

November 16, 2014

The Lord Will Have War on Amalek

Exodus 17:8 – 16

Last week we looked at the first part of this chapter where the Israelites brought charges against God because they had run out of water in the desert. Their cry was 'Is the Lord among us or not?' And what they meant was 'If God is so good, why are we dying of thirst in the desert?' Essentially, they were putting God in the dock and saying, 'Explain Yourself. It looks to us like You brought us out into the desert just to kill us. What about the land You told us of milk and honey? Not only is there none of that stuff, we don't even have any water.' And this is the complaint that lurks in every human heart. 'If God is so good, why are bad things happening to me?' We put God on trial. The creation of God says to the God the Creator – 'Explain Yourself to us!'

But we saw too in that section the incredible patience of God and the abundant provision of God. God's response to these sinful rebels was to strike the rock and give them water. The record of God's grace to them was clear. When they needed rescuing, He rescues them. When they needed protection from Pharaoh's army, He protected them. When they ran out of food, He rains it down from heaven. But every time, right after every miraculous intervention of God, they get into trouble and the first thing they say is, '**He's not going to do it this time. You just can't trust this guy. He's never around when you need Him. If He were really concerned we wouldn't be out of food and water all the time.**' The record of God's enduring faithfulness had not worked in their souls a proper perspective of God. What we need in this desert journey is a proper perspective of who God is and what He is about.

We need to understand that God is incredibly patient with us, enduring our mistrust, overcoming our unbelief, forgiving our treason against Him, always supplying what we need, when we need it. We need to understand that His provision for us is abundant, but that it usually flows from the most unlikely of places – like water from a rock. We need to understand that He brings us into these dry places where God is all we have, so that we finally understand that God is all we need. But most importantly, we've seen that God endured the sinful arrogance of His creation who put Him on trial in Jerusalem, and stood before us on the Rock in the person of His Son and took the blows of justice that should have landed on us so that living water would flow from Him to us. He thirsted on the cross that our thirst might be quenched. And when we believe in Him, when we drink of that Rock, what we get are inner rivers of living water that take us through all the deserts.

We need to know the patience of God, and trust in the provision of God. But this story goes on to tell us something about **the power of God**. Verse 8 is the beginning of a short story that doesn't really seem to be related to the story of the smitten rock. *Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.* Maybe this belongs in another chapter? From a tense courtroom scene, all of a sudden we find ourselves in a battle. The Amalekites come and attack the Israelites, but it is a very curious battle. Moses goes up to the top of the hill with Aaron and Hur, and the rod of God in his hand. And he sends Joshua and the army out to fight the battle in the valley below. Moses is up there on top, holding his hands up, and down below Joshua starts winning. But his hands get heavy and he drops them and Joshua starts losing. It's a weird little picture – 'We're winning, we're winning – we're losing, we're losing – no, we're winning – no, we're losing'. Finally Aaron and Hur figure out they'd better help out here and hold Moses hands up until Joshua wins.

What are we to make of this? You have to see that you'll only make it out of this desert journey alive if you understand the patience of God – that He is for you and not against you; that He will provide no matter what the situation looks like on the surface. And you can only trust in Him if you receive His provision for you by drinking from the Rock. Drinking from this Rock means that you put your trust in Jesus, who was struck by the rod of God for us so that redeeming blood and life-giving water flows out from Him to us. This is the liberating power of God in His wonderful saving provision for us. This power of God liberates us from the bondage of sin and death and then it makes a way to eventually and finally deal with sin and suffering and evil in the world, without wiping us out in the process.

But we also need the sustaining power of God on this journey because hunger and thirst are not the only enemies we have on this journey. Amalek is there. And he's just waiting to ambush us. We see Amalek, or the Amalekites, all through the Old Testament; and they are always hostile to Israel. The description of them in Numbers is that *'Amalek was the first among nations but its end is bitter destruction.'* That was a reference to the fact that they were the first ones to attack Israel on its way to Canaan. And Moses reminds the people in Deuteronomy: *'Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.'* And the Israelites are continually commanded to utterly exterminate them. *'Therefore when the LORD your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.'* Every year this warning from Deuteronomy, 'Remember what Amalek did to you on the way out of Egypt' is read in Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath before Purim, when the Jews memorialize their miraculous deliverance from their enemies while in exile in Babylon.

But why does it seem that God has it in for Amalek? To answer that question, you have to understand that this passage not only contains very real historical truth, but very real spiritual truth. The Amalekites were descended from Amalek, the name means *'plunderer'*. The original Amalek was the grandson of Esau. Esau was the one who sold his birthright and his part in God's promise. He had been part of God's covenant people, but he valued his own appetites more. As descendants of Esau, the Amalekites were aware of God's promises to Jacob, but rather than honor God's choice of Israel, they chose instead to be their enemy. As a nation, they had opted out of the covenant which defined God's people. The book of Judges records that the Amalekites consistently allied themselves with other nations to commit genocide against Israel. And in Jewish history, this hostility gradually came to represent the ongoing hostility not only between the biological descendants of Esau and Jacob, but also between those who are the sons of promise and those who reject the promise as Esau did.

In 1 Samuel, we read where God commanded Saul, the son of Kish, to completely destroy the Amalekites. But he disobeyed and spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites and the best of the spoils. But that apparent act of mercy ultimately resulted in another attempt of genocide of the people of Israel recorded in the book of Esther. There we read that a man named Haman – the Agagite, descendent of Agag the Amalekite – tried to have all the Jews in the land of Persia put to death, but he was ultimately stopped by another descendent of Kish, a guy named Mordecai. The lesson all through the Old Testament is that unless Amalek is utterly destroyed, he will continue to pick off the people of God. At the end of this story, God tells Moses that *"A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."* In other words, God takes an oath upon Himself – He swears by His eternal throne, that He will always oppose Amalek, from generation to generation, until, as He says in verse 14 that He, *'...will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven'*.

Israel was God's chosen conduit of blessing to the whole world. Amalek had actually had a chance to be there as well, being descended from Esau. But Esau had renounced his blessing, trading it in for a bowl of soup, and Amalek continued in that. They had decided that they would oppose the very means that God had chosen to bless them and every other nation. And God knew the Amalekites. He knew they were a nation that had rejected to be a part in God's plan to bless the world. He knew that their actions for hundreds of years had been set on destroying and stopping God's plan to bless the world. He knew that if they weren't destroyed, they would continue to try to stop his plan. Thus the Lord will have war with "Amalek" from generation to generation, and in the end utterly blot out even the memory of them.

So we see that historically, these Amalekites were bitter enemies of the people of God from generation to generation. But the spiritual reality closely parallels the historical reality. Spiritually speaking, where do the fiercest attacks come from? Where is it that we are most bitterly challenged? Against whom or what is our most continual battle? Our biggest battle is against the thought that God is somehow against us – that He is looking for some excuse to do us harm, or at least not looking for ways to do us good. How do you stand against that? How do you resist the temptation to put God in the dock? And I think this story gives us three things that are effective weapons against Amalek. Three things that call on the power of God against our enemies: ***Prayer, the word of God and community.***

Amalek goes after the weak, the stragglers, the defenseless, those out there on their own. Literally the Bible says that he attacked the 'tail' or the part that follows behind. He aims for the weak spot. In other words, he comes after the doubters, *'Is the Lord among us or not?'* That is where the first blow was struck in the garden: *'Has God really said...?'* He hits us with doubts of God's goodness and love for us. And the defense against that kind of thinking is prayer, the word and community. Look at what happens. Moses tells Joshua to take the fight to Amalek with the sword, while he stations himself on the top of the hill with the rod of God. Moses is up there with the rod in his hands, lifting it to the heavens. At once this is a picture of **prayer** and the authority of God. He's raising his hands to the only One able to defeat our enemies. Hands up on the hill – victory down below in the valley. Hands down – Amalek prevails. You see this is not only telling us that prayer is crucial to the victory, but that God Himself is the victor. It points, not to our steadfastness in prayer so much as it points to God's ultimate power.

You need to notice that God tells the Israelites *'I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven'*, *'The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation'*. But over in Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people, *'...you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you shall not forget.'* And you want to say, 'Which is it – the Lord or you? Who is doing the blotting out here? Who is making war on Amalek? Is it God or is it us? And the answer is 'Yes'. Everything God did in the desert for His people was meant to point them to His everlasting love and unfailing provision for them. In fact, He was the one who rescued them; He was the one who destroyed Pharaoh; He was the one who rained bread from heaven; and here He is the one that defeats Amalek. But He also calls His people to participate in the thing. Moses had to wield the rod; Joshua had to wield the sword. Just like He rained down manna and quail, God could have sent lightning bolts from heaven to destroy Amalek. But He didn't. He sends Joshua down to fight and Moses up to pray – yet it is His power that wins the battle.

E.M. Bounds tells us: *'Prayer honors God, acknowledges His being, exalts His power, adores His providence, secures His aid'*. Prayer is both an admission of our need and recognition of God's power. Prayer is both an open declaration that God is sovereign and all-powerful, and a frank admission of our helplessness. When we pray we admit that the thing is in God's hands alone. We are saying that tomorrow, and all it brings, is not under our control but under His control. It is in His hands and not ours. We are saying that today, and all that comes our way; tomorrow, and all it brings, is not under our control but under His control. It is in His hands and not ours. It is saying to God, and to ourselves, to the principalities and powers that the battle is the Lord's and the victory is His.

Prayer is also the greatest means God has given us to commune with Him. One of the reasons we doubt His goodness and love for us is that we have not spent time with Him. We have not been in prayer to God. Maybe we've offered quick prayers when we're in a tight spot, but we've never really spent any significant time in prayer. We don't really know Him. So when we get into trouble, we forget how patient and loving God has been with us, we forget His marvelous provision for us, time after time. We tend to say in our hearts, 'Yes I remember that you came through before, but what have You done for me lately?' Is the Lord among us or not? And your defenses are penetrated and you get weak and start straggling behind and you get picked off.

Against Amalek we need prayer, and we need His **word**. Or as Spurgeon put it: *'...the authorized method of warfare – hard prayers and hard blows...'* Moses is on the hill praying, and Joshua is down in the trenches slashing away with the sword, until we read: *And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.* The sword here speaks to us of the sword of the Spirit, which Ephesians tells us, is the word of God. You need the rod of God in prayer and the sword of the Spirit in the word to fight this enemy. **The word of God inspires prayer to God and brings the truth of God to bear on your situation and circumstance.** God's word informs our prayers, and tells us what to pray and it becomes the substance of our prayer. You see, our real battle is against the lie that God wants us to die of thirst in the desert. It comes against the lie that He doesn't care about us, not really. If He really cares, why are we thirsty, why are we hungry, why is Amalek raiding us, why are we in this desert?

We need the truth of God's word to expose the lie. *'The sum of Your words is truth'* declares the psalmist. And if we live in the truth of His word as Jesus tells His disciples in John chapter 8, then that truth will set us free from all our doubts and fears. You say: "It's impossible" His word says: **With Me, all things are possible.**

You say: "Nobody really loves me" God says: **My love for you is everlasting.** You say: "I can't go on" God says: **My grace is sufficient for you.** You say: "I don't know which way to go" God says: **I'll direct your steps.** You say: "I can't manage" God says: **I'll supply all your needs.** You say: "I'm not able" God says: **I am able.** You say: "I'm worried about so many things" God says: **Don't worry about anything. Pray about everything.** You say: "I'm all alone here" God says: **I'll never leave you.** You say: "It's not worth it" God says: **It will be worth it all.**

Finally, we need to be in deep **community**. Amalek picks off the loners. He goes after the ones who think they can handle it by themselves. Moses tried to do it up there on the hill by himself. But his arms got heavy. He couldn't hold them up. He tried. Down in the valley Joshua must have been thinking, 'Just keep those arms up buddy'. But he couldn't. We couldn't. None of us can do this by ourselves. We need Aaron and Hur beside us to help us. We need arm-holders. We need to be in prayer as a community. There is strength there. There is help and encouragement as we come together to pray. We need to be praying ourselves in our own prayer closets. **But I've never known anyone with a solid individual prayer life that didn't have a corresponding habit of corporate prayer.**

We're just fooling ourselves if we say, 'I just prefer to pray alone; I'm not comfortable in large groups'. The truth is, if you're not regularly praying with others, it is **certain** that you don't have much of an individual prayer life. **In fact, the measure of your corporate prayer life is a pretty accurate measure of your individual prayer life.** If nothing else, this little story shows us the incredible importance of corporate prayer. What happens to Joshua and the army when Moses can't hold his arms up by himself? They get overwhelmed. Mark Dever wrote that **'...corporate prayer helps us discover that our lives as followers of Christ are tied up with one another's.'** You really begin to enter into deep community when you begin to pray regularly with one another.

C.H. Spurgeon writes: **'Oh! yes, (the prayer meeting) is the place to meet with the Holy Ghost, and this is the way to get His mighty power. If we would have Him, we must meet in greater numbers; we must pray with greater fervency, we must watch with greater earnestness, and believe with firmer steadfastness. The prayer meeting...is the appointed place for the reception of power.'** Prayer in community brings the truth of God and the power of God to bear on our world and on our circumstances in a way that individual prayer does not. Spurgeon believed this so much that every service in which he preached up in the sanctuary, there were people praying down below in the basement. He once took five young college students on a tour of the facility before the service and asked them: **"Would you like to see the power plant of this church?"** They were then taken down the stairs into the basement and a door was quietly opened. Spurgeon whispered to them, **"This is our power plant."** Surprised, the students saw 700 people praying for together for the power of God to descend on the service that was about to begin in the auditorium above.

At the end of this battle, the Scripture records: **And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner** Exodus 17:15 In the Bible, wherever you see someone building an altar, you see them building it in the place where they have met God. People who build altars know something of the power of God. They know that the power of God to meet all their needs, to fight all their battles, to overcome all their doubts and fears is found in prayer to God and through His word. They are people who know that they can't make it through the desert alone. We will never know the power of God to defeat the Amaleks in our lives until we wield the rod of God in prayer and the sword of the Spirit in His word, and build our lives together in community. **In the desert you need to rest in the patience of God; trust in the provision of God; and look to the power of God, in prayer, in His word and in community.**

Heavenly Father,

Grant that we would know You as our source of all joy and the well-spring of happiness. Thank You for sending Your Son to take the blow of Your justice that was ours to bear and filling our lives with living water from the Rock of our salvation. May we know Your power to save and Your steadfast love that is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear You. Forgive us O Lord our largely prayerless lives and independent ways. Grant us to see how much we need Your power and each other in this life. Teach us to live by prayer and grant us to prize the privilege of prayer. May our lives be saturated by prayer and sustained by the truth of Your Word we pray in the powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.