

Victory Over the Amalekites

Israel has been pretty much in crisis mode since they left Egypt, the first one arising when they were trapped at the Red Sea. Through God's miraculous power He delivered Israel and destroyed their enemies. The next crisis came after three days of traveling in the wilderness and finding no water to quench their thirst. Arriving at Marah, Moses found water but it didn't help because the water was too bitter to drink. Again God provided for them: He sweetened the water so they could drink and then led them to Elim - an oasis in the desert with twelve springs and seventy palm trees.

The third crisis facing them was hunger accompanied by all of their grumbling and complaining. God promised He would feed them, providing both meat and bread. Quail covered the camp every evening. Imagine enough quail to feed two to three million people every day for forty years! Likewise, the bread from heaven, manna, covered the ground for the full forty years as well. Another spectacular miracle from God, just for them. The fourth crisis occurred as they left the desert of Sin and reached Rephidim, fully expecting to find water. Arriving, they discovered to their horror that the creeks were totally dry. No water anywhere! They blamed their thirst on Moses (like he had control of the water) and then began quarreling among themselves. God instructed Moses to strike the rock at Horeb and water came flowing - once again showing Israel He was their true provider.

Our lesson today finds us still in Rephidim and getting ready for Crisis #5: Warfare. The focus is not really on the war itself but rather on what brought about the victory in the war: prevailing prayer (intercession).

Exodus 17:8

Now Amalek came and fought with Israel in Rephidim.

So who was Amalek? He was the the son of Eliphaz and grandson of Esau, actually making the Amalekites distant cousins of Israel. But as you recall, brothers Jacob and Esau were never really on good terms with each other, especially after Esau lost both his birthright and the blessing. They each went their separate ways and the animosity between the brothers grew, developing into a long-lasting feud between the Amalekites and Israelites.

The Amalekites were nomads, living in the Negev Desert, just south of the promised land of Canaan. Perhaps they felt threatened by the large group coming their way because to reach Canaan the Israelites would have to march either through or close to the land of the Amalekites. They most likely knew what land God had promised to Israel but decided to attack anyway - thus becoming the first nation Israel fought with after gaining freedom.

The method of attack used by Amalek was despicable. Deuteronomy 25:17-18 recounts, *"Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God."* The attack was cruel because they launched it at the rear of the camp where the slower people would be found: the women and children, the handicapped, sick, weary and aged - those who couldn't keep up with the rest. Scripture tells us they killed

them all. The Amalekites were set on annihilation of the Israelites, to erase them from the face of the earth. They were driven by hate and prejudice. We see that same spirit of hate against Israel today; enemies still call for the complete removal of Israel. *“Come,” they say, “let us destroy them as a nation, that the name of Israel be remembered no more.”* (Psalm 83:4)

Exodus 17:9

And Moses said to Joshua, “Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.”

In response to the unprovoked attack, Moses called on Joshua to draw out a detachment of choice men from the thousands of Israel and drive back the Amalekites. This is the first mention of Joshua in the scriptures and the first significant experience of warfare for Israel in a long time. They had lived for hundreds of years as slaves and God had fought the Egyptians for them. Now they had to learn to rely on God as they fought a military battle. The only weapons they possessed were the ones they had taken from the Egyptians at the Red Sea or any tools they had brought with them on the exodus out of Egypt. They were definitely not armed as well as the Amalekites.

Moses promised to stand on the top of the hill, to seek God and intercede for Joshua and the soldiers. He would hold the rod of God, which he had just used to bring water from the rock, to remind the troops that God was with them. Joshua was to fight and Moses was to pray. They each had their part to play and knew that God would give them the victory over their enemy.

Exodus 17: 10-11

So Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. ¹¹ And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed.

Joshua did just as Moses instructed him - a pattern we see throughout Joshua's life: he served the Lord and Moses faithfully. Moses was also true to his word. Along with Aaron (his brother) and Hur (his brother-in-law), Moses climbed to the top of the highest hill. He went to the very top so everyone could see him as he sought God. When it says Moses *“held up his hand”* it describes the Israelite posture of prayer. Where we might fold our hands or bow our head, they held up their hand. As Joshua fought the battle, Moses prevailed in prayer for them. They began to notice that when Moses held up his hand and the rod of God, Israel advanced. When Moses' hand tired and he lowered his arm and the rod, Israel had to retreat. Why did this happen?

Because God needed to teach His people a lesson. They were just beginning their trip to the promised land and they needed to learn a basic truth: victory is through the Lord and through the Lord alone. In the future, no matter who the enemy was, their only hope for victory was the Lord. He had Moses in the sight of all so they could witness the power of prayer and trusting God.

Exodus 17:12-13

“But Moses' hands became heavy; so 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 the other on the other side;

and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.¹³ So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.”

The job of supporting the battle in prayer was difficult and Moses could not easily continue. His hands and probably his whole body became tired. Moses was around 80 years old when this happened. Their solution to the problem was twofold. First, *“they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it.”* This would relieve the stress on his legs. Second, *“Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side.”* Moses had support on both sides so his hands were “steady” until the sun set. The word *steady* comes from the Hebrew word “emunah” which means “faithfulness” or “firmness.” Moses’ hands were “faithful” in staying raised to bless the Israelites. Moses lifting up his hands was a tangible sign that the LORD was faithful to Israel and would give them the victory over their enemies. The victory was the Lord’s, not theirs. Proverbs 21:31 affirms, *“The horse is prepared for the day of battle, But deliverance is of the Lord.”*

We also see the importance of teamwork. Aaron and Hur came alongside Moses and literally held up his hands in prayer. They helped him and partnered with him in intercession. In the New Testament, Paul illustrates teamwork by comparing believers in Jesus to a human body, where all of the body parts do as they were created, working together, which shows how faithful servants of God ought to cooperate. We might think that Joshua had the harder job doing the fighting and praying was easier work. But true prayer is often very hard work. In Colossians 4:12, Paul described the ministry of Epaphras as *“always laboring fervently for you in prayers”* and in Colossians 4:2 wrote we must *“continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.”*

So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.” The phrase “with the edge of the sword” implies that the Amalekites were crushed. Israel’s victory came through human obedience (Joshua and his army going out to confront the enemy) and divine power (Moses holding up the staff and praying.) Moses’ praying was key but it didn’t eliminate what Joshua needed to do.

The enemies of our salvation will attempt to destroy us when we are weak, tired, and falling behind in our spiritual walk, even as Amalek attacked the weak and straggling Israelites who had fallen behind the camp. This passage reminds us that we can call on God for help and He will be faithful to protect us. The Bible declares we are more than conquerors through Jesus and nothing can defeat us when we are in the will of our Father in heaven.

Exodus 17:14-16

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this for a memorial in the book and recount it in the hearing of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.”¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and called its name, The-Lord-Is-My-Banner; for he said, “Because the Lord has sworn: the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

God told Moses to write down an account of the attack and victory so that Joshua and succeeding generations would always remember the event. What would God want the people to remember?

1. Victory is through the Lord and Him alone

2. When enemies attack God's people, their hope is the Lord
3. God's people need to pray and keep praying till the Lord gives the victory

Judgement was also pronounced on the enemy - God declared He would blot out the remembrance of Amalek - they would be utterly destroyed. They had set out to erase God's people from the face of the earth and eventually ended up being the nation who was erased. In I Samuel 15:2-3, God told King Saul. *"I will punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel, how they ambushed them on the way as they came up from Egypt. Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey."* Saul did attack the Amalekites but he didn't complete the task. He allowed their leader, King Agag to live, took plunder for himself and his army, and then lied about it. This disobedience caused Saul to be rejected by God as king and the escaped Amalekites continued to harass and plunder the Israelites.

In I Samuel 30, the Amalekites raided Ziklag, a Judean village where David held property. They burned the village and took captive all of the women and children, including two of David's wives. David and his men went after and defeated the Amalekites and rescued the hostages. However, a few hundred Amalekites escaped.

The last mention of the Amalekites is the time when Esther was Queen. Her uncle Mordecai, a Jew, refused to bow to the wicked Haman. Haman was so angered by this man's refusal to bow to him that he connived to get King Xerxes to sign a decree that on a particular day every Jew in the kingdom should be destroyed. This hatred for the Jews came naturally to Haman because he was an Amalekite, a descendent of King Agag. However, God, true to His promise, saved the Jews in Persia and Haman and his sons were destroyed instead.

Finally, though Moses knew his prayer was important, he wasn't foolish enough to think that he won the battle. As an act of worship he built an altar and praised the name of Jehovah-Nissi, which means "the LORD is my banner." The word for "banner" is from the verb "to be high" or "to be raised." Like the staff of God being raised for victory in battle, The LORD was to be raised for the purpose of praising Him and acknowledging Him as their God. The LORD was their protector.

Just as Israel had to deal with many enemies in their time, we face many enemies today. The world attacks us with many dangerous enemies. But if we know the Lord, we have hope. All enemies, no matter how strong or terrible, can be defeated. We can overcome and conquer. How? By God's power! By calling on the Lord for help. If we call - pray, prevail in prayer - God will hear and deliver us from the Amalekites of our day.



*The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom.
To Him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

II Timothy 4:18