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**Sermon Title: *God's People in Spiritual Warfare***

**Manuscript written by Roger Roberts and sermon preached**

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**Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.**

**Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.**

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## ***God's People in Spiritual Warfare***

### **Introduction:**

I invite you to open your Bibles with me to our text as we continue to look together in the Book of Exodus, with the theme of God's Deliverance of His People. Last Sunday we saw how God graciously responded again to the quarreling and grumbling of his people and supplied them with water from the rock, just as he had supplied their daily food with manna (17:1-7). We noted how the Apostle Paul made a bold application of this Scripture text to say that the Rock from which the water flowed was none other than an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ, who remained with God's people throughout their wilderness sojourn (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). We observed that, based on Christ's claims to give us streams of Living Water, the water given in the wilderness was a type, a prefiguring and symbol of the Holy Spirit, whom God gives to all who receive his gift of eternal life (John 4:10-14; 7:37-39).

One truth that stands out in these experiences of God's deliverance through the Sea and his faithful provision in supplying the needs of his people is his faithful presence. God was testing his people and teaching them to trust in his presence, which is the guarantee that all of our needs will be met. This next experience, the first battle the Israelites faced after their departure from Egypt, would teach them to trust in his presence not only to provide but also to protect them and give them victory in battle with the enemy.

The attackers against the Israelites were the Amalekites, descendants of Amalek, the grandson of Esau (Genesis 36:12), who were a warring tribe of nomads, "loosely based in the land of Edom" (Oswalt, NLT, 154). Likely they were threatened by the encroachment of this huge migration of Israelites, who would vie for oases and water supplies in this barren wilderness in the Sinai Peninsula.

From this battle with the Amalekites we note the truths we are to learn about fighting in spiritual warfare. Follow as I read **Exodus 17:8-16**.

We're all too aware of the presence of wars and political and military conflicts around the world. Unrest and turmoil seem to be the order of the day across North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, and for these places we must pray and pray for those in authority that peace might be achieved. As God's people we are to seek the blessing Jesus gives to his peacemakers (Matthew 5:9) and are to "seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14), even though Jesus said that there will be wars and rumors of wars, right up to the very end of human history (Mark 13:7).

Fallen humankind and a world under the influence of the Evil One are bound to be arenas of conflict and warfare. But Scripture teaches us also that the people of God can expect conflicts and warfare on a level different from the political and external. We can expect and must prepare for spiritual warfare, which is what our Scripture text is teaching us today. The Apostle Paul wrote that the experiences of the Israelites in their pilgrimage to the Promised Land are "examples and were written down as warnings for us" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Jesus told us that as his followers we can expect the same kind of treatment he received from his enemies, who are also our enemies. As he was opposed by the Evil One and his minions, so we can expect hostility from Satan and his dupes (John 15:18ff). Paul also reminds us that our struggle as followers of Christ is "not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

When anyone comes to Christ and becomes his disciple, a new conflict is introduced that wasn't there before. Before Christ, everyone is, as Paul says, "dead in...transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who now is at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also," says Paul, "lived among them at one

time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Ephesians 2:2f). But when we were rescued from Satan’s control and born again into the Kingdom of God, we received a new nature and found ourselves in a conflict we hadn’t known before—between the new nature in Christ and our old, sinful nature. This is the spiritual warfare Paul describes in Romans 7:7-25. We’re in God’s army and Satan, who used to have us in his grip, now has become our sworn enemy. As the Charles H Spurgeon says, the Israelites didn’t have to fight the Egyptians. God did all the work of the plagues and the parting of the Sea to destroy them. That’s a picture of God’s saving grace. We can’t save ourselves, and are delivered by God’s grace alone. But the Israelites faced a new enemy, the Amalekites, and now they had to go to war, even as we followers of Jesus must now go to combat against our real foe, the devil.

Our text gives us a very graphic picture of our spiritual warfare and what we must do to wage a successful battle against the evil that faces us, even as the Israelites faced their foe, the Amalekites. First of all, we...

### **Must identify *the foe***

As was true for the Israelites, so must we identify our real foe, who is...

#### *The Enemy and his dupes*

The Amalekites are the first enemies the Israelites faced and also became their “most inveterate foe” (Griffith-Thomas). This warring tribe appears no less than 25 times in the Old Testament opposing God’s people: during the exodus, the conquest of Canaan, during Israel’s monarchy, and being finally destroyed under King Hezekiah (Honeycutt, 385). There was no question that the Amalekites were their enemies, and God’s as well (14).

Yet many Christians who claim to be followers of Christ deny the existence of a real, personal devil. In his ingeniously insightful classic, *The Screwtape Letters*, C S Lewis has his chief antagonist demon, Uncle Screwtape, advising his demon nephew, Wormwood, on how to destroy their subject, a new believer. The most effective accomplishment, says Wormwood, would be to convince the new Christian that the devil doesn’t exist (7ff). If Christians think and live without taking into account the reality of the devil and his demons, then they will be clueless and heedless, and likely to fall under Satan’s influence and the downward pull of the old, sinful nature (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Probably those professing Christians who deny the existence of a personal devil are not doing much for the Kingdom of God. Satan is quite happy to have them deny his existence and he has them exactly where he wants them, living clueless and useless lives of worldliness and complacency, with a false sense of security and under a delusion that because they joined a church, were baptized as infants or as adults, or

at one time “prayed the sinners prayer,” are now “going to heaven when they die.” On the other hand, those who seek to live for Christ as his disciples are likely to have had many encounters with the devil and will have no doubts about his existence.

We need to distinguish between the real enemy, Satan, and his human dupes. Our real enemies are not people, even unbelievers who ridicule, oppose or persecute us (Ryken, 459). They are simply acting as dupes of Satan, pawns under the control of the real Enemy. Jesus taught us to love and pray for our enemies, who may yet escape the grip of the devil and be converted into our fellow believers (Matthew 5:43-48). Also, we are never to think of fellow believers who irritate or oppose us as our enemies. We are always to seek reconciliation and be at peace with everyone, as much as possible, and seek to help release any fellow believer who might have been made captive to Satan’s purposes to divide the fellowship (Romans 12:18; 2 Timothy 2:25f). In spiritual warfare we must identify the real foe and be mindful of...

### *The strategy of the Enemy*

In his reflections on the exodus, Moses recalled the strategy of the Amalekites:

“When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off those who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God” (Deuteronomy 25:18).

This is the way the devil works, to attack the spiritually tired or lazy who make themselves vulnerable by lagging behind in spiritual discipline and in regular worship and fellowship with God’s people. Also, those who lack proper physical rest are at risk in their spiritual life and moral vigilance, since often prayerlessness and carelessness accompany fatigue. Satan knows all about our weaknesses because he used to have full control of us (Ephesians 2:2f). He knows our basic character, moral weaknesses and where we might have “chinks in our armor.”

Satan also is likely to attack us after “high spiritual moments,” as he did Jesus following his baptism (Matthew 3:13-4:1; Wiersbe, 107). After mountaintop experiences we are vulnerable to an emotional shift to the valley of doubt, or at least are prone to be off guard because of the spiritual “high” we have just experienced. The Amalekites simply ambushed the heedless Israelites who lagged behind.

Satan’s strategy is usually not to present himself as an ugly guy in a red suit, carrying a pitchfork. In fact, he masquerades as an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). He attacks us from behind with subtle voices that distract and catch us off guard. He works through what may seem innocuous enough, such as “the friendships we keep, fear of the future, the words we use with spouses and children that show our self-centeredness, our avoidance of prayer, the corruption of simple pleasures that God has given us, and so forth” (Enns, 361).

Whatever our spiritual or emotional state, we must “take heed” (1 Corinthians 10:12), says Paul, and “be self-controlled and alert,” says Peter:

“Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith....” (1 Peter 5:8f).

The devil’s power over us was broken at the cross where Jesus died (Hebrews 2:14). And he has been dealt a mortal blow, and knows that his days are numbered before he is finally thrown into the lake of fire prepared for him and his demons (Matthew 25:41; Revelations 20:7-10). But Satan is still alive and kicking and is intent on doing as much damage to us as possible. We made him mad when we became the children of God and were freed from his kingdom of darkness and “took the other side.” He cannot touch our souls or take us out of the Father’s hand (John 10:28-30), but he can attack us and seek to destroy our purity, the power of our testimony, the fruit of the Spirit and our joy in Christ. He can do a lot of damage to a heedless, straggling, lazy believer, just as he attacked the straggling Israelites.

Jesus warned his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane that they would have to watch and pray against the weakness of the flesh in the light of their impending spiritual warfare (Matthew 26:41). And James says that we must take responsibility for being led into sin by our own inherent sinful desire (1:13f). Peter warns us to “abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

We all know sad stories of Christian leaders who brought disgrace to the name of Christ by their moral fall to the influence of Satan. These leaders were caught up in great causes and crusades against moral evil and yet were careless and heedless as to Satan’s attacks and temptations against their own moral and ethical life. Their scandalous behavior surely brought great joy to Satan, whose kingdom of darkness scored a victory (Enns, 362).

When the enemy attacked, Moses immediately gave the command to his “apprentice Field General,” Joshua, to choose some men and “go out to fight the Amalekites” (9). So in spiritual warfare, we...

### **Must engage in *the fight***

Moses sent Joshua, who makes his first appearance in Scripture in this text, with a commission to represent...

#### *Our Commander*

Joshua’s original name was Hoshea (salvation) and was changed by Moses to Joshua, which means “Yahweh, the Lord, saves.” The Greek name is Jesus, the name of the One who saves us from our sins (Kaiser & Youngblood, 112).

Jesus is our Commander, the one who fights for us. The battle is the Lord’s, as the young warrior David told the giant, Goliath (1 Samuel 17:47). After leading the Israelites to conquer their enemies and gain possession of the Promised Land,

Joshua reminded the people that “the Lord your God fights for you” (Joshua 23:10). Christ the eternal Son of God is the one who is always with us, as the crucified Lord who is triumphant in his resurrection. Again and again, whether in delivering across the Sea, giving manna to eat and water to drink, Yahweh, the great I Am, is the central figure in this story of deliverance (Durham, 238).

Christ is our commander and it’s imperative that we follow his lead, that we submit ourselves to him. When we submit ourselves to our Commander in Chief, we can then resist the devil (James 4:7). There’s no use in talking further about victory in spiritual warfare if we are not submitted to the Lordship of Christ, have given him full control of every area of our lives—mind, emotions, will, actions, relationships, aspirations and plans. When we are surrendered to him as Lord we have confidence that Christ is present in us through the Holy Spirit, and also we have the assurance that “the one who is in (us) is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). Unless we are seeking to live under the Lordship of Christ and are willing to resist the downward pull of the old sinful nature and the ways of this fallen world, any talk of victory in spiritual warfare is futile. If we fall morally and bring dishonor to the name of Christ and then blame our fall on the devil (like the African American comedian, Flip Wilson, who used to defend his behavior by saying, “The devil made me do it!”), it’s a clear avoidance of our responsibility and childish blame-shifting (James 1:13ff).

Joshua was their commander and Jesus is ours as we engage in...

### *Our struggle, with God’s strength*

When we enter the kingdom of God through God’s gift of eternal life, we are necessarily enlisted into his army, pitted against the Enemy and the forces of his dark world. As we engage in the Commander’s business of the Great Commandment, loving God and neighbors (Mark 12:28-34) and the Great Commission of making disciples (Matthew 28:18-20), we can expect to be thrown into the thick of the battle against the Enemy, who does all he can to thwart godly love and the extension of the Kingdom of God. We get on the devil’s “hit list.”

Not only does Satan oppose the Great Commandment and Commission, but he hates the quiet growth of godliness in your life, and will do all he can to defeat your pursuit of godliness and holiness. He hates purity and will do what he can to soil your “garments” and spoil your joy. He hates lives that produce the fruit of the Spirit that show the character of Christ (Galatians 5:22f), marriages and other relationships that reflect and honor Christ, and a unified church that demonstrates to the world the love of Christ (John 13:34f). We can be sure that the devil will attack us on all of those fronts. The devil’s battle fronts are our own flesh and this fallen world, which we must resist (James 1:13f; 4:1-7).

So we must struggle in spiritual warfare. Although we were once under Satan’s control, we are now released from his power and are able to “Resist him, standing

firm in the faith..." (1 Peter 5:8f). James adds that as we submit ourselves to God we can "resist the devil, and he will flee from (us)" (4:7).

As Joshua chose troops to join him in battle, so the Lord has chosen us and given us one another as fellow soldiers, and part of the army of God. The Israelites had Joshua as their Commander, Moses, Aaron and Hur on the mountain as their encouragers, and fellow soldiers fighting alongside them in the battle in this "dynamic partnership" (Oswalt, *CBC*, 416). We can resist and assist, resist Satan in our lives and assist others in their battle with the devil.

In our spiritual warfare, the most important thing to remember is the presence of Christ in us through the indwelling Holy Spirit. He is with us and within us, and also he has given us one another as the Body of Christ. When Paul gives the command to be filled with the Holy Spirit it's in the context of describing the Body of Christ as a mutually encouraging and strengthening fellowship. The entire church is to be filled with the Holy Spirit so we can speak and sing words of encouragement and thanksgiving to one another with a spirit of mutual submission (Ephesians 5:18-21).

A vital part of this dynamic partnership is the ministry of intercessory prayer, pictured for us by the uplifted hands of Moses, accompanied by Aaron and Hur, on top of the hill overlooking the battle below (10-12). As long as Moses' hands were raised the Israelites were winning the battle; but when his hands grew tired and dropped, the Amalekites were winning. So, Aaron and Hur gave Moses support by seating him on a stone and each one holding up his hands at his side. The supernatural power of God worked through the upraised hands of Moses, which were raised in prayer, which a biblical posture for prayer (Psalm 63:4; 1 Timothy 2:8 (Ryken, 461, Cole, 136).

The one absolutely indispensable activity for success in spiritual warfare is intercessory prayer. The battle against Amalek was fought in the valley below, but "the victory was won on the mountain" (Motyer, 162). Even in his description of the armor of God, which is our necessary protection against "the devil's schemes," Paul says we must "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind," he continues, "be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (Ephesians 6:18). Prayer and living in a prayerful state of vigilance against the Enemy is essential for each one of us (Matthew 26:41; 1 Peter 5:8).

Moses' uplifted hands were crucial for the success of the Israelites' battle against the Amalekites. In his passage on wearing the armor of God for spiritual warfare, in addition to admonishing the Ephesians to pray for themselves, Paul urged the church to pray for him, that he might declare the message of Christ fearlessly (6:19f).

The advancement of the cause of Christ through IBC, our doing the Great Commandment, the Great Commission and the spiritual growth and protection of our church family depends on our "dynamic partnership" with the Triune God through our intercessory prayer. Whatever our physical posture (raised hands or not), our hearts

must be lifted to the Lord in prayer for one another and for the cause of the Kingdom around the world. We are seeking servant leaders, team leaders, deacons, elders and others to fill ministry positions here at IBC; but the most essential thing is that we all give ourselves to faithful prayer and intercession for one another and the cause of Christ, including our missionaries and the persecuted church around the world. This great battle on the mountaintop can be done with anyone and everyone, including our children and youth.

Together we join the battle, and in spiritual warfare we...

### **Must be assured of *the finish***

“So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword” (13). The *New Living Translation* reads, “Joshua *overwhelmed* the army of Amalek in battle (italics mine).” Our spiritual warfare will someday be finished, and this we know for certain because of...

#### *The decisive victory*

Joshua defeated the Amalekites decisively on that day of battle. Never again would the Israelites need to fear what the Amalekites could do, even though they tried to threaten and bluff them until their final and complete destruction under Hezekiah (1 Chronicles 4:41-43). So we need to be reminded that D-Day, the decisive victory has been won through Christ’s death and resurrection. The crucified Christ cried in triumph from the cross, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He had, through his atoning death, accomplished the payment for our sin and guilt to enable us to be made right with God (Colossians 2:15).

After the battle, the Lord told Moses to write on a scroll the reminder of this victory and the promise that the Lord would eventually totally eradicate even the memory of Amalek (14). Similarly, we are given the written record of God’s victory through Christ. The Scriptures give us the account of Satan’s defeat at the cross and empty tomb of Christ Jesus, our Savior.

Moses next built an altar and called it “Yahweh Nissi,” The Lord is my Banner” (15). Victory banners were lifted as a rallying point for armies in battle, and we need to continually look to the banner of Christ and his cross, and to see “banners” as markers of God’s work in our lives, where he has given us victory over the Enemy (Enns, 362f). These serve to give us encouragement in our ongoing skirmishes with the devil, assuring us of God’s continuing presence and of our eventual total victory, when all warfare shall cease.

Whether Moses was referring to “fists raised against the Lord’s throne” (16, *NLT*) or expressing hands “lifted up to the throne of the Lord” (*NIV*) in worship and prayer,

the truth remains: we may “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

We need to remember that “The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation” (16). But we can trust the Presence to always be with us in our ongoing spiritual warfare, to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). And at the end of our earthly pilgrimage and the close of human history, we are assured of the finish of spiritual conflict with...

### *The final battle*

Moses knew that in God’s time even the memory of Amalek would be erased (14). There would be the final battle and total defeat of the enemy, even as we are promised the final destruction of our Enemy. He has been dealt a mortal blow, and will be finally thrown into the lake of fire prepared for him and his demons (Matthew 25:41; Revelations 20:7-10).

The battle of D-Day has been fought and won; and we look forward with hope to the final V-Day, when we can celebrate the final and total destruction of our Enemy, including the destruction of our old, sin-prone nature, when we are glorified with Christ (Revelation 18-22: 1 John 3:2).

When we join the heavenly victory procession, we want to be among those who fought the battles of spiritual warfare faithfully and didn’t succumb to the Enemy and weren’t deceived by his wiles or damaged by his attacks. We need to know that when we stand in the victory procession, we can stand with the laurel wreath of the victor’s crown.

"Hold The Fort" is a Gospel song I can remember from my childhood, and has a history that is “long and complicated.”

“The title comes from a famous incident of the American Civil War. In October, 1864, when Union troops were trapped in a fort at Allatoona Pass, near Atlanta, General Sherman sent a message which was signaled by flags from mountain to mountain: ‘General Sherman says hold fast. We are coming.’ Despite heavy attacks, the men held the fort until Sherman’s army rescued them.

“A certain Major Whittle, who had served with the Union forces, told this story at a Sunday school meeting in Rockford, Illinois, in May, 1870. In the audience was Philip P. Bliss, a well-known singing evangelist. Inspired by the story, that night Bliss wrote a gospel hymn with the following refrain:

"Hold the fort, for I am coming!  
 Jesus signals still.  
 Wave the answer back to Heaven -  
 ‘By Thy Grace we will.’"

<http://unionsong.com/u511.html>

Knowing Jesus is coming, the victory is certain, and realizing our time in spiritual battle is brief in the light of eternity, we're encouraged to "hold the fort" of steadfastness in spiritual battle.

### **Conclusion:**

When we are feeling discouraged in our spiritual battles and intimidated by the Enemy and even by our old, sin-prone, downward-pulling nature, we need to get out the "scroll," and read the words of God to us, that remind us of his power, promises and presence. We need to eat the daily manna of the words of God and drink fully of the water of the Spirit to keep from "lagging behind" and falling prey to the snares of the Enemy.

When we are attacked in our sinful flesh, in our minds, hearts, bodies and emotions, we need to look up at the banner of Christ, and be reminded of how he has faithfully delivered us in the past, and has promised to remain our faithful Rock of refuge and strong tower (Psalm 61). We also need to realize that when we have fallen in spiritual warfare, we are invited by a loving heavenly Father to his throne of grace, to receive his mercy for complete pardon and grace to return to the battle (Hebrews 4:16). God forgives and restores even his AWOL (absent without leave) soldiers.

In our time of trouble, we have only to approach the throne of grace with confidence in his faithfulness in supplying mercy and grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Let's commit to the battle of personal but also intercessory prayer. Let me encourage and urge you to join with our Prayer Ministry Team in participating in our monthly 24-Hour Prayer Chain, our monthly and special prayer meetings, and our home groups as we become a church that is powerful in prayer and powerful in spiritual warfare against our common Enemy.

May we find all the encouragement we need from our Joshua, our Jesus, who fights for us and lives within us by the Spirit! May we also encourage one another, "and all the more as (we) see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25b). We have no idea about some of the battles our people here this morning are fighting. Maybe during our time of fellowship following the service you can say a word of encouragement, and perhaps even place your hand on a brother or sister's shoulder and offer a prayer of encouragement.

Realize and remember: we are God's *victorious* people in spiritual warfare.

**Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:**

1. Do you think spiritual warfare is avoidable or unavoidable? Share your answer and reason(s).
2. Why do some Christians not believe in the existence of the devil, and what difference might this denial make in their lives?
3. The Amalekites attacked the Israelite “stragglers” (Deuteronomy 25:18). In what ways do we make ourselves vulnerable to Satan’s damaging attacks?
4. Scripture gives warnings about Satan’s strategic efforts to attack believers. What are some warnings you need to heed, i.e. some ways you might be particularly vulnerable to spiritual defeat?
5. Think of some Scripture promises of God’s help to us in overcoming the Enemy in spiritual warfare and reflect on how well you are applying those promises in your life.
6. Recall some instances in your life when God faithfully delivered you from spiritual defeat. Ask him to give you renewed encouragement for spiritual and moral victory in the present and future.
7. What is the role of prayer in victory in spiritual warfare? What does Moses’ raised hands and the assistance of Aaron and Hur tell you about the need for intercessory prayer? In what ways are you involved in the church’s prayer ministry, and how might you increase your involvement?

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