



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text
Exodus 23:20-33

Topic
God promises Israel to send His Angel
ahead of them into battle against their enemies

Title
"Angel in the Battlefield"

It is perhaps the worst miscasting in a feature film of all time. Who do you think it was, in what film? Hold that thought.

Casting is so important. Every now and then someone publishes a list of actors who were almost cast in iconic roles instead of those who were:

- We can't imagine anyone other than Harrison Ford as Han Solo in the original *StarWars* trilogy. But they almost cast Al Pacino.
- We can't imagine anyone other than Al Pacino as Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* trilogy. But they almost cast Jack Nicholson.
- *Forrest Gump* was brought to the screen by Tom Hanks instead of John Travolta.

Who was the worst actual miscast of all time? No, it wasn't George Clooney as *Batman*. It was John Wayne as Genghis Kahn in *The Conqueror*.

The film was a critical flop; it is often ranked as one of the worst films of the 1950s and one of the worst ever. *The Conqueror* was listed in the 1978 book *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*. Wayne was posthumously named a "winner" of a Golden Turkey Award for his performance in the film.

On top of that, eleven above-ground nuclear weapons tests occurred at the location where it was filmed. The cast and crew spent many weeks at the site, and the producers later shipped 60 tons of dirt back to Hollywood in order to match the Utah terrain and lend realism to studio re-shoots. The filmmakers knew about the nuke tests but the federal government assured them that the tests caused no hazard to public health. The cast and crew totaled 220 people. By the end of 1980, 91 of them had developed some form of cancer and 46 had died of the disease.

Turning to our text in Exodus: **The Israelites were perfectly cast as the conquerors of the Promised Land.**

God said to them,

Exo 23:27 "I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn *their* backs to you.

Exo 23:28 And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you.

Israel's mandate: Go into the land and completely conquer its inhabitants.

We can learn from their example as conquerors, for sure. But our mandate, as Christians, is very different. **We do not eliminate our enemies; we dwell with them. We are called upon to live in the midst of a fallen, even evil, world, surrounded by supernatural powers of darkness.**

Jesus prayed to the Father about us, specifically asking Him, “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

In this world we are *not* taken out of, surrounded by enemies like “the evil one,” we are described by the apostle Paul not as conquerors, but as “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37).

We often want to be conquerors when, in fact, we are “more than conquerors.”

Let’s use illness as an example. We want to conquer it through prayer and fasting and faith and seeking God. Our Father still heals, and there is nothing wrong with seeking Him for conquering illness.

A “more than conqueror” is someone who, like the apostle Paul who coined the term, can accept God’s “No” and experience grace sufficient to glory in it.

Conquering is easy, in one sense. God could easily, immediately overcome all our pains and problems.

More than conquering - that’s real work, spiritual work, that readies us to see the Lord Who suffered and died that we might live.

It will help to remember this basic worldview: “To live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

I’ll organize my comments around two points: #1 You Are More Than A Conqueror In The Place Jesus Has Prepared, and #2 You Are More Than A Conqueror Against The Powers Jesus Has Permitted.

#1 You Are More Than A Conqueror In The Place Jesus Has Prepared

(v20-24)

God is a prepper. I don’t mean in the survivalist sense. I mean that He is always at work preparing things for us:

- “I go to prepare a place for you,” Jesus promised us. You can read its description in the last chapters of the Revelation. It’s our mansions in the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.
- Meanwhile, we read in Ephesians that God has “good works... prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

In verse twenty, the Lord tells Israel He has “prepared” the Promised Land for them. Seeing the kind of prepping the Lord did for them will help broaden our understanding of His prepping in our lives.

Exo 23:20 "Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.

This “Angel” is none other than an Old Testament appearance of the Second Person of the trinity - Jesus Christ.

We are confident it's the Lord, and not a mighty angel, because in the Book of Joshua you'll see this Person described as Captain of the Lord's host, and Joshua worships Him as God.

We all have a favorite *Far Side* cartoon. Mine was one in which God was a contestant on *Jeopardy!* He was the only one with any score, and He had a gazillion dollars heading into Final Jeopardy. It was an easy win.

With the Angel of the Lord, the Captain of the Lord's host - Jesus - fighting for you, it was an easy win. Or at least it was a guaranteed win.

We have the Lord with us in a much greater sense. True, He's departed and in Heaven; but He said that was a good thing, because now we each have the Holy Spirit indwelling us.

The Angel would "keep" Israel "in the way." The place He had prepared must be approached along the way He had ordained.

We need reminding that it is the narrow way - the way of separation from the things of the world. We are *in* the world by God's design; we are not to become *of* the world by its deception.

Exo 23:21 Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name *is* in Him.

This doesn't mean their "transgressions" could not be forgiven, but that they would have consequences. Part of God's covenant with Israel was conditional on their obedience. I said they were guaranteed a win - but only if they obeyed Him and followed "the way" He prescribed.

Case in point: After the Israelites obeyed God in the conquest of Jericho, they disobeyed Him in the assault on Ai. They were defeated until they dealt with those who had sinned. Then they received a new strategy from the Lord, followed it, and were victorious.

Exo 23:22 But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries.

Tremendous promise, yes; but did you catch what He said? There would be “enemies” and “adversaries” in the land.

God had prepared the land for them by allowing enemies and adversaries to remain in it. They were headed into battle.

Our ideas about preparation are very different than God’s. I’m thinking He should have already driven-out the enemies, so that they could walk right in and start farming. Instead verses twenty-three and twenty-four describe what was waiting for them:

Exo 23:23 For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.

These nations were to be conquered. Let me deal quickly with the complaint that God was cruel in ordering the destruction of these peoples. First we must understand how incredibly wicked they were, e.g., casting their infants into fire to worship their gods.

There is something else we must factor in, and it’s put well by this quote:

It is contrary to the spirit of the divine law, and to the facts bearing on the subject scattered in the history, to suppose that any obstacle was put in the way of well disposed individuals of the denounced nations who left their sins and were willing to join the service of Yahweh. The spiritual blessings of the covenant were always open to those who sincerely and earnestly desired to possess them.

We see examples of individuals from these nations saved. It wasn't that they could not repent; they would not.

Exo 23:24 You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their works; but you shall utterly overthrow them and completely break down their *sacred* pillars.

The Angel of the Lord would overcome these nations. All the Israelites had to do was not bow down to their gods, but instead utterly destroy their places and objects of worship.

It reminds me of when I first was saved. The Gospel was the power of God unto salvation, and it included deliverance from sin. I've told you before I was a drunk. The Lord immediately took that away; I no longer had any desire to drink alcohol. It was much better to be filled with the Holy Spirit. All I need do was to not be drawn back into drunkenness.

Is there something in your life the Lord conquered but you have now returned to? Over time, walking with the Lord, we are definitely "prone to wander... Prone to leave the God I love."

In the world Jesus asked His Father to not remove you from, there remain serious enemies: Satan, sin, death and the grave.

Our enemies were all conquered at the Cross when Jesus said in a loud voice, "It is finished!"

- **Satan** and his malevolent followers were defeated. Colossians 2:15 proclaims, "Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it."
- **Sin** was conquered. Romans 6:11-15 declares, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"
- **Death and the grave** are no longer enemies. First Corinthians 15:55 says, "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING? O HADES, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY?"

We have only to appropriate the conquest of the Cross by resisting the devil and refusing to yield ourselves to sin.

As for death and its aftermath, the grave, I told you earlier to have this mindset: To live is Christ, and to die is gain.

As we wait for Him, the Lord encourages us to discover "good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

One commentator said this:

It involves the idea of a previous determination, or an arrangement beforehand for securing a certain result. The previous preparation here referred to was, the divine intention; and the meaning is, **that God had predetermined that we should lead holy lives.**

God has prearranged that we can bring forth good works as we encounter and engage with our defeated enemies. We normally think of good works as feeding the poor, or taking care of widows. Those are good works; but something else is in view here.

An example of this type of good works will help. The apostle Paul encountered something he called a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan that buffeted him. He prayed repeatedly for healing and deliverance. God said, emphatically, "No."

God said more than "No." He said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

To which Paul responded, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (Second Corinthians 12:9-10).

Paul wanted God to **conquer** the thorn in his flesh. Instead he became **more than conqueror** by letting grace be sufficient for him.

Many of you have gone through, or are going through, something in which you are asked to be more than conqueror. If not - you will have experiences like that.

With the empowering of the Spirit Who lives in you, bring forth the good works of a believer trusting in his or her Savior.

#2 You Are More Than A Conqueror Against The Powers Jesus Has Permitted

(v25-33)

If victory was guaranteed, why fight? As it turns out, fighting was necessary for some very important reasons.

Exo 23:25 "So you shall serve the LORD your God, and He will bless your bread and your water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you.

“Bread and water” are basic staples for living. We think of them as a diet for criminals. The promise here is that even things as ordinary as bread and water would be amazing in the Promised Land.

Do you have a favorite bread? Maybe King’s Hawaiian bread? Or any version of garlic bread?

How about water? I love Topo Chico sparkling mineral water.

There would be no sickness. Remember: This was promised to Israel in their mandate to drive-out all their enemies. Our mandate is to live among enemies; we are most definitely not promised health and wealth.

Exo 23:26 No one shall suffer miscarriage or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

Long-life and a heritage were promised. Behind this is the reminder that God would fulfill all that He had unconditionally promised to Abraham, e.g., multiplying his descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the sand on the beaches.

Exo 23:27 "I will send My fear before you, I will cause confusion among all the people to whom you come, and will make all your enemies turn *their* backs to you.

God would employ a number of odd strategies in their conquering of the Promised Land, including "fear." When Israel crossed the Jordan, we read,

Jos 5:1 So it was, when all the kings of the Amorites who were on the west side of the Jordan, and all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of the Jordan from before the children of Israel until we had crossed over, that their heart melted; and there was no spirit in them any longer because of the children of Israel.

God used fear... And hornets!

Exo 23:28 And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you.

There is a lot of speculation on what is meant by "hornets," including that God sent actual hornets. I rather think it's a way of describing the effect of any of the strategies God would employ. Whether it was drying up the Jordan River... Or marching around the walls of Jericho... Or causing the sun to stand still in the sky while Israel defeated her enemies on the battlefield... It was like sending swarms of hornets in its effect.

Exo 23:29 I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field become too numerous for you.

The conquest would take more than a year. In fact it took seven years for Joshua to subdue their enemies.

I'm positive the average Israelite would have preferred that God drive-out their enemies without any fighting. But that would have been impractical, in many ways, but certainly regarding the land reverting to being too wild.

Thirty years after its reactor #4 exploded in a pillar of radioactive smoke, the abandoned wasteland around the Chernobyl nuclear power station is one of the most important habitats for scientists studying native wildlife in Europe. Within ten days of the accident on April 26, 1986, almost the entire population of 120,000 people had been evacuated from a 30 kilometer exclusion zone around the plant. But with humans off the scene, wild animal and bird species are roaming what is effectively one of Europe's biggest - if unintentional - wildlife reserves.

Wild boar, wolves, elk, and deer in particular have thrived in the forest and grassland landscape. The "zone," as is it popularly known, has become an improbable sanctuary for more elusive fauna including Lynx, endangered European Bison - that wandered across the border from Belarus - and a growing population of Przewalski's Horses, a wild equine released in the area in the 1990s. The extremely rare breed is doing so well in the area that herds are beginning to stray beyond the zone.

In another place in the Bible God tells them that He left enemies in the land so the Israelites would grow in their skills and abilities as warriors.

All-in-all, God's plan to put them into battle was faith-building.

Exo 23:30 Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased, and you inherit the land.

God had a solid strategy for occupation. It would take time, but victory was assured.

Exo 23:31 And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

It was an ambitious plan, but very doable for a people who would obey the Lord.

Exo 23:32 You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods.

Exo 23:33 They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For *if* you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you."

Israel had to be all-in. These nations must be destroyed - save for any who repented and believed in the Lord. The Israelites were not to deviate at all from God's plan by merely subjugating the people, or entering into treaties with them. That would keep "their gods" in power - and that would ruin Israel.

We must realize that these “gods” were genuine supernatural entities. They were represented by idols of wood and stone; but they were not the mere imaginings of primitive people.

We saw, for instance, that the magicians of Egypt could perform more than magic tricks. They harnessed genuine supernatural power to duplicate a few of the things Moses could do.

It was simple: If Israel tried to make the pagans serve them by entering into covenants, they would end up serving their gods. They would thus be ensnared. They would be defeated and disciplined by God until they repented and got back on spiritual track.

Demands for exorcisms in the Catholic Church are on the rise. Earlier this year more than 200 priests from around the world traveled to Rome for an annual Vatican training course on how to perform exorcisms, the ritual used by the Catholic Church to free people who are believed to be possessed by demons.

We should not be surprised. The apostle Paul described “principalities... powers... the rulers of the darkness of this age... [the] spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*” (Ephesians 6:12).

Peter told us to resist the devil - indicating he would be on the attack, like a roaring lion, during the Church Age.

The passage in which the apostle Paul glories that we are “more than conquerors” reads like this:

Rom 8:35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

Rom 8:36 As it is written: "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE KILLED ALL DAY LONG; WE ARE ACCOUNTED AS SHEEP FOR THE SLAUGHTER."

Rom 8:37 Yet **in all these things** we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

Rom 8:38 For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,

Rom 8:39 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 our Lord.

That's quite a list of perils, pain, problems, and pitfalls. To be a more than conqueror, you must experience some of them.

William MacDonald shares this commentary about being more than conquerors:

Instead of separating us from Christ's love, these things only succeed in drawing us closer to Him. We are not only **conquerors**, but **more than conquerors**. It is not simply that we triumph over these formidable forces, but that in doing so we bring glory to God, blessing to others, and good to ourselves. We make slaves out of our enemies...

It all sounds so glorious - until it's me who is in pain or peril. If I remember that to live is Christ, and to die gain, then God's grace will be sufficient.

That word, “sufficient,” is described in *Strong’s Concordance* this way: “ the idea of *raising* a barrier; properly to *ward off*, that is, (by implication) to *avail* (figuratively *be satisfactory*): - be content, be enough, suffice, be sufficient.”

It isn’t that you are promised just barely enough grace to hang-on to your faith.

No, you are guaranteed grace that acts as a barrier, warding off the things assailing you. They cannot touch you *spiritually* - even as they may ruin you physically.

Your outward man is always perishing; your inward man is being transformed into the image of Jesus.

Sufficient grace also preaches to others watching you. To see you basking in the love of Jesus in the midst of such pain puts Heaven into perspective.

Satan, sin, death and the grave are defeated. While we patiently wait for Jesus to resurrect the dead believers of the Church Age, and rapture those alive at His coming, these enemies are permitted to operate on the earth.

The time in which a believer lives determines the casting:

- Israel was cast as conquerors, empowered to drive-out enemies.
- We are cast as more than conquerors, empowered to dwell in victory in the midst of enemies.

One Christian author wrote, “While other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life’s joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the midst of this world’s sorrows, tasting the coming joy.”

In the lyrics of Henry Francis Lyte,

*I fear no foe with you at hand to bless,
though ills have weight, and tears their bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, your victory?
I triumph still, if you abide with me.*