

## Prayer

Lord God, my Father and my delight, You are the unsearchable source of peace and security in a world that does not know You. By the riches of Your grace and the touch of Your kindness, reach each precious facet of my soul and make me a child of quietness and peace in a world of strife and war. God, my Father and my delight, stay close, I pray, stay close. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*In the course of your day, expect the Lord to speak to you, and wait purposefully for Him. This is no exercise, it is a true expression of faith.*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for the homeless.** *Pray about the way your government treats the homeless in your country, pray for compassion and understanding*
- *Pray for your local rescue services and those who control them*
- *Give thanks for the open countryside near to where you live*

## Meditation

Lord Jesus;

Capture my mind and think through me;  
Grasp my hands and work through me;  
Seize my feet and walk through me;  
Conquer my eyes and see through me;  
Acquire my mouth and speak through me;  
Procure my feelings and empathise through me;  
Engage my spirit and inspire through me;  
choose my life and work through me;

And above all, Lord Jesus;

Secure my heart and live through me;  
Do Your work within this world, through me.

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## Bible passage – Exodus 17:8-16

<sup>8</sup> Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some men for us and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will take my stand on the hill top with the staff of God in my hand.' <sup>10</sup> So Joshua did just as Moses told him, and he fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> Now it happened that when Moses held up his hand, Israel had the upper hand; and when he lowered his hand, Amalek had the upper hand. <sup>12</sup> But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on each side. Because of this, Moses' hands were steady until sunset. <sup>13</sup> So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

<sup>14</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, 'As a means of remembrance write this in a book, and recount it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.'

<sup>15</sup> Moses built an altar and named it, 'The LORD is my banner'. <sup>16</sup> He said, 'A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.'

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# Bible Study

## Review

After the difficulties of the previous stories (chapter 15:22 - 17:1-7), our passage today changes tack. Previously, the Israelites had trouble trusting God and Moses, but there is nothing like an enemy to bring people together, and in this case, bring them closer to their God. The story begins with Moses identifying Amalek as a threat and choosing Joshua to command an elite force to fight them (17:9). It continues by describing Moses' dramatic command of the battle whilst seated on a hill top (17:10-12), assisted by Aaron and Hur. After the military victory (17:13), it describes two significant events of commemoration; the writing of a book of 'remembrance' to retell the battle story (17:14), and the building of an altar called 'the Lord is my banner' (17:15). What, however, does all this mean?

There have always been those who oppose what the Lord is doing, and in the Old Testament, the Amalek are presented as one such enemy. These people are a race descended from Jacob's brother Esau (Gen 36:12, 1 Chron 1:36). Although our reading does not tell us what caused Amalek to be a threat, a brief read of Deuteronomy 25:18 reveals the background. This passage tells us that the Amalek attacked those who were weak and could not keep pace with the main camp of Israel as they travelled through the desert. So because an attack on a few was an attack on all, and an attack on the integrity of Israel and God Himself, Moses took the opportunity to unite Israel in battle against their oppressors.

Another feature of this passage is its identification of Joshua as a military leader (17:9). We do not learn much about him here, but he was clearly a natural choice as leader in battle, even though he must have been young at the time. Joshua was to fight the battle, and Moses exercised a higher authority (17:11,12). The battle went well when Moses held his hands up, but fell back when he let his hands down, and this has fascinated people for centuries. There are many theories about it, but the most obvious should not be ignored. There is a logical connection between what Moses felt and needed, and what the people of Israel felt and needed while they fought the Amalek. Most of us know that when we hold out our hands, we can only do this for a short time before we need help; and clearly, Moses needed help as a leader of God's people after the barrage of recent events. Here, the help came for Aaron (Moses' brother) and Hur (an unknown Israelite). In the same way, the Israelites had to work together to win their battle. Victory comes through co-operation in doing God's will at every level, from the bottom to the top!

After this great battle, the Lord instructed Moses to remember the victory in two powerful ways, firstly in keeping a record of it, and secondly by worshipping the Lord (represented by building an altar. In the earliest days of the life of Israel, history was kept by means of stories told from one generation to another. But now, Moses was told to record this event immediately, and in writing. This the first instance in the Bible of an instruction from God to write down what would one day become Scripture (17:14), and together with it, the idea that it is important to record God's work as well as recite it. The Lord did not want the details of this victory to be lost!

Next, an altar was to be built to remember the victory, named, 'the Lord is my banner'. This banner is a sign, or a battle rallying point, and it signifies the need of God's people to work together to defeat the enemy, a theme we have already found in the text (see above). In this light, the last verse of our text makes sense; it is a rallying cry. Clearly, the progress of God's people is impaired if we do not work together with our leaders to fight those enemies who attack people 'at the edge' of the community of the Lord's faithful.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The location of the battle
- The Amalek, a traditional enemy
- Details of the battle
- Remembrance and recounting
- The banner

## Notes on the text and translation

**V8,9 'Amalek', 'Joshua'** *The name 'Amalek' may mean 'trouble-maker', and the name 'Joshua' may mean 'God is deliverer'.*

**V11 'had the upper hand'** *I have used this expression to translate the Hebrew word which means 'prevailed' in the sense of winning the battle. Of course, only one side won the battle in the end, but*

because 'prevail' is not a commonly used word, the expression I have given makes the situation clear enough.

- V12 'one on each side'** I have simplified the text here which reads literally, 'this on one side and that on the other side'.
- V13 'with the sword'** The Hebrew expression is literally 'by the mouth of the sword', referring to the idea of the sword 'devouring' those it consumes. This is not how we speak about swords or battles, but it was the Israelite's way.
- V14 'as a means of remembrance'** This translates one Hebrew word in the original text which means 'a remembrance'. We do not use words quite like this to refer to objects by which we remember things, so I have translated the words with a phrase that makes this meaning clear. Some translations use the word 'memorial', but this word tends to be used exclusively for the remembrance of the dead (and this is not the primary purpose here), so I have not used this linguistic option.
- V16 'A hand upon the throne of the Lord'** This is what the Hebrew says. Some translations give this 'a hand upon the banner of the Lord ...' (NRSV), but this assumes that one consonant is written wrongly in the Hebrew text and I do not see the need to follow this line of translation. Others assume that hands are raised to the throne of the Lord as if in worship (NIV), but again, this is an assumption. Yet others suggest that this expression is a form of God swearing upon Himself (New American standard, and New King James) and yet again, this is an assumption.

## Going Deeper

### **The location of the battle**

If you read through chapters 16 and 17 of Exodus, you can become confused at the plethora of names both used within the stories, and the number of occasions when places are 'named'. It is best to remember that the names 'Sinai' and 'Horeb' are best considered as referring to the same general location, and that a mental picture of one single mountain is not helpful. Firstly, if you look up the references to these two words you will find that even in Exodus, they clearly refer to the same place, that is, where Moses met God and received the Law (for Sinai, see Ex 16:1, 19:1f. 24:16 etc., and for Horeb see Exodus 3:1f. 17:6, 33:6 etc.). Any attempt to suggest they are two different places is doomed to failure, and there is no harm to our understanding of God's Word in accepting that a place has more than one name (for example, Lake Galilee is called Lake Gennesaret in Luke 5:1).

Sinai and Horeb also refer to more than one solitary mountain peak in the desert. The region of the Sinai peninsula we are discussing has a number of mountain ranges and peaks, and it is best to think of the Biblical word as referring to the range of mountains towards the southern tip of the Sinai 'triangle'. It seems that the story in our passage today happens as the people of Israel travel down the side of this mountain range, gradually approaching the peak at which Moses will receive the final instructions from God about receiving the Law (Exodus 19,20). The stories we are reading clearly take place at differing places on the journey down the mountain range, and those named in the text are indeed different places, but long since lost in history. There are some theories about the whereabouts of places such as 'Elim' (Ex 15:27, 16:1f.), but no clear identification. The names have symbolic and spiritual meaning for us, and we should now look for this rather than location, because there is direct spiritual benefit for us in this quest.

### **The Amalek – a traditional enemy**

In a casual read, we might wonder why there is such animosity against the Amalekites. Amalek is stated as being a grandson of Esau (see references above), and the link is no accident. Trouble comes from familiar sources, as we so frequently discover in life, and this is a key feature of this story. The passage of Scripture we have read today indicates (together with the description of what Amalek did in Deuteronomy 25:18 – see above) that in common with the Edomites (other descendants of Esau), they harassed Israel for many years. Now, in verse 14 of our passage, we are told that the Lord promised to 'blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven'. This sounds rather extreme to us, unless we take notice of the spiritual significance of 'Amalek' in the way we have suggested.

In the Old Testament, the story of the Amalekites is interesting and to a certain extent it illustrates what is said here. Although Amalek were defeated, Israel did not entirely wipe out Amalek in this, their first ever battle (17:13). Later in Israel's history, you will discover that King Saul fought the Amalekites (1 Sam 15) and failed to exact on them the 'complete' sacred ban, or 'cherem' (the Hebrew name for complete destruction in war by dedication to God). As a consequence, the wrath Saul incurred cost him his kingdom, and in the very next chapter (1 Sam 16) Samuel anointed David King over Israel. Also, the young man who incurred David's wrath, decades later, by lying about the death of King Saul (claiming to kill Saul himself – see 2 Samuel 1) was himself an Amalekite. It is only when you place scripture together like this that you can perceive why David was so angry at King Saul's death. In the light of this ancient story of Israel we have read today, being

killed by an Amalekite was like being killed as a weakling, as a straggler following behind Israel. Of course, David would not have Saul described or remembered in this way.

### ***Details of the battle***

The battle against Amalek is characterised by Moses' dramatic stance above the battle on some crag of the Sinai / Horeb range, with his hands held up by Aaron and Hur (17:11,12). It is a dramatic picture. Some have suggested that Moses' hands held high were a sign of worship, and they connect this with the idea of the Lord as a 'banner' (17:15) to add weight to this. This, however, can only ever be a suggestion, because the text does not say this with any degree of clarity. Literary critics have suggested that the raising of the hands and lowering of them was some kind of symbolic imagery known only to people of ancient times, by which Moses controlled events on the field; but again, this is not what the story tells us. The emphasis is surely on that word 'support'. The interpretation I have given above is based on the idea of the support of Moses, and a close read of the passage reveals that not only did Aaron and Hur hold up Moses' hands; before they did this, they placed a stone under Moses so that he could sit down. The Hebrew words indicating that he was thereby 'supported' in his task (see verse 12); it is because of this support that Israel prevailed in a long battle that lasted all day, until 'sunset' (17:12).

The gestures of Moses may have been worshipful, but the story leads us more forcefully to the conclusion that they were an expression of Godly authority from a position of height and advantage. The whole battle is the story of the united, supported and strengthened resolve of God's people to act together for the common good. There is such a contrast here to the division and anger of the first story in chapter 17 of Exodus, one would think we were reading a different book of the Bible! A few verses earlier we read of the Israelites attempting to stone Moses, and now he, though weakened, is enabled to lead them to victory!

### ***Remembrance and recounting***

There have been and will always be debates about the balance between the writing of scripture and the retelling of scripture from the earliest of times. How much we now have as written stories once lived only in the hearts and minds of people is simply not known, but it is fascinating to find in this story of Exodus an instruction from the Lord to write down the story. To this day, the Bible remains that most well attested ancient document of all, with thousands of truly ancient copies in existence (though only a few going back to within centuries of when they may have been written), far more than other well accepted ancient documents of historic and cultural interest. This passage must come down to us as one of the earliest instructions ever recorded in the sacred writings of any people, in which the works of 'God' are to be recorded.

Of course, the one thing to be written down and recorded is this: 'I will utterly block out the memory of Amalek from under heaven' (17:14 – see discussion of this above). However, this only demonstrates the importance of this text as a definition of God's favour and blessing on His people, through whom He intended to work for the salvation of all. Note also that alongside the instruction to write this down, the Lord instructed that Joshua should be told. At this point in Scripture we do not yet know that Joshua will be the successor to Moses, though we could well assume from this that we are to presume this in Scripture, from here onwards.

### ***The banner***

When Moses built an altar and named it 'the Lord is my banner', he did not know the confusion he would create for further generations! The meaning of 'the Lord is my banner' is outlined above, but the fact is that this is the name of an altar, a place of worship, moreover, a place where sacrifices were made to God. There are a number of scenarios that can be invented to explain the name. Perhaps it reflects the fact that Moses was tired from holding his hands high, even with the help of Aaron and Hur, throughout a day of battle. The altar therefore indicates Moses' authoritative statement that the source of his authority to give the signs for war to Israel was the Lord God Himself. Throughout the early days of his leadership of Israel, Moses had to deal with the people failing to be clear about the difference between himself as their leader, and the Lord their God (see 17:1-7). By building the altar, Moses held high the 'name of the Lord', and declared his allegiance before the people.

The last verse (17:16) is genuinely confusing, because as the translation notes above explain, we do not know exactly what the Hebrew of this verse means, and most available Bible versions give very different translations. My own opinion is based on a close translation of the Hebrew as we have it, in which Moses says 'a hand upon the throne of the Lord ...' and then repeats his threat against Amalek (which is equivalent to a call for the unity of God's people). This makes sense as a pronouncement by Moses that anyone who touched the altar should remember that God's people have a common cause in their own protection against a common enemy. The 'banner' is the rallying cry for God's people to act in unity to defeat His enemies and their enemies. Unfortunately, it is easy to take this text and make it into a scriptural quote supporting the use of banners in church! The Lord may or may not have an opinion about this, but I doubt if it is expressed here!

## Application

One lesson we find within this passage is the common one of being careful to read the Scriptures as they are, and not as we wish them to be. Too often, people read this passage as if it is about 'banners' or about war in general, when in reality, it holds a basic message about protecting the community, especially the weak. We may be cautious about defining the 'weak' within our communities, but this should not prevent us from seeking to hold all God's people together for the good of our witness, and for the battle against God's enemies. In addition, those who have read these studies of mine in recent times will notice that yet again, the Bible has thrown up another text underlining the importance of the unity of God's people.

We should also recognise that this passage also says something about the support required for our leaders, especially the greatest of our leaders. Moreover, this support should be open and visible, and is essential at times of crisis. How often do we hear the cry within our churches, 'Oh, for a leader who will explain God's will to us in this situation today ...?' According to our passage, the best leadership is established, widely recognised, supported and authoritative.

Lastly, the emphasis on writing down the instructions of God is important even today. We live at a time when people often do not wish to have the bother of keeping records of meetings (minutes); this is sometimes describes as 'a waste of time when people know what they should be doing', or just 'a bore'. Records of church attendance or of membership are often not kept, and churches with very large numbers of attendees often have no idea of the identities of the individuals who attend. Indeed, many people come to large churches precisely because they know they will not be contacted, listed or followed up as people formally connected to the church.

How extraordinary! Our God knows each of us by name and counts 'the hairs of our head'; but we fight shy of keeping records and following up things with accuracy. The people and the things that happen to them today within the Kingdom of God are important, and we do well to consider it important to record what we do and act with care and precision in what we do for the Lord. This is not contrary to the work of the Spirit, it is part of the way He works to make sure that all are cared for. It would be wrong of us to allow 'the Amalek' (the enemy) to pick off those at the edges of our churches because we cannot be bothered even to know who they are or their needs!

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss how we can respond to the spiritual issues raised by this story, as outlined in the first part of the study.
2. How do we fight the spiritual battles of today, and how can we fight to prevent the 'weak' from being attacked?
3. What are the rallying calls of the church today, and are they scriptural or suitable for our age?

### **Topics covered by this text**

- *Battle with the Amalek*
- *The importance or remembrance*
- *The importance of record keeping*

### **Personal comments by author**

*I was not expecting to find the points I have outlined within this study. Most of the commentaries I have studied for this passage contained the information I have passed on, but the message about the importance of defending the weak is profoundly challenging to me, and I did not see it coming. You may or may not agree that it is an important part of this text, but you may agree that the general thrust of the church's evangelistic effort is often not focussed on making sure that those on the edges of our churches are drawn in. Indeed, I know that some evangelists teach that this is the hardest evangelistic field, and one not to be touched unless necessary! All people are of interest to God, especially those who have some interest in Him!*

## ***Ideas for exploring discipleship***

- *Think about who might be considered to be on the edge of the life of your church. How can they be ministered to in such a way that ensure they do not simply 'drop off' and cease to be a part of the life of the church?*
  - *Pray for evangelists and those who govern the mission and goals of the church. Pray that they will hear the cry of those who feel oppressed and are at the edges of the Christian church.*
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## **Final Prayer**

O Lord my God, remove from me everything that blocks the pathways of the Spirit and give me such faith and love that speed my soul towards Your will. Rescue me from my sins, so that I may offer a purer gift of service within the whole of my life; through Jesus Christ my Lord, I pray; AMEN

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