

The Amalekites Came and Attacked the Israelites at Rephidim

17: 8-16

DIG: Read this section and compare it to First Samuel 15:32-33. God's desire was to completely destroy the Amalekites. Explain Samuel's words: As your sword has made women childless, so will your mother be childless among women.

REFLECT: When and how have you needed your faith propped up? What battle has God won in your life lately? What would you name your altar? God is my _____? How hard is it for you to relinquish every area of your life to the LORD? What part(s) of your life do you think you are still in control of? What does He think about that (see Revelation 3:15)?

This section is very similar to the previous one. Both are based at **Rephidim** and both involve a great test. **The staff of God** played a significant role and He intervened to save His people in both instances. The major difference was that after leaving **Egypt** the adversity experienced by **the Israelites** had been against an inanimate foe, a lack of food and water. But then Israel discovered that perhaps there were worse enemies than even hunger and thirst; they were confronted with a human enemy. This was the first battle against a human enemy since their deliverance from bondage.

We learn that **Amalek** declared war on Israel. But who was **Amalek**? In **Genesis 36:12** we are told that **Amalek** was the son of a man named Eliphaz, therefore **Amalek** was the grandson of Esau (**Genesis 36:12**), and the great-grandson of Isaac. Yet in spite of this, his descendants, **the Amalekites, came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim (17:8)**. They were a tribal group living in Sinai and southwest Canaan as early as the patriarchal period (**Genesis 14:7**). Moved by suspicion, jealousy and fear, they were determined to prevent the passage of **the Israelites** through what they perceived to be their territory. So they opposed the purpose and plan of **God**. Some believe that they were fighting over control of the Kadesh Oasis, a very important caravan center. However, the exact location of the battle is unknown. Probably the most that can be said is that **the Amalekites** attacked Israel because they felt threatened with regard to their control of oases and caravan routes.³¹⁸ No doubt they felt they could easily defeat this newly freed slave rabble without supplies or knowledge of the country. For indeed **the Israelites** were an ill-equipped, ill-disciplined and inexperienced mob going out against a well-equipped and experienced foe. But **the Amalekites** did not know the power of **God**.³¹⁹

The manner of their attack was a sort of harassing, guerilla warfare against Israel. **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. They had no fear of God (Deuteronomy 25:17-18)**. As a result of this sneak attack, Israel was to counterattack.

We see here for the first time a man named **Joshua**, whose original name was **Hoshea (Numbers 13:6)**. Later, **Moses** would change his name from **Hoshea**, which means *savior*, to **Joshua**, which means

The Lord is salvation. It is interesting to note that **Joshua** translated from the Greek into English means *Jesus*. **Joshua** became the personal aid to **Moses** (**Exodus 24:13, 33:11; Joshua 1:1**), and would later bring Israel into the Promised Land of Canaan. One is immediately impressed with the faith and obedience of **Joshua** (**17:10**). He was about forty-five years old at the time. Without question or objection he organized the relatively untrained and unseasoned soldiers of Israel and fought the Amalekites.

Israel did not take off as they had done when they left Egypt. At that time, the people merely watched as **God** crushed their enemy. But here *they* would defend themselves. Remarkably, there appeared to be no fear of confusion among Israel in such a crisis. **Moses** calmly ordered **Joshua** son of Nun: **Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in both my hands and raise it up when I pray** (**17:9**). The use of the word **tomorrow** reminds us of the plagues of Egypt (**8:10, 8:23, 8:29, 9:5, 9:18, 10:4**).

The fact that **God** ordered His people to fight their enemies on the field of battle has often dismayed the readers of the Bible. Many have charged **the LORD** with being cruel and bloodthirsty, while others have tried to dissociate what they believe to be the Old Covenant **God** of wrath from the New Covenant **God** of love. But **God's** love appears often in the Old Covenant (in **Deuteronomy** and **Hosea**, for example) and His wrath is found often in the New Covenant (in **Revelation**, for example). The same holy **God** always loves sinners at the same time that He always hates their sins. When people persist in rebelling against Him, He punishes them and if they eventually pass the point of no return, they bring about their own doom and destruction. Willful, unrepentant, sinful conduct - like that of **Amenhotep II** of Egypt, for example - always brings divine judgment, whether the agent of the judgment is impersonal (such as during Noah's flood or against Sodom and Gomorrah) or personal (such as during the conquest of Canaan in the book of **Joshua**).

While **ADONAI** is **gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love and faithfulness** (**34:6**), He **does not leave the guilty unpunished** (**34:7**). He sometimes uses the battlefield as an arena of judgment against those who, like **the Amalekites**, were persistent in their refusal to fear Him (**Deuteronomy 25:18**).³²⁰

Moses was so old at this point, that he could not physically lead his people into battle. But that didn't matter because prayer would win the battle. In his **hands Moses held the staff of God**, through which His power had brought the plagues of Egypt and water from the rock at **Rephidim**. **So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill** (**17:10**). As in the case of **Joshua** in **17:9**, here the person of **Hur** is first introduced. He would later become an important judicial figure in early Israel (**24:14**). He was probably from the tribe of Judah and was the grandfather of Bezalel, the leader in the construction of the Tabernacle (**31:2, 35:30, 38:22**).³²¹ **The rabbis teach that he was either the husband, or the son of Miriam, the sister of Moses.**

The key to the battle lay in the **hands of Moses**. **As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning** (**17:11**). While **Moses' hands** were upheld in intercession, Israel gained the victory. As usual, their help came from above. When in bondage in Egypt they could have looked over the whole earth and there was not one nation to help them. But when they looked up and cried out to **God**, He delivered

them. When they were trapped by Pharaoh's army at the Sea of Reeds, help also came from above. It was the same at Marah, Elim, the Desert of Sin, and it would be the same here **at Rephidim**. **The LORD** was evidently trying to teach them the lesson that He would have all His children learn. In this new life with Him we are to depend totally and completely upon Him *for everything*.

*When a bitter experience comes to us in this life, go to **God** for comfort. As sweet as human sympathy may be, it is only **the LORD** who can wipe away tears and heal broken hearts. When your soul is faint and hungry, do not seek the safety of anything this world has to offer, but feed upon the true Bread from heaven. And when you are thirsty, drink only of the Living Water.*³²²

If Israel was to defeat **the Amalekites**, **Moses** needed help. **When Moses' arms grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his arms up - one on one side, and one on the other side - so that his arms remained steady till sunset (17:12)**. The basic meaning for the Hebrew word **steady** is *faithful, trustworthy or true*. Normally, it is used in a moral sense and this is the only time in the Bible where it relates to something physical.

So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword (17:13); yet, this was not a victory of total destruction. The verb **overcame** means *to weaken or disable*. There is a play on words between the noun *halas*, and the noun used in **Deuteronomy 25:18** to describe the stragglers who were **weary and worn out**, or *hannehesalim*, being picked off by **the Amalekite army**. Therefore, **Joshua** made weak and disabled those who prayed upon the weak and disabled.³²³

With the battle over, we have the remembrance of **Amalek**. **Then ADONAI said to Moses His servant: 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 (17:14)**. This is the first mention of writing as related to Scripture and official Hebrew records. He evidently kept a diary of Israel's journey through the desert as implied in **Numbers 33:2**. **Moses'** major role in writing the first five books of the Bible is emphasized over and over (**Exodus 24:4, 34:27-28; Numbers 33:2; Deut. 28:58, 29:20-21 and 27, 30:10, 31:9, 19 and 22**). Scrolls of the kind used by **Moses** were long, narrow sheets of leather or papyrus on which scribes wrote with pen (**Isaiah 8:1**) and ink (**Jeremiah 36:18**), sometimes on both sides (**Ezekiel 2:10; Revelation 5:1**). Because they were clumsy to read and difficult to store, soon after the time of Christ the scroll gave way to the book format still used today.³²⁴

Moses built an altar and called it ADONAI Nissi, or ADONAI is my Banner (17:15). Other altars were built elsewhere in the Old Covenant. For example, Jacob built an altar at Shechem and he called it **El Elohe Israel**, literally meaning *God, the God of Israel (Genesis 33:20)*. These altars were not built for sacrifice, but to remember some event that had happened there. The Hebrew word often translated **banner** is really a standard or signal-pole. In ancient times, it bore an emblem, symbol or **banner** on its top. It was used as a rallying point, and was often placed upon a high hill to be seen by all (**Numbers 21:4-9**). It was an object of hope for the people. Therefore, the appearance of **Moses** on top of the hill with the staff of God both his hands acted much like a banner.

Commenting on the reason for Israel's victory, **Moses** said: **For my hands, with the power of God in my staff, were lifted up to the throne of the Lord, and ADONAI will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation (17:16)**. Therefore, **the Amalekites** would be a thorn in

the side of Israel for generations to come. One year later, **the Amalekites** joined forces with the Canaanites at Kadesh-Barnea to defeat **the Israelites (Numbers 14:45)**. Balaam would later prophesy: **Amalek was the first among the nations, but he will come to ruin at last (Numbers 24:20)**. **The Amalekites** were the first among the nations to attack Israel after the deliverance from Egypt, and they later subjugated **the Israelites** in the period of the judges (**Judges 3:13, 6:3-6, 7:12**).

Centuries later **Samuel** came to King Saul with a message from **God** to completely destroy the **Amalekites**. He said: **Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belongs to them. Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants, cattle and sheep, camels and donkeys (First Samuel 15:3)**. **God** had vowed to completely blot out the memory of **Amalek from under heaven** because **the Amalekites** were under the *herem* judgment, or in other words, *they were devoted to destruction (Joshua 6:18 to 7:26)*. But King Saul failed to carry out **God's** command (**First Samuel 15:2-3**), which cost him his kingship and his life (**First Samuel 15:26-28**). When he lay dying on the battlefield of Mount Gilboa, a young man, a stranger, came to him. Saul asked him to kill him so he would not be captured alive (**Second Samuel 1:1-16**). Ironically, this young man was an **Amalekite!** Because Saul had not obeyed **God**, his disobedience had cost him his life. Not until the days of King Hezekiah did **they kill the remaining Amalekites who had escaped (First Chronicles 4:42-43)**. Yet it is highly probable that **Haman the Agagite (Esther 3:1)**, who a thousand years after **Moses** almost accomplished the total destruction of all the Jews in Persia, was a descendant of King Agag of **the Amalekites**, whom Saul so foolishly spared.³²⁵

The lesson taught to us by the name **ADONAI Nissi** is that we cannot **fight** our spiritual battles alone. When **Moses'** arms grew weary **the staff of God** was **lowered**. Then the enemy prevailed and Israel was pressed back. The lesson is quite clear. **The staff** was the symbol and pledge of **God's** presence and power. Lowered, it could not be seen. It was as though **the LORD** were not present, and therefore not in the mind of the people. *We also need to learn that the evil forces of the world are powerful and cruel, too great for us to handle alone. We, like Moses and the Israelites, can only be strengthened by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob (Genesis 49:24).*³²⁶

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