

The Battle belongs to the Lord

by Scott Grant

The details are covered

As I prepared to leave for a ministry in Brazil, I was really concerned with only one thing: teaching Ephesians. That's not the only thing that needed to be done, of course. A trip like this involves a plethora of preparations. But those preparations were made by the organization that had arranged for our trip, the Japanese Evangelical Missionary Society. JEMS went before us, so to speak, and took care of all the details. I'm thankful for this, because I'm not a details person. Knowing that JEMS was taking care of all the details liberated me to focus on the one thing I knew I was called to do: teach.

As anyone familiar with the New Testament knows, we are in a spiritual war. The details of that war can be overwhelming. They would be, in fact, if not for the fact that God has gone before us and fights for us. Like JEMS, he takes care of all the details. This frees us up to do the one thing we know we're called to do: worship the Lord. In spiritual warfare, God fights for us while we worship.

Exodus 23:20-33 contains echoes of the Lord's dealings with Abraham. Abraham was told of judgment upon the Amorites (Genesis 15:16, Exodus 23:23). The Israelites would serve a foreign nation, but they were not to serve the gods of the nation (Genesis 15:13-14, Exodus 23:24). God would bless them and they would not be barren (Genesis 15:2-3, Exodus 23:25-26). Their number would be great (Genesis 15:5, Exodus 23:26). They would live in the land (Genesis 15:18-21, Exodus 23:31). God made a covenant with Abraham to give him and his descendants the land, and the people were to make no covenant with those who lived there (Genesis 15:18, Exodus 23:32-33). Just as the Lord promised to be faithful to Abraham, and was faithful to Abraham, he promises to be faithful to Israel, and will be faithful to Israel. In their upcoming battles, then, it will be important for them to remember God's historic faithfulness. Likewise in our spiritual battles, it is important for us to remember God's historic faithfulness, as recorded in the scriptures, as demonstrated in history and as proved in our own lives. The record is there. God is faithful.

The structure of Exodus 23:20-33 is built around what God will do and what the people will do. Therefore, we will consider the text thematically:

A 23:20-23 What God will do

B 23:24-26 What the people will do

A' 23:27-31 What God will do

B' 23:32-33 What the people will do

What is it that God does? He fights on our behalf.

God fights (23:20-33, 27-31)

God promises the people that he will send an angel before them. This is likely the same angel that is connected with the cloud that guided and protected Israel, inasmuch as similar terminology is used (Exodus 14:19). At any rate, the important thing to note is that the Lord has tremendous resources. Angels elsewhere in scripture

are called "hosts," or troops. God is "the Lord of hosts," who commands armies of angels. In light of the battles that lie before them, this is important for the Israelites to know.

The angel is going to bring them to the place that the Lord has prepared, a reference to Canaan. The people are in the wilderness now but are on their way to Canaan, the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

The people are warned about being "rebellious" toward the angel. The angel is God's representative; this is the meaning of the Lord's name being in the angel. So any rebellion against the angel is a rebellion against the Lord. Obviously, a serious rebellion is in view here, because it will not be pardoned. Nothing less than a rejection of a relationship with the Lord is in view. The Lord is telling them, "Do not break off relationship with me."

Instead, they should "be on guard," which is further defined as obedience to his voice. The base meaning of the word translated "obey" is "listen." Instead of rebelling against the angel, they should listen to him, and by extension, the Lord. The way to guard against rejecting the Lord is to listen to him. What does the Lord have to say? He has already said it, and he is about to say it again: "Don't worship other gods; do worship me." If they worship the Lord and him alone, he promises to be an enemy to their enemies, and he promises complete victory.

The Lord prepared the land of Canaan for the Israelites. What has he prepared for us? He has prepared Christ for us. Just as the Lord placed the Israelites in the land, he has placed us in Christ (Galatians 3:27). Rest is not in the land, as it was for the Israelites, but in Christ (Matthew 11:28). Inheritance is not in the land, as it was for the Israelites, but in Christ (Ephesians 1:11). Those of us who believe in Christ are in him presently. But just as the Israelites entered the land and had battles to fight, so do we.

Who are our enemies? Not the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites or the Jebusites. The New Testament advocates engaging in no battles against any human foe. But it does speak profusely of spiritual foes: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). So this is one of those sections in the Old Testament where we learn about spiritual warfare -- how to do battle with Satan and his spiritual entourage.

First, we need to note two little words that appear 11 times together in these verses: "I will." Before we consider our part in spiritual warfare, we need to consider God's part.

Demons operate best in the dark, in hidden places where they go undetected. What is more hidden than the future? Not knowing the future, we may be inclined to fear it. Demons themselves would promote that fear. Eight times the Lord says that he, or his angel, will go "before" or "ahead of" the people. When we move forward into the future, the Lord is there already. We therefore need not fear the future.

Demons would not only inspire fear, they would inspire terror. Yet the Lord says that his "terror" will go ahead of the people, and that their enemies will be in terror. James says the demons "shudder" (James 2:19). We need not be terrified of demons, because they are terrified of the Lord.

The Lord says he will confuse Israel's enemies. Satan is brilliant, but he commits cosmic blunders. His wits are no match for the Lord's. His intent was to crush the seed of Eve, both Christ and his people (Genesis 3:15), but every effort has been thwarted. Everything he tries backfires. That's because the Lord uses Satan's evil schemes for good purposes. Satan entered into Judas (John 13:27), whose betrayal led to the crucifixion of Jesus, the worst thing that could have ever happened to Satan, as he discovered when Christ rose from the dead. He must be the most confused being in the universe. Satan is brilliant, but God's wisdom confounds him every time. Therefore, we need not fear Satan's schemes, for the Lord will turn them against him.

The Lord will make the enemies of the people turn their backs in flight. The New Testament speaks of Satan and his demons running in defeat. After failing in his battle with Jesus in the wilderness, the devil "left him" (Matthew 4:11). James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). In the end, Satan always runs away, because he can't win. Therefore, we need not fear that Satan will ever be triumphant. He

will flee in defeat time after time.

The Lord promises that he will drive out the enemies of the people, but not all at once. He will not do it in a single year but "little by little." We may feel that spiritual "victories" are few and far between. If God is so great and can vanquish Satan with the blink of an eye, we may reason, why do we still feel so oppressed? Where is the victory in this supposed victorious Christian life? And for that matter, why do we have to face these spiritual enemies, anyway? What are they doing in our way?

The answer to these questions is in Exodus 23:29-30. Note that God takes responsibility for the pace. So if we don't feel the war is going so well, could it be that God is responsible? Could it be that, from our perspective, he's taking his own sweet time about things, allowing demons to continually bombard us with thoughts raised up against him and to place before us golden opportunities to reject the Lord? It's not only possible, it's true.

Why is the Lord so deliberate? He's deliberate, strange as it may seem, for our sakes. If he were to drive out Israel's enemies in a single year, they would not be able to control the numerous "beasts of the field" simply because there are not enough people to do so. At this point, they don't have enough people to take possession of the land. But as they "become fruitful," meaning reproduce, the Lord will increasingly drive out the enemies. The Lord will later tell the people that he is leaving enemies in the land to teach them war (Judges 2:20-3:4). The Lord, then, is using the enemies of Israel for its benefit -- to keep the animals from ravaging the land and to teach Israel war.

How does the Lord use our spiritual enemies -- Satan and his demons -- for our benefit? First, like the Israelites, we would not be able to deal with instant freedom from enemies. Like a newly released prisoner who can't deal with life "on the outside," we'd have a difficult time with all the choices that freedom allows. We need to become more spiritually fruitful. We need to learn spiritual warfare. The Lord uses evil, then, to teach us spiritual warfare that we might become spiritually fruitful that we might be mature. The Lord, then, is using Satan for the sake of our maturity. Maturity comes not in a single year but little by little, as we believe truth by truth, as we have our "senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14). So because of the Lord's graciousness, we're in a war, an inch-by-bloody-inch war, that is contributing to our spiritual maturity.

The Lord promises the people that one day they will be fruitful enough to take possession of the land, their inheritance. One day, too, we will be spiritually mature enough to take full possession of our spiritual inheritance. That will be the day when Jesus Christ returns for us to set up his eternal kingdom, when we live forever in the land that God brings down from heaven (Revelation 21:1-2). Just as the Lord fixed the boundaries of the promised land, so he will fix the boundaries of the heavenly land, where we will be safe from any further attack. Just as the Lord would completely drive out the enemies of Israel, he will completely drive out our spiritual enemies (1 Corinthians 15:25, Revelation 20:10). He will "soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). These spiritual enemies, therefore, are being used by God to get us ready for heaven, to bring us to maturity, to the point where we are prepared to know and worship the Lord for all eternity in the particular way he has for each of us.

Exodus 23 illustrates the great truth of Romans 8:37-39: "But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus." Satan and his demons are numbered among principalities, powers and created things. Simply, Satan is against us, but God is for us, and God is bigger than Satan -- way bigger. God is so big, in fact, that he uses Satan's resistance to the favor of those who love Jesus. That means, where spiritual warfare is concerned, there's nothing to worry about. There is little for us to do in this section of Exodus but to believe it -- believe that God fights for us and is defeating and will defeat Satan.

In the early 1970s, British journalist Malcolm Muggeridge learned from Anatoli Kuznestov, an exile from the Soviet Union who was living in England, that the intellectual elite were experiencing a spiritual revival in the Soviet Union. Muggeridge recalls, "I asked him how this could have happened given the enormous anti-religious brainwashing job done on the citizenry, and the absence of all Christian literature, including the gospels. His reply was memorable; the authorities, he said, forgot to suppress the works of Tolstoy and

Dostoevsky, the most perfect expositions of the Christian faith of modern times." Satan can't win. Every move he makes backfires. God fights for us.

That means we can focus on what we're supposed to focus on: worshipping the Lord.

We worship (23:24-26, 32-33)

The previously considered sections were dominated by the words "I will," in reference to what God will do. These sections are dominated by the words "You shall," in reference to what the people should do. They appear together four times in five verses. In 23:21-22, the people were told to listen to what the Lord says. These sections contain what he says. The Lord says to worship him, not other gods.

Satan, in his war against God and God's people, has one goal, really. It is to turn people away from God (2 Corinthians 11:3). In order to do this, he offers an array of other gods that parade before us a host of promises (1 Corinthians 10:20). Not surprisingly, then, the Lord tells us not to worship other gods but to worship him. This is the essence of spiritual warfare, really. Our part is simply to worship the Lord. He fights; we worship.

But how easily we are drawn away from the worship of the Lord to the worship of other gods. The people of Israel were easily drawn away, also. That's why the Lord takes a no-prisoners approach to idolatry. The people who worship other gods are to be overthrown, no covenant is to be made with them, and they should not be allowed to live in the land. The pillars used in the worship of these gods are to be crushed, and no covenants are to be made with these gods, either. From a New Testament perspective, we can understand the people as demons and the gods as those offered by demons. We are to make no provision whatsoever for other gods.

What are these gods? The people of the land worshiped various pagan deities and made idols in devotion to them. Such obvious worship of other gods is still with us today in the form of Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Mormonism, astrology, fortune telling and scores of other headings. Much of it is gathered today under the banner of what is called the New Age. Perhaps more insidious in our culture are the gods that might go by the names of Success, Materialism, Sex, Self-fulfillment and Control.

Whatever poison we choose, it's still poison. And that's why God is so ruthless when it comes to idolatry. He tells us not to worship other gods because they'll kill us. Keeping other gods around is a "snare" that would trap and kill. The word that is translated "snare" was used of bait in a fowler's trap. The intention, in setting up the trap, was to kill the bird. Idolatry is poisonous.

If idolatry is so lethal, why then do we opt for it? We worship other gods for one simple reason: We think they will bless us. We think that Success will finally make us feel good about ourselves. We think that Materialism will add spice to life. We think that Sex will meet our relational needs. We think that Control will protect us from harm. When we think this way, we're thinking exactly the way Satan wants us to think. Those gods meet none of those needs. They hold forth the promise of blessing, but they never deliver. They don't bless; they kill.

The antidote for worshipping other gods is worshipping the true God. God gives us plenty of help here by showing himself as the true source of blessing. He tells the Israelites that he will bless them. Gods who don't bless are not worthy of worship. The Lord blesses. He will bless their food, he'll remove sickness, none will miscarry and they'll live full life spans. This didn't happen, of course, because the people, once in the land, sought after other gods for such blessings.

How are we to understand such blessings from a New Testament perspective? The Old Testament physical blessings are given to us as a picture of the far more important spiritual blessings. Paul says in Ephesians 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." God promised physical blessings to Israel, though such blessings were to lead them to understand how he had blessed them spiritually in their relationship with him. He promised them blessings in the land -- their inheritance, though David and others declared that the Lord himself, not the land, was their portion (Psalm 142:5). Our blessings are not physical but spiritual, they are not earthly but heavenly

and they are not in the land but in Christ. Paul then goes on to sing about them in Ephesians 1:4-14. They include being adopted as sons, being redeemed and being given an eternal inheritance, and they all gather around the concept of knowing God through Jesus Christ, and knowing him forever. God has ultimately blessed us by giving us himself. The source of blessing is God, and the blessing is God. He is what we want; he is what we were made for. What do the other gods have to offer in comparison the blessings in Christ? They're peddling junk jewelry, and the Lord is offering the real thing.

The best thing we can do in this spiritual war, then, is recognize the Lord as the true source of blessing and worship him. That means we don't have to be paranoid about what the enemy is up to. We don't have to be looking for him everywhere and figuring out where he is. We don't have to be looking all over the place for demons to cast out. It is incumbent on us to worship the Lord.

When I was a sophomore journalism major in college, I took a required editing course along with the other aspiring journalists. As young journalists are wont to be, we were an ambitious lot, with big dreams of working on big stories and changing the world. There were thousands of battles to fight out there, and we wanted to fight them. Our first assignment in the editing class was to take a grammar test. Without exception, we all failed miserably. We were journalism majors, and we failed a grammar test! What happened? We were distracted by everything "out there." The basics of grammar didn't interest us, but that was the main thing we needed to do. Similarly, we can get distracted from our main purpose in spiritual warfare. We can be paranoid about demons, and that paranoia distracts us from worshiping the Lord. But if we worship, like focusing on the basics of grammar, everything else will take care of itself.

Believe and Worship

So what do we do with what the Lord tells us in Exodus 23? First, believe that he fights for us, and that Satan is grossly outmatched. Second, worship the Lord, not other gods. In spiritual warfare, the Lord fights for us while we worship.

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