him. Teach them God’s decrees, and give them his instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives. But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people’s common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you. Let the leaders decide the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you. If you follow this advice, and if God commands you to do so, then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace.’

“Moses listened to his father-in-law’s advice and followed his suggestions. He chose capable men from all over Israel and appointed them as leaders over the people. He put them in charge of groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. These men were always available to solve the people’s common disputes. They brought the major cases to Moses, but they took care of the smaller matters themselves.”

Moses was overwhelmed because he was holding on to too much! He was trying to do all of the things himself, and he was way past the point of diminishing returns. He needed to realize the same thing that we need to realize, that I need to realize, so often. Sometimes doing too much is what keeps us from getting things done!

Moses needed someone to help him pause, and slow down, and see that he was doing too much. He wasn’t being effective, and what he was accomplishing was completely unsustainable. Jethro had a relationship with Moses where he could help him see that, and he actually listened to him.

I hope you have some friends and family members like that! (And, I hope you actually listen to them!)

Today we are going to learn from the advice that Jethro gave to Moses. I love the two questions Jethro asks Moses in *Exodus 18:14*. They are a great starting point for us when we are facing overwhelm in our own lives. Let's look at them together.

The first question in verse 14 is, **“What are you really accomplishing here?”** It is a sobering question. What is the aim? Is what you are doing effective? Jethro is basically asking Moses, “How’s that workin’ out for ya?” In doing so, he gives Moses an opportunity to remember why he is doing the work in the first place! When we are overwhelmed, we don’t see things clearly. We need to pause and remember what we are trying to accomplish, and reevaluate our plan.

The second question Jethro asks is, **“Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?”** This question gave Moses another reminder we all need sometimes. “You are not the only one God can use!”

I have a good friend whose wife would help remind him of the same thing when he would get overwhelmed with something he could not figure out. She would take her finger and circle it around his head. Go ahead and try it. Circle your finger around your head.

He knew exactly what she was saying. The world doesn’t revolve around you. You don’t have to be the answer for everything. You can’t be the answer for everything. God is working through other people, too, and there is more going on than you can see. It is not all about you. The world doesn’t revolve around you.

She was giving him some perspective to help him change the way he was thinking about things. It is the same thing Jethro is doing for Moses. Let’s see how he responds.

In verse 15-16, “Moses replied, ‘Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God’s decrees and give them his instructions.’”

“They are coming to me!! I am not asking for this! I just have to take care of it! I am the leader. I have to handle this.”

I love how direct Jethro's response is... "This is not good!" "This is not good!' Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. 'You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself'" (*Exodus 14:17-18*).

For Moses, the heavy burden was the weight of leadership expectations, and all the things that needed to be taken care of for the people of Israel. For us, there are all sorts of things that can overwhelm us. Some are obvious (loss, sickness, financial challenges, work/school expectations, etc). Others are a lot more subtle. They are almost more dangerous, because we don't see them coming. Let me give you a more specific example...

One of the biggest sources of overwhelm in our world right now is something most of us carry around in our pockets — the smartphone. These are fantastic tools, but they are impacting us in ways we rarely pause to consider. So, let's pause and consider some of those impacts now.

First, we are overwhelmed with information. I don't know anyone who is starving for lack of information. On the contrary, the people I see when I look around me (and when I look in the mirror) are drowning in all the information that is coming at them all the time! One of the problems with this is what we call "cognitive overload". We are filled to overflowing, and we can't handle anymore. What they find is that when we experience cognitive overload, it reduces our working memory. We still know things, but we can't access them. It is like a computer that slows down when it is out of RAM.

But, it is not just raw information. The type of information we are receiving can be problematic, too! We are aware of so many bad things from all over the world, and we become overwhelmed with worry! Think about it. We hear about problems on the other side of the world faster than you used to hear about problems on the other side of the Cape Cod Canal! The impact here is "compassion fatigue". We are weary of all the problems. It is too much to handle. We start to become numb, and we wear down mentally and physically.

Often, we will turn to distractions, especially the ones on our phones (games, tv shows, doom scrolling) that can even help for a time. The problem is, we can become overwhelmed with distractions! Even when I was working on this talk, I would look up at the open tabs on my computer and see websites with my searches for a new car, and

email, and other jobs, and fantasy football. None of them were bad things in and of themselves, but there were lots of things that were clamoring for my attention.

The major issue here is one we will dive into more tonight. It is “opportunity cost”. Every time we say “yes” to one of the distractions, we are saying “no” to something else. What makes it worse is that a lot of the distractions coming our way were designed, specifically, to get — and hold — our attention. They give us dopamine hits that leave us wanting more! More on that tonight. Let’s keep going for now.

Another source of overwhelm we face is being overwhelmed with our social relationships. I am not talking about that one friend who is overwhelming (though that is real, too...). I am talking about our number of social relationships. Relationships are good, but we simply can’t manage them all.

An anthropologist named Robin Dunbar estimated what has now become known as “Dunbar’s Number”. He claims we can only maintain about 150 stable social relationships. Even if that is not exactly the right number, we all have a limit, and many of us are trying to go way past it. As we have seen improvements in travel and communication, it is easier to stay connected with more people. That can be fantastic, but it can also become overwhelming. When you add in social media, the number of people we are trying to keep up with skyrockets! Many of them are just acquaintances, but it still adds up! This problem is called “social overload”. It leaves us stressed, tired all the time, and wanting to withdraw from social interaction.

All of these challenges are growing, and they can leave us overwhelmed and anxious. I want you to look at someone beside you and tell them, “This is not good!”

SO, WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT? Let’s look back at the story of Moses and Jethro. Jethro gives Moses a plan that is based on those two questions from verse 14. I think we can learn something from his plan.

Jethro lays out a plan to create a system where they divide the people into groups, and other leaders handle the first layer of concerns and questions. Moses can focus on the major problems, and continue to be their representative to God and teach the people God’s decrees.

I love how practical this is! He answers both of the questions he raises. He asks “What are you really accomplishing here?” and then he helps him focus on the things he

should prioritize. In light of your aim, these are the things you need to carry. Let go of the rest!

This is far easier said than done, so how do you get there? That is addressed in some really well known verses throughout scripture. Let's look at some examples from the New Testament.

Matthew 11:28 — *Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."*

Philippians 4:6-7 — *Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*

1 Peter 5:7 — *Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.*

We take our burdens and give them to God. We aren't supposed to hold them all. However, I want you to notice something really important. The answer here is not to become passive. People sometimes think that living a life of faith means you don't do anything, because that would be relying on yourself. That is not how this works. The answer is not to become passive. The answer is to step boldly into the active faith God has for you!

We can see this if we look back at those verses. None of them are at the end of the book or letter. They don't just drop off at the end of the verse. Right after *Matthew 11:28*, we read things like "take my yoke upon you" and "the burden I have for you is light". There is a burden he has for us. Right after *Philippians 4:6-7*, Paul gives instructions for the believers in Philippi to "think about what is true and honorable and pure" and "keep putting into practice all you learned". Right after *1 Peter 5:7*, we read things like "stay alert" and "stand firm". God invites us to lay our burdens down AND pick up what he has for us!

One of the ways I remind myself of this truth is with a physical practice. Sometimes, I need to do something physical to help me remember. I will clench my hands together and hold them really tightly, and then I will release them and pray, "God

I give all of this to you.” Then, I keep my hands out open, and pray, “Help me know what you have for me.”

When I am overwhelmed by work to be done like Moses — “God, what role do you have for me?” When I am overwhelmed by distraction — “God, where do (and don’t) you want my focus?” When I am overwhelmed by social overload — “God, which relationships do you have for me?” When I am overwhelmed by cognitive overload — “God, what do you want me to know right now?” When I am overwhelmed by compassion fatigue — “God, for whom do you want me to care today?”

God has something for you, but you have to stop holding on to everything so tightly so that you are ready to pick up the right things!

At the same time, you need to remember Jethro’s second question, “Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?” As we said, you are not the only one God can use!

Sometimes, God uses others to do things we were holding on to. That is okay. That is how it should be. We are supposed to work together, not all try to do everything! We see this in *Romans 12* and other passages that use the illustration of the body of Christ. “Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ’s body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you” (*Romans 12:4-6a*).

This is what happens to Moses. God uses other leaders to do things Moses thought he had to do himself. He was not the only one God could use.

Other times, God uses others to give us support we need. Let’s look back at the Old Testament, at Ecclesiastes. In a book that says so many things we chase after in life are like a meaningless vapor, we see something that we should desire.

“Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble. Likewise, two people lying close together can keep each other warm. But how can one be warm alone? A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (*Ecclesiastes 4:9-12*).

God uses others to carry things we thought we had to hold, and to help support us as we carry the burdens that are ours to hold. In both cases, we need to remember that we shouldn't tackle overwhelm alone! We are better together. We need each other.

As we wrap up, there is one more thing we need to remember from this interaction between Moses and Jethro if we want to Leave Something Beautiful Behind. We see it in verse 24. "Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions" (*Exodus 18:24*).

This seems easy, but it is often the hardest part. It is certainly the part I struggle with the most. I am far better at coming up with systems than following them. It is way easier to read books, and listen to podcasts, and talk to friends, than to actually take their advice and do something with it. But that is simply not enough.

Whether it is delegating, like Moses needed to do, or navigating our own overwhelm, or working together to help make the world better for this anxious generation and all the generations to follow, we need to — it is not enough to just figure out what we could do differently. We have to actually do things differently!

My prayer for you, as we close, is that you would do things differently this week. That you would step into the things God has for you (and only those things) this week, with bold faith. That is my prayer for myself, and for my wife and for my boys. God, would you give us peace in an overwhelming world as we follow you and place our trust in you. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. In *Exodus 18:14*, Jethro asks Moses the first of two questions: "What are you trying to accomplish here?" How would you apply that to a current situation in your life, right now?
2. How would you answer Jethro's second question: "Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?"
3. What are you finding most overwhelming in life right now?
4. What is being harmed, or held back, by things in life that are overwhelming you?
5. What is something you can do to help you release the things that overwhelm you to God?