

## The Lord is My Banner

Exodus 17:8-16

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus 17. Last week we came to the final stage on Israel's journey in the wilderness before they reach Sinai, but the oasis of Rephidim turned out to be yet another example of Israel's faithlessness and God's patience and mercy. Things are going to get worse at Rephidim. Israel, we've already mentioned, faces four crises on the way to the mountain of God. They face a lack of drinking water in Exodus 15, then a shortage of food in Exodus 16, then a further lack of drinking water in Exodus 17, the first part of the chapter, and now they face a sudden unprovoked attack by a desert tribe, the Amalekites. It is the last crisis which is going to occupy our attention tonight.

Remember, before we look at the passage specifically, the grand theme that we're been announcing in the book of Exodus is that Israel is saved to worship. God is redeeming them from Egypt and creating a people to glorify His name. That's His purpose; He's creating a people who will worship Him. And in the wilderness too, God is preparing a people who will worship Him. That doesn't mean a people that externally and merely engage in specific liturgical or ritual ceremony. It means much more than that. It means that they worship God in all of life from the depths of their heart in faith and by obedience are cognizant that they are in utter dependence on His grace and power for their survival in this fallen world. And before, during and after their corporate praise, that reality must pervade if they are going to be true worshipers in spirit and truth. That's a lesson they are going to learn again in this battle at Rephidim. So let's turn our attention to Exodus 17 and verse 8. This is God's word.

Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us, and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." And Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and

his people with the edge of the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar, and named it 'The Lord is My Banner'; and he said, "The Lord has sworn; the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation."

Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Lord this is Your word. You intend us not merely to learn of Your great deeds of the past, but to cultivate a present faith. Enable us to do so by the seeing and hearing of Your Holy Spirit. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

This story has all the makings of a national and spiritual disaster. Israel has been discouraged in the wilderness. The trials of lack of food and water have already taken their toll on the Israelites. They have only been a few weeks in the wilderness in their journey to Sinai. Their morale is already low and now they are attacked. The weakest, the most vulnerable part of the train of the Israelite people is swarmed upon by this tribe of desert dwellers. No telling how many people died, but even with a victory following up on such an event you can hear the grumbling against Moses. "If Moses hadn't taken us unto the wilderness, my grandfather wouldn't have died at the hands of those barbarians. If Moses hadn't taken us into the wilderness, my daughter wouldn't have died at the hands of those barbarians." This even has all the makings of a national and spiritual disaster.

Yet in it. Moses shows us three very important things. First he shows us God's wise providence. Second he shows us God's divine provision of victory. And third, he shows us God's call to remembrance, a call to remember both the victory that He supplied and the judgment that He pronounced and in so doing Moses teaches us important lessons for the Christian life.

So I'd like to look at this passage with you tonight again in three parts. First looking at verses 8 through 10 where the assault of the Amalekites is described. Then in verses 11 through 13 where we see a description of the course of the battle and the sign of victory and then finally in verses 14 through 16 where we see God's pronouncement to Israel about remembering His power and remembering His judgment. Let's begin in verses 8 through 10.

### **I. The attack of the Amalekites.**

Here we have described for us the assault of the Amalekites and Israel's' preparation for military action. But you need to understand what is going on here. God is preparing Israel for yet another day's class in *Theology 101*. You may think that this is a sudden, absolutely coincidental, accident unattached to any

other matter of significance in the Exodus attack on the Israelites, but this is in fact part of God's plan to teach Israel some very important lessons.

Remember so far all the trials experienced by Israel in the wilderness have involved the sheer survival of the children of Israel. God has three times provided them with their most basic needs; food, and water in the face of seeming death. These trials we've emphasized over and over are not light things. In other words, we should not accuse the Israelites of making a mountain out of a molehill. Their complaints have come in the context of genuine need and the problem is not that they had no real genuine need, they did. The problem is they have not sought relief from those genuine needs in the right way.

Now in this passage, God is going to save His people from the attack of their enemies and in so doing, He is going to show them that He is abundantly able to save them and thus He is abundantly worthy of the worship that He has saved them for. He is taking them to at Mt. Sinai and He's going to teach them that one way they need to worship Him is with trust and obedience. In other words, they worship Him not only with their mouths in praise but they worship Him by putting their faith in Him, by putting their trust in Him and by recognizing His power. So, let's look at the passage.

In verse 8 we're told that Amalek or the Amalekites attack Israel. You will remember perhaps that the Amalekites were of Edomite origin. That is, that they were descendants of Esau in Genesis 36, Amalek is listed as the thirteenth descendant of Esau. He was born of Esau's first son Eliphaz and Eliphaz's concubine Timna. Israel would still be dealing with the Amalekites in the time of David and Saul. You may remember the encounters in I Samuel 15 and I Samuel 27 and I Samuel 30, and II Samuel 8 and the Israelites would be dealing with the Amalekites as late as the time of Esther, almost at the end of the Old Testament period. You remember that Haman was an Agagite. Now Agag is the name for the royal line of the Amalekites, and so Haman and Mordecai are repeating the same antithesis and antipathy between Israel and Amalek in their days. At any rate the Amalekites clearly viewed Israel as trespassing on their territory.

We suggested last week that perhaps the Amalekites had been involved in keeping Israel from drinking water at Rephidim. At any rate the Amalekites attacked and Moses tells us exactly how they attacked later in the Torah, in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 25 verses 17 and 18. This is what Moses said. Remember, he's recording for us God's words here, "remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. How he met you along the way and attacked you and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear who were faint at weary." So, the attack of the Amalekites wasn't a frontal assault, it wasn't a set military battle, it was an assault upon the trailing stragglers in the line of Israel.

In this passage in verse 9, Joshua first appears. Moses appoints Joshua to

respond to this attack on the part of the Amalekites. We know nothing else about Joshua at this point. Later we'll find out that he is the son of Nun, that he is the grandson of Elishama, that he's a tribal chieftain, that he's Moses right hand man, his junior assistant, that he's his designated successor, and that he is the chief captain of Israel's army. But right now we know nothing of that about Joshua. He's a man that Moses chooses to appoint who will attack or defend Israel against the Amalekites. This passage is the only passage, in fact, from the first five books of the Bible that makes any reference to Joshua's military skills though there will be an entire book after the first five books, the book of Joshua, which will record many of Joshua's military exploits. Later of course we are going to see him as Moses' first officer.

Now, in this passage if you look at verse 9 you'll note that unlike at the Red Sea, God instructs the people to play an active role in their own defense. At the Red Sea, the people of God were to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. Here at Rephidim the people are to have an appointed army to respond to the Amalekites and they themselves must be faithful in defending Israel against the attackers.

Isn't it interesting how even in the Pentateuch, even in the Torah, even in the first five books of the Bible, there is a nice balance between the active and the passive elements of the believing life. There is the passive element of depending upon the Lord, trusting in the Lord, resting in the Lord, watching the Lord work, depending on His power, and there is the active element of doing the responsible things that God calls us to do. Both of those elements are part of healthy Christian growth. If you have a totally passive approach to the Christian's life, we'll you'll let be in "the let go and let God" camp. You'll sort of sit in the pew and see what He's going to do. If you're in the totally active count, then you will have a totally hard time trusting on Him to do it and you will be trying to figure out the way you are going to do it for him. There is a balance in the Christian life between depending on God and on acting in accordance with those things He has called us to do, and you see that balance even here as the children of Israel are called to play an active roll in their own defense.

Now, it makes perfect sense that Joshua is appointed for this task. Moses is over eighty years old now. He's not in the kind of shape to lead an army into battle, so Joshua, a younger man, is charged with gathering a suitable force and leading them. Moses, on the other hand, explains that he is going to station himself at the top of the hill with the staff of God in his hand.

Now, this whole scene, you can already sense, is going to take Moses off of the playing field in order that God's power can assume center stage. There would have been a temptation wouldn't there have been, for the children of Israel to see Moses himself as the answer to the attack. Not only would they have been tempted to blame him for any problems, but they would be tempted to see him as the answer, since he was the mediator of God's people and the conduit of God's

voice to the children of Israel. God takes him off the field of battle. He is going to be on a mountain side and so you can already sense in this story that the main point is going to put the power of God on display at center stage. So we have this scene where Joshua and Israel are down on the field of battle, and Moses and Aaron and Hur, are over on the hilltop.

Now consider this situation. You are going into armed combat for the first time. You are going into armed combat with former slaves who have no professional military training. You're going into armed combat for the first time with former slaves with no military training against experienced desert dwellers on their own turf. Your people are completely untested and their morale has been exceeding low for the last six weeks to two months. Your number one guy is on a hillside with a stick. Do you like those odds? That is the circumstance that the Lord has placed His people in deliberately, because God is positioning His people to learn something about Him and consequently to depend on Him more. We see, in other words, even in this passage the wise providential hand of God at work.

## **II. The battle.**

Now, look with me at verses 11 through 13. This section describes for us the course of the battle, the sign of God's favor and power and the outcome of victory, and if there is one great theme that runs throughout verses 11 and 12 and 13, it is that victory comes from the Lord. Sure enough, you were expecting something strange to happen, and sure enough, something strange does. Moses tells us in verse 11 that when he held his staff aloft, the army of Israel had the upper hand, but when his arms got tired and he brought the staff down, the Amalekites would regain the advantage.

Now tons, tons of ink have been spilled by commentators attempting to explain the significance of Moses holding this staff aloft. Let me give you an example of six suggestions that have been given by the commentators. Many of the old devotional commentators speak of this as a representation of prayer. Moses is on the hillside praying and so often times their sermons will be about the prevailing power of prayer. I don't want to denigrate that in any way though I do want to mention that most of the day Moses is sitting and you will find no examples of praying seated in the Old Testament, except possibly one reference to the King of Israel. Other than that you always pray standing in the Old Testament, so that may weigh against that particular interpretation. Others have suggested that the staff is a sign of general military advance. It's sort of like the general commander lifting up his hat and signaling the armies forward. Again, this doesn't make sense. Moses' job on the mountain isn't a military job, that's Joshua's job. Moses has already ceded that responsibility to Joshua. Other commentators say that it's the sign of Moses putting Amalek under a curse with the staff of God. Others suggest that it's the focusing of mysterious magical powers on Israel in order to make them able to defeat the Amalekites. But we

pointed out all along that the staff itself, God has made abundantly clear, has absolutely no mystical, mysterious, magical powers or properties. It is the physical representation of the activity of God. It's not a magic staff. It's not like a wizard's wand that he's going to do great things with. Fifth, some have indicated that the staff is a sign of the presence of God and when it goes out of sight, the people lose sight of the presence of God, and others have suggest that it's a symbol of encouragement to the Israelite army and there are other interpretations as well.

Without getting lost in the trees of suggestion, let's look at the big picture, let's look at the forest. The general significance of what Moses is doing here is crystal clear. Notice that there is one common denominator between this story and the previous story in Exodus 17. What is it? The rod, the staff, the staff of God. That is the one common denominator. Do you remember the rod had been used to do what? To strike the rock and bring forth the water at Rephidim. Now, once again the rod is center stage. In fact it is so center stage because Moses has been removed from the thick of the battle to the hillside so that the rod itself becomes the focus of Israel.

Secondly, notice that when the rod is held up Israel wins, and when the rod comes down, Israel is losing. So it's pretty clear that God wants our focus of attention to be on the rod. Once you've decided that, then all you have to do is ask, "What's the message?" If He wants me to look at the rod and think about that, then what's the message that He wants me to get? Again it's very, very clear. The rod, he's already taught you, is both a symbol of the presence and power of God. It is the physical sign of the might that God wields on behalf of Israel. So the point is that it is God who is fighting for Israel. His power is going to be more important than theirs, and thus He is the one that they should depend on for victory, and the one to whom they should give the glory.

On the one hand, they might be tempted to despair, given their odds, given their morale, given their lack of training, given their inexperience, all the things were against them, they might have been tempted to despair. On the other hand, after winning this victory, they might have been tempted to think, "Hey, we're pretty good." Do you remember those songs in the sixties where the singers used to start the songs by telling you how cool they were? Maybe you don't remember those. Do you remember Archie Bell and the Drells? Do you remember the beginning to *Tighten Up*? "Hello, I'm Archie Bell and these are the Drells from Houston Texas, and we not only sing good, but we dance just as good as we walk." I mean, they are celebrating themselves. Well, the Israelites may well have been ready to celebrate themselves after this victory, and the whole point is, "You didn't do this. I did. I'm the one who gives victory. I'm the one who has the power and I'm the one to whom you are to give the glory."

The very next phrase you see in verse 12 beautifully highlights the power of God. Why? Moses' hands are heavy. He's on the hillside, he can't even keep his

hands up and so they have to contrive the rock and the assistance to keep the hands up in the air. What better way can you think of to emphasize the sole power of God? Not even Israel's exalted leader was the source of strength and victory, God was.

But again, even in verse 12 we see that balanced emphasis on human activity. This time it's Aaron and Hur giving Moses a place to sit and holding up his arm. Israel must be faithful, Israel must do her part. She must be faithful in response to God, but God will supply the power and the result you will see in verse 13, where Joshua mops up the Amalekites and God clearly gave the victory and deserved the credit.

What's the lesson? Israel must learn dependence on the Lord for victory, for those who will worship the Lord aright, must worship Him in faith, and if your dependence is not on the Lord, you can't worship the Lord in faith. My friends, that's a lesson for us. That's not just a lesson for the Israelites. We can't worship God unless we worship Him by faith. We can't worship God if we are not in utter dependence on Him. If we are not depending on Him, then we can't worship Him because He called on us to depend on Him. He only wants worshipers who worship Him in spirit and in truth. So, if we are going to worship Him, we have to worship Him in faith.

### **III. A call to remember God's power, presence and judgment.**

Finally in verses 14 through 16, we come across a strange passage. A passage that may look vindictive, it's not. Pay close attention because in these words we find a call to remembrance. God explicitly calls Israel to remember His power and presence and to remember His just judgment on the Amalekites. In this section of the passage, we're taught that God's people are explicitly called to remember both God's deliverance and His judgment of the wicked. If you look at verse 14, you will see that God is enraged at the cowardly assault of the Amalekites on the weakest members of Israel's host, so He pronounced a harsh judgment on the Amalekites. You can see how serious God is about this in the verse first words that He speaks to Moses, "Write this in a book."

Now let me pause right there. This is the first time that writing is mentioned in the Bible. Isn't it interesting that it comes in response to the Lord's anger with what the Amalekites had done. Elsewhere, whenever you see God say, "Write this in a book," something big is coming up. For instance, later in the Exodus, God is going to mention ten things which will come to mind and He will say, write these down. In Habakkuk, God is going to tell the prophets to write this down and what does Habakkuk end up writing down? "The just shall live by faith." which becomes the favorite Pauline text for the doctrine of justification by faith. When John is carried up in the spirit, into the Heaven of Heavens on the Lord's day, and sees this vision of God's control of the world, he's told to write these things in

a book. When the Lord tells you to write something in a book, it's serious. Isn't it interesting that what He tells Moses to write down, is to write down His judgment against the Amalekites. Moses expands on this in Deuteronomy chapter 25 where he says this, "The Amalekites did not fear God. Therefore it shall come about that when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your surrounding enemies in the land in which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance for zest, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under Heaven. You must not forget."

Now I want to say two things about this. First of all, this is not a petty, vindictive act of God, it's a reflection of God's just judgment. The Amalekites had done something that was odious in God's sight. They had attacked weak, straggly noncombatants in an act of war and God was enraged by it. Secondly, this judgment that God has brought against the Amalekites, gives a picture of God's final judgment intruded into the experience of Israel going into the land of Canaan for the first time, but not for the last. From this time all the way through the book of Joshua, over and over, it will be indicated that God's judgment against the occupants of the land who resist Israel is a final picture of God's judgment. It's a pre- picturing of God's final judgment against the wicked, those who are not His people. So He's giving us a picture of the dispensation of final justice.

Let me say one more thing about this. I think there is a parallel, I think there is an inferential social application of this truth today to the matter of terrorism. I think you're seeing God's attitude towards terrorism reflected in His anger towards the Amalekites. Let me quote to you a very helpful quote from Dr. Benjamin Netanyahu,

who gave his testimony before the US congress. "Terrorism is a crime against humanity. We must consider the terrorists enemies of mankind to be given no quarter and no consideration from their propitiated grievances. If we believe to distinguish between acts of terror justifying some and repudiating others based on sympathy based on this and that cause, we will lose the moral clarity that is so essential for victory. This clarity is what enabled America and Britain to root out piracy in the nineteenth century. This same clarity enabled the allies to root out the Nazism in the twentieth century. They did not look for the root cause of piracy, or the root cause of Nazism, because they knew that some acts are evil in and of themselves and do not deserve any consideration or understanding. They did not ask whether Hitler was right about the alleged wrong done to Germany at Versailles. That, they left to the historians. For the leaders of the western alliance, nothing justified Nazism, nothing. We must be equally clear cut today. Nothing justifies terrorism, nothing. Terrorism is defined neither by the identity of its perpetrators, nor by the case they espouse, rather it is defined by the nature of the act. Terrorism is the deliberate attack on innocent civilians." That is what we have right here, in this passage. The attack of the Amalekites against civilian stragglers at the end of the host of Israel and it meets with God's decisive

judgment.

In verse 15, as a testimony to the Lord's power and providence, Moses erects not an altar of sacrifice, but a commemorative altar. Again, we are going to see these commemorative altars erected from time to time in the first books of the Bible. It's there in order to highlight the Lord's work. You can see the Lord's work and the Lord's centrality in the name that Moses gives to the altar. He calls it, *the Lord is my banner*.

The rod of the Lord was the banner of Israel in that day in order to draw attention to the power of God. Every believer needs to remember God's power and every believer needs to remember God's judgment. We must also remember the coming judgment, according to Jesus, will be meted out by Him. Take your hymnals in hand and look with me briefly at hymn 318. This is the great hymn of Wesley and Cennick, *Lo' He comes with clouds descending*. It's a hymn about the second coming and it's the one hymn in our hymnal about the second coming which focuses on the judgment of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, *Joy To The World* mentions the phrases, but this hymn focuses on the truth. "Lo! He comes with clouds descending, once for favored sinners slain; thousand saints attending swell the triumph of His train. Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign. Every eye shall now behold Him, robed in dreadful majesty; those who set at naught and sold Him, pierced, and nailed Him to the tree, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, shall the true Messiah see. Every island, sea, and mountain, heaven and earth, shall flee away; all who hate Him must, confounded, hear the trump proclaim the day: Come to judgment! Come to judgment! Come to judgment, come away! Now Redemption long expected see in solemn pomp appear! All His saints by man rejected, now shall meet Him in the air. Alleluia! Alleluia! See the day of God appear!"

The Lord Jesus Christ will come again to mete out the judgment of God in a final display of His power. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank you for this display for Your power in the book of Exodus, and for the greater display of your power in Jesus Christ and for that display which is to come, grant us to live in hope of that day. In Jesus name. Amen.*

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