

The secret of a successful life

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Preacher: John Johnstone

- [0 : 00] Well, let's turn then to God's Word, to Exodus chapter 17. Exodus chapter 17.
- So this is a really dramatic story, the second part of Exodus chapter 17.
- Because the Israelites are on their way to Mount Sinai when suddenly they are attacked by the Amalekites. And it's a cowardly attack.
- How do we know that? Actually, we know that from Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 25 verse 17. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt.
- How he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary. And cut off your tail those who were lagging behind you. He did not fear God. Therefore, when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you in the land that the Lord your God has given you for an inheritance to possess.
- [1 : 24] You shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget. So this is a dramatic and awful story. Because you could think of a modern day equivalent, I suppose.
- Think of thousands of refugees, women and children fleeing Syria, for example. And then maybe ending up somewhere like the Turkish border. And all of a sudden enemies, whether it's the Taliban or some other group, come and attack the weakest and the sickest of the women and children and kill them.
- Something like that. That's exactly what is going on here in Exodus chapter 17. The Amalekites were a semi-nomadic tribe.
- No doubt they felt threatened by the presence of Israel in the land. But they go after the weakest and most disadvantaged of the Israelites.
- Many of us like watching David Attenborough documentaries and incredible scenes you see on those programs. And we've probably all seen wolves attacking and animals that hunt in packs.
- [2 : 43] And often they go after the weakest, don't they? They single out the weakest one and they go for it. And that's what the Amalekites are doing here to God's people, the Israelites.
- They're going after, as it were, the most vulnerable deer in the herd. And so let's think together. What's the relevance of this today?
- Isn't this just an ancient battle from thousands of years ago? What's it got to do with us in Bon Accord in 2021? What is God saying to us from this passage tonight?
- Well, I've got predictably three headings. And the first point is know your enemy. Then we're going to see the secret of success.
- And finally, we're going to consider Moses the mediator. So those are our headings. Know your enemy. The secret of success. And then Moses the mediator.
- [3 : 44] So firstly then, know your enemy. Because in some ways, the devil uses exactly the same tactics today as he did back then.

He tries to pick us off when we're weak, when we're vulnerable, when we're tired, when we're depressed, when we have doubts about the Christian faith that come into our minds, when our circumstances are really tough.

It's not like Satan eases off on us then. He goes for us. He kicks us, as it were, when we're down. And so when we're faced with the flaming arrows of Satan, those doubts or fears or questions that bombard us all from time to time, often that's when we find Satan at his most active, trying to tempt us with all kinds of temptations.

And then we can even begin to doubt. Does God really love me? Is God really in control? Is God really a good God if he allows these things to happen to me or to the world or to our friends?

And if we're feeling down in the dumps, and we know that can be such a serious thing and can be a prolonged thing, if we're feeling down in a sustained way, we might even think, what is the point in opening my Bible today?

[5 : 22] And days can become a week or two weeks. What's the point in praying? What's the point in even going to church? And we feel discouraged. Because like the Amalekites went after the weakest of the Israelites, often Satan does that to us.

What are the two main things that Satan never wants us to do as Christians? Of course, it's the basics. It's reading God's word. He doesn't want you to do that.

And he doesn't want you to pray. He doesn't want you to do these things in church. He doesn't want you to do these things on your own or as families. God's people, in the context of this passage here in Exodus 17, God's people had already faced internal problems.

They had lacked water twice. They had lacked food. And each time God had shown his grace and had provided water and food for them.

So these were the internal problems that they had. The problem came from within the people themselves. It was their lack of faith that was the biggest problem.

[6 : 42] And we read the first half of Exodus 17. And we're not going to look at that tonight. But we can just note that a huge problem they had was their lack of faith in God providing for them.

That was the internal threat. But as we focus this evening on the second half of chapter 17, we see that they also faced an external threat from outside, from the Amalekites.

And they're taken from surprise. And the Amalekites hate the people of Israel. They want to actually wipe them off the face of the earth.

And where do we see that? Well, we see that in Psalm 83, actually. You can read that later. But I'll just read a couple of verses from Psalm 83. For behold, your enemies make an uproar.

Those who hate you have raised their heads. They lay crafty plans against your people. They consult together against your treasured ones.

[7 : 45] And later on in the Psalm, the Amalekites are amongst the people identified as those who hate the Israelites and want to wipe them out. The church, if we take the church today as in parallel with God's people back then, and I think that's an absolutely good thing to do, because many of the experiences in the Exodus and in the wilderness are a spiritual picture for God's people and their spiritual journey today.

So if we make that connection, we can see throughout the Scripture that the church always faces external and internal threats. You think of the Book of Acts, and the internal threats came from Ananias and Sapphira, and they're lying in Acts 5, or it came from Acts 6, and the way that there was favoritism and how Grecian and Hebraic Jews, Jewish women, widows were treated and all that.

And that caused all kinds of problems and division. So there are these internal threats, the lack of faith in the church. And then we read through Acts, and we also see the external threats from persecution, from the Roman Empire, from the Jews, and from other people who hate God's church, people like Saul of Tarsus, for example, and many others.

And so we see throughout the Bible that the church has this challenge, always facing a threat from within and a threat from outwith, an external threat as well.

And that is the same today. Today is exactly the same. We can suffer as a church because of our own unbelief when we fail to trust in the power of God and the promises God and the purposes of God.

[9 : 43] And we also recognize that there are so many today who persecute the church of Jesus Christ. So in Britain, there isn't much overt persecution in terms of physical threats and things like that.

We know that two-thirds of Christians in the world face terrible physical threats, and they're marginalized and imprisoned and martyred and all kinds of terrible things.

And we don't have that in our country, but we still have different forms of persecution and people who mock Christianity and mock being a follower of Jesus and who have an agenda against the church.

So there will always be an internal and an external threat. But I want us to see from this dramatic picture that we are in a battle.

The church, Christians, we, you, we are in a spiritual battle just as the Israelites are in this physical battle here.

[10 : 48] And so this scene in Exodus 17 is a picture of the Christian life. That becomes obvious in Ephesians 6 in the famous armor of God passage.

Verse 12, For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

And Paul tells us in Ephesians 2 that we were once slaves to sin and we were on Satan's side when we were slaves to sin.

But when we're born again, we're taken out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. But that means Christians become Satan's enemies. We are now the opposition as far as Satan is concerned.

And so we cannot underestimate the interest that the evil one and all who belong to him have in us as God's people and in the church.

[11 : 59] And so often Satan attacks us in the ordinary places of our lives, in our family life, in our marriages, in our relationships with our children, at work, even at church.

He comes and he tempts us in all of these places. And we can't resist him in our own strength. And so the first heading is know your enemy.

Let's take this stuff seriously. There really are forces of evil at work and we really do have a spiritual opposition.

And so we need the armor of God. And this isn't something way out there in terms of Christian theology. This is very basic. This is Lord's Prayer stuff, isn't it?

Because what do we pray in the Lord's Prayer? Jesus said, pray this, deliver us from the evil one. And we need to keep on praying that, don't we?

[13 : 06] That the Lord would protect us against the powers of darkness. So that's the first heading, know your enemy. More positively, let's move to the second heading and that is the secret of Israel's success.

The secret of Israel's success. So how does this fledgling nation deal with the threat of the Amalekites? Well, Moses responds in two ways, doesn't he?

He instructs Joshua to go and coordinate these untrained men, these inexperienced men to fight in the valley. That's one response.

And the other response is prayer, symbolized by Moses going up the mountain and holding the staff of the Lord up in his hands.

And it is so dramatic, isn't it? It's such a wonderful story that when the staff of the Lord is held up, the Israelites are winning and Moses grows tired and he can't hold it up anymore and then the Amalekites are winning and the battle ebbs and flows.

[14 : 15] And so the Lord makes it clear to everyone from what's happening that the outcome of the battle is determined by depending on God.

Because what is Moses doing with the staff? He's not there on top of the mountain directing the troops. He's not there performing some kind of magic so that Israel win.

No. This is the staff of God's power. This was the staff that Moses threw down and it became a snake that swallowed the other snakes. It was the staff that opened up the Red Sea.

The staff with which he struck the rock and water came gushing out. This was the staff of God's power. And so when Moses holds up the staff in his arms he's saying to the Lord, Lord, do it again.

Show yourself great and strong again. Display your power once more. Moses is appealing for God to act.

[15 : 23] Moses is appealing for the Lord to fight for his people. and Moses knows that the only way of success is through dependence on the Lord.

Dependence on the power of the Lord. So let's remind us all here this evening of that basic Christian principle that if we want to have successful Christian lives, successful in terms of God-pleasing Christian lives, then we need to depend and rely on the power of God.

Remember the words of Jesus in John 15, 5, I am the vine, you are the branches and so on. And he says very plainly, without me you can do nothing.

And so in one way the staff represents intercessory prayer. The staff represents intercessory prayer.

So let's just take a step back and think what two things are going on simultaneously. Well on the one hand Joshua and his men are fighting, fighting, fighting in the valley and that's necessary.

[16 : 41] But also Joshua is on the mountaintop praying and praying and praying. And that is a beautiful picture of the Christian life and one that I hope stays with you and lodges in your heart and mind forever.

Because we have in this marvelous passage the tension, the balance of the Christian life and that balance being one of prayer and action.

these things dovetail together in the life of the Christian prayer and action. Imagine you only did one and not the other, it would be ludicrous, wouldn't it?

Imagine Moses was up on the mountain praying but Joshua and his men just did nothing, that would be a catastrophe. And equally if Joshua was fighting away against the Amalekites but there was no prayer, that would be a disaster as well.

And actually that's seen a year later when they fight the Amalekites again and lose because they forget to rely on the Lord. And so this is the main thing I want to bring to your attention tonight.

[17 : 56] The secret of success of a God-pleasing Christian life is that each one of us has a life steeped in prayer but a life full of Christian action as well.

Prayer and action dovetailing together. And we could apply that in all kinds of ways. Even if we want to grow as Christians and become stronger, of course we need to pray.

You're not going to grow in your Christian faith if you don't pray about it. But there's also things you must do. You must come to church regularly and you must enjoy Christian fellowship and turn up at house groups and things and learn from older Christians and younger Christians too and use your spiritual gifts and all these different things, prayer and action.

Or if sin is somewhere in our lives and we see that and we can identify I've got an issue here, I've got a problem here with sin. The secret of success will be prayer and action because of course you must pray about it, confess your sin and ask God to help you.

But there's things you must do as well. You must avoid those places which lead you into sin, avoid those people which lead you into sin. We always need prayer and action.

[19 : 25] Or if we want to see our children converted, of course, ultimately, that lies with the Lord. But if we want to see our children converted, are we praying for them every day for their salvation?

We need to do that. But we also need to take action. We need to teach them the gospel. We need to model Jesus to them, albeit imperfectly.

Prayer and action. I love Colossians 1 verse 29 which brings these two things together. Paul says this, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that powerfully works within me.

Can you hear that prayer but action in the heartbeat of Paul there? I toil, I struggle, but with all his energy as he depends on the Lord in prayer for all that he needs.

or back to Ephesians 6 again in verse 17 and 18. There's things we must do. We must take up the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, get to know our Bibles, which is the Word of God.

[20 : 43] But then it says praying at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication. action. So, what about you guys here tonight?

Have you got the perfect balance between prayer and action? I wouldn't claim I do. I'm sure you wouldn't claim you have the perfect balance as individuals.

Sometimes we can be more inclined to pray about things and that's great, but we don't really get involved or use our gifts as much as we perhaps could.

or there might be others who are getting fired into all kinds of works and things and are busy, busy, busy in Christian things, but seldom pray.

And neither of these things is good. And so what we're seeing in this spiritual picture is that we need both together. We need to be men and women, boys and girls of prayer and of action.

[21 : 47] We can think about that as individuals, and we can think about that as a church as well. And I can say that because I haven't been here for many years, so hopefully without offending anyone I can say, what kind of church are you?

Are you strong on prayer and weak on action or strong on action and weak on prayer or where's the balance? And it's just good for us to think about these things so that we are always ensuring that we have this balance of prayer and action.

Well, one thing's for sure in this passage, that the outcome and the victory wasn't because of the amazing prayers of Moses or the amazing military skill of Joshua, but it was because of the Lord.

Victory comes from the Lord. And we see that message throughout the whole book of Exodus, actually, that God is saving a people. God is saving a people for himself with this purpose, to make them a worshipping nation, a nation that love him and that trust him.

And so the whole focus of this passage isn't so much about Joshua's skill as a military leader or Moses' skill as a spiritual leader. He can't even hold up his hands on his own.

[23 : 15] He needs the help of others. But really, it's about God working through these things. Yes, the Lord knows we're weak, but he loves to work through ordinary people like us as we pray and as we get stuck in to the work that he has for us to do.

So let me throw out a few challenges here. as things, God willing, continue to open up after the pandemic and as the church goes back to basics, I think it's good for us to think, in all churches, how can we pray more as the people of God?

Whether it's at the prayer meeting or prayer triplets or meeting up with a friend to pray, how can we pray more? prayer. And let's acknowledge that some people are terrified of praying out loud, aren't they?

They've maybe never been taught how to pray out loud. Maybe they've grown up and just never done it. And so maybe they're 30 or 50 or 70 and they've just never prayed out loud and that can be a very stressful thing for people.

And so they can avoid prayer with other Christians and think, I could never do that. But I just want to encourage anyone who feels like that, not to think that you can never learn or never pray out loud.

[24 : 42] Maybe not in some contexts. Maybe you'd rather the ground would open up and swallow you, I don't know. But you know, it's such a blessing for praying out loud to be just a normal part of our Christian experience.

Those of us who've been in the church here for a while remember with love and affection, John Davidson, I'm sure, who was converted initially after having a stroke and reading some of the signs and Bible verses outside of the church here.

And I used to love hearing him praying at the prayer meeting. They weren't long prayers or flowery or ornate prayers, but he just stood up and prayed from the heart.

And it was such an encouragement and a beautiful thing to hear him praying. And sometimes we think we have to learn to pray for 20 minutes, prayers that have a million Bible verses in them or that are, I don't know.

But I think the main thing is just try and learn to pray and start somewhere. Maybe a couple just begin praying together or ask an older Christian and say, hey, could you teach me to pray?

[25 : 58] That would be a hard thing to do, wouldn't it? It would feel awkward at first, but it would be such a blessing to do that. Go back to basics and think, how can we pray?

We see here the importance of prayer, the importance of action as well. And we know that this is an encouragement to us, again, a basic thing.

How are we living our Christian lives? What are we like at work? Are we known as people who are kind and loving? Are we taking action in front of those who aren't Christians yet so that they know that we belong to Jesus?

Let me give another example of prayer and action together, thinking of evangelism. As we all know, there are so many people who don't have the first clue about the Lord Jesus Christ these days.

And we know that God's entrusted us with the gospel, that we are his ambassadors, and we have the responsibility to share the love of Jesus with the lost.

[27 : 05] Let me encourage you to do that with prayer and with action. Of course, with prayer, because only the Lord can open the eyes of the blind.

We saw that this morning, that it's the Lord who gives understanding. It's the Lord who enables people to see. God is sovereign. Only he can replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.

And so as we want and long for other people to become Christians, as like the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9, we want to win others for Christ, Christ, then we need to pray.

But we also need to take action, don't we? We need to spend time with those who aren't Christians. We need to befriend them. We need to love them. We need to bless them.

We need to live godly lives before them. We need to model Jesus before them. And as we do these things, prayer and action together, God will be at work.

[28 : 15] So that's the second point. And the main point, God uses our prayers and God uses our actions. And the secret of success in the Christian life is always coming back to these things, prayer and action.

Finally, I'd like us to see Moses the mediator. Moses the mediator, that's the third point. Because in this passage, of course, Moses acts as a mediator.

He's interceding for the Israelites as they're in battle in prayer. He's pleading for this undeserving nation. And victory comes through the power of God working through Moses the mediator.

Now Moses was a great prophet. We know that. And he was the one who led the people out of slavery in Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the promised land.

And in that sense, Moses is a type of Christ. He points to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is a greater prophet than Moses, who is the greatest prophet, and who has led us, not out of slavery in Egypt, but out of slavery to sin.

[29 : 39] He set us free from slavery to sin, and he's led us out into the promised land of heaven. And so Moses foreshadows here, or points to, what Jesus would do in the future.

Moses foreshadows what Jesus would do later on. And just as Moses' physical intercession brings life and victory as God works through him, so we find in Christ one who intercedes for us, and who appeals before the Father on our behalf.

Jesus is the greater mediator. He appeals on account of his death for us on the cross. We see that in John 17, verse 9.

The great high priestly prayer of Christ. I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. Again there in the high priestly prayer, Jesus is coming back to the fact we have an enemy, back to the first point, the evil one, that sinister enemy, the devil.

[31 : 07] But let's be encouraged tonight that we have one in Jesus Christ who is interceding for us. When? Right now.

We read in God's word that Jesus lives to intercede for us, or to be more personal. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, Jesus is praying for you.

Isn't that an encouragement? Don't we just get encouraged when other people are praying for us, when they say, look, I know you're going through a hard time. I've been praying for you. What a blessing and encouragement that is to us.

And tonight, we're mindful too that the Lord Jesus Christ himself is praying for us. Let me just speculate for a moment.

We have in this scene Moses on top of a mountain with two other men on either side of him. And as he's stretched out, he brings victory through the power of God to the people.

[32 : 21] What does that remind you of? What does that remind you of? Surely, it reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was stretched out on a cross with two criminals on either side of him.

And it's through that intercession for us that the victory comes. So what do I want us to remember as we draw to a close?

Three things. Firstly, we're in a war. It's not easy being a Christian. It's not easy living the Christian life.

We have a great enemy and we're in a battle. So expect it to be tough. We are in a war. Secondly, I want us to remember that to succeed in this war, we need to take prayer seriously.

Prayer on our own, prayer as families, prayer as a church family. And that might mean some of us coming out of our comfort zones and that's okay.

[33 : 33] But learning to pray together. prayer. And lastly, I want us to remember that we need to be men and women and boys and girls of action as well.

Using the spiritual gifts that the Lord has given you and he's blessed this congregation with many, many spiritual gifts. gifts. I remember during my seven years as youth assistant here, I was five years as a student and then seven years as youth assistant.

And during those seven years, I remember certain people who came up to me and said to me, how can I help? How can I help in the work of the church?

And what a blessing that was to me and to the church. And so, my challenge for you guys would be likewise to do what, I better not name who they were, but it really left a big impression on me and how wonderful it would be if you can say to your elders and to others who are doing things, how can I help?

And how can I pray for you? Prayer and action. Let's bow our heads and pray. Almighty God, we just thank you for this wonderful portion in your word.

[35 : 12] We thank you so much for the Lord Jesus Christ. We thank you that he lives to intercede for us. Were it not for that, Lord, we would wander away from you.

But you are the keeping God. You who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion. And we thank you so much for that. Father, we just thank you for all the efforts to pray together that Bon Accord make and have made over the years.

And we just pray that this would grow and develop and deepen in new and encouraging and godly ways. And we again thank you for each act of love prompted by faith by members here.

and again we pray that those would but grow and deepen their love for one another, their love for the communities in this city.

Father, help us all we pray to be people of prayer and action. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.