

THE PERIL OF WARFARE
EXODUS 17:8-16

INTRODUCTION:

Even the saved have spiritual battles. Being under the rule of God does not give you immunity to attacks from the enemy. Israel came out of Egypt as the redeemed people of God. But on their journey toward the land of promise they faced several enemies. The first enemy they faced was the Amalekites. These descendents of Esau came against them in a furious attack. This first incident of warfare was used by God to teach the people of Israel some of the basic principles of spiritual warfare. They would be able to look back on this incident and learn from it.

After the battle was concluded Moses was given instruction to write down the account of this victory in a book. It was to be especially for Joshua, who had led the army in this conflict. Since he would be the man who would be responsible for leading the armies of Israel against her enemies in Canaan, he needed to remember the lessons of his victory. The lessons are for the people of God of every generation. I want us to look at this confrontation between the people of Israel and the army of the Amalekites that took place at Rephidim so that we, too, may be ready for the battles we face.

I. THE ENEMY WE FACE.

The Amalekites that came against Israel on this occasion were actually kinsmen. Amalek was the son of Esau. The tribe of people that he put together were known as the Amalekites. They will appear a number of times in the Biblical record and they are always in a position of giving opposition to the people of God. While they were a very real enemy they remind us of a

persistent enemy with which all of us fight. Our most constant enemy is not someone without but rather something within. Those who know the Lord and take seriously their walk with God know about the inner spiritual battles that we fight with the “flesh.” What ever is said about the Amalekites in scripture could be said about the flesh against which we battle.

1. Our enemy opposes the purpose of God.

The Amalekites had adopted the attitude of their grandfather, Esau, who had serious conflict with Jacob. They were opposed to what God had promised to do for the descendents of Jacob. God had promised them that they would inhabit the land of Canaan and that it would be their land. They are moving under the direction of God toward the land of Canaan. The Amalekites do not want Israel established in the land of Canaan under the rule of the God of Jacob. Since they are opposed to the purpose of God for the people of Israel, they come against Israel in battle at Rephidim.

Our spiritual enemies take on the same character. Whether we are referring to the flesh, the world, or the devil, they have a common characteristic – they are opposed to the purpose of God in your life and my life. Their constant opposition to us is rooted in their opposition to the God that we serve.

2. Our enemy hits at our weakest point.

In a passage found in Deuteronomy 25:17 Moses remembers this conflict with the Amalekites. He reminds Israel that the Amalekites came up on their weakest and straggling members from the rear. It was not a frontal attack on the part of the Amalekites, but a surprising attack at the

weakest point of the tribe. They actually attack the weak and infirm and the elderly who were lagging behind the tribes of Israel as they traveled across the desert. You can put it down as an abiding principle that our spiritual enemy will always attack at our weakest point. If we have a weakness, our enemy will find it and exploit it.

3. Our enemy is determined.

It is worth remembering that this would not be the only time that Israel would face the Amalekites. Their enmity against the people of Israel was a settled matter. As long as there was one Amalekite still on the face of the earth he would be opposing what God was doing through Israel. Actually the last Amalekite that I am aware of in the Old Testament occurs in the book of Esther. During this period of exile Esther encountered an Amalekite in the court of the Persians. His name was Haman. It was Haman who plotted to have Mordecai destroyed along with all the Jews. This Haman was actually a descendent of the Amalekites. So the opposition to Israel was a determined and persistent opposition.

The enemy of your spiritual life is no less determined. The battle is real. The battle has great spiritual stakes. The battle cannot be avoided. The battle must be fought. There is an enemy that we face.

II. THE WARFARE THAT WE WAGE.

When the Amalekites made their attacks on the marching tribes of Israel, Moses made a strategic response. It involved both the sword and the rod. There is an important lesson to be learned in the way that Moses faced the enemy on the field of battle.

1. The sword – do what we can do.

Moses put some of the men of Israel under the command of Joshua. He gave them instructions to face the enemy on the field of battle the next day. They went out to face the Amalekites with the swords that they had in hand. It may well be that they fought the battle Amalekites with swords that they have recovered from along the shores of the Red Sea. When the Egyptians had drowned in the sea, they had obviously lost all of their implements of warfare. It is likely that the people of Israel had claimed those swords and implements of warfare for themselves. They may well have marched to victory holding in hand the sword taken from the field of battle which the Lord had fought at the Red Sea.

It is obvious that the plan included for Israel to do what they could do. While what they could do would not be enough to achieve victory, they must do what they could do. Moses and Joshua were not deceived. Joshua was a 45 year old young man from the tribe of Ephraim, who was prepared to do what he could do. But he knew that the inexperienced men of Israel were no match from this nomadic tribe that was coming against them. These Amalekites had made such battles a way of life for themselves. But God's plan always includes something for His people to do.

The same principle applies in our walk with God. We must take the field of battle. There are decisions for us to make and the sword of the Spirit for us to pick up. We cannot expect God to give victory while we sit on the sideline and do nothing. Are you doing your part in the pursuit of victory?

2. With the rod – depend on God.

In the strategy that the Lord gave to Moses He sent Joshua to the field of battle but he took a position on the top of the hill. He assured Joshua, “Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” And this he did. The next day he stood on top of the hill and watched the battle as it raged on the plain below. As long as he held the rod in his hands, stretched toward the field of battle the Israelites would win. However, if he allowed his hands to drop and thus took down the staff of the Lord, then the Amalekites would begin to win the battle.

Because the battle went on for a long time and Moses became weary, his arms began to droop, Aaron and Hur saw what was happening to Moses so they took some practical steps. They found a good size stone on which Moses could sit and seated him on it. Then Aaron stood on one side and held up an arm of Moses and Hur stood on the other side and did the same thing for the other arm. Since they held his arms up through the day, Israel prevailed against the enemy. So it was not only Joshua’s sword it was the rod of the Lord that brought the victory to the people.

What is the lesson that we are to learn from this?

Did the uplifted hands of Moses symbolize prayer? Or were the uplifted hands simply an expression of confidence in the Lord in the midst of the battle? The traditional understanding of this passage through the years has been that his uplifted hands symbolized intercessory prayer. Many moving sermons have been preached about the power of intercessory prayer based on this passage. While it is true that the word prayer is not used at any point in the passage, this understanding is probably not amiss. The old rabbis among the Jews understood this to be an act

of prayer on the part of Moses. They understood that Israel prevailed because Moses prayed. Moses was able to prevail in prayer because of the assistance that he received from Aaron and Hur. However, if it was an expression of prayer, the prayer itself was an expression of faith. It was a way that Moses had of demonstrating his complete confidence that it would be the Lord that gave the victory or there would be no victory at all.

The lesson for us is the same. While we are to do what we can do, we must always make prayer and dependence upon God a priority in all we do. Our use of the sword will be impotent if God does not choose to demonstrate His power. Ultimately the battle is the Lord's and He gives the victory!

III. THE VICTORY WE ENJOY.

God was pleased to give Israel a decisive victory over the Amalekites. The hand of God was revealed in power as Joshua and those who fought with him pursued the battle while Moses was hold the rod on the mountain. We need to learn from this.

1. The victory is temporary.

While Israel prevailed over the Amalekites on that day, it would have been a mistake for them to conclude that the war was won. Actually, they had won a battle in an ongoing war. There would be many other battles to be fought with the Amalekites.

Any time you or I experience a spiritual victory it is a mistake for us to conclude that the war is won. Actually as long as we live on this earth, we will continue to fight the war with the world,

the flesh and the devil. There can be and will be decisive victories along the way but the war will continue until God calls us home. There is no final and complete victory as long as we are in this body. There are only battles won in the ongoing warfare.

2. The victory is the Lord's victory.

When the battle was over Moses and Joshua understood what had happened that day. God emphasized what had happened when He instructed for the scroll to be written about the battle and the victory won. But Moses did more than write down a record of the victory on a scroll; he also built an altar. He called the name of the altar "the Lord is my banner." He wanted Israel to know that they had prevailed that day not because of Moses on the mountain or Joshua on the field of battle, but because of God's intervention on their behalf. They had actually fought under the banner of the Lord. The banner signifies God's presence with them that they are fighting as the soldiers of the Lord. So, that day it was recorded and commemorated that victory comes from the Lord.

Nothing has changed. The Apostle Paul declares, "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." We are indeed more than conquerors through Him that loved us. Our victory comes from the Lord. It comes as we do what we can do and trust Him to do what we cannot do. We take the sword that we have available to us and do our utmost in the battle, but we know that unless the Lord intervenes on our behalf, we will be defeated. The victory is the Lord's.

Spurgeon, the great preacher saw a picture of Jesus in this great passage. Jesus is to us both the one standing on the mountain interceding for us and the Joshua on the field of battle leading us into victory. His prayers in the presence of God and His presence with us in the struggles of life make the difference between defeat and victory. They make the difference between winning the battle and losing the battle.

Don't be surprised by the struggles that you face and the enemy that comes against you! It will be that way for the rest of the journey so you must learn how to win the victory. The Apostle John said "faith is the victory that overcomes the world. Faith involves doing what you can, using the sword you have in hand, and trusting God to do this faithfully, your victory will be as decisive as that of Israel at Rephidim. On to victory!