

“The Battle Belongs to the Lord –  
The Place of Prayer in the Battle for our Souls”  
Exodus 17:8-16  
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Have you ever wondered if God is real?  
Have you ever thought to yourself, “What if there is no God after all?”

Some good people get the worst kinds of diseases and die while  
some bad people live in the lap of luxury.

A missionary dies at 35 years of age in an automobile accident  
while a Ku Klux Klansman lives into this 80s.

Some Christians who get sick pray and they healed, others pray and  
they die.

Some Christians seem to prosper in everything they do while  
others languish in near poverty.

And you don’t have to live very long to realize these  
differences are not simply a matter of intelligence or  
industriousness.

A number of years ago a Jewish Rabbi wrote a book that didn’t  
answer the question very well but certainly asked it well –

“Why do bad things happen to good people?” (Harold Kushner in book by  
that title)

One response came from Ellie Weisel a WWII concentration camp  
prisoner who came out of his experience convinced there cannot be a  
God.

Others have clung to their belief in the existence of God but have  
supposed him to be absent from their individual lives in any practical  
ways.

“There may be a God, but I don’t expect anything from him.”  
“The sun and the rain alike seem to fall on the just and  
the unjust alike.”

The question is often asked in the midst of crisis or discouragement,  
“Is the Lord with us or not?”

How about you? Is the Lord with you?

Can you and do you trust him with your life?

As you move through the mundane and the momentous experiences of everyday life, do you know that God is there, protecting and providing?

In the book of Exodus the Israelites ask the very question I just asked, Exodus 17:7 "Is the LORD among us or not?"

After their escape from Egypt, and God's destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, Moses led the people into the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

But immediately they ran into trouble.

Exodus 15:22-23 "For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter."

So God made the water drinkable.

Exodus 16:1-2 "The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai... In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron" about no food.

So God gave them Manna.

Exodus 17:1,3 "The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink... But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?"

And God gave them water to drink.

But the text says in Exodus 17:7 "And (Moses) called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, **"Is the LORD among us or not?"**"

When, from our perspective, bad things happen to us, that is the question we ask, "Is God here or not?"

It appears to me that the author of the book is attempting to answer that question when he writes of yet another incident in the lives of these, God's people.

Please stand for the reading of God's Holy Word:

Exodus 17:8-16

"The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands."

So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. <sup>12</sup> When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up--one on one side, one on the other--so that his hands remained steady till sunset. <sup>13</sup> So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. <sup>16</sup> He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."

May God bless the hearing of his Word.

PRAY

With the added perspective we are given by the New Testament, we can look back on the Israelites' experience of the OT and see that it parallels our own spiritual experience.

- Their bondage in Egypt is like our own captivity to sin – our lives before salvation.
- Their active faith at Passover, trusting God's provision through the sacrificial lamb is like our trust in God's ultimate Lamb, his own son, the Lord Jesus – this is justification, conversion, new life.
- The long walk from Egypt to the Promised Land is also a metaphor for the Christian life lived between conversion and being ushered into the presence of Jesus at our death or his second coming.

And this long walk, this Christian life, is God's means of fitting us for heaven, of changing us from weak, immature new believers into mature, trusting, and faithful people of God.

These experiences of Israel in the desert parallel our own Christian lives.

- Last week we saw the Israelites, weak in faith, graciously provided for by God.
- This week we come to the first attack from outside – they meet the enemy and their lives and Gods' purposes in the world are on the line.

“Is the Lord among us or not?”

**The first thing we learn from this encounter is that the battle in life is real and it is for “all the marbles.”**

Exodus 17:8 “The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim

Years later Moses would describe the attack again.

Deuteronomy 25:17-18 “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. <sup>18</sup> When you

were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God.

The Amalekites attacked from the rear, picking off the stragglers.

You might remember that the Israelites are the descendants of Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

The Amalekites are descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau.

Animosity between these two peoples was already hundreds of years old and would continue for at least another 1500 years down to the birth of Christ when Herod (a descendant of Esau) would attempt to kill the Christ-child. (See [Genesis 36:12-16](#) – birth of Amalek; [1 & 2 Samuel](#) – Saul's and David's battles with Amalekites; [Esther](#) – Hamaan an Agagite/Amalekite; and [Luke](#) – Herod an Idumean/Amalekite)

In this Exodus encounter between the Amalekites and the Israelites, people died – it was a very real battle.

Not only was it real but it also had far-reaching implications.

This was not simply one nomadic tribe fighting another tribe for water rights.

It was a battle between Satan and God for the souls of God's people.

God plan was to take these former slaves and fit them for the Promised Land so that they might live there in his love for generations to come.

In Jewish tradition, the Amalekites became the symbol of evil incarnate.

Much as the name Hitler stands for all that is evil and opposed to the Jewish people so the Amalekites were the archenemy of Israel not only then but, as I said, for generations to come.

The Amalekites were the symbol of all that opposes God's saving work in the world

This was not just a tribal battle; this was an eruption of a cosmic battle between God and Satan.

And the battlefield was the people of God.

### **The same is true today!**

We too often treat the temptation to sin and even sin itself in our lives as little matters, sometimes even funny matters.

Violence, immorality, vengeance, profanity, greed, and the like have become subjects of entertainment – presented in ways to make us laugh.

We forget God's word to us in 1 Peter 5:8 "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The Lord said to Cain in Genesis 4:7 "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you."

We hold the burning embers of lust, anger or bitterness to our chests as if they will not burn us.

We forget the clear warning of God in 1 Peter 2:11 "abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul."

Satan was out to destroy the people of God then and he is still at it.

We too often think the greatest battles of our lives are for our financial security or our physical health.

Lance Armstrong, 6-time winner of the Tour de France battled with cancer.

I think it has been referred to as the battle of his life.

But there is another battle that is much more serious – the battle for your soul.

Foolish, foolish is the man or woman who forgets this – who forgets that the enemy of God and hence the enemy of the church, the enemy of our souls, is actively working to bring us down.

Even while the Apostle Peter was taking communion in that first Lord's Supper, even in that great spiritual experience, Jesus looked at him and said, Luke 22:31 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" – to destroy you as he has Judas.

The financial and physical is not most important; unless Christ comes first, our bodies will die and our wealth, such as it is, will be given to another.

But we, our souls, are forever.  
 Oh, there is a real battle alright!  
 And it is being waged every day.

The next thing I want us to see in this encounter between the Amalekites and the Israelites is that they and we are called on to **engage the enemy in very practical ways** in this very real battle for our own and others' souls.

Exodus 17:8-10 "The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites... So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered..."

It is instructive to note that sometimes the Lord does it **all** without our involvement **at all**.

When, just a few weeks earlier, the Egyptians were pursuing the Israelites and had them cornered at the Red Sea God said this: Exodus 14:13-14 "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; **you need only to be still.**"

But this time, when the Amalekites attack, God tells them to take up arms and fight.

In the Bible, among other things we are told to do, we are told to flee immorality, to resist the devil, to put off the old sinful habits of life and put on new ways of acting and responding, and we are to hide God's word in our hearts that we might not sin against God.

Over and over again throughout the OT and NT we are given instruction as to what we are to do.

Christians are not passive, but active, in the battle against the sin that Satan would use to destroy us.

I cannot stay on this subject long because it is dealt with other places in the Bible and it is not the focal point of this passage.

But before leaving it listen to Charles Spurgeon:

“Young Christian, you have begun a life of warfare, rest assured of that. You would never be told to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ if it were not so. You must not put that sword up into its scabbard, but rather grind it sharp and hold it always ready in your hand. Watch constantly, and pray without ceasing; for, till you get your foot upon the golden pavement of the New Jerusalem, you must wear a warrior’s harness, and bear a warrior’s toils. Spurgeon MTP V12 Sermon 712 p658

And again, “When we are delivered from bondage, although it is God’s work to help us, we must be active in our cause. Now that we are alive from the dead we must wrestle with principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness if we are to overcome. “Go fight,” is the command. Do not many Christians act as if sin would be driven out of them through their sleeping soundly? Let them be sure that a slumbering spirit is the best friend that sin, can find. If your lusts are to be destroyed, they must be cut up root and branch by sheer force of personal exertion through divine grace, they are not to be blown away by languid wishes and sleepy desires... We shall see our sins die (only) while our minds are thoroughly active against them, and resolutely bent upon their destruction. “Go, fight with Amalek.” Spurgeon MTP V12 Sermon 712 p662

But I must move on quickly because clearly the focus of the story is not on Joshua on the battlefield but on Moses who is on the mountain.

**Exodus 17:9-13** “Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.” So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. <sup>12</sup> When Moses’ hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up--one on one side, one on the other--so that his hands remained steady till sunset. <sup>13</sup> So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.”



**So thirdly, what I learn is that we are called on to exercise and express our dependence on God in prayer; it is our greatest “work”.**

Imagine the scene: Joshua and others are doing battle and at times they are winning while other times they are losing.

The author specifically indicates a direct correlation between Moses' hands and that winning or losing.

When Moses' hands are raised, Joshua is winning.

When Moses' hands are lowered, Joshua is losing.

Nothing in the text explicitly says that Moses was praying.

But raised hands are often an OT and even a NT expression for praying.

1 Timothy 2:8 “I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer.” (see also Psalm 28:2; Psalm 63:4; Psalm 134:2; Psalm 141:2; Lamentations 2:19; Lamentations 3:41)

And everything here says that the point of this text is to demonstrate their complete dependence on God and God's faithfulness to provide.

Moses is praying, which is the highest expression of confidence in God and God is winning the battle.

The eminently quotable Spurgeon captures it succinctly:

“It matters not how loudly Joshua shouts to his men, unless Moses fervently cries to his God.” Spurgeon MTP V12 Sermon 712 663

God clearly ordained prayer as the primary means by which the battle would be won.

Please notice I said prayer is the “means” by which God would win the battle.

People sometimes speak of the power of prayer almost as if prayer were magic.

And sometimes we speak of the power of prayer as being vested in the one who prays – as if by our greater sincerity or by our longer praying we accomplish the task.

The power is not in the prayer or the pray-er but in God.

Praying is the means of expressing our dependence on God.

And so when we pray we come to God.

We aren't just saying words that contain some code to unlock God's benevolence.

We come to him; we come as supplicants to a father who loves us more than we love ourselves.

But we come **seeking him** even more than we seek our own desires because we trust him and his answers to our needs even more than our answers.

### **Why couldn't Moses just pray one prayer for help; why was all-day prayer needed?**

One author answers that question well, "God doesn't want our prayer to become nothing more than formulas that 'work' the wheels of divine power. He doesn't want us to think of prayer as some kind of magic rite which flips some switch and sends spiritual current through the wires of result. Prayer is not a porter's bell we ring to bid God to carry the bag of our desires... Prayer is nothing less than holy conversation with the King and Sovereign of the universe. It's an invitation to partner with God in his eternal plan to bring redemption to this fallen and sin-sick world. God wants us to understand that prayer is not us getting our will done in heaven or by heaven but that it is the means God has chosen to get his will done on earth."

[www.calvarychapel.com/oxnard/studies/ot/exodus/intercession.html](http://www.calvarychapel.com/oxnard/studies/ot/exodus/intercession.html)

### **And what is this about Moses' arms getting tired so that he dropped his hands and the battle would turn against Joshua?**

What was God doing in this?

I think it dramatically demonstrates that the battle belonged to the Lord, not even to mighty Moses.

Even Moses grew tired in prayer.

No one would be able to say the victory came because Moses prayed so fervently.

Be careful of calling attention to the one who prays.

The victory belonged to God alone.

Calvin wrote that even though Moses prayed he could not “boastfully commend his own zeal in prayer, but rather (it was) the public witness and proclamation of his weakness, that the glory might be entirely attributed to the gratuitous (unearned) favor of God.” (in Philip Ryken, Exodus, 464)

**The last thing I learn and the sum of it all is this: God is with us!**

Remember the question? Is the Lord with us or not?

God has answered it in dramatic fashion.

Exodus 17:14-16 “Then the LORD said to Moses, “Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner.<sup>16</sup> He said, “For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.”

The Lord said, I want you to remember this; I want your children and their children to remember how I intervene.

The Lord said he, the Lord, would defeat Amalek, that personification of evil that attempts to thwart God’s plans, that seeks to destroy your soul.

The Lord said that from generation to generation, the LORD would be at war with the Amalekites – he would never stop protecting his people.

So Moses built an altar, not for sacrifice but as a memorial.

And the name he gave the memorial also speaks to the truth that God was the source of the victory over evil – “The LORD is my Banner.”

Just as the flag, the standard, the banner of the United States of America stands for the presence and power of the USA so this standard, this banner symbolized the real power behind the victory that day – The LORD.

I come nearly to the end with two applications:

1. Will I look at the evidence and conclude with Moses, Joshua and the rest of God's people down through history that the Lord is among us? The battle belongs to the Lord.
2. And the second application is this – will I exercise dependence on God by the primary means that God has given us? Will I pray?

I want to conclude by talking primarily to men; men who, like me, call ourselves Christians – Christ-followers.

Men, what is our most important work - breadwinning or prayer?

Certainly it is not either/or but both/and.

But I ask you men, and fathers especially, **are we engaged only in the valley with Joshua** or are we also engaged on the mountain with Moses?

Why are the prayer warriors we name today, most often women?

It was not always so. Moses, David, Elijah, Paul, and others were fully engaged in the world as soldiers, administrators, preachers and evangelists but also, and even more so, as men of prayer – men in dependence on God.

Two weeks ago Mark Earley spoke of Martha and Mary as illustrative of two ways of responding to life.

One was driven to get everything done; the other was called to meet with Jesus.

Likewise with us, it is not a matter of **either** actively working **or** praying but of which has priority.

Men, will we pray?

Will we be intercessors for our families, our church, our community and our world?

Without a doubt, prayer is the hardest thing that some of us do in ministry and life!

One man wrote, "Beware of weariness in praying; if Moses felt it who can escape? It is far easier to fight with sin in public, than to pray against it in private. It is remarked that Joshua never

grew weary in the fighting, but Moses did grow weary in the praying; the more spiritual an exercise, the more difficult it is for flesh and blood to maintain it. Spurgeon page 663

Will we lift up holy hands in prayer and not let down, but call on Aaron and Hur to join us, to help us?

I need some Aarons and Hurs to help hold up my hands – to keep me praying.

Some of you men need the same – like me you have tried making new commitments to yourself that you will be more faithful in prayer.

But it hasn't lasted.

You've even asked others to pray that you would be more faithful.

But one of the things I like about the OT is how concrete most things are – Aaron and Hur literally took hold of Moses' arms and helped hold them up.

I think there is something there for us.

We need each other.

We need each other to hold each other accountable for praying, for leading our wives and families in prayer, for praying for our mission as a church, for praying for the Kingdom of God.

I'm suggesting that all men who would like to be part of a team of three who would use some means of communicating with each other (e-mail, phone, meeting) to help each other stay faithful in praying for and with their wives and families, send me your name and e-mail address or give it to me today.

Closing Prayer

**Additional notes on why this text is about God's provision:**

Exodus 17 is the first mention of Joshua in OT – his name means “Jehovah delivers” which is a clue to the purpose of this narrative.

The narrative also ends with the promise that Jehovah is the one who will do battle with his people's foes in the generations to come (v16).

The specific mention of the “staff of God” symbolizes God's presence and power.

That it is God who is the power is demonstrated in the raised hands (staff). When the hands are lowered (in contrast to the instruction that Moses must have been given) the power wanes – indicating further that this battle is God's.

The “staff of God” is a clear indicator that the battle is God's not Joshua's alone.

Exodus 4:2-4 – the staff is the one God turned into a snake to convince Moses originally.

Exodus 4:17-20 This is the staff God told him to take to Egypt to perform the miracles of the plagues. It is here first called “the staff of God.”

It was with the staff that the plagues were initiated.

It was with the staff that the Red Sea parted.