

Exodus 17:8-16
Israel's Fourth Crisis – War

Up to this point in Exodus, the tests and trials from the LORD toward Israel have been internal

- Basic, fundamental needs such as water and food were used as a gauge to test the faithfulness or faithlessness of Israel

These tests created an internal tension

- Grumbling
- Complaining
- Quarreling

These are internal, heart-level issues that eventually were manifested externally

But God soon brings a new test toward Israel

- An external test

In this morning's sermon, we will see Israel go to war

- For the very first time, but not the last, they will have to fight for their survival

As we think about Israel's history, they would have to fight on many occasions

- Even in our lifetime, Israel has had to be on the ready for war

Israel is known to have a world-class military

- It has some of the best technology

But here in Exodus 17, how would a band of untrained soldiers take on an enemy?

- What will happen?

Will they achieve victory?

- Will they suffer defeat?

Let's read Exodus 17:8-16

This passage teaches us several truths about the war between Israel and Amalek

- The strategy of the war (17:8-11)
- The victory in the war (17:12-13)
- The memory after the war (17:14-16)

I. The strategy of the war (17:8-11)

[8 Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim.](#)

Not much of a timetable is given here in verse 8

- We are not told the calendar of events between the provision of water from God and the attack of the Amalekites

We do know that the attack took place at “**Rephidim**”

- This is the same place mentioned in verse 1 where there was no water to drink

So Israel is still in the same general vicinity

- They haven’t moved much

The first question we need to address is, “Who are the Amalekites?”

As far back as Genesis 14:7, we are told that they lived in the southern part of Canaan, around Kadesh

As you think back to the main family lineage of Genesis, you will begin to see something very important

Abraham’s son, Isaac, had twins through his wife Rebekah

- Jacob and Esau

Jacob, of course, was the chosen seed

- Esau was not

Esau had sons of his own

- Esau’s son Eliphaz fathered Amalek¹

So what does this mean?

- Amalek was the grandson of Esau

We know from Genesis that there was great animosity between Jacob and Esau

- There was also great animosity among the descendants of Jacob and Esau

We fast-forward to Exodus 17

- Israel is, of course, the chosen seed through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

As Israel is heading toward the Promised Land, who do they meet?

- The Amalekites
- The descendants of Esau, the non-chosen seed

We must also keep in mind something that the LORD Abram, “**I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed**” (Gen 12:2-3)

Amalek had a choice to make

- They could bless Israel
- Or they could curse Israel

Amalek chose to attack Israel

- Thus, they were choosing not to be blessed²

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Exodus*, 407.

² *Ibid.*, 408.

Deuteronomy 25 gives us a bit more detail about the attack from the Amalekites³

- “Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies, in the land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget” (25:17-19)

We see from this Text a few key truths that are not given in Exodus 17

- Let’s take note of these

First, Amalek didn’t attack Israel head-on

- They attacked from the back of the camp

Second, Amalek targeted “the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary”

- They preyed on those who were the weakest

Third, Amalek “did not fear God”

- This is a telling statement of the spiritual commitment of this people group

Some have seen a connection between the lack of water in Exodus 17 and the rear attack from the Amalekites⁴

- Perhaps there was water
- But it was heavily guarded by the Amalekites

We can’t be too sure about this

- But it would be an interesting connection

9 So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us, and go out, fight against Amalek.

Moses immediately begins to put a battle strategy into place

- The first piece of the puzzle is for Joshua to select some men for fighting

But who is Joshua?

- This is the first time that he is mentioned in the Bible⁵

However, the manner in which he is addressed here makes it seem that everyone else knows who he is

- Elsewhere in Scripture, we can gather more information about this man

This man was first named Hoshea (Num 13:16)

- Moses changed his name to Joshua

In the Jewish mindset, a name meant something⁶

- Hoshea meant “salvation”
- Joshua meant “the LORD is salvation”

³ Ronald F. Youngblood, *Everyman’s Bible Commentary, Exodus*, 86.

⁴ John L. Mackay, *A Mentor Commentary, Exodus*, 302.

⁵ Michael Bentley, *Travelling Homeward*, 206.

⁶ Youngblood, 87.

Joshua was the son of Nun (Num 13:16)

- Not a lot else is known about his family

Joshua was Moses' sidekick (Ex 24:13; 33:11)

- Later, he would be Moses' successor (Deut 31:14; Joshua 1:5)

We also know of Joshua as being one of the two faithful spies⁷

- Only he and Caleb had the courage to tell Israel to press on

Joshua was probably around 45 years of age at this time⁸

He is given the task of selecting men who could fight

- All in a single day!⁹

We have to establish something upfront

- There is no mention of the LORD speaking or directing in verses 8-13

How are we supposed to respond to this, however?

- Does this mean that Moses took matters into his own hands?

We remind ourselves that there are some entire books of the Bible that don't even mention the name of God one time!

- Esther
- Song of Solomon

But does that mean that God is absent from these books?

- Certainly not!

Just because God isn't mentioned in Exodus 17:8-13 doesn't mean that He isn't working

- It doesn't mean that He isn't leading

As we look at Moses over these verses, we will see a man who is utterly dependent upon the LORD

- Not self-motivated
- Not self-reliant

[Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.](#)

Moses tells Joshua that the battle will take place, "Tomorrow"

- So this wasn't an immediate threat

There was time to rally the troops

- There was time for planning

Moses tells Joshua what he will be doing during the battle

- Moses says, "[I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand](#)"

⁷ R. Alan Cole, *Tyndale OT Commentaries, Exodus*, 136.

⁸ Kaiser, 408.

⁹ Douglas K. Stuart, *NAC, Exodus*, 394.

Why isn't Moses going into battle with Israel?

- Is this a sign of weakness?

Quite the contrary!

- There is a definite purpose, as we will see, in Moses taking a position on the top of the hill

The word for “**station**” here implies a position of authority¹⁰

- It can be used of being on military duty (Isa 21:8)

Please take note what Moses says, “**I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand**” (emphasis mine)

- This is extremely important

What had Moses just done with the staff?

- In verses 5-6, the LORD told Moses to take the staff and “**you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink**”

Some have looked at the staff as a magician's wand

- As if Moses could do anything he wanted to with it

But that's not the case

- God is the One who guides Moses to use the staff

Whenever a miracle takes place with the staff, God is the One behind it

- God is the One who is orchestrating the events

At this point in the Text, simply take note that Moses isn't going up on the hill alone

- He is taking the staff of God with him

10 And Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek:

Joshua is seen to be an obedient servant, following Moses' directions

- Joshua “**did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek**”

He is also seen to be a faithful soldier

- He “**fought against Amalek**”

Again, we have to remind ourselves that Israel is an untrained army

- They have been in slavery for hundreds of years

Their military tactics are elementary

- Their weapons are basic, at best

Yet Joshua faithfully and bravely leads Israel into battle against Amalek!

- He is walking by faith, and not by sight

¹⁰ Mackay, 303.

and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

While Joshua positions himself for battle, Moses heads to the top of the hill

- But he isn't alone

We read, "Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill"

- Why these three men?
- Why not Moses by himself?

Moses we know

- Aaron we know

But not a lot is known about "Hur"

- Hur is not a her
- Hur is a he!

Some have seen him as the husband of Miriam, Moses' sister

- He was with the people of Israel when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai

11 So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed.

Moses told Joshua back in verse 9 that he would position himself on top of the hill with the staff of God

Verse 11 tells us the ebb and flow of battle

- Specifically, it gives us how the battle was won or lost

When Moses held his hand up, then Israel prevailed

- When Moses let his hand down, then Amalek prevailed

Why is this?

- It wasn't Moses' hand that controlled the battle
- It was what was in Moses' hand

Remember, Moses had the staff of God in his hand (cf. 17:9)

- The visible representation of the power of God among Israel

In ancient military battles, raising or lowering one's hand meant different things¹¹

- Raising one's hand was a sign for the battle to advance
- Lowering one's hand was a sign for the group to retreat

Every battle has a strategy

- Military leaders have a "game plan" in mind

History tells many fascinating stories of how battles were won or lost depending on the strategy of the leaders

¹¹ Cole, 136.

Here in Exodus 17, we are told of a very unconventional strategy

- Some fight
- Some will go up on a mountain

We still don't have the full story

- This seems confusing, if we are honest

What was the big deal with Moses and the other two men up on the mountain?

- Gratefully, the Word of God doesn't stop here

Having discussed the strategy of war, let's discuss...

- **The strategy of the war (17:8-11)**

II. The victory in the war (17:12-13)

12 But Moses' hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set.

In the heat of battle, we encounter a major problem

- Verse 12 opens up with these words, "But Moses' hands were heavy"

Most of us have discovered what Moses realized

- If you hold your arms above your head for a long period of time, the blood drains down
- The result is that your arms seem heavy

If you have ever installed ceiling lights, you have discovered this

- If you have ever held weights over your head, you have discovered this

Even with something as simple as a wooden staff, Moses quickly realized that he couldn't hold it up indefinitely

- He needed help

In His grace and sovereign providence, God had Aaron and Hur go with Moses up on the mountain

- Moses didn't have to do it all by himself

Aaron and Hur did something very unusual

- "They took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other"

Do you see the picture?

- Do you understand what they did?

Before, Moses was most likely standing

- Then he was trying to hold the staff of God up by himself

Inevitably, Moses' hands would become tired

- So he would have to take a break

But what happened when Moses took a break?

- When his arms were down, the Amalekites prevailed!
- That's not a good thing!

Wisely, Aaron and Hur devise a plan to help Moses

First, they select a stone big enough for Moses to sit on

- This would allow Moses to be in a sitting position
- Hence, Moses would be positioned lower than Aaron and Hur in the standing position

Second, Aaron and Hur supported Moses' hands

- Each man took an arm

No longer was Moses the only one bearing the responsibility of keeping the staff of God in the air

- It was a combined effort
- It was a team effort

The end of verse 12 tells us the result, “his hands were steady until the sun set”

- With the help of Aaron and Hur, Moses was able to keep the staff of God lifted high
- All day long!

It is worth noting what Aaron and Hur did not do

- They didn't take turns holding up the staff of God
- That was a task assigned only to Moses

They did their part in helping Moses

- But it was not taking over his job

Just what was Moses doing on that hill?

- Different responses have been given

First, some see Moses praying

- In other words, he is interceding for the nation Israel

But there are a few problems with this response

- Nowhere in Exodus 17 is prayer mentioned
- Why would Moses need two men to help him pray?

A second response is to see Moses acting as a magician

- As long as he holds us the staff, like a wand, the battle is secure

A third response is to see Moses in a position of dependence

- He puts himself in a position where he is totally reliant upon the LORD
- All Moses can do is simply lift the staff of God above his head

I favor the last interpretation

- I don't want to spiritualize this Text to make it say what I want it to say
- I merely want to allow the Text to speak for itself

Do I believe that Moses could have been praying while on the mountain?

- Absolutely

But the problem is that we are not told specifically that he was praying

13 So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.

With Moses' arms in the air, victory was assured for Israel

Verse 13 tells us, “Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword”

- There is a bit of irony in this verse¹²

In Deuteronomy 25:18, we read that the Amalekites attacked Israel's “stragglers”

- Those who were weak

The verb here in Exodus 17:13 for “overwhelmed” means to weaken

In other words, the tables were turned for Amalek

- They had tried to weaken or disable Israel by their attack
- But in the end, they were weakened by Israel's attack!

Joshua is the one who is given credit for the victory

Isn't this strange?

- Why is Joshua given credit?

How about Moses?

- How about Aaron and Hur?
- What about the LORD?

This verse reminds us of a principle that runs throughout Scripture

- It is a principle that is so simple, yet so profound
- It has caused great confusion for Christians over the years

The principle is two-fold

- God is sovereign
- But man is responsible

Although God isn't even used, the staff of God is a clear reminder that God's power was at work

- When the staff was raised in the air, the Israelites were assured of victory

But did this erase man's responsibility?

- No

Think of what man did

- Moses delegated responsibility to Joshua to lead Israel
- Joshua selected men to fight
- Many Israelites fought the Amalekites
- Moses put himself in a position to hold up the staff of God
- Aaron and Hur were responsible for steadying the arms of Moses, holding up the staff of God

So when we read, “Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword,” that's right!

- But it isn't all

¹² John D. Currid, *An EP Study Commentary, Vol 1*, 367.

God also achieved victory

- God protected His people
- **The strategy of the war (17:8-11)**
- **The victory in the war (17:12-13)**

III. The memory after the war (17:14-16)

14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Now we read specifically that the LORD speaks to Moses

- He tells Moses several things

First, He tells Moses, "**Write this in a book as a memorial**"

- This could very well be the first reference to writing in the Bible

The type of writing material that Moses had available was probably a scroll¹³

- Most likely, it was leather or papyrus

We know that Moses was highly educated in Egypt (Acts 7:22)

- Remember, he was raised by the Pharaoh's daughter!

Where is the record of this battle?

- It could be in the Book of the Wars of Yahweh, referenced in Numbers 21:14¹⁴

Second, He tells Moses, "**and recite it to Joshua**"

- Joshua would be the future leader of Israel
- It was important for him to have a written record of the attack of Amalek

Third, He tells Moses, "**I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven**"

- This sounds pretty harsh, doesn't it?

Some have actually had major problems with verses like this

- How can a God of love say such things as this?

We have to understand that our view of God is oftentimes imbalanced

- We don't appreciate the totality of God's character and nature

For example, you may have heard people say something like this

- The God of the OT is a God of wrath
- The God of the NT is a God of love

That is a false view of God

- In the OT, God is both loving and wrathful
- In the NT, God is both loving and wrathful

¹³ Youngblood, 87.

¹⁴ John I. Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary, Exodus*, 237.

God wanted Moses to write down what Amalek had done

- Because in the future, God would see to it that Amalek would be absolutely blotted off the face of the Earth

In other words, God would ensure that at a future point in time, there would be no remaining Amalekites

- Their lineage would come to an end

During the reign of Saul, Israel's first king, God told him, "I will punish Amalek *for what he did to Israel, how he set himself against him on the way while he was coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and utterly destroy all that he has, and do not spare him; but put to death both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey*" (1 Sam 15:2-3)

- That is very straightforward, isn't it?

Did Saul obey?

- No!

Saul defeated the Amalekites

- But he spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:8)
- He also spared the best of the livestock (1 Sam 15:9)

That is in direct opposition to what God said

- God said, paraphrasing, "Kill everything associated with Amalek."
- Saul spared the king and the best of the spoils of war

David had to fight against the Amalekites (2 Sam 1-8)

Some even think that Haman, the evil villain from the book of Esther, was an Amalekite¹⁵

- We know how he wanted to kill all the Jews
- That goes back to the family feud between Jacob and Esau, doesn't it?

The Amalekites were finally destroyed during the days of Hezekiah (1 Chr 4:42-43)¹⁶

15 And Moses built an altar, and named it The LORD is My Banner:

After writing down the events, we read that "Moses built an altar"

There have been others who have built altars to God

- Noah
- Abraham
- Gideon

There is no mention of any sacrifices being offered on this altar¹⁷

- It served as a memorial
- It served as a reminder

¹⁵ Kaiser, 409.

¹⁶ Mackay, 305.

¹⁷ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the OT, Vol 1*, 374.

Moses gave the altar a very specific name, “**The LORD is my Banner**”

The word here for “**banner**” was used of a flag

- It was also used as a rallying point

On the top of a pole, there might be an emblem, symbol, or banner¹⁸

- This pole would be positioned high on a hill, for everyone to see
- It would attract the focus of the people

Most of you have heard of the infamous raising of the flag on Iwo Jima in 1945

- The picture is of 5 Marines and 1 Navy man, raising the flag

Even today, we can see this during college football games

- If a team is needing a boost of morale, what happens?
- The man with the flag will run around the sidelines, exciting the crowds

With that in mind, think back to Exodus 17

- What does Moses name the altar?
- “**The LORD is my Banner**”

Israel wasn't rallying around Moses

- Israel wasn't rallying around Joshua

Israel rallied around the LORD

- He was their Banner
- He was their Focal Point

In verse 13, we were told, “**Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people**”

- Here in verse 15, Moses writes, “**the LORD is my Banner**”

Nowhere does Moses take credit for the victory

- On a human level, it was Joshua
- On a Divine level, it was the LORD

16 and he said, “The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation.”

Verse 16 is very hard to translate

- That is reflected as you look at various English versions of the Bible

The basic premise of the verse, however, is the same

- The Amalekites raised their hands against the LORD
- However, the LORD would be the Victor in the end

How does this passage apply to us?

- After all, we will most likely not be called upon to engage in war

¹⁸ Currid, 368.

Again, there is great danger in spiritualizing or allegorizing what God did to Israel and then applying it to the Church

- With that warning in mind, there are some principles that I think we can glean from this Text

First, there is a war going on

- An invisible war¹⁹

In Ephesians 6, Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God (Eph 6:11)

- Then he makes this statement, “**For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places**” (6:12)

Spiritual warfare is a very real element of being a Christian

- Satan and his demonic forces will oppose those who are trying to follow the Lord
 - o Doubt
 - o Discouragement
 - o Depression
- Satan will even try to convince you that the battle is against flesh and blood
 - o He will try to turn believer against believer

Second, we need to acknowledge God’s supremacy in the midst of our spiritual battles

In the book of Zechariah, we read these words, “**This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel, ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts**” (Zech 4:6)

- Victory will not come about through brawn
- Victory will come about through dependence upon God

Third, we need to keep in mind the dual truths of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility

- It’s not all God
- It’s not all me

In a mysterious way, God commands us to be involved

- Yet the task is always bigger than our best achievements

Fourth, we need to live in a posture of dependence upon the Lord

- Just like Moses, we are to lift up the Lord in all we do
- He is our Banner

The Bible is clear, “**God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble**” (James 4:6)

- We are a proud people in great need of humility

One of the ways in which we express our dependence upon the Lord is through prayer

- Prayer is a humiliating task, isn’t it?
- Prayer is admitting, “I can’t, but You can.”

It is easy to talk about prayer

- It is easy to teach/preach on prayer
- But it is hard to pray!

¹⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Preaching the Word, Exodus*, 459.

Satan would have you to neglect prayer

- God commands you to devote yourselves to prayer

When we pray, we are in a posture of dependence

- We are admitting our weaknesses
- We are admitting that He is our strength

From the very beginning, the Church has been committed to prayer

- Praying individually
- Praying in small groups
- Praying as a church

God sends various tests to His people

- Some external
- Some internal

Are we looking to the Lord to be our Provider?

- Are we taking matters into our own hands?