

Exodus Chapter 17 v 8 - 16

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[0 : 0 0] in chapter 17 verse 8 and they're not moaning. In all the other cases there wasn't really much for them to complain about. God provided for them, God brought them what they needed, they didn't die of thirst or hunger or anything like that. There wasn't any great threat in one sense to their lives but here they are close to death. Here they are surrounded by or under attack from the Amalekite army. Now they're in real danger. Nobody is complaining. Nobody is moaning.

Nobody is saying, Moses, why have you brought us this place where we're being attacked? Why is that, I wonder? Not a sound, not a murmur, not a complaint. During the Second World War, so I'm led to believe, or reliably informed, there was a unity and a camaraderie that took place amongst the people of London and other cities when they were bombed by German planes. It was something that has not been known ever since and it's often referred to as the spirit of the Blitz.

During that time people put aside their petty differences, their selfish concerns. They helped each other. If a family had been bombed out of their home, neighbours would give them shelter, help them search through the ruins for their possession, to all sorts of selfless acts of kindness, courage, to people who up to that time had perhaps been even disliked, maybe just strangers.

The reason that is put behind that spirit of the Blitz is because they had a common enemy, a common foe. And whenever there is a common enemy, people are united. Divisions are put aside because they no longer turn on one another, but they turn on those who threaten them all.

And that's exactly what happens here. The reason why God's people, moaning and complaining as they were, and often are, were not complaining at this point in time was because they had a foe, a common enemy that was threatening all of them. And so again what we need to recognise first of all here is that God brought the Amalekites to attack God's people. As we've seen all the way through, it's God who's led them, hasn't he, through the wilderness. He led them by the pillar of fire and of cloud. He led them to a place where there was no water. He led them to a place where there was no food. He had a purpose in everything that he did. A purpose that was for their good. First of all, because he wanted to kill them of their petty grumbling. God led his people into a place of warfare so that they might overcome that grumbling spirit which they had, that they might not be always turning on one another and complaining. Sadly, as we find as we go later on, it returned once more. Secondly, God brought them into a place of danger and difficulty and of conflict because he wanted to prove to them his faithfulness. He wanted to show them that he was a God they could trust. And therefore, ultimately, his main reason was he wanted to enlarge their faith. There are people who know nothing of the Lord in Egypt. There are people who'd never experienced all the wonders that God had done for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, for Joseph and others.

[3 : 31] He wanted them to experience for themselves the reality of God's faithfulness. That's what being a Christian is. A Christian is somebody who doesn't just believe in their head but has experienced the faithfulness of God. They've put their faith in him and seen that that has turned a transforming effect upon them. It is that God has answered their prayers, that God has helped them, that God has sustained them, that God has provided for them. You can never be convinced into becoming a Christian.

You can never be argued into becoming a Christian. It has to be the experience of knowing the faithfulness of God. And my question to you is, have you experienced the faithfulness of God? You might believe in him, know about him, but have you truly believed in him? Now, the reality is, of course, that like the Israelites of old, if we are a Christian this morning, if we are part of the church of Jesus Christ, we also have a common enemy, a common foe. Whatever our background, whatever our personal needs or concerns, whatever our differences, all of us have trouble from an enemy. An enemy who fights dirty.

An enemy who attacks the weak and the infirm. An enemy who has no concern about the Queensbury rules or cricket. An enemy who attacks in whatever way he chooses. We read about that in Deuteronomy 25, how the Amalekites actually attacked the people of God in this episode. In Deuteronomy 25, it says this, verse 17, 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 attacked all who were lagging behind. They had no fear of God. So they came and attacked those who were the stragglers at the back.

And the enemy that we have is, again, a nasty piece of work. In 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 8, Peter writes this, your enemy, that's the Christian, your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians in chapter 6, that closing chapter, he goes at great length to talk about the spiritual battle that every Christian is engaged in, and how the devil, our enemy, fires flaming arrows at us.

[6 : 07] Talks about the armour that God has provided and our need to look to him. The question, of course, must be this, and it has been a question that's concerned people from ages, and even today, Christians as well, is this, why does God allow the devil to do these things?

We read, if you get the Barnabas magazine, or you get Open Doors, or other Christian organisations that support and help persecuted Christians, the question is often this, why, Lord, do you allow them to do these things to your people? Why do you allow persecution? Why do you allow the devil to work in such a way as he is the one who's behind these things? Why doesn't God just destroy the devil as he so easily could? Why doesn't he extinguish his power? One of the answers, there's no simple answer, but one of the answers surely is what we can draw from here as God's people are under attack.

There are several positive effects that God brings about through his people's suffering attack, through his people facing a common foe and an enemy, and the first of them is what we've been hinting at already, that through these things, God's intention is to unite his people, to unite his church, his local church, and all God's people. You see, the reality is that as Christians, we are already one people, we are united, we are one body, one church, and what God does through times of attack and through allowing Satan to do his work is to make that reality practical, to bring what is we are in spirit into what we are in action. So rather than looking at the things that divide us, and there are many things that we could look at to divide us, whether it's our age, our color, our nationality, our background, our education, our own preferences, rather than being taken up with these things, which often, sadly, the church of Jesus Christ is taken up with, what song should we sing?

What Bible translation should we read? How should we dress? And all these things, instead of being caught up with those things, we are united with one passion and desire to live for and serve God.

And so the constant theme throughout the Bible is one of illustrating that the church is united, that the church is united in diversity. So 1 Corinthians, it has large sections of Paul writing to a divided local church, who are falling out with one another all the time, taking one another to court. They all had their own particular hero preacher, as it were, as well.

[9 : 06] Paul goes to great lengths to teach that the church is one body made up of several parts. In the rest of the New Testament, church is likened to a building, we're thinking about that this evening in 1 Peter, containing many bricks, all built on one foundation, the Lord Jesus, or one flock with numerous sheep, all being cared for by one good shepherd. You see, one of the weapons of mass destruction that Satan uses against the church over and over and over again is to promote division. We all know the saying, divided we fall, united we stand. The devil knows that only too well. And he delights to divide believers within a local church and between believers worldwide.

So we are united because we are united to Christ. That's what a Christian is, somebody who has placed their faith in Jesus Christ and has experienced the Spirit of God bringing them into that unity, that oneness with him. And because we are all one with him, then we are all one with another.

So Jesus' illustration of himself as the vine and we are the branches. Every branch is connected through the vine. Now that spiritual reality that we know is something that takes work. It takes effort.

Though we are united, sin in our hearts, the devil behind us, all are working and mitigating to division. So we need to make an effort. Here's what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12.

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit, so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free, or slave or free, and we were all given one Spirit to drink. And so the body is not made up of one part, but of many. God allows difficulties, trials, attacks to come to his church for the purpose of uniting us in our actions. Let's get back to this story again for a moment, because we see there how unity in diversity brought the victory. Unity in diversity brought the victory.

[11 : 44] We see there were several different groups of people all involved in that day. First of all, most obviously, of course, there was Joshua and the men who made up the army. They were at the spear point. They were at the forefront of the battle. They were those who had swords and weapons. They were those who were engaged in battle with the Amalekites. Verse 9, Moses said to Joshua, choose some of our men and go up to the fight. Now, we know there was probably around about 600,000 men.

Not all of them went to the fight, and certainly the women and children go to the fight, but a large number of whom we're not told the exact amount. They were one group, fighting, active, able men.

Then, of course, we have a second smaller group, which we're told of, who were Moses, Aaron, and Hur, who were up on the hilltop. Verse 10, so Joshua fought the Amalekites, as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And although they weren't in the midst of the battlefield, per se, verse 10 tells us that Moses held up his hands with the rod, the staff of God in his hands, and that by that, it had a very important effect upon the gaining of the victory.

Verse 11, as long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning. Whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. Something, we'll come to it in a moment, had an effect. They were engaged in the battle in a different way, but through their efforts, through their work, the victory was gained. Then, of course, there was another large part, in fact, probably the largest part of the people who were in the camp. They were those who were apart from the battle, but, of course, they were not disengaged. They had to prepare food for the soldiers. They had to look after the wildlife, the cattle and the flocks. They had to take care of the affairs of the home and of the families. Every single person was engaged. So, getting back to the last war again, the battle was not only fought overseas, wasn't it, by the soldiers. There was a great move at home for everyone to do their bit.

There were banners and posters, dig for victory. There was this essential element in which everybody contributed to the war effort. And so, again, in the church, that is the unity that we have is to be expressed in diverse ways, in different areas of service, according to our gifts and abilities.

[14 : 34] It's one of the points that Peter makes very plain when he writes in his letter, his first letter, chapter 4. We'll get to this eventually in the coming months. This is what he says, verses 10 and 11. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ, to him be the glory and the power forever and ever. At this point, Peter's making a very important point. He's showing that every single believer is gifted. Every single believer has something to contribute. And one of the things that can be unhelpful in the church is when we disparage our own gifts or the gifts of others, when we don't feel that we've got anything to contribute. Or, sadly, as we know does happen, and we are not above any of these things, we complain about others in the things that they do because they don't do it our way or to our standard or whatever it may be. But here's the wonderful thing. God wants each of us to give, to serve, to contribute in the midst of what is a spiritual battle. Many of you who are church members will know that at our last meeting and for the last couple of meetings, members' meetings, we've been talking about establishing church teams. Now, already there are a lot of people engaged in the life of the church, a lot of people who are serving and involved. But one of the reasons for establishing church teams, and they're beginning to come together now, is that we want to bring similarly gifted people working together in areas of their own skill set and ability. So, we're going to have teams to do with pastoral visiting, teams for catering, communication, for finance, for fabric, and other things as well.

And the desire and the longing behind all this is that every one of us, whether we're a church member or whether we're a believer who worships here, that we can become part of one of those teams.

And I would encourage you very strongly to think about, what is it that God wants me to do? What is it that I can contribute to? Where have you gifted me, Lord? Now, again, recognizing that just us in that battle, there were those who really had the strength and the energy to get down into the midst of it. Others who stood by very supportive roles. Others who did things which you might think, well, that's a bit mediocre. They made the cups of tea. That's not important. That is important.

They did the catering. That is important. They cleaned the premises. That is important. And we've got to get away from this idea that somehow there is a level of importance. Let me say this to you again and again. I am not the most important person in this church. Okay? I'm not.

I'm the best paid. I'm not the most important in this church. That's because I'm the only one who gets paid in this church. It's not me. And it's not the elders. And it's not the church offices. And it's not the members. There's no sense in which we or some person is more intrinsically important than the other. As Paul pointed out, the foot needs the hand and the hand needs the mouth and the eye needs the nose. And whether you're a nose or an eye or a foot, many of us don't want to be feet, do we? Because they're a bit smelly and they bear all the weight. But they're necessary.

[18 : 23] Let me encourage you to think seriously about these things. And about if you're approached, as you may be about a church team, or if you're not approached, let me ask you to ask, what can I do?

Where can I serve? Speak to myself. Speak to one of the elders or somebody else who can help you with that. So they're in a battle. And it's united them to work together. The second thing as well, and we've hinted at it already, is this. God has brought about this battle to unite them in their faith and to unite us in our faith, in our trust, our faith in the one who has the power to win the battle. See, in spite of all that I've been saying and all that I'm saying I believe in, our confidence, our assurance, the future of the church does not depend upon any persons or person in the church.

It depends on the Lord. Our faith, his confidence is not in ourselves, but in him. He's the one who accomplishes. He's the one who brings the victory. And it's for that reason in verse 15 that Moses built an altar and called it, the Lord is my banner. What is he doing? He's acknowledging that it was the Lord who did it. It wasn't Joshua with all of his skill as a soldier, all the other men who were there. It wasn't Joshua, sorry, it wasn't Moses and her and Aaron's faithfulness. It was God who did it.

They fought under his colors. They fought in his name for his glory. But he was the commander-in-chief. He was the general. He was the one that won the victory, just as he'd done before when they faced the armies of Egypt. Remember, as they stood by the Red Sea, what did God say to them through Moses?

Do not be afraid. The Lord will fight for you. And so, yes, we do have a terrible enemy in Satan. We have one whose desire and delight is to divide, to overthrow, to make us ineffective, to cripple, to undermine Christian believers and the gospel. But he is against, not us, against God himself.

[20 : 33] The fight is God's. We are part of that privileged number who serve and work with God, co-workers with Christ, co-laborers with him. That brings the question then, what is this, what's Moses doing, waving his staff above his head? Do you know the one thing that came to my mind, shows how simple I am.

I thought, wouldn't he have terrible pins and needles when he put his hands down again? Can you imagine, if you ever lifted your hands up, he had them up for hours. I bet he couldn't use them for the rest of the day. Terrible pins and needles as the blood came flowing through.

You probably thought of more spiritual things than that. But what's going on? Why has Moses got his arms raised in the air? Why is it necessary that he keeps his arms up? Why is it that when his arms came down, the Amalekites were winning? Well, we know, of course, that the staff of God, which he held above his head, was that symbol of the very power of God itself. When Moses was in Egypt, when there were the plagues to be administered, what was it that touched the Nile, that made it turn to blood? The staff. What was it that changed into a snake before Pharaoh? The staff.

And when they crossed the Red Sea, what was it that was waved across the Red Sea? It was the staff. It was always the staff. It was the symbol of God's power working for the good of his people.

Of course, it was a bit of stick. It had no power in itself. But it was that symbol given to Moses that God would empower him and enable him to see the victory.

[22 : 10] When they wanted water from the rock, what did God tell Moses to do? Strike it with the staff in his hand. And so now when Moses is lifting up the staff into the air, he is symbolizing his trust and faith in God's power.

God's power to enable the Israelites to win the battle. When the staff was lowered, it was a symbol in one sense that their faith was not in God, but in themselves, which is why they lost.

I'm sure that him being on the hill was so that Joshua and the army could see him there. And they could see that when the staff was raised, there was that symbol. Their confidence was in God and his power to keep them.

And when it came down and they couldn't see it, then they lost hearts. The whole purpose with Moses and Aaron and her on the hill was to remind God's people that they weren't to trust in themselves or have confidence in their skills, but to delight and lean upon the Lord their God.

Their victory was their banner, the Lord. He does the same today. Yes, we are in a world which is antagonistic.

[23 : 34] Atheism is militant. False religions are prevailing again and again. When there is indifference in our society, when churches sadly are closing, when men and women are going astray in sin and false teaching, in all these things we have an enemy behind it all, but we need not be afraid.

We need not be discouraged. We need not be downhearted. Because our strength and our victory depends upon God and not us.

As long as our eyes are upon him, as long in one sense as our arms are lifted up in prayer and we are trusting him by his power to keep, sustain and bless, then we have nothing to fear.

God is our banner. God is the one who works. God is the one who will bring this church and every other church that trusts in him through trials, battles, difficulties. He's the one that is able to continue to unite us in spite of the differences that we have.

He's the one who's able to deliver us from the murmurings and groanings that keep rising up in our hearts and minds. That's why when Paul writes to those believers in Ephesus at the end, before he even begins to talk about the spiritual warfare, he says to them, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.

[24 : 54] For we have a battle. We have the victory, dear friends, as Christians. We know we have the victory because we know that when Christ comes again, Satan will be vanquished.

With the breath of his mouth, God will destroy Satan. We know that. But dear friends, we have the victory now as well. Because Jesus is Lord. Paul, as he speaks about the great enemy, which is death itself, says at the end of 1 Corinthians 15, but thanks be to God, he gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We know that the devil is allowed to work, just as he was allowed to work in Job's life, because God has a purpose in it for the good of his church. But we don't take lightly the battle we're in.

We're not to think of it as being something inconsequential. The greatest battle that's going on in the world and in humanity is not in Syria or Iraq or Nigeria or anywhere else.

It is spiritual and we are engaged in it. There's a call to arms, dear friends, as church people, as Christ people.

[26 : 06] There's a real threat and there's a real battle. We need to be engaged together with one heart, with one mind, with one purpose.

We need to work together with the gifts that we have, that God has given us as one people, with one mind and one heart, to fight together in the Lord's strength that he provides. Prayer, service, obedience and courage.

As Paul wrote to Timothy at the end of his first letter, fight the good fight of faith. Pray for one another, dear friends.

Pray for this church, if you're visitors. Pray for me as I pray for you. Work together, serve together. Let's see that those things which the enemy would use to divide us are actually those things given to help us, that we might be one body with one work and with one goal.

Let's sing together as we close a fantastic hymn. It's going to come up on the screen above me here. Oh, church arise and put your armor on.

[27 : 27] Amen. The God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

To him be the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen.

Gary.