

Overwhelmed but Overcoming
Exodus 17:8-16 and 18:1, 10-24
August 20, 2017
M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Imagine that you are a Hebrew. You have somehow survived decades of hot, exploitive, back-breaking labor in servitude to Pharaoh. Victimized and exhausted, you follow Moses out of Egypt only to be met with difficulty upon difficulty: backed into a corner at the Red Sea. No food to eat and no water to drink in the arid, inhospitable desert. Constantly on the move. As grateful as you are for God's deliverance, you have no idea where you're going, how you'll get there, or whether you can even survive the journey. Then out of the blue, you find yourself under attack from a roving band of desert marauders.

I can't speak for the Hebrews, but if it was me, I think my initial reaction might be something along the lines of, "You've got to be kidding me. Not again. Not another struggle on top of everything we've already been through. Haven't we suffered enough?"

As Exodus has already made clear to us, journeying with God does not come with an EZ Pass. We don't get to zip along in the fast lanes, avoiding the snarled traffic and headaches that others have to deal with. No; life is full of struggle and that struggle often hits us when we are weakest. Deuteronomy 25 tells us that this attack by the Amalekites was a sneak attack, unprovoked and underhanded. They attacked Israel from behind and picked off the stragglers—those in the group who weren't strong enough to keep up. The Amalekites were said to have "no fear of God." They weren't at all concerned with the morality of what they were doing, with the value of human life or with justice. They were out for themselves which made looking for the weak link fair game. This scene provides a cautionary tale for us to pay attention to those times and places when we are most susceptible to falling behind or letting down our guard, to opening ourselves to influences that pull us away from God. Sometimes we are vulnerable because we're physically tired or hungry or overwhelmed with busyness. Sometimes we make ourselves an easy target because we aren't connecting with God through service, worship, or prayer. Then there are times, of course, when there is nothing we can do to avoid the struggle, and we certainly can't see it coming. But, knowing to expect difficulties, we can walk as closely and faithfully as possible with God and the community of faith so that we are supported when it does come.

You'll recall that after the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh had practically thrown the Hebrews out of Egypt, but not before their neighbors had sent them off with gold, silver, clothes and other parting gifts. Among those gifts there must have been some weapons, which Israel now uses to defend themselves. Once again we see the interconnectedness of divine and human agency. At the Red Sea Moses had told the people to stand still, that the Lord would fight for them. But here, human participation is of obvious importance. Trusted human leadership and active community defense are necessary to achieve victory. Yet, the course of the battle is not solely determined by Israel's warriors.

Moses moves to the top of a hill holding his staff. Whenever Moses holds up his hands, the fighting goes in Israel's favor. As he becomes weary and his hands drop, the tide turns in favor of the Amalekites. As the people look up the hill, seeing the hands of Moses is to see the hands of God. His staff held high assures them that God is actively engaged in their struggle—and that Moses is completely confident of God's involvement. It reminds the people of their total dependence on God. They are to do their part in the fight, but their salvation will not be won because of their strength, their wits, or their weapons. It will be won because of their dependence on God.

C.S. Lewis has written that we sometimes regard God as an airman regards his parachute: it's there for emergencies, but he hopes he never has to use it. That's not the way God envisions a relationship with us. We depend on God as fully and completely as the ancient Israelites did. God has provided another "man on a hill" who also stretches out his hands to ensure our salvation. The Lord was the banner, the victor, the defender of Israel against the Amalekites. The Lord Jesus Christ is still our banner, our victor and our defender against all the forces of evil and sin that even now seek to enslave us.

This episode is immediately followed by a lengthy retelling of a visit by Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Obviously, at some point Moses had sent his wife and two sons back to Jethro to stay safely out of Pharaoh's reach as the plagues were unfolding. It is now time for the family to be reunited, and Jethro accompanies his daughter and grandchildren to Moses' camp. Moses tells his non-Israelite father-in-law everything that God has done on behalf of the Hebrews. Exodus says that Jethro "rejoiced over all the good that the Lord had done for Israel, how he rescued them from Egypt's hand." "Blessed is the Lord," says Jethro, "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods," whereupon Jethro made an offering to Yahweh and celebrated a meal with all the elders of Israel.

The following morning Jethro is still in the camp which gives him the opportunity to observe Moses in action. What he sees does not impress him. People line up all day long to have an audience with his son-in-law. Moses settles their disputes, prays and discerns the will of God for decisions that need to be made, and he teaches the people the laws and ways of Yahweh. The problem is that there are tens of thousands of them and only one Moses.

As Jethro astutely observes, “Moses, this thing that you are doing is not good. For sure, you will wear yourself out, yourself and also this people with you, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.” Jethro goes on to advise Moses that he should continue to discern the will of God for the people and to teach them God’s ways, but that the judging of all but the biggest civil disputes should be delegated to spiritually mature and wise men from within the community. Leaders would be chosen to oversee the people, grouped by the thousands, the hundreds, the fifties, and even down to the tens, so that everyone would have access to someone with the responsibility and authority to handle their affairs.

These two stories—the battle with the Amalekites and Jethro’s advice to Moses—are easy to overlook, in part because neither are part of the Sunday lectionary. But, to skip over them means that we miss some important details about how God is growing his people. First, notice that in both of these stories, Moses can no longer do his job alone. The physical toll of caring for the Israelites has become too great—he cannot hold up his arms long enough in the battle and he cannot hear all the cases that need to be judged. The peoples’ needs have outstripped his ability to act alone, no matter how gifted a leader he is. Part of the solution is for Moses to learn to delegate, but the other half of the solution is that people within the community step up to take responsibility for one another.

The result, according to verse 23, is that Moses is not worn out and the people are able to live in peace. By sharing responsibility for the life of the community, everyone benefits.

Second, notice what a significant role a non-Israelite plays in the life of the people of God. I am impressed with Moses’ witness to Jethro of God’s mighty acts, with Jethro’s embrace of the good news, and his interest and investment in Moses’ endeavors. This is a great reminder to us not to make assumptions about people who, we think, may be choosing to live outside the life of faith. We see in Moses an example that when we share out of our own sense of awe and genuine gratitude for what we see God doing in our lives, that is something people of all

stripes may well be ready to celebrate with us, whether they share our religious convictions, or not. Our job is to tell what we know, to share the ways our lives are being touched by God at work. The goal is not to convert anyone—it's simply being faithful to give God the credit God deserves for the blessings we experience. That's exactly what Moses does. He doesn't talk about himself—what a great leader he is or how he beat the mighty Pharaoh or how he parted the sea. Moses focuses on what God has done. That's the great news he shares with Jethro.

And, then, this scene is also a reminder that people don't have to be Christians to have gifts that are valuable to the church, and they may be far more willing to share those gifts than we realize. Jethro is clearly wise and has a good head for managing people. He's got the kind of mind that can see how to organize a task for maximum efficiency and effectiveness. Those were skills that the community of faith desperately needed at this point in their journey. Without it, the whole endeavor was threatened. This is yet another example of the sacredness of all of life—there is no division between what is holy and what is secular. All truth comes from God and is useful in God's service. We need to remember that the next time we are tempted to judge what's true or useful based on the source. Too often, if we don't like the source, we invalidate everything that's offered, but in doing that we have no idea what we are losing, what helpful truth we fail to hear. God plants gifts and skills in all kinds of people and in all kinds of places. Those gifts are for our benefit, if we're open to receive them.

Finally, both of these stories have the same result: God is worshiped and praised. After securing the victory in battle, Moses builds an altar. After hearing the good news of God's mighty acts, Jethro praises God, offers a sacrifice of thanks, and breaks bread with Israel's elders. There is peace and unity among God's people, there is gratitude for God's provision, and there is a celebration of God's presence.

Israel's wilderness wandering has thus far been a challenge. Both from without and within, they have been overmatched, overwhelmed, and under-resourced. Yet, here they are in worship because with God they are overcomers. What places in your life do you feel overmatched? Are there sins that have caught you from behind? Weariness that threatens to undo the progress you've made? Too many demands being made of you? Are you waiting around for someone to fix your problem but failing to wait on God? Are you trying to do it all yourself, forgetting your utter dependence on the Lord? Life is a struggle. Expect it. But God will provide. Embrace that provision. Then, express your praise. We may be overwhelmed, but we are overcoming. Because God is our banner. Amen.