

FAITH KEEPS ON PRAYING

Eleventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Living by Faith* from Exodus 17:8-16
“*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 the one on the other. Thus his hands ere steady until the sun set. So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword.*” Exodus 17:12-13

My son woke me on Friday morning with the words, “Dad, did you hear about Ted Haggard?” It was a rude way to begin the day. On the way home from Washington more information trickled in from the radio. Ted Haggard has been the pastor of a 14,000 mega-church in Colorado Springs, and president of the National Association of Evangelicals. You and I are part of the 30 million member NAE because our denomination is affiliated with that body. According to a homosexual prostitute in Denver, Ted Haggard paid him for sexual favors over the past three years and purchased the illegal drug, methamphetamine.

Haggard denies most of the allegations and has another version of the relationship, but who knows at this point what is truth? The result is that Ted Haggard has resigned his leadership positions. Some are celebrating another evidence of Christian hypocrisy. The church of Christ is wounded again by the apparent moral failure of a high profile leader. Today should be a day of mourning for those who love the Lord Jesus.

Yet, you and I should not to give way to despair. Nor should our faith in God be shaken. Instead, we should renew our determination to be faithful to Christ. The church is constantly under assault. And there will always be casualties. Sometimes it’s someone big. Sometimes it’s closer to home. But God isn’t deterred. His plan is certain to be fulfilled. Today I want to talk with you about how we can avoid defeats and how we may win when the battles of life overtake us. Turn with me to Exodus 17, beginning with verse 8. We will look at this passage in three parts. **1. Bushwhacked, 2. Battling back,** and, **3. Beating our enemies.**

1. Bushwhacked. The word *bushwhacked* comes out of old western movies. It means the bad guys ambush you. The enemy attacks you by surprise. It’s what happened to Israel in our passage this morning. Israel had experienced great spiritual victories, enough that they got the idea that when God was working for them they were invincible. The Red Sea had parted and they had crossed through on dry ground. The manna had appeared each morning, enough to feed them all for the entire day. And in the verses just prior to our passage, water had gushed from a rock when Moses struck it with his staff at the command of God, enough for the entire nation to drink. Maybe you experienced something like that when you became a Christian. You trusted Christ to be your savior and suddenly you found yourself not only forgiven for your sins, but now aligned with the Living God. And you felt his power surging through your life.

The people of Israel were on their way to Mt. Sinai in the lower part of the Sinai Peninsula. They were on a spiritual mission. They were going to meet God and enter into a formal covenant with him. They were going to be God’s family on earth, his holy nation. Perhaps you have set yourself and your family on a similar course. You joined

the church and entered the covenant with God through baptism. You baptized your children. You intended that your family should be a godly family.

Israel, we are told in the first verse of chapter 17, had camped at a place—probably a spring or oasis—called Rephidim. Rephidim was the last stop before Mt. Sinai. This was the site of the miracles of the manna and the water from the rock. My guess is that Israel had gotten pretty strung out in the wilderness. There were perhaps two and a half million of them. Some were old. Some were sick and infirm. Others were driving flocks and herds. So the stragglers were given time to catch up and then to rest before the final push to the mountain of God. Verse 8 says, “*Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim.*” In Deuteronomy 25:18 Moses reminds the people of Israel about their experience at Rephidim, and he says that the Amalekites had struck them from behind. It was the weak and slow, the stragglers, that the Amalekites attacked. In other words, the Amalekites bushwhacked the most vulnerable of the Israelites.

Who were the Amalekites? The Amalekites were a tribe of nomads who wandered around the Sinai Peninsula and the southern Negev. The Amalekites were descendants of Esau. Amalek was the grandson of Esau. That made them cousins of the Israelites. The Amalekites harbored an ancient family hostility toward the Israelites. They had kept it alive in their darkened hearts even though they and the people of Israel had been cut off from one another for over 400 years. No wonder we are having trouble bringing the tribes of Iraq together in peace. No wonder the Jews and the Palestinians can't get along. Perhaps you have family fractures that date back to some real or imagined injury from years ago. People's hatred can run deep and remain for years.

So it was that Israel, slowly passing through the Sinai desert, thought they were alone and safe. But the Amalekites, by reason of their long simmering resentment, targeted the weak and most vulnerable Israelites, and attacked by surprise. Notice that when the devil plots to attack the church of Christ, he doesn't come after the strong and heavily fortified Christians (I'm speaking in a spiritual sense), but he probes for weakness. It may be the place you've left spiritually undefended because you thought you'd never fall into sin at that point in your life. It could be the family that has neglected to guard their behavior and allowed moral compromise to enter their home. It could be the Christian couple who has not erected a protective shield around their marriage by faithfully attending worship or participating in a Bible study. It could be believers who have not taught their kids about God by holding daily family devotions. It may be the individual who has lapsed into discouragement because of physical illness or overwhelming problems. It is easy to become a Christian straggler and therefore vulnerable to attack by our spiritual enemy. It can happen to any of us. Don't underestimate the weakness of our spiritual willpower. Any of us can be bushwhacked.

2. Battle back. When the attack by the Amalekites came, notice how Moses responded in verse 9. “*So Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose men for us, and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.’*” This is our first introduction to Joshua. We are told nothing about him here. He is just the guy Moses commissioned to lead the counterattack against the

Amalekites. Often the person God uses to beat back the foes of the church, or to come to the rescue of a fellow believer, are people we've never heard of, the relative nobodies in our lives. Joshua was prepared, to be sure. The name Joshua means *Yahweh Saves*. His name implies that he was spiritually ready when Moses summoned him. Did you ever think that you could be the person God might use to lead some battle for him, to rescue a fellow believer, to win a small but significant victory in someone else's life? You may be the Joshua, the one who the great *I AM* calls upon to save the day. It may be what you say. It could be an act of helping. Christian friend, it pays to be ready!

Joshua had to select a sufficient number of men who could successfully counterattack the Amalekites. These would be tough men, men used working hard for the slave masters of Egypt. But none of them were soldiers. All were untrained in the arts of war. They were like the farmers of New England who took on the might of the British Army in 1775—the Minutemen. These Israelites picked by Joshua found swords and gathered a supply of homemade spears, and at daybreak they went out to battle.

But there was another aspect to the battle that day. In verse 9 Moses told Joshua that he, himself, would climb to the top of a hill and he would raise the staff of God in the air and hold it up so his soldiers could see it. This was the staff with which Moses had struck the Nile and turned it to blood. This was the staff he had used to part the Red Sea. This was the staff he had used to bring water from the rock. When Joshua's army looked up on the hilltop and saw Moses with the staff, they would think of the power that was symbolically endowed in that piece of wood and be inspired to fight harder. Verse 15 says that after the battle, "*Moses built an altar, and named it 'The Lord Is My Banner.'*" The Hebrew word translated *banner* in verse 15 is the same word that is translated *staff* in verse 9. And that tells us something important. We think of a banner as a flag—the *Star Spangled Banner* that reassured Francis Scott Key at dawn's early light, flying over Ft. McHenry in Baltimore harbor. The Israelites thought of a banner in a much wider sense.

In the Spring of 1943 my dad climbed into the cockpit of his B-26 bomber and took off from Florida, and hopped his way to Natal, Brazil, the easternmost point of the Americas. From there he and his crew flew across the Atlantic. Their destination was a small spit of volcanic rock measuring 34 square miles, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Nothing grew on that tiny outpost except at the top of the lone hill where there was a scrubby tree and some ragged bushes. Nothing lived there—no people, no animals, except flocks of terns. There was no water supply. Nobody even knew Ascension Island existed until Ascension Sunday in 1501 when a Portuguese ship stumbled upon it. The Portuguese didn't want it. Neither did anyone else in the world, so the British claimed it even though they had no use for it until World War II started. Then it became a crucial refueling stop as warplanes were ferried from America to Europe. The U. S. army blasted a runway out of the rock and erected a radio beacon that broadcast a beam at Brazil. And that was what my dad followed across the Atlantic with just enough gas to get there. Ascension Island was a banner in the sense the Israelites would have understood. It was a connection, a point where there was communication with God. You can find a banner where you don't expect it. Look up. You have a line to God.

Verse 10 says, “*And Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.*” The battles of life for the Christian may be spiritual battles, but they are fought in the real world by men and women like you and me. And the staff of God was the connecting point, the banner, between the soldiers on the ground and God in heaven. A banner is essential when we are called upon to battle back against our enemies as best we can.

3. Beating our enemies. As you picture Moses on top of the hill holding the staff in the air, he was doing more than just providing a spark of inspiration for Joshua’s troops. This battle involved more than human effort, although it took human effort—swinging swords and thrusting spears. Up on the hilltop Moses was praying with hands stretched out to heaven, holding aloft the staff that God used to impart his power. Moses was interceding for Joshua’s army who defended God’s people.

In verse 11 we see something of the importance of prayer. “*So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed.*” Years ago I led the children who came to Vacation Bible School at our church in Baltimore in singing *Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho*.” We’d come to the place where the song says, “Joshua commanded the children to shout!” and I had the kids scream at the top of their lungs. It was great fun, although a couple of the elders thought it was inappropriate in the church sanctuary. I trained the children to stop and start as I moved my arm back and forth, and they got so good at it that I’d have screaming for a few seconds and then total silence, and then screaming again. What a magnificent sense of power! It must have been something like this for Moses. He’d lift the staff in the air and Israel would start winning. He’d lower the staff and the Amalekites would gain ground. Soon he realized that if Israel was going to win that day he must keep his hands pointed toward the sky. That’s the picture of prayer. When we pray, we win because the power of God is released. If we stop praying, we lose.

But prayer is tiring work. Look at verse 12. “*But Moses’ hands were heavy.*” Have you ever tried to hold your arms upward for a long period of time? I remember the day in sixth grade gym class when our teacher held a contest to see who could hold his arms extended out the longest. I was determined to be the last to hold out. The pain was excruciating, and finally my arms fell of their own weight. Moses was experiencing that. Even though he knew that the moment he let down his arms Israelite soldiers would die, there was a limit to how long he could hold them up. Prayer is like that. It explains why we pray so little and why we resist engaging in prolonged prayer. Sometimes I hear especially spiritual people talk about spending two or three hours in prayer. Maybe they do that. But I have my doubts. Martin Luther had a helpful suggestion. He said, “*A good prayer mustn’t be too long. Do not draw it out. Prayer ought to be frequent and fervent.*” To me that makes sense, and it’s what I try to do. Train yourself to pray on and off throughout the day, as if you were having a conversation with God. Lay your requests before him as you think of them. Thank him as you encounter your blessings. Pray for other people as you run into them or as they come across your mind.

But there is more to prayer. Prayer is an experience best shared with other believers. Verse 12 says, “*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 the one on the other. Thus his hands ere steady until the sun set.*” In his prayer for Israel Moses had a couple of allies. One was Aaron, his brother and Israel’s high priest. The other was his brother-in-law, Hur, the husband of Moses’ sister, Miriam. These two stood alongside Moses, maneuvered a rock so he could sit down, and then each grabbed an arm and held it up for Moses. What a beautiful picture of prayer. Christians pray more effectively when they pray together and when they support the prayers of a fellow believer with prayers of their own. I can pray for a lot longer period, and keep my attention focused, when I am praying with other Christians. There are times when the whole church gathers to pray. We do that in our Sunday worship when the pastor prays on behalf of the congregation. The pastoral prayer is not supposed to be an opportunity for you to take a nap. When I sat where you do I always struggled with staying awake. But this is important work we are doing together. It’s a lot easier to gather in a small group where you can pray some very intimate prayers to God with a few Christian friends you’ve grown to trust. Better yet, lead your family in prayer. Give each family member time to pray while the others listen. Learn as a family to entrust your concerns to God.

Verse 13 tells us the result of Moses’ prayer. “*So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek, and his people with the edge of the sword.*” The victory that day was the combined effort of those who were fighting and those who were praying. There is a partnership here that we must learn to copy—for each other, for our church, and for our nation. Part of God’s answer to Israel’s prayer is given in verse 14. God promised that he would “*utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.*” That’s defeating your enemies! But it wasn’t finished that day. There were still Amalekites giving Israel trouble in the time of David. So more prayer was required. It wasn’t until the time of King Hezekiah that the Amalekites were finally finished off. Sometimes God’s people must keep on praying for a long, long time. Just because the answer to your prayers doesn’t come quickly, don’t stop. Faith keeps on praying until our enemies are beaten forever.

On Thursday I held little Lauren Barbara Perrin in my arms and prayed for her. She was a bit more than 24 hours old. I wondered what her life would be like in this dangerous and wicked world. I looked down at her tiny face with its delicate features. I didn’t close my eyes as I prayed. But in my mind I looked ahead into the future—who knows how many years—and I prayed for her growing up and for her coming to faith in Christ, that she would faithfully love Jesus all her days, and that her children would likewise love Jesus. Because the answers to our prayers for our children and grandchildren are not answered in a day or a week, I expect pray for her and her big sister each day for as long as I live. And who knows, perhaps from the vantage point of heaven I will continue to pray for her day after day. I pray that my life will be the banner of Christ over her, that her *poppa* will be faithful to Christ to the very end, and that he will have a part in securing God’s blessings in her life. May you be so for those you love.

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