

EXODUS

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Exodus 17:8-19:8
War and Peace

We are going to Exodus 17 today.

In this story so far, the Israelites have been put to one test after another. They've run out of water twice, but God provided. They've run out of food, but God provided. They have had major conflict within their community and infighting, and some of the community members even sought the death penalty for Moses. And this was just in the first 2 months. And now...

Exodus 17:8 Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

So now there's a war. Coulda done without that.

There is never an end to the testing and the trouble, even on this path following God through the wilderness. They just never get a break.

And these things were written for our instruction: God works by moving his people through a trying wilderness toward a holy kingdom or holy city in His presence. He did that for them and He is doing that for us - our lives are like this wilderness wandering - we are constantly tested and tried, faith is challenged, and that doesn't end till we get there and see Him. So there's a lot for us in here.

And now the Israelites are tested by war. It seems that this horde of a million people has become threatening to the inhabitants of the land, so when they are camped at Rephidim, where the water came out of the rock, they are attacked by the Amalekites.

And the Amalekites have probably heard some of what God had done for these people in Egypt - word was spreading. A powerful caravan of people was coming into the land where the Amalekites lived and that was a threat. The Amalekites lived right near the land of Canaan, the land the Jews were calling the promised land. (And if someone

comes into my house and says, 'Ah, the house God promised us,' that would bother me - this is my house!)

Now the Amalekites have a choice: they can hear about the mighty works of God, they can believe those stories, and they can join up with what God is doing. Or, they can hear about the works of God, feel threatened by them because they rightly think they'll lose control of their lives, and try to stop what God is doing because it infringes on what they're doing.

Will they oppose God when He infringes on them? Or will they gladly join what God is doing? Because God always has welcomed the nations to Himself. His plan is that all the earth would be blessed through Israel - and that would happen as they saw that this nation had God as its Lord and as they said, "Us too!"

Psalm 22:27-28 "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you.28 For kingship belongs to the LORD,and he rules over the nations.

God's ultimate plan is that all nations would bow before Him, that all nations would have the Lord as their God. All the earth was going to be blessed through God's people. There wasn't going to be war for war's sake - the nations could get on board with what God is doing, lay down their sovereignty, lay down their desire to rule the world, and submit to God's rulership. Which would be for their good and peace.

Or they could say, "Nobody's gonna rule over me." And go to war with what God was doing.

And those are the two human responses to God. We hear the good news of Jesus, we hear the message that we can be made His sons and daughters, but it will require laying down the arms we've taken up against Him, turning from our own control of our lives, and yielding to Him. And we can continue in our natural state, which is war against Him, or we can let Him have the land, let Him have control, let Him work His plan, and yield to Him.

We're born in a natural state of war against God, but when we hear of His works, we're being offered peace, but the price is that we now have a Lord, a new King, a new Sovereign.

And often we'd prefer our independence.

Which was the option the Amalekites chose. They decided that they wanted to stop that work of God from infringing on their land, so they attacked.

Humanly speaking, this battle should be been no problem for the Amalekites. The Israelites don't know how to go to war. They've been slaves in Egypt, where the authorities were afraid of them. So they kept them from learning war, for sure. Two months out, they haven't had time for boot camp, so they don't know how to fight.

And the Amalekites were a strong band of people. There were warring tribes all throughout this land, so they were used to war. The Amalekites had domesticated camels, and camels can run at 45 mph, faster than horses.¹ So the Jews are sitting ducks.

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.

So in preparing for war, we meet a couple of new characters - Joshua, who ends up leading Israel after Moses dies. And Hur - who is on the leadership team in Israel. We don't know much about him, some historians think he was the husband of Miriam, Moses' sister. But the Bible doesn't say. His name just means "whitey" so he may have been the pale complected type - the kind of guy who goes swimming in a tee shirt and sun hat.²

And as the older statesmen, Moses, Aaron, and Hur go to the top of the hill to watch the battle below. And Moses goes with the staff of God in his hand.

Remember, this was the staff that rendered judgment from God. It turned the Nile into blood, it struck the rock where God took the blame for their conflict. It was the symbol of God's justice.

And here are a people, the Amalekites, attacking what God is doing. And to show that God prevails, here's what happened:

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² I think Jim Gaffigan made this observation about pale people.

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

So when Moses raised his hand, the hand with the rod, Israel won in the battle. When he lowered, Amalek started winning.

And as long as that staff of God's authority is held over Moses' head, God's people win. When it drops below Moses's head, they lose.

So God's people are attacked, and God judges those attackers. And as long as God is in authority, God's people win.

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.

So they win the battle, and God wants his people to remember this battle and learn some things from it:

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."

He has Moses write this down (probably here in the book of Exodus) so that the people will know something about the Lord. He's teaching them who He is in the wilderness.

When it says "The Lord is my banner" it is literally "The Lord is my signal pole"³ The signal pole in battle was like a flag pole that would hold different flags to direct the soldiers.

And so in saying, "The Lord is my signal pole," it was saying that God is the one who leads His people, who calls the shots, who directs them in battle. And that God is a God who is at war from generation to generation.

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And this is certainly not an attribute of God that gets much attention in our day, but one the Bible does come back to again and again:

Psalm 24:8 "Who is this King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle!"

God has been revealing himself as compassionate and patient, He has shown that He will take the judgment His people deserve. He is showing He is a provider. But He also shows that He is a God at war. There's going to be a perpetual war between the Lord and those who make themselves his enemies.

There's a feud that runs all the way through the Bible.

You see a feud on the first couple of pages where Cain kills Abel, only because Abel was righteous and pleases God. Then there's a feud in the womb between Jacob and Esau, Jacob being the one know would one day know God. And Jacob's feud was with his twin brother, Esau. Esau, according to Hebrews 12, was a godless man. He sold his birthright, forsaking his godly lineage, for some porridge. He married non-believing canaanite women, and was in many respect the enemy of God and what God was doing in the world.

And here his descendants, the Amalekites, show up, and they attack the jews - again because God's favor is on them.

And at the end of the battle, God says, "This battle is going to keep going from generation to generation."

And this is a pattern we can't miss because it speaks to what we should expect: the people of God have always had enemies in the world.

We need to beware the dangers of a martyrs complex, and we don't need to see persecution under every offense we experience. If you get pulled over and you get a speeding ticket, it's not because of a long war against God's people, it's because you need to slow down. Not every difficult boss or relationship is because you're a Christian. We don't want to be people who gravitate toward claiming the Christian victim position.

And, the war that we are in today isn't one that's fought with weapons. In the Old Testament, the people of God were defined by a place, a geography, and an earthly kingdom, so there were actual wars fought to define and defend that kingdom. Jesus

came and said the kingdom of heaven would work in and among all nations, there's no longer a physical kingdom of God on earth. And Jesus showed us how the battle is fought - by speaking truth, by works of great love and sacrifice, and by laying down our lives for enemies.

But we should not be surprised when the societies we live in are more against us than for us because of the ways that our faith makes us a distinct people.

And this is something I want us to be prepared for as a congregation. I think we have lived through the last iteration of church being cool in the USA - at least for the foreseeable future. (I'm no prophet.)

But even when we planted Grace Road ten years ago, a lot of the talk in the church planting community was how to make church palatable and relevant so that people would come to services, enjoy the experience, and find Jesus there. And the goal was mostly to not change the doctrine, but to repackage it. And the theory was that if you could make the room cool and the band just right, serve great coffee, and understand your culture, you could deliver the message in a way that made it contemporary and palatable. And for 40 years it seemed to go fine.

But we've now, I think, crossed over a threshold where if you want to be cool and palatable to the majority of the culture, you have to meaningfully change teaching of scripture. There are at least 5 major biblical teachings that are unpalatable to the culture - issues revolving around sexuality, we don't think all divorces are ok, we don't think all religions are valid, we don't think there's any other true way but Jesus, we don't think self-care and self-actualization are the highest goods, but rather laying down our preferences to obey our Lord and serve people. Our culture has a religion, and our religious tenets do clash with theirs.

And I think if we go farther than we've gone to make church cool, we'll be cutting too deep. And no longer calling people to repentance. No longer calling people to turn from anything to turn to Jesus. And we won't be able to apply grace to anybody because there's nothing we've called sin to apply it to. If everyone is fine and acceptable just as they are, there is no need for a cross, no need for redemption, and no opportunities for radical forgiveness.

Jesus calls his people to be the small minority of people in culture who are radically distinct.

Matthew 5:13 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

Salt is small - compared to the steak there's a much lower volume of salt. But it changes the whole steak with its presence because the salt is so distinct. Christians are a small and distinct part of any culture.

But with that distinction comes tensions. "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." In scripture, the story nearly begins with Cain killing righteous Abel. It continues with prophets sawn in two. At its pinnacle, they kill Christ. And He said we can expect opposition as well.

There are great tensions between the kingdom of God that is at work among us and the kingdoms of man. There have been since the beginning, and will be until He comes back and conquers fully. So we have to expect, in the meantime, that if we are biblically faithful, we will look bad, be thought of as crazy, be laughed at, we'll be said to be full of hate even if we consistently love, we'll be excluded from all of our culture's cool kids' tables, lose status, access, and relationships. But He is worth it.

We can expect that all that God is doing is constantly being opposed by those who prefer to be their own sovereigns. And we know it's out there, because we can sense it in us - even as followers of Christ we don't want to yield. We get ideas and practices and we get set in our ways and we pick certain areas where the Bible could never change our mind.

And it is so easy to have a worldview shaped by trying to fit the Bible in to what we already believe and want to do, as opposed to holding up the rod of God's authority over our lives, allowing Him to be the judge, and shedding and building beliefs because of what He says.

We know how we tend to drift, so we can expect that, unrestrained, that drift would create a people who are in opposition to so much of what we believe and sometimes to us.

Which means we need to be praying for one another. And praying for the work of God to continue and thrive, for His people to say, "The Lord is my signal pole" and draw strength and direction from the Lord, serving Him with incredible joy in a world at war

with Him. And we'll prayerfully ask God to bring a humble yieldedness to Him into our communities, that people would lay down their arms, and find their joy in Him. Which is actually what happens next:

18 Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the LORD had brought Israel out of Egypt. 2 Now Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, had taken Zipporah, Moses' wife, after he had sent her home, 3 along with her two sons. The name of the one was Gershom (for he said, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land"), 4 and the name of the other, Eliezer (for he said, "The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh"). 5 Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God. 6 And when he sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her," 7 Moses went out to meet his father-in-law and bowed down and kissed him. And they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent.

So Moses hears that his father-in-law, Jethro, is coming to town. We met Jethro in chapter 2. His other name is Reuel, which means friend of God. Moses met him about 40 years ago when he was fleeing justice in Egypt after killing a guy. Moses married one of Jethro's seven daughters and then worked for Jethro for 40 years as a shepherd.

And Jethro was a priest of Midian. He wasn't Jewish, but probably in some form worshipped the God of the Jews - he maybe had a watered-down, unclear and poorly defined picture of Him, but was still his priest somehow in Midian.

And Moses had sent his wife back home to him. He probably sent her away before the showdown with Pharaoh so she could be safe.

And Jethro, who is not part of the Jewish nation, heard about what God is doing, and has to hear more. So he drops in on Moses.

8 Then Moses told his father-in-law all that the LORD had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake, all the hardship that had come upon them in the way, and how the LORD had delivered them. 9 And Jethro rejoiced for all the good that the LORD had done to Israel, in that he had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians. 10 Jethro said, "Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. 11 Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people." 12 And Jethro, Moses'

father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices to God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God.

Look what happens in this conversation:

Moses tells Jethro the good and the bad: God has done some amazing stuff, and also that there has been incredibly hardship (verse 8). I'm sure Jethro has walked into a camp of tired people who just lost some people in battle, who have gone through hunger and thirst and rebellion, they never catch a break. But God has been good, and worked miraculously.

But verse 9, he rejoiced at the good God was doing. Yes, this community is a mess. It is unwieldy and struggling and impossible to rule. They're living out in the open air. There are tensions and one problem after another. But He rejoiced in what God was doing.

That was his first response: I know now that the Lord is greater than all Gods.

And to see this required eyes of faith, eyes that were far more affected by the evidence of God's presence than by the deficiencies.

But also, Jethro had as much to lose as the Amalekites did. He lived in Midian, he's a priest there, which means he also had political power. And these people are approaching his territory, too. He could lose as much as the Amalekites.

But instead of going to war with this God and His people who were clearly being blessed by God, he opened His eyes to the reality of what God had done. He saw how God was at war with those who treated His people with arrogance. And then he offers a sacrifice and eats bread before God.

So you have one nation that goes to war. Another that bows.

One that wants to eliminate what God is doing. Another that wants to be on the side of this God.

And to get on this God's good side there has to be a sacrifice. And all the sacrifices in the Bible point to the work of Jesus, who was the lamb of God that was slain for our sins so that we could be in the presence of God.

And there's Jethro feasting on bread in God's presence, just like we get to do when we see Jesus is the bread of life who brings us near to God.

And what a picture for us here: God is doing something in the world. He is raising up a unique people, people who are his sons and daughters. But to join them, to have our sins forgiven, we must repent. We must lay down our rights, all the weapons we take up against God, learn of His ways, accept the sacrifice that was made on our behalf.

So if you are here and not a Christian and willing to yield to God, you can trust in His son. Trust that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was a sacrifice made in your place. Believe that because He was perfect God among us that was sufficient. Accept that by faith, and turn to give Him the throne in your life (whatever you have to change, whatever that will cost), you can be forgiven and welcomed to the feast in the presence of God.

But its important to realize that God wasn't only eager to conquer other nations through the Israelites. He was also working to conquer the Israelites. To make them a distinct and unique people among the nations. He wasn't trying to raise up a carbon copy version of the Amalekites only one with His brand on it. He was making a unique people.

And He was using Moses to teach them the ways of God and to be a judge for them on all the issues that came up in their society so that in every instance he could teach them God's ways.

So Moses has quite the job.

13 The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. 14 When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" 15 And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; 16 when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws."

So Moses, apparently not a great delegator, has a line out the door to come see him every day. And every day from morning until evening he is hearing cases and judging them.

And you do want Moses doing this - He has clearly been led by God, God has used him specifically. Shouldn't he be the one to directly pastor and judge and care for all the people of Israel? So Moses is doing the work.

And in comes Jethro. The one who has just looked at the works of God and rejoiced with Moses and said, "God's works are so good, what God is doing is so good," now says, verse 17:

17 ... "What you are doing is not good. 18 You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you.

Jethro looks at Moses' google calendar and says, "This is nuts. You can't sustain this. You will wear yourself out, and that will wear everyone around you out. This is too heavy! There's a million people on a high-stress trip together and you're personally sorting out all of their disagreements?"

This is not the work of one man.

18 You are not able to do it alone. 19 Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, 20 and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. 21 Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 22 And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. 23 If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace."

So he says, "Get some help." Find men who can't be bought (who hate a bribe), who are trustworthy, who have demonstrated a fear of the Lord, and let them do the judging. You go to God, teach the ways of God, and handle the high-level complex stuff.

Exodus 18:24 So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. 25 Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. 26 And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. 27 Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

There's a lot to say here about organization, delegation, and ministry. One is that ministry work is hard and can wear someone out if you're not careful (it is real work), one is that we should delegate spiritual care down into small groups, one is that there isn't just one man who fears and knows God - there are lots of gifted folks who love the Lord who can serve and disciple and spiritually care for others. This stuff does underlie our philosophy of dividing into grace groups, of giving spiritual care through an army of leaders, of not having pastors do everything.

On top of that, you see incredibly humility in Moses. This is the guy that God is using to part a sea and smack a rock and get water out of it, the guy who can lift his staff and put the Amalekite army to flight, the guy who has had God single him out and talk to him to lead the people, who has had an audience with Pharaoh. And he takes the advice of his gentile father in law who just now figured out that God is above all other gods.

He was the humblest man alive, and he showed that humility here by assuming his father-in-law had something to teach *him*. He was eager to learn, was able to see, "This isn't working," was able to listen to someone who was genuinely trying to help. Good leaders are humble and listen, and know that all truth is God's truth and they are willing to put that truth into practice no matter where they find it.

But none of that is the big point here. (It's all secondary).

Look again at verse 19 and what they wanted to accomplish with all of this:

Exodus 18:19 Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God, 20 and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do.

The goal of this reorganization of Israel was so that they could be taught the statutes and laws and ways of God.

They were going to be a people saturated with God's word. A people made unique by believing the unique truths and following the unique ways laid out in the word of God. They were being prepared to be a people who were thoroughly taught the law of God so they could walk in it.

Because next up is Mt. Sinai - next they get the ten commandments. And if you look at what happens next:

Exodus 19 On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. 2 They set out from Rephidim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped before the mountain, 3 while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: 4 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; 6 and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." 7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."

God is raising up a people who know the voice of God, who obey it, who are a holy kingdom of priests. They are going to be called to be so submitted to God's law that they stand out as a holy nation in all the world.

Their whole reorganization of the community was so they could make sure God's word was known to everybody - from the highest among them to the least among them.

When God raises up a people, one of the defining marks that sets them aside as the people of God is that they are committed to obeying the teachings of God's word.

Matthew 28:18-20 "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Disciples, followers of Jesus, are learners - people who are learning all that Jesus commands and working to observe it. That's what disciples are.

God is still raising up a people who know his word and obey it.

And when we come to know Jesus, we are given the Holy Spirit, who enables an obedience far beyond what we see in these Israelites. They said, "All that God has spoken we will do." And then proceeded to not do it. They showed themselves to be enemies of God as well.

So Jesus came, as the True Israelite, and He did it all perfectly.

But still, God went to war with Him like He was an Amalekite. Jesus took our sins and rebellion on Himself on the cross so He could give us His righteousness.

But when we believe, we are made into the people of God, where we expect to see far more obedience than Israel had. Sure, we sin daily and need his forgiveness, we have constantly confess our sins, but Christians are, by definition, learning the ways of Jesus.

And Christians who refuse the ways of Jesus aren't Christians at all. We are people whose lives are ordered for receiving, learning, obeying, and changing around the word of God. If the bible can't change our mind about something, we aren't His, we're still on the other team. If the word of God has no place of authority over us, then we are not under God's authority but have his authority at war with us.

But in Christ, God calls us all to repentance, confession, holiness, and peace.

Scriptures Referenced:

Psalm 22:27-28 (Call to worship)

Exodus 17:8

Psalm 22:27-28

Exodus 17:9-10

Exodus 17:11

Exodus 17:12-13

Exodus 17:14-16

Psalm 24:8

Matthew 5:13

Exodus 18:1-7

Exodus 18:8-12

Exodus 18:13-16

Exodus 18:17-18

Exodus 18:18-23

Exodus 18:24-27

Exodus 18:19-20

Exodus 19:1-8

Matthew 28:18-20

Sermon Notes:

War and Peace
Exodus 17:8-19:8

I. The Long War Against God (Exodus 17:8-16)

II. The Peace that Is Possible (Exodus 18:1-12)

III. The People of Peace (Exodus 18:13-27)

For Discussion in Small Groups:

- 1) In what ways does the "long war against God" manifest itself in our daily lives? In what ways might we be tempted to fight it using the wrong means? In what ways might we exaggerate the conflict?
- 2) Who might you, like Jethro, help and encourage as they carry out spiritual labor? How?
- 3) What is the Bible's place in your life? Is there anything that it could never change your mind about?