

Exodus 17

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Preacher: Phil Hair

[0:00] Well, I would invite you to turn with me in your Bible to where we read together just these few moments ago, here in the book of Exodus chapter 17 and verses 1 to 15.

But we are going to be concentrating our minds this morning largely on verses 8 to 15.

This passage which is entitled in the NIV Church Bibles, The Amalekites Defeated, though we will be looking as well at verses 1 to 7.

As we were going to see these verses provide us with the context to this passage. Which is all about what?

What's it all about? Next to programs which are all about crime. Both true crime and fictional crime, my favourite type of television programme, television series, would be natural history.

[1:23] Especially those, and maybe this says something about me, especially those which are all about predators going in for the kill.

You know the sort of thing, killer whales in the Antarctic hunting down that poor seal marooned on the ice flow.

Or lions in the Serengeti hunting down the poor wildebeest as they search for grass and so on and so on.

A few months back I was watching one such programme and it was all about wolves in the northwestern reaches of Canada.

And in particular as they hunted down their prey. And there was this incredible footage of this pack of wolves relentlessly tracking this herd of buffalo.

[2:23] Mile after mile after mile after mile. Huge distances. Not racing in to try and make a kill, but as the great predators that they are waiting for these buffalo, who eventually began to lag behind.

Such was the ongoing pace of the chase. The old. The sick. The newborn. And when that began to happen, the wolves swooped in for an easy kill.

And the cameramen were there for it. And I hardly need to tell you what that was like in terms of the terrible savagery of it.

The blood. The gore. I thought it was just great. I really did. The Amalekites, who we read about here in this passage, were predators par excellence.

There were none better. Indeed, we read about their predatory skill in Deuteronomy 25. And there at verse 17.

[3:43] Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey.

And cut off all who were lagging behind. And you can almost see it in your mind's eye, can't you?

Like these wolves relentlessly tracking the weak and the frail buffalo. These Amalekites relentlessly tracking the worn out people of Israel.

Looking, waiting for those who were beginning to lag behind. And then swooping in mercilessly for the kill.

Now, we can't be sure, but it may well be the case that these Amalekites became so emboldened by the success of these predatory attacks that they decided to make a full frontal assault on the people of Israel.

[4:56] You know, we've been able to pick off the few with hardly any loss of life. Why should we not be able to slaughter the many? And so, verse 8.

The Amalekites came and attacked Israel at Rephidim. Now, what we need to try and remember at the very outset this morning is that what we have here in the book of Exodus is not only a picture of the Christian gospel.

We've seen this in recent weeks, both in the celebrating of the Passover, which was all about escaping judgment, and in the crossing of the Red Sea, which was all about entering life. Both of these picturing freedom from the bondage of sin and newness of life in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But not just a picture of the Christian gospel, a picture of the Christian life. You see, just as the people of Israel were on a journey, they were on a pilgrimage to the promised land of Canaan. [6:15] So, we too, as Christian believers, are on a journey, a journey with God, a pilgrimage. It's the Apostle Peter who says in 1 Peter 2, as he describes the Christian as a sojourner or a pilgrim.

In the words of the old spiritual, this world is not my home. I'm just a passing through. And just a passing through because we are on a journey.

We are on a pilgrimage to the promised land of heaven. And the point is, the point to be drawn out from this book, this journey, can be anything but easy.

It can be hard and difficult. Testing, as we heard last Sunday morning, as we have to face up to times of trial and trouble and tribulation, the design of which, in the providence of God, are to teach us the necessity of daily dependence, daily reliance on God, as God seeks in His wise, gracious, and merciful dealings with us to grow and develop our faith and obedience.

In the words of John Samos' 19th century hymn, When we walk with the Lord in the light of His word, what a glory He sheds on our way.

[8:06] While we do His good will, He abides with us still and with all who will trust and obey. Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.

And my friends, this is what the book of Exodus is all about for the Christian believer today. It's all about trusting and obeying.

Indeed, if you wanted a key text concerning this, it would be 1 Corinthians 10 and verse 11, where Paul says, with respect to the people of Israel here and all that they were going through, and this is the Christian life application of studying this book, these things happened to them, to them, as examples and were written down as warnings for us, for us today.

And so, with respect to this matter of daily dependence, what we saw last week in the account of how God miraculously provided bread from heaven, give us this day our daily bread, Jesus tells us to pray.

Here in this account of the attack of the Amalekites, it's not so much daily dependence for material provision, but daily dependence for physical protection, physical and spiritual protection, which again Jesus told us to pray about, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

[10:04] Well, here the people of God were in need of deliverance. The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.

Well, let's look at this passage for a little while, at this story, and all that has to teach us about the ongoing daily life of Christian faith and obedience.

And to help us, let me give you these three very simple headings, in that what we need to try and grasp and understand as we work our way through this chapter, is that firstly, there is an enemy that we need to face.

And then secondly, there is a strategy that we need to follow. And then thirdly, there is a victory that we need to remember.

First of all, the enemy that we need to face. Now, there are two questions which we need to ask about this enemy here.

[11:18] Firstly, with respect to who he was. And then secondly, with respect to when he attacked.

First of all, who he was. And you'll notice the language that I'm using here. Not who they were, but who he was.

You see, who were the Amalekites? Well, in terms of their origin, we read in Genesis 36 and verse 15, that they were descended from Eliphaz, who was the eldest son of Esau.

Esau, who was Jacob's brother. But what's really important here is not so much who they were, but what they were.

What they were. To go back to Deuteronomy 25, we're told there at verse 18, that they had no fear of God.

[12:27] And what this means is not so much that they weren't afraid of Israel's God, but rather that they hated Israel's God.

They hated Israel's God. And in hating him, were absolutely determined to, and they were confident that they would wipe out, wholly, completely, his representatives on earth, the people of Israel. Indeed, when you trace the history of the Amalekites all the way through the Old Testament, you actually read about this again and again and again.

And so, for example, do you remember the story of Esther? The young girl, the young Jewess, who in the providence of God was raised up to the throne of Persia to be the queen to King Xerxes so that she might be the means of saving the Jews, saving the people of Israel from being wiped out. And do you remember who it was who was behind the plot for this to happen? This mass genocide. It was Xerxes' right-hand man, his evil chief of staff, who was called Haman.

[14:02] And we are told in the book that tells this story, the book of Esther, that Haman was an Amalekite. You see, just as it was back then in ancient Persia, in the days of Esther, so it was here at Rephidim in the days of Moses with this attack designed to wipe out the people of God.

And in the wiping out of the people of God, now, my friends, this is the point, and you need to try and grasp it and understand it. This is the point.

So the bringing to naught of the hope, the expectation, the promise of a Savior in the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, what we need to try and understand here, what we need to discern is that there was an evil hand behind this in that whenever the people of God are attacked, the source of that attack, can be traced all the way back to Genesis chapter 3.

Genesis 3 and verse 15, with God saying to Satan in the Garden of Eden, and it's the answer, it's God's answer to sin coming into the world, what the early church fathers, the great theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries described as the protevangelium, the first announcement of the gospel, the first prophecy of Christmas, and I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers.

[16:04] He will crush your head and you will strike his heel. And this is exactly what we see here.

Satan striking out at God and seeking to bring to naught his saving purposes, the coming of a Savior in and through his people.

If I could put it this way, in that Satan was saying, if there is one thing I'm determined in doing, it's this.

There will be no Christmas. There will be no Christmas. wasn't it C.S. Lewis in the Chronicles of Narnia and the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe who described Narnia as a land where it was always winter and never Christmas.

And do you remember what happened when the news began to filter through that Aslan was coming back? Do you remember what happened? The snow began to melt.

[17:28] And this is what Satan was saying. There's never going to be a Christmas. I gave the title to this study.

My titles are hopeless usually. The battle for Christianity. Another title could well have been Christmas under threat. That's what this is all about.

Christmas under threat. But not just who he was. Something of real interest here is when he attacked. And this is why we can't read and understand this passage without reference to what goes before it.

In verses 1 to 7 where we find the people of Israel doing what? Now did you notice at the reading what were they doing?

And if you thought they had stopped doing it when they were given bread and meat as we saw last Sunday morning in chapter 16. Oh no.

[18:37] Oh no. They arrive here at Rephidim and what don't they have? They don't have water to drink.

Verse 1. They camped at Rephidim but there was no water for the people to drink. Now, what would you have expected the people of Israel then to say and do?

Well, of course. They would have said to each other when we were hungry God gave us food to eat. Now that we are thirsty God will give us water to drink.

No. Verse 3. The people were thirsty for water there and and they grumbled against Moses.

Now, no less than seven times in chapter 16 we are told that the people grumbled. And here they are at it again. Grumbling. The word itself is onomatopoeic.

[19:51] That is to say to see it is to hear it. Grumble. Grumble. Grumble.

I want to ask you this morning are you a grumbler? In country town or city some people can be found who spend their lives in grumbling at everything around.

Oh yes, they always grumble no matter what we say for these are chronic grumblers and they grumble night and day.

They grumble in the city. They grumble on the farm. They grumble at their neighbors. They think it is no harm. They grumble at their husbands.

They grumble at their wives. They grumble at their children but the grumbler never thrives. They grumble when it's raining. They grumble when it's dry.

[20 : 53] And if the crops are failing they grumble and they sigh. They grumble at the prices and grumble when they're high. They grumble all the year around and they grumble till they die.

It was way back in the 1990s, this ages may I know, that the Oxford English Dictionary added a new descriptive noun to its pages. At the time it made all the news and I remember reading it in the newspaper and the new descriptive noun was a Meldrew.

A Meldrew. You know where that comes from? The old BBC sitcom, One Foot in the Grave, Victor Meldrew, the chronic grumbler, always complaining.

Now why is grumbling so serious? We don't have the time to properly expound verses 1 to 7 but do you notice how the story ends?

It really ends quite interestingly. God having provided water from the rock, verse 7, and he called the place Massah.

[22 : 08] Massah means testing. And Meribah, Meribah means quarreling because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the Lord saying, is the Lord among us or not?

Now we read about what happened here at Massah and Meribah in Hebrews chapter 3 and there we are told that grumbling like this evidences an unbelieving heart.

An unbelieving heart. Verse 12 of that chapter, a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

This is why grumbling, continually moaning, continually complaining is such a serious issue and that it makes you ask of such a person who is like this, are they really a Christian?

Are they really a Christian? But not just what it evidences, it's what such grumbling provides. And the words of Paul in Ephesians 4 and verse 27, it gives the devil a foothold.

[23 : 31] Or as in the authorized version, it provides the devil with an opportunity. An opportunity to attack God's people and therefore attack God's work.

You see, here they were so taken up with doing what? Sticking the boot into Moses. They were sticking the boot into Moses.

And so intent were they doing that with a grumbling spirit that they didn't realize that the Amalekites were approaching.

That's why Jesus tells us to watch and pray that we don't enter into temptation.

Just to point out here that the answer to such grumbling is always the same. It's Jesus. It's Christ who this incident points forward to in that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, thinking of this miracle of the water which flowed out of the rock.

[24 : 47] Verse 3, they all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.

And what this passage is telling us, pointing us forward to Christ, is that it's Christ who satisfies.

And so you remember that day when Jesus stood up in Jerusalem amongst all the heaving crowds and he cried out, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.

In the great words of Horatius Bonar, I heard the voice of Jesus say, Behold, I freely give, the living water thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.

I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream. My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.

It's the gospel, isn't it? It's the gospel. Now then, how were the people of God going to face up to this attack by the Amalekites?

[26 : 20] Well, pressing on very quickly, this brings us secondly to the strategy that we need to follow. And briefly, you'll notice that the strategy was twofold.

Firstly, there is where Joshua went and what he got on with. Verse 9, Moses said to Joshua, Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites.

Just to note that the name Joshua means the Lord saves, which raises the question, of course, as to how the Lord was going to save in this particular situation.

Was it going to be through force of arms or through superior military tactics? Well, no. And this is where the twofold strategy is very important in that not only is there where Joshua went and what he got on with, secondly, there is where Moses went and what he got on with.

Moses said to Joshua, Choose some of our men. Go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow, I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

[27 : 39] Now, the staff of God, the staff which God told him to raise up and stretch out when God parted the Red Sea, represented God's almighty power.

Verse 10, So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered. And Moses and Aaron and her went to the top of the hill. Now, of course, the question is, what was Moses doing with Aaron and her on top of the hill?

And the answer is, he was praying. He was praying. You see, what Moses understood was the nature of the battle.

And the nature of the battle that was about to be fought in that it wasn't just physical. It was more than that. It was spiritual. It was spiritual.

God's gospel was at stake here. And that being the case, Moses knew that mere physical force of arms and tactical human ingenuity wasn't going to be enough.

[28 : 55] He might not have put it this way, but he could have said with Paul in 2 Corinthians 10 and verse 3, For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does.

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. And so, verse 11, As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning.

But whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. In other words, what went on down in the valley below, now this is a principle, what went on down in the valley below was determined by what went on on the hill up above.

And what went on was prayer. This is what we're told in verse 16, isn't it? He said, For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord.

You see, when the Bible speaks about the throne, it's symbolic of God's sovereignty, power, and rule.

[30 : 15] That God is the God who can do for us what we could never, ever do for ourselves. And isn't this why we pray?

It's why the writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 4 and verse 16, let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we might receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

And it's such a challenge, isn't it? You see, do we really believe this? Yes, yes, we fight the battle in the valley, but where the battle is won or lost is dependent on what goes on up on top of the hill.

I was thinking about this with respect to some spheres of work and some areas of the world where the reality of the spiritual battle for the things of the gospel is really in your face.

It's absolutely brutal, absolutely brutal. And I was going to come with some examples of this, but I can't give them because this is being recorded.

[31 : 39] You see, what a responsibility. Verse 11, as long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning.

The phrase, were winning, literally means, were given strength. But whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.

You see, it's not just a lesson about prayerfulness. It's also a lesson, a solemn lesson, about prayerlessness, prayerlessness.

You see, why is it that the church so often seems to be on the back foot as the world steamrolls through our land with all of its secular, anti-God, atheistic agenda?

And is this the reason that there aren't enough of us prepared to climb the hill to where the outcome of the battle is really and truly determined?

[32 : 53] And it isn't easy. It isn't easy. This ongoing perseverance in prayer is hard. It's tough going in that it demands time and energy.

Verse 12, when Moses' hands grew tired, he got exhausted. Ah, but he wasn't alone in the work. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat in it.

Aaron and he held up his hands, one on one side and one on the other so that his hands remained steady. steady till sunset.

This phrase, his hands remained steady till sunset, can actually be translated, his hands remained faithful. Isn't that great?

His hands remained faithful till sunset. Faithfulness in prayer. And the prayer was wonderfully answered.

[33 : 58] Verse 13, so Joshua overcame the Amalekites with the sword. What happened down in the valley below in the brutal, brutal battle, what happened down in the valley below was determined by what happened on the hill above.

When I was a student in Edinburgh, I used to go and visit an elderly lady in the congregation that we worshipped in.

Her name was Mary Ingalls. She was a spinster. And out of sheer respect, we never referred to her as Mary. She was always Miss Ingalls.

Miss Ingalls. And when we went up to Ullapool, I would often write to her telling her how things were going. And on one occasion when things were really quite hard and things were really, really tough, I had written to her.

and almost by return, I received a little card. And on the card, it simply said, Exodus 17, I'm on top of the hill for you.

[35 : 20] I'm on top of the hill for you. And that enabled us to go on to persevere. You see? Who or what do you, do we need to climb the hill for?

It's a real challenge, isn't it? And I'm the first to be challenged. Time, time is gone. The enemy we need to face, the strategy we need to follow, just in a word.

Thirdly, the victory we need to remember. Let me just read verses 14 to the end. 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. We would probably say the Lord is my flag. You know, armies have their colors and you flock to the colors.

Well, here the people were to flock to the Lord. The Lord is my banner. 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.

[36 : 44] Now, the solemnizing thing, and with this I finish, the solemnizing thing with respect to the people of Israel is that far from remembering this, that it's the Lord who, in answer to prayer, gives us the victory.

They forgot it. You can read about this on your own later on, Numbers 13 and 14, which is all about the report, and this was just two years later, just two years later.

The people of God had arrived at the borders of Canaan and were getting ready to cross over, and Moses had sent spies into the land.

And the report that Moses' spies brought back about the promised land, well, it was anything but encouraging because, said the spies. Now, can you believe this?

This is what the spies said. The Amalekites live there. We can't attack those people. they are stronger than we are.

[37 : 59] Can you believe it? And you can almost hear God saying, haven't I shown you?

Haven't I shown you how to defeat the Amalekites? Haven't I shown you how to win the victory over the enemy?

From strength to strength go on, wrestle and fight and pray. Tread all the powers of darkness down and win the well-fought day till having all things done and all your conflicts passed, you overcome through Christ alone and stand complete at last.

this thought just comes right into my head just now. Let's all determine to be this. Let's all determine to be hill climbers. I don't like climbing hills.

But I want to be this type of a hill climber. This type. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

[39 : 22] Thank you that even in this point of time, there was the promise of the gospel, there was the promise of Christmas, the promise of a Savior coming into the world.

But Lord, we know that we are in a battle for Christmas. So help us to be hill climbers, to be men and women who have grasped this principle that what goes on down in the valley below is determined by what goes on in the hill above.

Lord, bless your word to all of our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen. very much. All right. Thank you.
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