

Shabbat Zachor

Notes by Tim Hegg

This Shabbat, the one immediately preceding Purim, is designated as *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of Remembering. This is taken from the additional Torah reading (Deut 25:17-19) in which the command is given to remember Amalek and what he did to us as we came out of Egypt. The fact that the earlier, three-year cycle connects this with the passage from Numbers that describes the travels of Israel from Egypt to entrance into the Promised Land shows that Shabbat Zachor is a very old part of the liturgical calendar.

For non-Jewish people, it seems quite out of keeping with a benevolent God that He should require His faithful followers to remember the evil deeds of an arch enemy. How does this impact the whole concept of forgiveness? Wouldn't such a practice foster bitterness? How does this fit with Yeshua's words (in the Sermon on the Mount) to "love your enemies?"

It is, in fact, days like this one which put Judaism in stark contrast with the religions of the Western world. While Western thought, modelled so much after Plato, Aristotle, and other giants in the Greek traditions, attempts to rid itself of this materialistic existence and soar to the heights of an enlightened spirit-existence, Judaism sees in the material world the actual outworking of God's purposes and plans. What is more, Judaism sees innate value in material existence, for the simple reason that God created the material world and pronounced it "good." Therefore, the attack by Amalek upon Israel as we came out of Egypt was nothing short of an attack upon God, for to touch Israel is to touch the "apple of His eye." Amalek will therefore represent, throughout all generations, the evil heart of mankind which, if it were possible, would attack and slay God Himself. And Purim fits perfectly, for Haman is a descendant of Amalek.

The physical attack of Amalek has, therefore, eternal spiritual realities. Here is a very important point to learn: our actions upon this earth have eternal consequences, both negative as well as positive. The idea that one will be judged entirely upon one's thoughts, or intentions, is foreign to a Jewish perspective on life. Indeed, when it comes to one's active service to God, one's motives are all important. To simply perform a duty of worship without any heart involvement is unacceptable. In fact, God teaches us through the prophet Isaiah that such service is not accepted by Him and that it is better left undone. The remedy, of course, is not to twiddle one's thumbs until one "feels like serving" but to take one's emotions and feelings in hand and command one's spirit to obey God because of who He is, and because of the covenant relationship which exists between Him and His chosen people, Jew and non-Jew alike.

Yet, serving each other is to be done regardless of one's feelings. Even if one does not "feel" like aiding the poor, one ought to perform the duty nonetheless. Why? Because regardless of one's motivations, to serve the poor is to meet their immediate, *physical* needs, which are the most pressing for the moment. Thus, the mere doing of the *mitzvah* is counted by God as a righteous act (and doubly so if the heart is also correctly motivated).

Now, to remember the evil of Amalek according to the command of God is to recognize that deeds done in this life may have eternal consequences. *God is not obligated to forgive Amalek*. Indeed, this is the heart of the lesson we are to learn. Amalek is not forgiven, not merely because he failed to seek forgiveness, but *because forgiveness was never extended to him*. He was offered the opportunity to help Israel, i.e., to bless her, and when he refused *he received the curse of the covenant without being offered another chance*. Let us get this clear: the fact that God has offered us the forgiveness of sins is a direct outworking of His mercy. He is not obligated to forgive us.

How this flies in the face of our present pluralistic, feel-good society. We are being told by people everywhere that everyone is right and no one is wrong; that every viewpoint has value and should be incorporated into the whole; that every perspective has some measure of the truth; and that we should, therefore, find the irreducible minimum of agreement so as to establish "oneness" or "unity." But the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of distinction—He is the One who marks out and divides, Who

highlights the differences.

Before anyone gets the impression that such talk is designed to build the pride of those who are God's people, I would hasten to point out that God Himself characterizes those He has chosen as the least among the nations (Amos 3:2). In other words, if He has extended His scepter of forgiveness to us, it is entirely because of His mercies, and not because He saw anything better in us than He did in any of His other creatures. This is so because He intends for our salvation to be a trophy of His grace, not of our works.

So, there is Israel, and there is Amalek. What makes the difference? Why is Amalek to be forever despised, and Israel forever loved? Why are the nations blessed when they honor Israel, but cursed if they side with Amalek? The answer is obvious: because God has chosen Israel, Amalek has cursed Israel, and *God did not extend an on-going offer of forgiveness to Amalek*. Amalek had an opportunity and chose wrongly. As a result, he and his nation become an eternal sign of disgust.

What is the application for us? That we should learn how to hate Amalek more and more? No—there's no command to hate Amalek. The command is to *remember what he did*. Why? Why should we, in our yearly cycle, take time to remember the deeds of someone whose memory is to be erased from the earth? Because in remembering what he did, we are forced to remember God's faithfulness to us in spite of Amalek's treachery, and we are reminded that our position of honor before the Lord is one which flows entirely out of His mercy and grace, and not because we deserve it. The offer to always forgive is an offer which is not extended to everyone, but flows out of God's sovereign grace and mercy which He apportions to mankind as He wills. He has promised by way of covenant that He would bless all who have Abraham as their father, and we may count upon His faithfulness to this covenant promise.

Indeed, Amalek's sin is highlighted in this regard as well, for in His attack upon Israel, he was attempting to overthrow the very covenant which God had made with Israel, and which He would confirm through His faithfulness to her. In this, Amalek, as king of his nation, attempted to overthrow HaShem, King of the World. It was a battle in which Amalek should never have engaged.

In light of this discussion, it seems appropriate to be reminded that we should never take God's gracious offer of forgiveness for granted, as though we can play with sin, having the idea that when we're good and ready, God will always be there waiting for us to return. To take such a position is to presume upon the grace of God. What is more, the Scriptures teach us that the heart that is at rest with sin is not the heart which has been born again. David, for example, in his sin, could not be content. When confronted, he confessed his sin *and turned from it*. John teaches us that one who is willing to make sin a pattern of life has no right to claim that his sin will be forgiven. And Paul agrees: the one who has died with Messiah no longer offers himself as a slave of sin, but rather gives his body as a slave of righteousness. The gathered testimony of the Apostles and of Messiah is that sweet and bitter water cannot come forth from the same fountain. And someone who truly has the Ruach HaKodesh will never be content with a life of sin. The work of God upon the heart has forever changed the heart, and secured the covenant promises for eternity.

So, as we remember what Amalek did, may it cause us to reflect upon how God so graciously changed our hearts, offered us forgiveness which we did not deserve, and brought us forever into His family. And may such reflection cause us to appreciate all the more His infinite love, mercy, and grace.