

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 17:8-16

To understand more about the treachery of the Amalekites.

Read the Text:

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. 9 So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." 10 So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. 13 And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. 14 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." 15 And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, 16 saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." (Exodus 17:8-16, ESV)

Study the Text:

Amalek

Verses 8 through 16 highlight an especially important conflict in the history of Israel between Israel and the Amalekites, descendants of a man named Amalek, first introduced in Exodus 17:8. This individual, for reasons not mentioned in Exodus 17, makes war against Israel. This conflict is highlighted as well as the enmity that develops between the Amalekite people and the LORD as a result of their treachery. Below is a breakdown of some of the key details in this passage.

AMALEK

Nothing is previously known of the figure named Amalek. He is suddenly thrust into the scene as an aggressor against the people of God while they are still camping in Rephidim. As is the case with Israel being the name of both an individual and a people, Amalek is very likely a designation for both an individual and a people. Some have sought to connect him to the grandson of Esau who was also named Amalek (Gen. 36:12). As was common in the ancient world (and to some degree, today as well), familial names are often carried on down through the generations, and so this is a probability. However, it's almost certainly not true that the grandson of Esau is the progenitor of the Amalekite people, given their mentioning in Numbers 24:20. As a people, they appear to pre-date the Edomite clan, ruling out their genesis as a people starting with Esau. Old Testament scholar John Durham writes, "Amalekites appear to have been a nomadic group who roamed Sinai and the Arabah north of Ezion-Geber as well as the Negeb."¹ William Propp notes, based on Judges 12:15, that the "Amalekites would sometimes serve as mercenaries" as well.² They also seemed to steal camels and other livestock as well (Jdg. 6:5; 1 Sam. 27:9).

¹ John I Durham, *Exodus*, vol. 3 of Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 235.

² William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 616.

Regardless of their origin point, they become infamous for this attack on the Israelites in Rephidim. While Exodus 17 doesn't lay out the details, Deuteronomy 25:17-18 indicates that the Amalekites attacked Israel from the rear while they were "faint and weary," apparently targeting the frail, the old, and the women and children in the back. Because of the especially wicked nature of sneak attacking the vulnerable (instead of fighting the warriors from the front), the LORD is especially insistent on "blotting out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 25:19).

JOSHUA AND HUR

Verse 9 also introduces for the first time another character of even greater importance: Joshua. Joshua is "the son of Nun," and is apparently a kind of military general at this point in the story, given the command of Moses to "choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek" (Ex. 17:9). He is also eventually one of the twelve spies that go to spy out the land of Canaan, and one of the only ones with an optimistic report upon return (Num. 14). Moreover, he is called Moses' "assistant" in Exodus 33:11. Joshua eventually becomes the successor to Moses as the leader of the people of God after Moses "laid his hands on him" and imparted a "spirit of wisdom" (Deut. 34:9). He is also the character for whom *The Book of Joshua* is named, an account that follows Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan as well as the subduing of the various tribes that were unlawfully in possession of it. The Book of Joshua in many ways provides closure to the Abrahamic promise first given in Genesis 12:7, wherein God promised Abraham to give him and his descendants the land that was occupied at the time by the Canaanites. Joshua, therefore, is an immensely important figure in the historical development of Israel in the first six books of the Old Testament.

Also of note is the character "Hur," first mentioned in verse 10. The Jewish historian Josephus identifies him as the husband of Miriam. Stuart argues, "Because of the prominence given to Hur as an appellate judge over the people in Moses' absence in 24:14, it would seem that he was one of the chief elders of the nation."³

THE STAFF

The central object of the passage is, yet again, the staff of Moses. No command is given explicitly to raise the staff in battle, and so it is unclear if Moses was told by God to do this off-script, or if he instinctively did it knowing the power of the staff in general. Either way, "whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Ex. 17:11). However, Moses' arms eventually get tired and he has a hard time sustaining the staff in the air. This provokes both Aaron and Hur to place Moses on a rock, and to lift up his hands, "one on one side, and the other on the other side, so his hands were steady until the going down of the sun" (Ex. 17:12). This ends up being the catalyst to winning the battle (Ex. 17:13).

BLOTTED OUT

The result of Amalek's treachery is recorded in verses 14-18, wherein God tells Moses that He will "utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven" (Ex. 17:14). This decision to destroy an entire people was to be written down "as a memorial in a book" and recited "in the ears of Joshua" (Ex. 17:13). It was known, from this point on, "from generation to generation" that "the LORD will have war with Amalek" (Ex. 17:16). This is a judgment even stronger than what falls on Egypt. Egypt, while dreadfully judged through the ten plagues, was at least allowed to continue on as a nation. The Amalekites, on the other hand, were to be totally cut off.

³ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 398.

What About Now?

Perhaps the strongest takeaway from this passage (albeit, an implied takeaway) is *the importance of putting sin to death totally and completely*. The Amalekites in this story and the corresponding story in Deuteronomy 25 present a harrowing picture of the unnecessary damage that is done when you do not cut sin out of your life. In 1 Samuel 15:3, Israel's first king, Saul, is told to "go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." It seems like a brutally immoral action until you remember that Israel is governed by *Lex Talionis* (the law of retaliation, or "an eye for an eye"). For the Israelites to kill "both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey" is an "eye for an eye" retaliation. This is what the Amalekites did to Israel in Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 25. However, Saul disobeys the commandment of God and instead takes the king of the Amalekites, Agag, hostage, and did not wipe them out as he was instructed. The results of this disobedience are catastrophic. The Amalekites eventually raid the city of Ziklag and take the wives of David hostage (1 Sam. 30). An Amalekite man ends up taking the life of king Saul (2 Sam. 1). They were thought to have been destroyed during the reign of Hezekiah (1 Chr. 4:43), but a remnant of the Amalekites might have been preserved through the antagonist "Agag" in the Book of Esther, likely named after one of the prominent Amalekite kings (1 Sam. 15). The point is that because Saul relented to put the Amalekites to death totally and completely, they continued to come back and take more and more from the Israelites than was necessary. If he had obeyed, they would have suffered less loss. Similarly, when you relent to put to death sin totally and completely, it will keep coming back to take more and more from you. Sometimes we suffer loss unnecessarily because we refuse to put to death sin when we have the chance (Rom. 8:13).

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 17:8. Who came to fight the Israelites in Rephidim? Why?

2. Read Deuteronomy 25:17-19. What extra details are given about this fight with the Amalekites that Exodus 17 leaves out? How does this change your understanding of the story?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 17:9. Who does Moses commission to fight Amalek? What does Moses say he will do?

2. Read Exodus 17:10-11. Did Joshua do what Moses asked him to do? Who went up on the hill while the fighting took place? How did Moses' staff affect the fight?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 17:12. What problem did Moses face during the fight? How did Aaron and Hur solve this problem?
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2. Read Exodus 17:13. Who ended up prevailing in this fight? How did they prevail?
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Day Four

1. Read Exodus 17:14. What did the LORD tell Moses to write down?
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2. Read Exodus 17:15-16. What did Moses build and what did he call it? Why?
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Discuss the Text!

Week 42 Discussion: Kill Sin, or It Will Kill You

The Amalekites are first introduced into the biblical narrative in Exodus 17, and they serve as a foreboding symbol of what happens when you do not deal with sin in your own life. Because the Amalekites were not eliminated when God told Saul to eliminate them, they came back over and over again and took more than they should have from the people of God. In the same way, sin will do the same when it is not put to death. Talk as a group about how your lack of dealing with sin has cost you more than you bargained for.

1. Icebreaker: Have you ever paid more for something than you should have? What was it?
2. Have you ever neglected to deal with a sin in your life that ended up creating more problems for you as a result of your neglect?
3. Read Romans 8:13. What is Paul's point?
4. What does it mean to "put to death the deeds of the flesh?"
5. Are you able to kill sin alone?
6. What kinds of grace have been provided to you to do war against the flesh?

Takeaways:

1. The Amalekites sneak up on Israel and attack them from the rear.
2. Moses commands Joshua to take men and fight the Amalekites while he raises his staff.
3. Aaron and Hur help Moses keep his staff raised when his arms get tired.
4. Joshua defeats Amalek and God promises to blot him and his people out of memory as a result of their treachery.