

Read Exodus 23:20-33

Victory. We love it. Doesn't matter if it's youth sports or victory in a raging battle, we think certain things are worth fighting for – and winning! And so does God.

When I was a young girl I remember going to my grandparent's community cemetery and decorating graves on Memorial Day. The whole community turned out and shared a picnic dinner. Originally called Decoration Day, Memorial Day began after the Civil War, but eventually became a day to honor all who have died defending our country in any war. We are grateful for their sacrifices, which come with extreme cost and great pain.

In the same way, God would fight for the children of Israel to bring them into the land of the promise. It would come at extreme cost. God laid out the plan, and the people of God were expected to partner with God exactly as God instructed them.

God's angel went before the people. This angel bore God's name and Presence. Some define the angel as Christ; others as God's very Presence. We are not sure exactly who the angel was except that he has the complete authority of God and so is very, very important. God, through the angel, takes the front line to guard God's children as they go and to guide them to the place God has prepared.

And indeed, Israel needed protection. They had enemies. From Egypt to Amalek, other nations attacked and fought this fledgling nation. That would not change. The Bible shows us the raw truth. You have read enough of the Old Testament now in your One Year Bible to see the dark side of human behavior and how nation comes against nation to conquer, destroy, and establish an empire. It was the way of the world in the Ancient Near East. But God has a positive plan, a future hope, and God sees the way through the enemies and through our sin to accomplish His plans, both for them and for us.

As God moves the Israelites forward to accomplish God's plan, God instructed Israel in what was expected of them. And, God has a plan for us too, along with expectations. As believers, we are supposed to be different from all other people. We are supposed to live up to God's high standards. God said to be attentive and listen to God's voice; to not rebel as we follow the angel, God's authority.

Wait a minute you might say – did you say us? Why is Ginger including us in this? Isn't this a story about ancient Israel? Come on, it's the 21st Century. We don't believe in angels leading us around. Isn't this just a long ago story with no real direct relevance for our lives?

Even though it's an ancient story, it is relevant. One way to understand that is to see its similarity with the New Testament. In this story God's Presence is represented in the angel. In the New Testament, believers receive God's Presence through the Spirit. The Holy Spirit remains with us throughout our lives, guarding, guiding, and teaching us what we need to grow as disciples.

Jesus said it like this. "When I leave here, I will not leave you alone. I'm sending the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will instruct you in understanding the truth (Jn 16:13). So we gather to study the

Bible. The Holy Spirit will guard you by giving you the words to say when people come against you because of your faith (Lk 12:11-12). The Holy Spirit will guide you with power to be Christ's witness (Act 1:8).

When the disciples and Paul went on missionary journeys, the Holy Spirit literally guided them from city to city by opening and shutting doors (Act 16:4-10). In the same way, as we pray, the Spirit guides us as a church. That's why we will gather this week for a prayer meeting, and that's the most important gathering of the month. And I encourage you to come.

Both the Old and New Testaments are relevant to our lives. Both teach us what God is like. Our God never leaves His children alone without protection, guidance, and instruction. God teaches Israel each step of the way. God says, "Be attentive to my voice; do not rebel."

Are you attentive to God's Word? It will pay off for you. Are you adjusting your decisions and lifestyle accordingly? God will guide you and it will be better for you. Moses said, "Do not rebel against the angel of God. Let his guidance change you."

The reason God had to go before them and fight for them is that the land was filled with people following all kinds of cults and superstitions and idols, just like Egypt. These people were oppressors and aggressors, just like Egypt. God said, "Have nothing to do with them. Get rid of their gods; do not follow their practices."

You and I know this is good advice. Bad company corrupts good character. God would clean out the neighborhood before they settled in.

Is God doing a terrible thing? I admit; I wish someone else were preaching this sermon – at least this part! All this talk about war and God annihilating people makes me uncomfortable. I'm a girl. I may like the victory, but I hate the fighting. I don't even like hockey. Why can't they be civil, work it out in a conversation or go to conflict therapy or something?

So how are we to think about this issue?¹

First, we have to see the passage through the lens of Ancient Near East culture. Nations attacked, conquered, enslaved, and established empires. God was working within the culture; that's the way things were done. We know God does that – speaks to us in a way we can hear. But that's still not enough. Why should God stoop to their level?

Do you struggle with that, as I do?

Remember, God annihilated the Egyptian army not to conquer but because of their oppression of the defenseless, and for not humbling themselves before God. So war is different for God. War is judgment, not aggression. God judged them for their idol worship and their abuse of others.

¹I found John Goldingay's book to be very helpful. *Old Testament Theology, Israel's Gospel*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), I:474-481.

And, once Israel was in the land, they were to act in a totally new way, following God's commands. They were to love God completely, and love their neighbors. Earlier in Exodus 23, God says to Israel, "you shall not pervert justice . . . and you shall not oppress a resident alien, for you know what it's like to be an alien in a foreign land." They were to bring a whole new way of life – God's way - and treat others in a totally different way. And the times Israel ignored this command and lived like these other nations, they too were subject to war (see Judges 2:14).

We need to live by God's good commands because they are the only way to truly overcome evil.

In addition, we have to remember that God is giving Israel the second part of the promise to Abraham – the land. The reason for that promise was very specific: God wanted to bless the world through Abraham's descendants. Now ultimately this means Jesus. God's plan of redemption was in the works.

Luke tells us out of God's redemptive plan would come peace (1:79). And Isaiah tells us God's ultimate desire is to turn swords into plowshares and that eventually nation will not lift up the sword against nation, nor shall they war any more (2:4).

So God's kind of war brings peace. But that has not happened yet. It is still a prophecy to our future. Nations still rage against one another for all kinds of reasons. And it's highly painful, even though freedom and peace come out of it.

So what does this passage say to us today, in 2010? Most of us are not likely to go off to war, but we do have our own personal battles. And sometimes those battles are just as hard to fight as if we were at war.

And there's something very beautiful to learn in this passage about God's special care. For God said to them, *I'm not going to do this all in one year, but little by little; for if I do, the land would become desolate, and the wild animals would multiply and threaten you.* There it is. Incredible love and wisdom.

When you turn to God for help to live God's way, it doesn't happen all at once. In fact, if you tried to change all at once you would never make. You would be overwhelmed. God realizes we do not become strong in one day. Victory occurs in the Christian's life step by step. Do you want to grow? Is there something in your life you want to overcome? Then go to God and ask for help.

Little by little God will help you. Simply be attentive to God's word; take the time to listen. Let God guide and protect you. God reveals himself to those who ask, seek, and knock. God makes your enemies his enemies. Whatever your need is – whether it's a struggle with forgiveness, or a moral sin, or a need for love, or something practical like a job or a new direction in life, whatever it is, God will fight for you to help you in that area.

I could tell you so many stories, but the story you need to concern yourself with is your own. Don't try to conquer all at once. Lean on God and in due time if you persist, God will lead you to victory.

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Step by Step God Gives Us Victory
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