



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### The Lord is My Banner

#### Exodus 17:8-16

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We're often slow to learn and quick to forget, aren't we? God provides for us time and time again, and then something difficult happens and our first reaction is to panic, to be afraid, sometimes even to take matters into our own hands in ways that are sinful. If you've read the Bible, you know that we're not the first people to have this problem. It's part of our fallen human nature. Being slow to learn and quick to forget sums up the history of Israel right back to the Exodus. God keeps doing these amazing things and a month or even just a few days later, the people are whining, complaining, and grumbling against God. But each time he is patient and gracious and provides for them again.

There was the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army. Then he made bitter water drinkable when they were thirsty and, despite their grumbling, led them to Elim where there was a spring for every tribe. When they were hungry and grumbled, the Lord gave them manna and quails. When they were thirsty and grumbled again, he again gave them water from a rock. Our lesson today continues this sequence of events in which the Lord provides and takes care of his people. Now, this time there's no grumbling on their part—at least not that we're told. But it's another hit, another desperate situation. They come one after another. But the Lord provides and each time he does, he reveals his goodness and his patience and his mercy. Each time he gives his people another reason to trust his character and to trust his promises.

So this morning we're looking at Exodus 17:8-16. Israel has escaped Pharaoh's army and you might think they'd be safe from military threats in the desert, but that turns out not to be the case. Here's how verse 8 begins the story:

#### **Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.**

Rephedim is where we left Israel last week. It was the place—not far from Mt. Sinai—where the Lord miraculously provided water from a rock. Now the Amalekites descend on them there. They might have heard of this new source of water and wanted it for themselves. Or they may have seen the Israelites as a threat. The desert can only support so many people. There aren't any details here about the attack, but Deuteronomy 25:17-18 tells us a bit more. We read there:

#### **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, and he did not fear God.**

It seems that the Amalekites were raiding the Israelite column as they made their way through the desert, picking off the weak and the stragglers at the end of the line. They may have been making repeated attacks or it may be that Moses or Joshua got to a hill and could see the Amalekites massing for a more pointed attack once the Israelites had made camp at Rephidim. It's not entirely clear. Whatever the case, the Amalekites were a serious threat.

Before we go on: Who were the Amalekites? We only know of them in the Bible. They were descendants of Esau. Later they seem to get lumped in with the Arabs. But at this point they were a powerful tribe of desert nomads living in Sinai and on the southern edge of Canaan. They will be a continuing source of grief for

the Israelites up until the time of Saul. Saul finally took the battle to the Amalekites and dealt them their first major defeat. David drove them back as well and so did Hezekiah centuries later. Interestingly, even after Saul and David and even after the Israelites are exiled to Babylon, the Amalekites will continue to threaten them. Against the Lord's instructions, Saul spared the Amalekite king, Agag, and it is one of the king's descendants, Haman the Agagite, who conspires to have all the Jews killed in the book of Esther. So the Amalekites were the first of the peoples to attack Israel after her exodus from Egypt and they will continue to be a thorn in Israel's side for nearly a millennium.

This time there's no complaining or grumbling from the people. At least for the time being, they've learned to trust in the Lord. Moses takes immediate action and summons Joshua to give him instructions. This is the first time Joshua is mentioned. As the people enter the promised land in forty years, Joshua will take over the role of Moses, so it's interesting that the story introduces him here, right after the Lord provided water from the rock. Numbers 20 is a parallel passage. Again, the Lord will provide water from the same rock and then, immediately following, we'll be introduced to Eleazar, Aaron's son, who will take over as high priest after Aaron has died. The leadership Israel needs is provided by the Lord, just as he provides everything else the people need. Now look at verse 9:

#### **So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand."**

So despite being slaves, the Israelite apparently know how to fight. At least they have arms. This might be, at least in part, why Pharaoh feared their growing numbers. There were capable warriors amongst in Israel and Joshua is sent out by Moses to muster them for battle on the morrow.

Moses, for his part, will go to the hilltop nearby with his staff, which we've already seen represents the presence and power of the Lord. It was by the staff that the Lord had introduced the plagues to Egypt, it was by the staff that the Lord had parted the Red Sea, and it was by the staff that the Lord had brought water from the rock. Now, by the staff the Lord will bring victory to the Israelites. The story goes on:

**So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.** (Exodus 17:10-13)

Joshua goes to fight, but it seems the real battle is somehow being fought up on the hilltop. Moses takes his position there overlooking the battle. When he raises his hands, the battle goes in Israel's favour. When he lowers them the battle goes in favour of the Amalekites. So he keeps his hands in the air. I assume he's holding up the staff of God with them, since it was the staff that represented the Lord's presence and power. It's hard enough to hold your empty hands in the air for very long. Add a staff and you'll get tired pretty quickly. So Aaron and Hur, seeing the problem, stand one on each side of Moses and hold his arms up for him. They hold his arms up until sundown and Joshua and the Israelites prevail over the Amalekites.

Now, what's up with Moses holding his arms up, or holding high the staff,

if that's what he was doing? And the bigger question: Why would the Lord allow the battle to turn against the Israelites just because Moses was tired and lowered his arms for a while? I can't give you a definitive answer. Both Jews and Christians have been wrestling with this for more than two thousand years and still there's no single, agreed-upon explanation. The key point in the passage is that it was God who won the victory. Notice that we're told that Joshua and the Israelites fought down in the valley, but the story puts all our attention on the hilltop with Moses. That's where the real battle is taking place. What happens on the hilltop directly affects what's happening in the valley.

It would be easier to come up with an answer if the text told us that the Lord had instructed Moses to do this, but it doesn't. Moses seems to have come up with this on his own. But it makes sense if we look back at how we got here. This isn't the first time Moses has raised his hands to the Lord on behalf of Israel. The plagues of hail and locusts began with Moses lifting his hands. The parting of the Red Sea began with Moses lifting his hands. And so it makes sense that Moses would instinctively do something like that here. The staff represents the power and presence of the Lord. So he takes it up the hill, overlooking the battle, and he raises it up. It's a sign to the Israelites that God is with them. It's also a sign to the Amalekites, just as it was to Pharaoh, that God is with Israel and that no one can stand against him. Here's how one of the ancient rabbis interpreted it:

"It was not assuredly the uplifted hands of Moses that invigorated Israel and laid Amalek low. Israel looked at him, and, so long as he lifted up his hands, they believed in Him who had given Moses the command to act thus. God it was who did the signs and wonders on their behalf."<sup>1</sup>

The raised staff on the hilltop was the symbol of the Lord's presence and power with his people. That the Israelites prevailed only when Moses' hands were raised wasn't the Lord being arbitrary or petty. It was a clear reminder to his people that he was the one giving them victory. They won not because of their prowess as warriors or because they caught the Amalekites on a bad day. And just as the plagues and the Red Sea had been the Lord's means to reveal himself to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, he now reveals himself to the Amalekites. They, too, see how the battle turns with the raising and lowering of the staff of the God. So the Lord won the battle for Israel. As we'll see in a few verses, Moses gives the Lord a new name in light of their victory here. He calls the Lord "Yahweh Nissi", which means the "the Lord is my standard" or "the Lord is my banner". The staff of God, held high in the hands of Moses was the standard by which the Israelite warriors went to battle in faith, it was the standard by which they defeated the enemy, and it was the reminder that it was the Lord who had done it for them.

Of course, because God's people are slow to learn and quick to forget, the Lord gave instructions to Moses. We read them in verse 14:

**Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."**

Moses is instructed to record this victory so that future generations will know of the Lord's provision for his people. This might be the start of the book we read of elsewhere called the "Book of the Wars of the Lord". Whatever the case, this record serves as a memorial for future generations of Israelites. In fact, the same word that describes this record as a memorial is the same word used to describe the

<sup>1</sup> *Mekhilta of Rabbi Ishamel* on Exodus 17:11.

feast of unleavened bread, which was to memorialise the Exodus and Passover for future generations. The Lord wants his people to remember so that they will know him and know his character. In contrast, and the ESV picks up the word play of the Hebrew perfectly, while the Lord's victory will be *memorialised*, the *memory* of Amalek will be wiped from history. It's interesting that this seems to be exactly what happened. So far we haven't found mention of the Amalekites anywhere outside the Bible. God has been true to his word. The only place the Amalekites are remembered today is in the Bible, which tells of their defeat by his hand. The Amalekites were a powerful tribe of warriors, but to this day they are remembered only for having been defeated by the God of Israel.

But then Moses takes this memorial a step further. He does something that we haven't seen since the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He builds an altar. Look at verses 15-16:

**And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."**

It's not an altar for sacrifices. It's a memorial altar. It's a pile of stones erected to commemorate the Lord's victory. It's something future generations will see as and by it they will know that the Lord fights for his people and defeats their enemies. The name that Moses gives the Lord, "The Lord is my Banner" is, again, military language. The explanation is a bit difficult. The ESV reads "A hand upon the throne of the Lord". The word "throne" here is only used in this one place in the Old Testament and isn't certain. It's also not certain what is meant by a "hand upon" or a "hand against" the throne of the Lord. It could be referring to Moses raising his hands, but Moses raised both his

hands and this talks about a single hand raised. I think it's more likely that it refers to the Amalekites. In attacking the Lord's people, what they were really doing is rising up against him. The Lord had called and created a people for himself for the purpose of redeeming his creation and the Amalekites foolishly opposed that plan. The Lord struck them down and will continue to do so every time they rise up. Moses reminds us here of God's sovereignty. It's not just a matter of the Lord caring for and protecting his people. It's much bigger than that. In caring for and prospering his people, the Lord is furthering his sovereign plan to redeem both humanity and the creation we have corrupted. Pharaoh couldn't stop that plan. The Amalekites couldn't stop that plan. And that leads us into the conclusion.

The Old Testament always leads us to Jesus. We see God defeat the enemies of his people in the Old Testament. We've seen him defeat Pharaoh. We've seen him defeat the Amalekites. We could keep reading and see him defeat the other peoples who rose up against Israel. But this string of battles against the enemies of God's people eventually leads us to Calvary and to the cross, where the the great enemies of God's people were finally dealt the decisive blow. St. John draws on this image of Moses on the hilltop, arms outstretched and supported by Aaron and Hur, when he writes about Jesus on the cross. For John, Jesus is the standard, the banner, the ensign lifted before our eyes that we might both see and believe the goodness and faithfulness and love of God. Here's how John explains the crucifixion:

**These things took place that the Scripture might be fulfilled... "They will look on him whom they have pierced." (John 19:36-37)**

Earlier in John he records these words of Jesus:

**As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**

We didn't have time this morning to get into the story of the brazen serpent, but it too was lifted up in the wilderness as a banner or standard, a place where Israel turned to the power of God in faith. Jesus has, in the same way, been lifted up for us. John even draws on the language of Aaron and Hur lifting Moses arms when he writes about the men crucified with Jesus.

**There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. (John 19:18)**

The Greek is awkward and the ESV smooths it out for us, so it's easy to miss. It literally says of the two other men "one here and one there" quoting the Hebrew of Exodus 17:12 where it says just this of Aaron and Hur. John doesn't mention that these men were criminals as the other evangelists do. What he saw was Jesus, like Moses, with his hands raised and a man on either side, a standard or a banner proclaiming the victory of God over sin and death.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus has won the decisive battle, just as on that day at Rephidim the Lord won the decisive battle against the Amalekites. But, just like Israel, we still struggle. The battle goes on. Jesus' victory is "already, but not yet". The Swiss theologian Oscar Cullman likened this to the victory won by the Allies in World War II. The decisive victory was won on D-Day. The enemy's doom was sealed on that day. But despite that, the final victory took place almost a year later on V-Day. In between, the enemy put up a good fight and the march from Normandy into the heart of Germany involved many hard-fought battles and many losses. So too with us. St. Paul

reminds us that our battle, unlike the Israelites' battle, is not against flesh and blood, but "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" (Ephesians 6:12). And so we put on our armour and we follow Jesus. We put on the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and we charge into battle with the sword of the Spirit. The Lord doesn't lead us straight from Egypt to the Promised Land. There's a long journey through the wilderness in between, but it's in the wilderness that the Lord makes us truly his people. He leads us out of our slavery to sin and death, but it's in the midst of the trials and the battles of the wilderness that he makes himself truly known to us. It's in the wilderness that we learn what it means to be God's people. It's in the wilderness that we learn to trust and love this God who reveals his own love and faithfulness.

Gradually we learn that no matter how hard the battle, the decisive victory was won at the cross. We march forward in faith in the God who has humbled himself to become one of us and who has given his life for our sake. He has done the hard part. He has provided. And so we can trust. We have his memorial recorded by men like John—and Matthew, Mark, and Luke, not to mention Paul and Peter. As his victory over the Amalekites was recorded for future generations, so the apostles and evangelists who saw for themselves the victory of God at the cross have recorded their memorial for our sake.

But beyond that we, too, have our altar. It is not an altar of sacrifice. Jesus has at the cross made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. But as we come to his Table each Sunday and recall what he has done our faith in the Lord

who is our Banner is renewed. As we eat the bread and drink the wine we are refreshed by his grace that we might march forward in faith and hope knowing that Jesus' arms are lifted up and that the Lord has won the victory.

Let us pray: O Lord God, the unfailing helper and governor of those whom you bring up in your steadfast fear and love: Keep us, we pray, under the protection of your good providence and give us a continual reverence and love for your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*