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 Exodus 17:8-16
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PERFECTING OUR HAND IN BATTLE

SERIES: BASIC TRAINING – SPIRITUAL SURVIVAL CAMP

Over the past several weeks we have been traveling with Israel in the desert as the nation makes its way from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. *Basic Training: Spiritual Survival Camp* is the title of this series. God equips his people with five essential survival skills that become “types” of our spiritual formation. These are not optional skills, but vital disciplines which every disciple must master so as to be attentive to the voice of God daily. Neglect them, and you will die in the wilderness; master them, and you will thrive. We have seen that the first three skills focused on Israel’s basic appetites of thirst and hunger. In a land where there was no food or water, God taught Israel to look to heaven daily for her most basic needs of bread and springs of life. The New Testament language for mastering these appetites is, “setting your mind on the things of the Spirit and not of the flesh,” or, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal 5:16).

Today the focus takes a dramatic shift from the kitchen table to the battlefield. We are instantly thrust from the quiet waters that restore our souls, to an unexpected call to arms, deployment of troops, and a fiercely fought battle. Before Israel has had a chance to cool off and leisurely break camp, she is viciously ambushed from the rear by a fierce band of nomadic fighters who bear the name “Amalekites” (found seven times in the text). Unfortunately for Israel, it is time for war. With precious little time to prepare (a mere 12 hours), she must master the secret for victory, or perish. In this little vignette of nine verses the narrator lays down a foundation stone for spiritual conflict which will prove foundational for the rest of Biblical theology on the theme of “holy war.” The key word of the text is the term “hand” (*yad*), found seven times. As the number seven is symbolic of perfection, we could title this chapter of our spiritual survival manual, *Perfecting Our Hand in Battle*.

The text will address key issues in spiritual warfare:

1. Who is our enemy?
2. When and where are we prone to attack?
3. What strategy should we employ?
4. What are the key ingredients to victory?
5. What are our post-op responsibilities?

The narrator has carefully constructed the text in a concentric pattern, where the center reveals the turning point and the key to victory (v. 12).

Literary Outline

- A Amalek comes to fight against Israel in Rephidim (8)
- B Moses gives the strategy to Joshua (9-10)
- C Moses’ inability to keep his hands raised on the mountain brings defeat in the valley (11)
- X Corporate help creates steady posture (12)
 - a Moses’ hands are heavy

b A stone is placed under Moses to support his weight

b' Aaron and Hur support his hands

a' Moses’ hands are “steady” until the sunset

C' Joshua overwhelms Amalek in the valley (13)

B' The Lord commands Moses to inscribe a memorial and recite it to Joshua (14)

A' God’s vow to have war with Amalek for every generation (15-16)

I. The Strategy for Battle (17:8-10)

A. Unprovoked Attack (17:8)

Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. (17:8 NASB)

Before Israel can break camp and continue her journey to Mt. Horeb, she is attacked by the warlike Amalekites. These were a nomadic people descended from Jacob’s brother Esau. Amalek, one of six sons of Eliphaz and a grandson of Jacob, is listed as one of the chiefs descended from Eliphaz in the land of Edom (Gen 36:15-16). Due to the limited amount of food and water in the wilderness, their tribes ranged over a wide area. It may be that the presence of a large population of people wandering in the vicinity of their borders (cf. Gen 14:7, where Kadesh was said to be controlled by the Amalekites) was seen as a dangerous threat to their existence, so they attacked. As in the case of Hitler’s rise to power in Nazi Germany, the terrible ambition and vehement resolve of this people are kept hidden from the first-time reader. The viciousness and cruelty of the attack is later described in Deuteronomy:

“Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary; and he did not fear God.” (Deut 25:17-18)

The merciless strategy of the Amalekites was to attack Israel when she was most vulnerable (“faint and weary”), and at her weakest point (the women, children and elderly who could not keep up in the intense heat). This kind of unwarranted attack by the Amalekites upon the weak continued throughout the reigns of Saul (1 Sam 15:33) and David (1 Sam 30:1-2). Such an act provoked disgust and outrage. It evoked the memory of Pharaoh, whose rule seemed threatened by the growing population of Israel, so that he aimed his attack at her helpless male children. Amalek personifies evil forces that, driven by extreme paranoia, attempt to thwart the promises of God by annihilating his people. Later this strategy came dangerously close to success in the story of Esther, when Haman the Amalekite plotted the annihilation of the entire Jewish race. Just as in the book of Exodus, it took the courage of a woman who, on the very day of execution, was willing to risk her life—“if I perish, I perish” (Est 4:16)—to turn the tide of Israel’s destiny.

With the coming of Christ, the veil of these evil forces is removed. They are identified not with any race or people, but with “spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12), whose ruler is the devil. Like the Amalekites, this angelic being and his demons are bent on our annihilation. They will attack us at our weakest moments and where we are most vulnerable. The timing of the Amalekite attack occurs just prior to Israel’s encounter with the living God on Mount Horeb, the place where she will receive his word. Such timing is illustrative of when we too are prone to attack. God’s word, which is divinely powerful (Eph 6:17), is the weapon that destroys the devil’s grip on mankind, and thus it provokes his greatest fear and hostility. We ought therefore to anticipate spiritual attacks prior to our encounters with God in his word.

B. Deployment to the Valley and the Mountain (17:9-10)

So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek tomorrow.¹ I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. (17:9-10)

But this imminent danger seems to pose little threat to Moses. He appears more composed against an attacking army than when he was mobbed by his own people. Having drunk from the heavenly waters at Massah, he seems to have been steadied with God’s supernatural presence. As the leader of this nation, he calmly and methodically gives the orders to Joshua to choose and deploy his troops into the valley to fight Amalek the following day. This is the first mention of Israel’s future leader, who will take over after Moses, and it comes just after God provided “water from the rock.”² The meaning of his name, “Yahweh is salvation,” is striking to the sensitive reader at this critical hour of Israel’s survival.

While Joshua is deployed with his troops to engage the enemy in the valley, Moses will position himself on the top of an adjacent hill. Unlike a typical spectator, however, Moses will play a significant role in the outcome, for in his hand he holds God’s miraculous staff, the one that brought Pharaoh to his knees. We can picture Moses on top of the hill with his staff, while Joshua is sent to fight in the valley below. The question the narrator probes us with is this: What will be the relation between the two for the outcome of the battle? Who holds the key to victory in “holy war,” the general or the prophet?

II. The Initial Battle: Inconsistent Success (17:11)

So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. (17:11)

The battle commences the next morning, with Joshua up at the crack of dawn, carrying out his orders in complete obedience. This first portrait of Joshua in faithful obedience will be the trait that dominates his character over his entire life, making him a rare example of unblemished integrity in the Old Testament. While he courageously engages the enemy in the valley, Moses stands on the top of the hill, raising the staff in his hand toward the heavens. Though we might think the battle lay in Joshua’s hands, in reality, success depends on Moses’ hand. It was not the strength of the sword that determined who prevailed, but the strength of Moses’ hand holding up God’s staff. Whenever Moses’ hand was held up, Israel prevailed, but when he grew weary and let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. So it is not the warrior who fights in the valley, but God’s representative

who sits high above the fray with his upheld staff, who determines the outcome of the battle.

What do Moses’ raised hands represent? Some commentators interpret this as prayer, but there is no mention of prayer in the text (this would make the outcome of the battle dependent on our constancy). Prayer is obviously vital in warfare. Paul would later write to the Ephesians, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Eph 6:18). But in this particular instance, the symbol of the outstretched staff is a much larger reality. It speaks of the very presence of God, mediated through Moses, and it works only when it is outstretched. As Childs writes, “In Exodus 17 the hands are the instruments of mediating power, as is common throughout the Ancient Near East.”³ So we learn that everything in this battle depends on God’s presence, mediated through his servant Moses (Exod 4:16-17).

So now with the focus on Moses, we wonder if he can remain steadfast. The battle starts well, but Moses is no longer in his prime. As the day wears on he cannot maintain his outstretched posture indefinitely. Gymnasts are required to hold their strength positions a mere three seconds for success, yet Moses had to maintain his pose all day! Even alternating his hands is of no avail. He is finally forced to drop his staff for periods of rest. As his hands rest by his side, the momentum of the battle changes dramatically. This reminds me of the frustrated football fan being treated to the excruciating sight of watching a substantial lead built up over the first three quarters evaporate in minutes. How will Israel survive when God’s representative, who mediates God’s presence to his people, cannot maintain his posture? How will we survive?

III. The Turning Point In Battle (17:12-13)

A. Mutual Support and Creative Initiative (17:12)

But Moses’ hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. (17:12)

Verse 12 marks the turning point in the story. In a beautifully arranged chiasmic structure (a, b, b’, a’), the narrator presents a detailed look at the solution to the problem:

a Moses’ hands were *heavy*

b A stone placed under Moses to *support* his weight

b’ Aaron and Hur *support* his hands

a’ Moses’ hands were “*steady*” until the sun set

Moses had wisely not attempted his task alone; he had taken support with him to the top of the high hill. Beside him were his brother Aaron, and Hur, who now become very resourceful to see what is at hand to support the “heavy” hands of their leader. First, they find a stone to use as a chair to rest Moses’ tired legs; then they themselves stand underneath each of his arms, providing support for the staff. In this way Moses’ “heavy” hands become “steady” hands (*emunah* “steady,” “faithful,” “reliable”), and he is able to maintain this outstretched position for the rest of the day. What an amazing rallying point this must have been for Israel’s troops in the valley. As they view the raised staff they are energized with God’s power. The momentum changes, builds and accelerates non-stop until the day is over.

Janzen makes the interesting suggestion that this picture of Aaron and Hur under the arms of Moses anticipates the dual roles of Israel's priesthood and elders who will continue to mediate the life of God to his people.⁴ Whether or not that is the case, we can be confident that the narrator is telling us that on that day it took mutual cooperation and resourcefulness in leadership to mediate God's continued presence to the people. A wonderful combination of human and divine energies eventually secures the victory. We find the same truth illustrated in the life of David when he was hiding from Saul in the wilderness. Jonathan risked his life to seek him out and encourage him. The text says that Jonathan went to David at Horesh and "strengthened his hand on God" (1 Sam 23:16).

As Aaron and Hur gave aid to Moses, I too have come to see how the presence of God is mediated through a multitude of gifts when one is under severe attack. Several years ago, I felt like the devil was trying to annihilate me. Over several months I felt a non-stop oppression. Finally, after trying many things with little success, I was at the end of my resources. I took a three-day prayer retreat and poured out my soul out to the Lord to end the battle. I gathered some small stones and built an altar, and waited. Shortly afterwards I received a call from a good friend, my "Aaron." She told me that while praying for me she had the sense that I was isolating myself in the wilderness. I used to go there to meet with God, she told me, but now I was living in isolation for self-protection. She said that God had impressed upon her that if I came out of isolation, my friends would be vital in the process of my healing. Her words proved true. God used a multitude of people to strengthen my grip on him. The oppression lifted, and I felt the presence of God in new and fresh ways answering my prayers again.

B. Overwhelming Victory (17:13)

So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword. (17:13)

The impact of Moses' "steady" hands was immediately felt in the valley. Joshua "overwhelmed"⁵ Amalek with the edge of the sword. This is the first instance in which Israel used the sword against an enemy. Earlier at the Red Sea, though she was fully armed, she was told to "stand by and see the salvation of the LORD" (14:13). This was to teach Israel that it was God's battle and he would fight for his people. Now that Israel has visualized "dependence," she discovers it takes creative, trustworthy and energetic human leadership, combined with courageous military prowess, to defeat her enemies. Yet all is still done in dependence upon God. Unlike the Exodus, the full effect of Moses' staff does not happen instantly; it takes a full day of determined effort to secure the victory over the opposition. Fretheim suggests that "the difference in the use of the staff on this occasion is probably determined by the fact that the object of its use is a human endeavor rather than a natural occurrence. In the other cases, various effects in the natural order were immediately coordinate with the use of the staff; human beings are apparently viewed as less tractable (cf. Josh 8:18)."⁶

As it was with Israel against the nations, so it is in the church when battling against demonic forces. Victory doesn't happen instantly, as is evident by Paul's repeated exhortation to believers in Ephesus to "stand firm" in the midst of the battle:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil...Therefore, take up the

full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. (Eph 6:10-13)

After the victory is secured, Moses still has some very important responsibilities to carry out.

IV. Post-Op Responsibilities (17:14-16)

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." Moses built an altar and named it The LORD is My Banner; and he said, "The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation." (17:14-16)

(or, v. 16a read with JPS)

He said, "It means, 'Hand upon the throne of the LORD!'"

Last month, my wife and I visited Washington D.C. and spent several days touring many of the war memorials around the capitol. Memorials are extremely important to a nation's moral fiber. They preserve honor, stimulate courage, and keep the price of freedom in full view from generation to generation. What I found especially inspiring were the inscriptions in stone of the reflections of military leaders who had withstood and endured the horrors of war. Reflections following war can be more significant than the battles themselves. The most compelling for me was in the Holocaust Museum. After you make your way down through several floors of horror that cannot even be named, you exit by a single stone inscription. On it are the words of Elie Wiesel, a survivor of Auschwitz, who made a vow to never forget:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.⁷

Following Israel's victory over Amalek, God commands Moses to write down in a book or scroll a divine curse on Amalek, just as generations earlier God told Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12:3). Because of this unprovoked and vicious attack by Amalek, when Israel's future was hanging in the balance, God takes an oath to blot out Amalek's memory, meaning that as a people they will lose their "name" (their posterity), and thus cease to exist. Survival for Israel would always entail conflict but, as Alter writes, "distinctions are made among enemies, and Amalek here becomes the very type of the ruthless foe that seeks to annihilate Israel. This nation, then, became the enemy of God Himself, Who pledges its utter destruction."⁸

God's words are not only divinely powerful, they also carry with them a weight of responsibility. Once the curse is written down, God's irrevocable resolve is to be impressed upon Joshua, who will be Israel's next leader, responsible to continue the fighting. But to ensure that neither Joshua nor any other future leader attempts to do battle in his own strength, Moses builds an altar and inscribes in stone the secret to his success: "The LORD is my banner." In the

ancient world, a banner was hoisted on high ground as a visible signal and rallying point for troops. For Moses, God was his rallying point, his sanctuary, and his entire focus during the battle. Victory was not achieved because Joshua was a great military strategist; it was achieved because God was among his people, made possible by Moses' dependence. This was God's battle, his initiative and victory, not man's.

The scene is sealed with God's oath, "The LORD has sworn." This phrase is difficult to interpret because the meaning of the final term (*kes*) is unknown. "With a slight change, one might read *nes* for *banner* (as in the RSV), or *kisse'* for *throne* (as in the NIV). The whole clause reads, literally, 'because a hand against (or upon) the throne (or banner) of Yah.'"⁹ The image is either one of Moses' hand reaching up to God's throne, or of God himself taking a vow by placing his hand on his throne. Whichever meaning one chooses, the ultimate message is clear: Those who seek to thwart God's purposes by annihilating his people will themselves fall under a divine curse. What they will find is that, rather than confronting a human army, they will have provoked a holy God into battle, and this God will see the fight to its very end. Thus God's people who find themselves in the midst of overwhelming attacks need never despair or doubt God's ability to save. As in the case of Moses, God has always provided a human mediator to bring his very presence into the battle. Though we must engage the enemy and endure to the end, we are to know that the outcome is determined not by what we do in the valley but by what is happening on the heavenly hill. The memorial serves still another function, as it is God's answer to Israel's earlier accusation, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Now in the aftermath of victory, the answer is etched in stone. Sometimes life serves as a better teacher than open rebuke.

V. Modern Memorials of Spiritual Warfare

As we engage in intense spiritual battles and by faith endure to experience the victory, we too must not neglect our post-op responsibilities. Following significant victories, we must take time to reflect on the secrets to our success, and give glory to God by erecting memorials of faith to pass on to the next generation. As in the case of Israel's battle with Amalek, we must raise high the banner which secured the victory and faithfully recount to a generation yet unborn the key elements to our survival. What then should we memorialize?

First, we must never downplay the danger that exists in the world. Our supreme enemy, the devil, hates us and seeks to annihilate us. No child should grow up naively thinking the world is a friendly place. Believers will endure severe attacks each time they attempt to advance in their faith, and in some cases this could lead to martyrdom (Rev 20:4).

But secondly, we must also remember that because the devil seeks to destroy God's purposes in the world, God himself has brought him under an irrevocable curse, confining him to his belly to perpetually "eat dust" (Gen 3:14). This means that an attack against us is an attack against the holy God—and that unleashes all his wrath and power. So even though we must engage and do battle with the enemy, God pledges his presence and his ultimate victory.

Thirdly, we must never forget that every victory over these demonic hordes comes not because of our strengths or abilities to do battle, but because of the work of our divine representative whose hands remained outstretched for three hours on Golgotha's hill. While God turned his back behind a dark cloud, evil was allowed to exhaust itself upon the Son. This is our greatest memorial and altar. The cross was the D-Day of God's war with evil, the ultimate battle, for at Golgotha, God "disarmed the rulers and authorities," and "made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him" (Col 2:15). Since that time we have been engaged in a war of liberation, invading the oppressive death camps and proclaiming release to the captives. And while our battles rage in the valley, our divine representative resides in heaven at the right hand of God, interceding for us. It is his prayers, the Father's love, and the life of the Spirit that grant us the victory. Therefore all glory for our victories must go solely to him.

If our children are ever tempted to ask, "Is the Lord among us or not?" may it be our supreme privilege to give them a tour of our sacred memorials.

1. *tomorrow* – "The Masoretic cantillation marking places 'tomorrow' at the beginning of the next clause, which makes the adverb a modifier of when Moses will take up his station, but it probably makes better sense as part of the instruction to Joshua about when he will be fighting." Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004), 413.

2. Sailhamer notes that "within the narrative strategy of the Pentateuch, God's chosen leader, whether 'king' (Deut 33:5) or priest, are thus closely associated with the 'rock' which brings life to the people." John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 279.

3. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 315.

4. Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (BCBC; Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 210.

5. On this term "overwhelmed" or "disabled," Robert Alter writes: "Several commentators have observed that the unusual verb here, *halash* (evidently derived from a root that means 'weak') has a punning echo in Deuteronomy 25:18, where the Israelite stragglers attacked by Amalek are referred to as *nebeshalim* (the same root with a reversal of the last two consonants)." Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 414.

6. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 192-193.

7. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), 32.

8. Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 415.

9. Janzen, *Exodus*, 211.