

Conflict at Rephidim

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[0 : 00] The book of Exodus chapter 17, and we may read again at verse 8. Exodus chapter 17, reading at verse 8.

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

When the Israelite people were miraculously delivered from their Egyptian oppression, the first enemies they faced were not external, but internal.

Their first enemies were themselves. Their struggle was with themselves, as the Lord showed them, their own hearts.

And I would like to suggest that it is still the same to the present hour. Our struggles are mainly from within and not from without.

[1 : 21] Now, you may challenge that, but I think if you are any length of time on the Christian path, you will know the truth of that statement.

You remember how the Apostle Paul writes about the inward strife that left him struggling time after time.

I see, he says, and my members, another law waging war against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

It wasn't just that he saw it, but that it brought him into captivity. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death, as if he were carrying about a dead body attached to his person.

Well, Israel, during their relatively short period in the desert, had encountered genuine difficulties.

[2 : 40] They came to Mara, and the water was undrinkable, causing them to complain. And you can appreciate how precious water was when you were in a dry, arid area.

And they must have been looking forward to arriving at this place, only to be bitterly disappointed by the quality of the water.

God made it drinkable by another miracle. Then it was lack of food that made them grumble.

And again, God provided them with manna. The difficulty experienced earlier in this chapter was that they were faced not with undrinkable water, but with a lack of water, either because the water was not there, or if it was there, they had no access to it.

And you can make your mind up. Which of these two possibilities is true? Because the Bible doesn't really disclose what it was.

[4 : 05] Such was their ire that Moses was fearful for his own life.

He thought they were going to stone him. They didn't trust God to provide. In fact, they wanted God put on trial. As they interpreted matters, God had failed them miserably.

And yet again, God graciously and marvelously provides by bringing water from a most unexpected source, a rock.

And you know from your New Testament that the New Testament interprets the rock as Christ. And there is a sermon there.

Incidentally, there is no indication of thanks for such fulsome and gracious provision.

[5 : 16] And I wonder how often are we guilty of the sale when the Lord has intervened marvelously and miraculously in our lives, when we have been pleading, perhaps for help, and how forgetful we are to give thanks when he responds.

Well, I'd like to bring three thoughts before you. That's just the background to our text this evening. First, conflict at Rephidim.

Secondly, countering hostility. And thirdly, celebrating the celebration of victory.

Conflict at Rephidim. Countering hostility. And the celebration of victory. Conflict at Rephidim.

The writer tells us, Moses, we accept as the writer. The people of Israel were physically attacked from without by those who were hostile to them.

[6 : 29] Remember? Up until now, their problems arose from themselves. We read, Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

This was Israel's first experience of our military encounter. The Amalekites were a nomadic people.

They could trace their ancestry back to Jacob's twin brother, Esau. In the book of Genesis, we find this information. These are the names of Esau's sons.

Eliphaz, the son of Adah, the wife of Esau. And then you find Timnah was a concubine of Eliphaz, Esau's son. She bore Amalek to Eliphaz.

And I suppose you could argue that there was a long-standing ethnic tension between the two peoples, given their ancestry.

[7 : 36] People of Israel tracing their ancestry back to Jacob and the Amalekites back to his twin brother. The writer doesn't suggest a specific reason why these Amalekites attacked Israel at this precise moment.

May have been because of the long-standing ethnic tensions. It is also possible that they may have felt threatened by the sudden arrival of all these people in their territory.

They may have seen them as a threat to their own existence by coming to the places which they themselves frequented for water.

Water being such a precious commodity in the desert, Rephidim, was an oasis. But the writer doesn't tell us why they were attacked.

There may be one more reason for the attack. The impression created, at least in my own mind, is that it was, that it happened very unexpectedly.

[8 : 53] Then Amalek came and fought with Israel. When did Amalek come and fight with Israel? Was it not just after the Israelites had given expression, vehement expression, to their disgruntlement with God, threatening to stone their leader?

So, I cannot rule out that this unexpected, sudden attack was indirectly provoked by themselves on account of their behavior.

Be that as it may, we cannot remind ourselves too often that the Bible does not record historical events just for the sake of giving us a history lesson.

The history in the Bible has spiritual meaning, from which spiritual applications can be made. And I would therefore like to suggest a reason from the New Testament for this actual physical attack by Amalek.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he writes twice in the same context of the need of putting on the whole armor of God.

[10 : 23] He is addressing the church, believers, and the reason he gives for the need to put on the whole armor of God is that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil.

And then he goes on to tell, for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Now remember, the people of Israel represent the church of Christ in the world, a people who are a direct result of divine intervention and deliverance, a people who are being led by God and who are actually instructed by the Lord to come to Rephidim.

Verse 1 in the chapter tells us, all the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of sin by stages according to the commandment of the Lord and camped at Rephidim.

They didn't choose to come to this destination in flagrant disobedience to the command of God. They moved there in accord with God's instruction.

[12 : 05] What could possibly go wrong? They were merely following divine instructions. And then we read, Amalek came and fought.

Why? Well, could I suggest it is because the devil hates God and he hates those who represent God in the world.

He seeks to destroy God's workmanship. You know how peoples tend to be proud of their ancestry and that pride can lead to jealousy, envy, and opposition and very often along with pride you get greed and selfishness.

And you can see that in many of the wars that have started in the world, how you can find these elements as it were foundational to the beginning of such wars.

But if you dig down deep enough and you discover that all of these reasons are the forces of darkness seeking to hinder and even repress the work of light.

[13 : 42] Spreading confusion is a tactic favored by the forces of darkness. The attack in this instance was somewhat cowardly.

How do we know? Well, in the book of Deuteronomy you find Moses writing, remember what Amalek did to you as he's speaking to Israel, on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were fed and weary and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

not only was the attack unprovoked, humanly speaking, in the sense that Israel didn't go out of their way to provoke Amalek, but the attack was aimed against the weak, the vulnerable, the helpless, the strugglers at the tail end of the procession, usually defenseless women and children, and possibly the frail elderly.

Now, it may have been that Israel thought there was no real danger to those at the end of the procession. The pursuing Egyptian forces had been destroyed at the Red Sea.

But you note it was the most vulnerable who were attacked, and it happened possibly where it was least expected.

[15 : 19] Now, we can apply that. Many things in life can leave us vulnerable to spiritual attack, our pride, an inflated view of ourselves, lack of prayer dependency, and when we are vulnerable, you can be sure that these attacks will intensify.

will be the clue, surely, to what lay behind this cowardly attack lies in the words, he, that is Amalek, did not fear God.

What a coup for Satan, if he could prevent the children of Israel from reaching the promised land. Here are the forces of darkness using guerrilla tactics to ambush and deter the progression of the church in the world.

And that, I believe, is still ongoing. It would be a huge mistake on our part to think otherwise. Our real enemy, it's not other people, it's the forces of darkness who will keep attacking you, yes, even use people to further their aims, and of course, you don't have to go further than Calvary to see how the forces of darkness manipulated people seeking to destroy Christ in the world.

And they do that to you and me in the hope that we will do something to dishonor God. Our demise then becomes the food of those hostile hostile to the cause of Christ.

[17 : 13] One glaring example in the Bible is a man who began well, who had a great reputation, a man by the name of Samson.

And the Bible tells us the Philistine seized him, gouged out his eyes, because in a moment of weakness, rather than trusting the Almighty, he trusted his fellow creature, gouged out his eyes and brought him down to Gaza and bound him with bronze shackles.

This is the point. And he ground at the mill in the prison. Now there he was being used as a source of providing food for the very people he had been engaged in destroying.

And now they were being fed by his efforts. Well, that hasn't changed. The world still feeds on the fall of God's people and the world.

Conflict at Rephidim. A hostile encounter and brings me to my second point, countering hostility. The chapter informs us how Israel launched a counter-attack.

[18 : 46] Moses addressing Joshua, choose for his men, go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand, says Moses, on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

So Joshua obeyed. He did as Moses told him, fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and her went up to the top of the hill.

Fascinating how the writer, well, Aaron, we know, was related to Moses, but her, he's just introduced as if we ought to know who he is.

Joshua goes to the battlefield. The hostile forces had to be engaged. They fought in the valley. Moses was up on the top of the hill.

Verse 11 tells us, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. When his hand lowered, Amalek prevailed. And does that not indicate to us, whatever Moses was doing on the hilltop is connected with the fortunes of the fighting men on the battlefield in the valley.

[20 : 08] Some might suggest that he was merely directing the fighting men in the valley below from his vantage point on the hilltop.

and when I think of that view, I think of Moses almost like a choir conductor.

And I would discount that immediately for one simple reason. Moses held the staff of God in his hand.

Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand. member of the staff has history. It was instrumental in the displays of divine power connected with the exodus.

And so therefore I understand Moses' uplifted hand to be symbolic of intercessory prayer. Now you may tell me there is no word of prayer in the passage.

[21 : 18] but if you look through your Bible you will find that the uplifting of the hand is a symbol for prayer.

For example in the Psalms, the very first Psalm that we sang this evening, so I will bless you as long as I live in your name.

I will lift up my hands. What was the psalmist doing there? He was engaging in prayer, engaging in wrestling with God. And then the second Psalm that we sang, let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.

What took place when the evening sacrifice was being offered up? There was prayer on the part of the priests. And although there is no record of what Moses said, the inference is that Moses' actions on the hilltop were an unmistakable sign of dependence on God alone to win the battle.

In holding the rod up to heaven, he was appealing for God to defend his people. Yes, men were selected for battle.

[22 : 44] And again, the writer doesn't go into detail of their skills or their suitability. None of that is revealed. Yet despite having selected men to fight, the outcome was not determined by the bravery and fighting skills of these men on the battlefield, but by what happened on the hilltop.

It depended on the God he was being pled with in prayer. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed.

Whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. Now remember, God answers prayer. Oh, how thankful every believer ought to be that God answers prayer.

Moses saw this firsthand as he watched the conflict in the valley. The success in battle depended on the God who answers prayer.

I'm sure everyone has heard the phrase, the pen, is mightier than the sword. But in this example, it was the petition that was mightier than the sword.

[24 : 09] And prayer is an effective weapon in the hands of the believer. In fact, Paul counsels the church. I could put it stronger.

He instructs the church in the letter to the Ephesians, pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

prayer. And when he writes that, it's after putting on the whole armor of God. What does that tell us? Does it not tell us this, that we may put on the whole armor, the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit?

But if we do not entrust ourselves to God in prayer, then we will not stand. We'll be led away into error. we'll give way to temptation.

We'll be dragged down into doubt and discouragement. We could fight valiantly like Joshua, but unless we pray like Moses, we'll not overcome in the battle.

[25 : 17] So how do we fight back against the forces of darkness? Do we not do what Moses did? He engaged in prayer. It is by persevering and prevailing in prayer that we become victorious on the battlefield of sin and temptation.

If you ask me, why is prayer of such huge importance? Why is it such an effective spiritual weapon? My answer would be this, that God is the difference between victory and defeat.

It is by prayer that we depend on him to win the battle. prayer. Does that mean that it is the power of prayer that is important?

Is it that prayer itself is the important factor? If we pray long enough, if we pray hard enough, or often enough, then God will do what we are asking him to do.

The power of prayer is not the prayer itself, but the power of God. In prayer, we are acknowledging our absolute dependence on God.

[26 : 36] Reminds me of a definition of prayer that I read many years ago in a book written by a man called Octavius Winslow, and the title of the book was The Work of the Holy Spirit.

This is what he wrote on prayer. Prayer is the expression of want, the desire of need, the acknowledgement of poverty, the language of dependence, the breathing of a soul that has nothing in itself but hangs on God for all its wants.

That definition of prayer greatly appealed to me when I first read it, and it still does years later.

Prayer is also for the glory of God. It glorifies God by showing that the victory belongs to God alone. Some have suggested that is why Moses was on the hilltop, because you could say, could he not have prayed in the valley?

On the hilltop, he was making sure that Israel learned the power of prayer. Had he not been visible on the hilltop, Israel might have concluded that they themselves were responsible for the victory.

[28 : 06] They would be celebrating their own strength and military power. We are so prone to this type of failing, of thinking that we ourselves have done it all.

When you read this book of Exodus carefully, you cannot but be struck by the frequency of prayer in the life of Moses, the servant of God.

Again and again you find him talking over his problems with the Lord. Here he intercedes on behalf of Israel. When he lifted his hand on the hill, top as I believe in prayer, he was elevating the entire nation before the throne of grace.

Given the many wonderful answers to prayer that he received, many might have thought of him as a prayer warrior. But what I believe this chapter shows about Moses' prayer life is not its strength but its weakness.

As long as he interceded, the Israelite forces had the upper hand. But there came a time when Moses' hands grew weary.

[29 : 37] Verse 12. He was unable to persevere in prayer. And that surely points to the need of one greater than Moses who is a better mediator, even the Lord Jesus Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that he always lives to make intercession for his people. He requires no one to hold up his hands.

There came a time for Moses when sheer exhaustion set in, unable to keep going.

And I am sure that every person who engages in prayer will agree that persistent, continuous prayer can be wearisome, can be exhausting.

It is difficult to remember what is recorded of the disciples who were with Jesus in Gethsemane.

[30 : 43] Remember, Jesus had gone a stone's throw from them. He had taken three with them. And we are told he came to the disciples and found them sleeping.

And he spoke particularly to Peter. So could you not watch with me one hour? And then he goes on to say, The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

The flesh is always weak. But the weakness of Moses only served to highlight and magnify the glory of God.

It showed that Israel was victorious not because Joshua was a good military leader or because Moses was a man of prayer, but because God was their captain in the battle.

We read Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, sat on it while Aaron and her held up his hands, and so on. And what this picture sets before us and suggests, is that Moses was given support in persevering in prayer by these two individuals, Aaron and her.

[32 : 05] With their help, his hands remain steady. Even prayer warriors require assistance. prayer. And I think it demonstrates to us the need of corporate prayer.

Yes, individual prayer ought to be a constant feature and mark of the believer in life, but there is a need for corporate prayer.

That's a feature of the New Testament church from the very outset in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. You find the early Christians engaged in prayer and groups.

At Pentecost, for example, they were all together in one place. Can you find this? They devoted themselves to the apostle teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

When choosing men to the diaconate, you remember the disciples said, we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And again remember when Peter was imprisoned by Herod, earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.

[33 : 30] When he was miraculously released from imprisonment, he went to look for his friends, and you remember what was true.

when he came to the house of John Mark, they were engaged in all-night prayer. Many were gathered together and were praying.

The strange thing is, in that example, they didn't even believe that the Lord had done what they were praying for. And sometimes we're like that too.

we ask for something, and when it happens, we can hardly believe that does happen. There was Peter knocking frantically at the door.

And you remember how Rhoda came to the door. She ran back in, such was her excitement. And they weren't believing it.

[34 : 29] that required some convincing. Well, prayer is the spiritual weapon of the church. Cannot be emphasized enough how we need to meet in prayer.

Remember, the promise of Jesus to the church, where two or three are gathered in my name. There am I among them. there is need, as I said, for private intercession.

But there is a great need for corporate prayer, where we pray for and pray with other Christians.

And you know, that can be very encouraging to people when they're praying for and with one another. Countering hostility, the importance of prayer, conflict, and referendum, a hostile finally celebration of victory.

The narrative tells us Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with a sword. Does the writer tell us how they celebrated the victory?

[35 : 43] A huge victory party was held. That's not what we read. But what we read is this, or what is implied by what we read.

They offered thanksgiving to God. They worshipped. How appropriate. Moses is instructed to write what took place, and significantly instructed to bring this to the attention of Joshua as the future leader of the nation.

Not so much that he might read the report, but to have it read out to him. Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the years of Joshua.

You know, write it as a memorial and let him read it. That's not what's said in the context here, but recite it in the years of Joshua.

And then there is this message, a very solemn message that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. The report was to act as a reminder to the future leader and to the nation what God had done, what he still intended to do regarding the Amalekites.

[37 : 07] Israel would face these peoples again. God wanted Israel to remember what he had done for them in the past, so when they came under attack again, they would look to the Lord for deliverance.

And not only that, but that these people were to be destroyed. And yet so often, we tend to disregard or forget the lessons of the past.

Is that not true? And we repeat the same mistakes again. Israel sadly did just that.

They encountered the Amalekites again when they reached the borders of the promised land. Instead of looking to the Lord in prayer, they were afraid.

As a result, they spent the next 38 years wandering in the wilderness. However, to come back to my third heading, the celebration of victory, they built an altar.

[38 : 17] Moses built an altar. That was a common practice amongst those who would probably be regarded as the patriarchs. For example, Noah, when he came out of the ark, he built an altar.

Abram built an altar at Shechem when the Lord appeared to him. Now, you will probably tell me there is no mention of an offering made in this context.

There is not. but there is no mention of an offering not being made.

The very word altar is derived from the idea of sacrificial slaughter. It's on the basis of sacrifice that fellowship with God was maintained.

and this altar, I would suggest, was erected in order to thank God. But it also serves as a memorial to the assistance given by the Lord in enabling the Israelite forces to overcome the Amalekites.

[39 : 32] The name which Moses gives to the altar is most interesting. The Lord is my banner. Yahweh Nisi. There is acknowledgement that God is banner and strength of his people.

A banner in the conventional military sense is usually military standard with a piece of cloth or a flag bearing the regimental insignia and raised on a pole that usually becomes a rallying point in battle reminding soldiers of their identity but also giving them encouragement at hope as long as the banner is displayed they know the battle is not lost.

And Moses by this name is saying to the nation the staff for my upraised hand is not your source of encouragement but God himself.

This was to be the rallying cry of the people of Israel. It's the rallying cry for the church to the present hour.

There's a need for vigilance in our daily life as we encounter the world the flesh and the devil. That may be an old truth but all truths require constant emphasis.

[41 : 01] Can we say this evening that Jesus is our banner and that we are walking under him as our banner.

Conflict at Rephidim a hostile encounter countering hostility the importance of prayer celebration of victory they give thanks and declared that the Lord was their banner.

Let us pray. Almighty God we thank thee that thou art the hearer and the answerer of prayer that thou art even the instigator of prayer in the lives of those who have been imbued with new spiritual life and we bless thy name that however feeble they might feel that they come to a strong and a powerful God even to one who is omnipotent who is able to turn matters around even when these situations may seem so bleak so hopeless and so lost that thou art able to turn them around help us to look increasingly more to thee to trust in thy power to seek thy face and the glory shall be thine in Jesus name we ask it amen let us conclude by