

## Walking by Faith: Holding Hands

[Exodus 17:8-13](#)

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[Real Audio \(3 MB\)](#)

On the journey through life we are all chased by some enemy. Our enemies infuriate us and scare us. We wish they would just go away. But we need our enemies, for they are used by God to mold our souls.

We are continuing in our series of sermons focused on the Hebrews' journey out of slavery and through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Today we join them in a place called Rephidim. It was another stop along the way and another opportunity to learn more about the faithfulness of God.

You will recall that God led the Hebrews on this desert journey for the same reason that he leads each of us on the hard road -- to teach us how to be free. Just because you have run away from something that was enslaving your spirit, that doesn't make you free. To be free you have to learn how to stop being afraid. The way you learn is by developing faith, the only antidote to fear. And the way you learn faith is to stop wasting your stress when the road is hard. See stress for what it is, an opportunity to discover more of God's faithfulness.

So far on the desert journey, we have witnessed God's faithfulness when the people thought they were lost, and moving in the wrong direction. Then we saw it when they were out of water, and again when they were out of food. Today we witness God's faithfulness when they, and we, are forced into battle with the enemy.

As soon as the people arrived at Rephidim, a place near the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, they were attacked by a nomadic warrior named Amalek. I have always thought of Amalek and his goons as an ancient motorcycle gang who preyed on defenseless travelers in the desert. Only the Hebrews were not defenseless.

When the attack began, Moses told Joshua to choose some men and go into battle to defend the people. Then Moses went to the top of a nearby hill and held up the staff of God in his hands. When Moses held the "staff of God" up in the air, Joshua and his men prevailed in the battle against Amalek. When Moses' hands grew tired, and the staff dropped to the ground, Amalek and his men prevailed in the battle.

Clearly the battle is being decided not by Joshua and the sword, but by Moses and the staff he held above his head. So you have to wonder, "What's the point of Joshua? Why doesn't God just send Moses up the hill to blow fire down on Amalek?" The point of the battle isn't to get rid of the enemy. The point is to teach the people not to be afraid of their enemies.

There are always going to be enemies. At the end of chapter seventeen we are told that "Amalek will persevere from one generation to the next." He just keeps showing up, with different names and faces, in every chapter of the biblical story. As he does in the high drama God is writing with your life.

Who is your Amalek? Who is the enemy that will tempt you to be afraid and make you doubt that you'll ever make it to the Promised Land? Is it the old voices from the past that say, "You are not good enough, or smart enough, pretty enough. You are not lovable"? Is it the relentless, old enemy you keep fighting? Maybe Amalek is the addiction you have struggled with for so long, or the guilt that has plagued you over that which you have done, or left undone. Maybe Amalek is an actual person in your life who has been your nemesis for many years now: the boss who is, well, the Antichrist, the ex-spouse who keeps hauling you to court, the teacher or coach who has decided you are never going to make the grade. Or is Amalek the terrorist who makes you afraid when your spouse walks onto an airplane?

You can pray and pray for God to make Amalek go away, but the way I read this story that's not going to

happen. You may defeat one enemy, or triumph in a particular battle, and the nations of civilization may root out the current rings of terrorists who threaten us. But there are more enemies to come. Always. "Amalek perseveres from one generation to the next." There is no getting rid of your enemies. However, there is a sacred use for them.

As I have said for the last three weeks, God is not found in the evil that terrorizes us. The enemy is not a divine judgment on us. God is always found in the redemption of evil, and the way he redeems and defeats evil is by using even the enemy for good. I think this is one of the reasons Jesus told us to love our enemies. He meant not only that love eventually triumphs over evil, but also that we can love the sacred purposes God has for our enemies. What are those purposes?

For one, doing battle with the enemy makes you strong. As a pastor I have discovered that most people do not realize how strong they are. They back away too quickly from their dreams and goals, thinking they are just runaway slaves who don't have what it takes to battle Amalek. But when the battle comes to them and it cannot be avoided, they are surprised to discover they are stronger than they realized. Remember all the great stories of heroism we heard on September 11? When the morning began, most of those heroes thought they were just ordinary people. But when confronted with a great struggle, they found more strength within them than they thought was there.

Amalek spent his life beating up defenseless people in the desert, while the Hebrews spent their lives with straw and mud making bricks for Pharaoh. Who were they to take on an enemy as fierce as the Amalekites? I'll tell you who they were -- a people who had a dream. No one is as strong in this world as person with a dream. But dreams have to be fought for. As the Puritans said, "In vain shall Moses be upon the hill, if Joshua be not in the valley." What they meant by that was even holy dreams have to be fought for. Because as you fight for your dream you possess it. That's the purpose of the fight, to make you strong until you really believe in what you believe.

Second, doing battle with the enemy makes you free. There is nothing more enslaving than trying always to avoid conflict or always pleasing people. Until you can live with people being disappointed in you or opposing you, you will always be their slave. Meeting other people's expectations is a relentless taskmaster.

Jesus Christ had plenty of enemies. That's because he was free as a person who knew who he was and what he was about. But he only allowed his Father in heaven to define his mission, which meant he was often a disappointment to those who had other dreams for him. If Jesus would have just taken a harder line on sinners, he wouldn't have turned the Pharisees into his enemy. But Jesus' mission was to forgive sinners. Knowing that, he was free to constantly battle those who wanted only to condemn them. You will never be free, fully alive, until you know who your enemy is.

The third, and greatest, benefit of doing battle with Amalek is that it forces you to pray. That is why the houses of worship in this country have been filled for the last few weeks.

In this narrative we are called to identify with Joshua in battle and with Moses whose hands are reaching up to the sky with the staff of God. Before this staff was given the noble name of "staff of God" it was just Moses' stick. This stick was the shepherd's staff that Moses was holding when God called him to liberate the people in Egypt. When Moses asked for a sign that God would be with him, he was told to throw his staff on the ground. When he did the staff turned into a snake. Then God told him to pick up the snake by the tail. I don't know much about handling snakes, but I know you aren't supposed to pick them up by the tail. It would take a lot of faith to do that, which was exactly the point.

As Moses learned to hold his ordinary staff in faith, God used it to do the most extraordinary things. It turned the Nile into blood, which led to Pharaoh's decision to let the people go. And when Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Hebrews, Moses held that staff in faith again when it divided the Red Sea so the people could walk away from slavery. Later, when Moses struck a rock with that staff, a river of fresh water flowed out for the thirsty people. Now as that staff was held in faith, again, over the battlefield, it was being used for its greatest purpose, as a means of prayer.

Prayer is the means by which you hold your battle in faith. In your prayers, heaven and earth meet, and then you discover that you are not called to victory in the battles of life. As this narrative makes clear, victory is God's business. Your only calling is not to be afraid of having enemies. But you cannot fulfill that calling without prayer, where you climb the mountain with Moses and hold your hands up to God. Seeing heaven above you, in your prayers you learn there is nothing to fear from the earth beneath you.

Being just a man, Moses eventually grew tired of holding up his hands, so they drooped to the ground. As an illustration of what happens when we do battle without prayer, Amalek would always prevail when Moses' hands were down. It is interesting that Moses grew tired in prayer before Joshua did in battle. That's because praying is harder work than fighting. If you are in prayer for someone who is battling a disease, heartbreak, or loss, and if you pray fervently, you will tire long before the person you're praying for. It is exhausting to hold heaven and earth together.

Seeing Moses' fatigue, Aaron and Hur came beside him to hold up his hands to the sky until the victory over Amalek was won. None of us have been called to do battle, or to pray over the battle, by ourselves. If you are going to take on something that is wrong in the world or in your own life, and eventually you have to, you will soon discover that you need a partner or two in prayer.

This is why several hundred people in our congregation have made a commitment to divide up the membership roll of the church and pray for every member of the church every day. They are not there to replace your own upheld hands before God. They are Aaron and Hur, people who have come beside you to pray for your praying.

Everybody needs an Aaron and Hur, and everybody needs to be an Aaron and Hur. That's because the battle against the enemy is great, and you need help, most of all, to see the battle from God's perspective. You can't avoid going into the valley to do battle with Joshua, but neither can you avoid climbing the mountain with Moses, Aaron, and Hur to get a transcendent view of that battle.

When in prayer you climb above the fray, you soon see that the real enemy you are battling is the fear that lurks in your own soul. Until you defeat that enemy within, you'll never be free to enter the Promised Land.

O God, may we be consumed by missions worthy of having enemies. May we be found faithful in the struggle and even more faithful in prayer. Amen.