

War in the Wilderness

Exodus 17:8-16

Introduction

In Threes: We pick up with the Israelites having just been tested in the wilderness. They failed to trust God but he graciously provided for them. They're in the desert with only the clothes on their backs and he gives them water from a rock and bread from heaven. #restnow (e.g., retirement; chill at Rephidim Springs). **God still has more to teach them.** "Suffering is never for nothing" (Elisabeth Elliot).

- We want the journey from salvation to heaven to be easy and comfortable. It's not. It's full of many battles.
- Now they must face a battle. But this battle is the first in many battles. God is going to teach them how to fight (#hint, it starts with trusting him).
- **Myth (Balance):** "Ever wonder why it's so hard to find balance in your life? Simple answer: the 'balanced life' is a myth."
 - Life is hard because of sin. We haven't made it to the promised land. There are still idols and worldly comforts that God needs to pry from our hands so we can hold onto him (e.g., monkey and gourd). The wilderness is the painful training ground for our sanctification.
 - It's one thing to get Israel out of slavery but another to the slavery out of Israel. It's amazing how when we get any freedom we immediately get to complaining.
 - The blessing sometimes feels like a punishment because we're not used to living in the light (e.g., opening the blinds and it hurts our eyes).
 - "There is no greater comfort to a Christian than to be made like Christ by patiently suffering adversity, trials, and weakness. Jesus himself suffered pain; he was crucified before entering glory. Truly our way to eternal joy is to suffer here with Christ. Our door to enter into eternal life is gladly to die with Christ so that we may rise again from death and dwell with him in everlasting life. So your weakness, sickness, trials, and pain are profitable for you as they conform you to the image of Christ" (*Book of Common Prayer*, "Visitation for the Sick," *adapted*).
 - That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death (Phil 3:10).
 - But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed (1 Pet 4:13).
 - It is a joy to share in the sufferings of Christ! The wilderness is actually a gift!
- **Myth (Handle):** "God **will not** give you more than you can handle." (#false) God **will** give you more than you can handle but never more than he can handle.

The journey from the Red Sea to the Promised Land, from salvation to glory, necessarily involves trials in the wilderness because only in my deepest challenges do I learn that God is my greatest need.

- God not only wants to bring you from slavery to salvation and deliver you into the promised land, he wants to transform you into a person fit for his kingdom.
- “You won’t know he’s all you need until he’s all you have.” True or false? I go back and forth because you can **know** (#head) God is rightfully supreme over all things, but rarely does that knowledge get **internalized** (#heart) to the point of changing the way you **think, feel, and act** (#hands). That usually only happens in the wilderness moments of life.
 - **In moments of deepest need we understand our complete dependence on God.** Through the wilderness, God reveals Himself as the ultimate source of our truest needs and desires.
 - The **wilderness** (e.g., struggle, trial, test, setback, disappointment) ultimately becomes a gift because it helps us see God more clearly and trust God more fully.

⁸ 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.”

1. The Reality of the Fight (vv. 8-10)

⁸ 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.

The Enemy of God’s People: ⁸ Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Amalek (metonymy/synechdoche “Amalekites”; e.g., Washington = government).¹

- The Amalekites are bad dudes in Israelites’ history.
 - **Practically:** They were not ultimately defeated until King David (e.g., Agag). So they were a *present* problem for the people reading the Pentateuch.

¹ Holy War: The problem of holy war and divine violence in the OT is a common modern objection to Christianity. (1) It is not a problem for Jesus or the NT. “The God of the OT” is a heretical statement. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is longsuffering and patient. Jesus is a warrior who is angry at sin. (2) Don’t confuse prescriptive (universal) and descriptive (what happened). (3) The Canaanites and other groups were idolatrous and sinful (e.g., child sacrifice, etc. Amalekites specifically raided the Israelites at their weakest, targeting the wounded and frail. (4) God is a warrior who destroys injustice. We don’t want a pacifist God.

- **Historically:** They were a nomadic group whose early domestication of camels allowed them to attack and plunder the wealth of neighboring tribes.
- **Theologically:** They were descended from the Esau (Amalek grandson; Genesis genealogy nerds). Esau and Jacob became archetypes for God's people and the idolatrous nations. Amalek is described as "not fearing God" (Deut 25:18). They were not Canaanites (southern nomads) but shared the idolatrous leanings of the Canaanites. Esau/Edom and, by extension, "Amalekite" become codewords for "idolatrous nations" in the rest of the OT. E.g., Haman, the antagonist of Esther, an archetype of evil, plotting Israelite genocide, is an Amalekite (Agagite = Agag a king of Amalekites; a possibly euphemistic term for anti-semitic; hates Israel).
- **Currently:** The reason the Amalekites are symbol of evil, anti-God, and subject to the punishment of God is from the curse of this very story: ^{16b}The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."
 - They (1) attack the people of God, (2) unprovoked, when they are (3) weak and wounded in the desert. Moses later says: "[they] attacked [Israel] on the way when [they] were faint and weary" specifically targeting "those who were lagging behind" (Deut 25:18). Presumably they picked on the weakest, oldest, slowest, most defenseless.

It's a Fight: 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."

- Ready or not, it's a fight. Israel doesn't have much (if any) experience in war that we can tell (like later), or a standing army (they're a bunch of recently freed slaves). "Choose for us men and go out to fight with Amalek" emphasizes that it was a challenge to find men (later will be healthy males b/w 20-50). E.g., don't make eye contact on the trail with the bear.
 - Despite their position of weakness, the fight is coming. capable of fighting. The skilled Amalekite warriors will decimate the untrained Israelites.
- We are in a fight! The sooner you accept the reality of the fight, the easier it will be to withstand the difficulty in front of you. Of course, we don't earn our salvation, but we also don't sit in apathy.
 - Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim 6:12).
 - 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 (Eph 6:12).
- We fight, we wrestle, we run, we strive, we struggle, etc. We are in a fight more serious than the Israelites in the wilderness. Tragically, too many of us have no idea we're in a battle. We approach life as if it were a vacation, rather than a war. "How silly to show up on D-Day with a beach towel."

A Warrior: First mention of Joshua (*Yehoshua, later shortened to Yeshua*), meaning “YHWH saves/is salvation.” He will end up acting as an assistant to Moses² and among the few who are faithful in the wilderness.³ Ultimately, he will succeed Moses, leading Israel into the Promised Land.⁴

- We’re not exactly sure why Moses picked Joshua. Maybe he had some military experience (he certainly proves to be a great military leader in the long run). He is called a “young man” (Ex 33:11), compared to 80-year-old Moses.

Obedience: 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.

- Joshua becomes a picture of a warrior who leads the people of God into battle. The sort of “on the ground” warrior carrying out the commands of Moses who is standing on the hill.
- He’s the obedient warrior who goes into battle, a man of trust and obedience (e.g., spies in the promised land, battle of Jericho, etc.; characteristics that define him).

We All Have a Role to Play: We have Joshua, on the battlefield, and Moses, Aaron, and Hur overlooking from a nearby hill.

- Hur (white, pure life, happy, etc.). Husband to Miriam (Josephus). Judahite grandfather to Bezalel (craftsman of the Tabernacle filled with God’s Spirit). A leader alongside Aaron during the famous Golden Calf incident.
- Everyone has a role to play. We are in a fight (not an unwinnable fight, or a fight we do on our own, but a fight nonetheless).
 - The local church is not a cruise ship (e.g., activities, excursions). The local church is a battleship (e.g., spiritual battle). The pastors are not your rec directors, the worship service is not your weekly entertainment, the ministries are not your fun excursions, and the mission is not a buffet from which you pick and choose. Everyone has a part to play. If you don’t man your battle station and do your part, then the ship will sink. Are you going to **be served** or **serve**?

2. The Method of Victory (vv. 11-13)

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.

Hands Up: ¹¹ Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

² Ex 24:13; 33:11

³ Num 14:6–9, 30

⁴ Deut 34:9; Josh 1:1–9

- This is an odd scenario. But we know God often uses odd “military” strategies because it proves who’s really powerful. It’s not the might of the Israelite army but the might of the Israelite God that is on display (i.e., object of their faith, not even the strength of their faith).
 - Cf. Jericho and the marching band strategy (*weird we reenact in kids ministry, a little morbid like Noah and the skeletons at the bottom of the sea).
- Hands up they win, hands down they lose. Winning. Losing. Winning. Losing. Maybe there’s a correlation? We better keep his hands up!
 - Biggest loser treadmill backward over water challenge. Hanging from a bar challenge.
- I’ve heard all sorts of more-or-less weird applications of this story to modern Christians.
 - Lift your hands in worship (less than 80° and God won’t be here).
 - Pray without ceasing (I mean, it’s not wrong, I guess).
- These aren’t “magic hands” but visible signs of God’s power.

God’s War: ¹² But Moses’ hands grew weary,

- Not only was Israel weaker than the Amalekites, Moses wasn’t strong enough to keep his arms up.
 - Some suppose Moses can’t keep his arms up because he’s an old man (80+). But this doesn’t seem likely. He is described at his death (120) as strong and vigorous.⁵
 - The reason he was unable to keep his arms up was **simple human weakness**. The battle lasted all day. None of us could keep our arms up that long (e.g., stress punishment, still used in certain countries, pain after 10-15 minutes).
- The only path to victory is through God. This is God’s war, not theirs. The only way they could win was God. Without his strength and blessing they will certainly lose.
 - It is not Moses’ hands that bring victory but God. Remember what was in his hands he was holding up, the staff of God, the visible representation of God’s power and judgment throughout Exodus. The act of lifting up the staff is an act of dependence on God. God must be lifted up, not us.
 - Moses gets tired, God doesn’t.
 - ²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. ²⁹ He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. ³⁰ Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; ³¹ but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isa 40:28-31).
- Moses doesn’t need to refresh and get back at it, he needs to keep the focus on God. They don’t need a new military strategy, they need God’s favor.
 - And the LORD said to me, ‘Say to them, Do not go up or fight, for I am not in your midst, lest you be defeated before your enemies.’ (Deut 1:42).

⁵ Deut 34:7

- You shall not fear them, for it is the LORD your God who fights for you' (Deut 3:22).
- If it's God's fight then we (1) do not need to fear and we need to (2) stay radically focused and dependent on him.

Teamwork: 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.

- Moses had a central role, but he needed help. Aaron and Hur take on this supporting role. God has given us people in our lives to help us "hold up his arms."
- Community support is essential. Moses points to Christ but he is not Christ. He is just a man. He is the leader but he has limitations. No person outside of Christ is sufficient to do all things. We need each other.
 - One of the consistent themes of Exodus is the grumbling, not only against God, but against Moses, that the people do.
 - Attacks will come, but they should come from without, not within.
- How do they help? They help keep the staff of God lifted high. They help keep Moses focused on exalting the power of God. **A good friend will help you keep your eyes on Jesus.**

Mediator: This whole time Moses has stood on a hill as a mediator between God and his people. Moses serves as an intermediary (e.g., interpreter; Bryan and Megan Taiwan interpreter; stand between the judge).

- Moses was an amazing mediator but he was still human. He still fell short. The shortcomings of Moses point to the fulfilment of Christ, our perfect mediator. Moses says he had "a hand upon the throne of the LORD" (17:16). Jesus walks sits on the throne.³ For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself (Heb 3:3)¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (Heb 4:14).

Victory:¹³ And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. When God did the fighting, they had total victory. They're still in the wilderness, still waiting for the promised land, but God gave them this battle as a reminder that all the battles belong to him.

3. The Banner of the Lord (vv. 14-16)

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."

Memory: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."

- Aware of our short memories and propensity to forget God's provision, we should deliberate memorialize his blessings (e.g., weekly LS).
- Moses memorializes in "the book" (we are reading it now). The Bible is one of the primary ways we can look back at the faithfulness of God.
- Pass it on (e.g., ears of Joshua).
 - To encourage the next generation (the best gift you can give a successor is to remind them of God's past work in their lives).
- Why did Jesus keep his scars at his resurrection? As a reminder of the price he paid for our salvation. The scars you bear are a reminder of the difficulty God brought you through (e.g., surgery scar, healthy).

What's in a Name: ¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner,

- The **altar** is a **place** of praise, worship, and sacrifice. A physical place to remember the Lord's provision and presence.
- The **name** of the altar is a way to teach us about the character of God. The name here is "YHWH is My Banner" (cf. banner culture in churches).
 - This banner is a signal pole in the battle, a visible banner exalted above the army with an insignia as both a rallying point and a marker of whose team you're on.
 - Whose banner you fight under matters. Who you fight for indicates what strength is supporting you (what team has your back). It also should be the unifying principle (e.g., US military doesn't matter your state, race, etc.).
 - Our unifying principle must always be the gospel of Jesus Christ, or we cease to be a church. We stop being an army of the living God and become a social club like every other hobby org in our culture (e.g., dress code, politics, education choices, lifestyle, etc.; homogenous cultures hide homogenous sins; often we want people like us so they can affirm the things we value because we worship us and not God).

Victory: ¹⁶ saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Conclusion

Another: We have another mediator, lifted high above his people on a cross, who stood between us and God. We have another Savior, another Yeshua, who fought the battle we couldn't fight and defeated the greatest enemy – death.

- Our victory is in his hands. When we place our faith in Jesus, we have certain victory, strength for the battle, and hope that we will make it to the promised land because he fights for us.

Weakness: But sin pounces on us in our weakness. Satan attacks us in the wilderness. But the weakness of the wilderness gives us the opportunity to completely depend on God.

- Are you in a season of suffering? This doesn't have to be a time that makes you bitter and hardens your heart, it can actually be an opportunity for God's strength to be magnified. In your weakness, he is strong.⁶

⁶ 2 Cor 12:1-10