

Facing the Impossible: *Moses & the Amalekites* (Exodus 17:8-16)

“If you want a wonderful experience, take your New Testament and use a concordance to look up the two little words, but God. See how many times human resources have been brought to an utter end; despair has gripped the heart and pessimism and gloom has settled upon a people; and there is nothing that can be done. Then see how the Spirit of God writes in luminous letters, but God, and the whole situation changes into victory.”

~ Ray Stedman

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 17:8-16

A. Introduction

In their journey to Mt. Horeb, the Israelites faced internal conflict (e.g., lack of water and food). They then faced an external problem—a surprise attack from the Amalekites. This Nomadic tribe was known as desert pirates who lived around the Negev, south of Israel (cf. Gen 14:7; Jdgs 6:5), and in western Arabia (cf. 1 Sam 15:7). Since the Amalekites were descendants of Esau (cf. Gen 36:12), they were distant relatives of the Israelites. These desert raiders often fought against God’s people (e.g., against Saul in 1 Sam 15:12 and David in 1 Sam 30:1). It is not until the reign of Hezekiah that the Amalekites ceased to exist (cf. 1 Chron 4:42-43).

B. Victory Over the Amalekites

v. 8 - This is the first account of Israel going to war in the Old Testament. Interestingly, “the Amalekites are the only people in the Pentateuch against whom the Israelites fight successfully” (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 270).

v. 9 - In this first mention of Joshua in Scripture, the author assumes that no biographical data is necessary for this prominent military leader. Later, Joshua is identified as Moses’ aid or assistant (Exod 24:13; Num 11:28).

The rod served as a symbol of God’s power and presence. The use of the rod indicated Moses’ and the Israelites’ dependence on the Lord.

Scholars debate whether or not Moses was involved in intercessory prayer based upon the absence of any petition uttered. And yet, often “hands raised to the Lord” indicated a demeanor indicative of prayer. One scholar who assumes that Moses’ stance was that of prayer writes, “While Joshua engaged in physical combat, Moses engages in spiritual combat by raising hands of prayer over the conflict” (Foster, *Prayer*, 192). Certainly one could argue there is a clear dependence upon the Lord and a call for His blessing on what was transpiring in the valley.

v. 10 - Aaron and Hur are seen together as leaders among the Israelites (cf. Exod 24:14). Hur’s grandson, Bezalel, is the foreman overseeing the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus 32

(also, cf. 1 Chron 2:19-20). The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, records that Hur married Moses' sister, Miriam (*Ant*, 3.2.4).

vv. 11-12 - The symbolism surrounding the rod is clear: victory comes from the Lord. While Joshua's military prowess and these choice Jewish men were significant to winning the battle, the ultimate victory was contingent upon the Lord.

v. 13 - The Hebrew verb "disabled" could be rendered wither "to inflict a crushing defeat" or "to weaken". Parallel phrases elsewhere in the Old Testament support the idea of total destruction or smiting without mercy (cf. 1 Sam 15:8; also, for further discussion, cf. A. Guillaume, 91). However, this victory at Raphidim was not the complete annihilation of the Amalekites because they defeated the Israelites one year later (cf. Num 14:43, 45).

v. 14 - Many scholars argue that the Lord highlights Joshua because he personally fought this long and arduous battle, and thus, he particularly deserved to hear God's promises. However, one could also argue that the reason the Lord singled out Joshua's name is because these words must not be forgotten by Joshua, or by any other subsequent Jewish leaders. The Amalekites will prove to be a persistent problem in Israel's future. So important is this memorial that a similar warning is echoed in Deuteronomy 25:13-18. In this final book of the Pentateuch, the Lord calls for the Israelites to remember the Amalekites' cruelty in attacking both the weak and the helpless people. Later, Psalm 83:5 will state that Amalek's motive was genocidal. One scholar summarizes it well, "As long as its [Amalekites'] memory and spirit remain alive, Israel will never feel safe and secure." (A. M. Langner, "Remembering Amalek Twice," *JBQ*, 253).

"wipe out their remembrance" - While this expression may include death, "it refers to an even more terrible fate—to lose not only one's life, but also one's name and memory among one's descendants" (Hamilton, *Exodus*, 269).

v. 15 - Building an altar served as a memorial not only for oneself, but also for all those who cared to observe. The altar served as spiritual reminder of a sacred bond and a physical reminder of a moment in which God dramatically intervened (cf. Noah in Gen 8:20; Abraham in Gen 12:7-8 and Jacob in Gen 35:7). In this victory at Raphidim, the Lord wanted the Israelites to remember what He did for them. Whenever they should come under attack, they needed to look to Him for salvation (cf. Ryken, *Exodus*, 466).

v. 16 - "the hand on throne of Yah [Yahweh]" - Scholars have proposed the following rendering of this difficult phrase:

- a. "The Lord has sworn." (KJV, NASB) - It is the Lord's hand that is making an oath. However, the raising of a hand to a throne is never seen as part of the process of swearing an oath.
- b. "my hand is lifted up toward the Lord's throne." - It is Moses' hand which signifies an oath.
- c. "hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD." (NIV, TNIV) - In this rendering, the hands are raised in hostility towards the Lord.
- d. "a hand was lifted up to the throne of the LORD." (NET) - This would mean that Moses' hand was extended to the throne of God, showing either intercession or source of power.

-
- e. "a hand is on the standard of the LORD." (RSV, NRSV) - Based upon a possible textual variant, some scholars argue that "this is a war cry, and the point is that the name of the altar, 'YHWH My Standard,' solemnizes the perpetual state of war that now exists between Israel and Amalek" (Garrett, *Exodus*, 434-435, fn. 57).

Sadly, this altar built by Moses, in conjunction with the Lord's words delivered to the Israelites, are soon forgotten. Two years later, the Israelites will fear the Amalekites (Num 13:26-33) resulting in another 38-years of wandering in the wilderness!

II. Intersect

- a. As believers, we are part of a spiritual battle against the spiritual forces of evil. The incident at Rephidim is a reminder that our victory comes from the Lord.

Ephesians 6:12 (also, cf. Colossians 2:15) -

- b. Prayer is vital to the spiritual life. In prayer we acknowledge our absolute dependence on the One who gives us the victory. It is not that the prayer itself is the power, but the power resides with God.

Ephesians 6:11, 18 -

- c. As believers, we can have confidence to approach the throne of the Lord for mercy and grace.

Hebrews 4:16 -

"Any battle for victory, power, and deliverance - from ourselves and from sin - which is not based constantly upon the gazing and the beholding of the Lord Jesus, with the heart and life lifted up to Him, is doomed to failure."

~ Alan Readapt