

JEHOVAH NISSI: THE LORD MY BANNER

EXODUS 17

Banners have been important throughout history as visible declarations of authority. They show whom you represent and to whom you are committed. In the Olympic Games, you will see athletes enthusiastically wave the flags of the nations they represent. Here in Tampa, at a Bucs game, spectators often wave banners as they cheer our team to victory. Banners are often hung or waved to declare commitment, allegiance, and victory.

Faith Teaches the Name of God

As we are discovering through our study, the names of God usually arise out of the situations in our life. People find themselves in difficult scenarios that require divine intervention, so God reveals Himself through a name that speaks directly to meeting the need of that moment. The bad news is that life has problems. But, the good news is that God has a name for each and every one of them. Regardless of the crises we face, the names of God remind us that He is able to see us through.

In the book of Exodus, we come across the next name of God we're going to look at. In this story, we find the people of God at a time when they are greatly discouraged. We know that is what they are feeling because of all the complaining they are doing. We can tell when someone's faith in God is waning by the way he or she complains. Complaining from time to time is normal, but when complaining becomes your modus operandi, that is a clear indicator your faith is weakening. In Exodus, we see that God's people complained when they camped at Rephidim and "there was no water for the people to drink" (Exodus 17:1). Their complaint had to do with more than just the water. We read later in the passage, "They tested the LORD, saying, 'Is the

LORD among us, or not?’ ” (verse 7). We can easily judge the Israelites and their accusation against God, but we’ve all wondered at some point, is God here or not? Where is God when I need Him the most? That was the question on the people’s minds when they ran out of water and wondered how their lives would be sustained. Sometimes life becomes so stale and listless that refreshment is more than a want—it’s a need. God knew their need. He saw their need. Through Moses and the rock, He met their need and gave them water. Yet as often happens with us, just as the Israelites came out of one difficult trial, they found themselves in another one. In the very next verse we read, “Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim” (verse 8). Now they have a war on their hands.

Keep in mind that Rephidim is a rugged desert place near Mount Horeb, where the water sources are very low. God’s people are worn-out, and as we’ve seen, their hearts are unstable. They’re doubting God’s goodness toward them. And on top of all they’re facing, they now have to deal with a battle. Amalek has shown up, and he wants to fight. Amalek is from the line of Esau, a branch of Abraham and Isaac’s ancestral tree. Nevertheless, there were problems. In fact, if we were honest, we would admit that some of our biggest problems often come from people in our own family—similar to what the Israelites discovered on this day.

Water had appeared from the rock, and things had seemed to be getting better, but now everything is going south for them again, leaving them to wonder if God is even on their side. Some things you can run from, and some things you can hide from. But this was neither of those things. Moses recognized this as a battle that they would have to face head-on even though the people were tired and poorly equipped. 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.” 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 (Exodus 17:9-11). When Moses said he would go to the top of the hill with the staff of God in his hand, he was referring to a simple shepherd’s crook. But this staff was significant because it had been sanctified. This is the same staff that had turned into a snake, ushered in the plagues, and opened up the Red Sea. Through it, God used the natural to perform the supernatural. And God brought victory to the Israelites in the battle against Amalek as long as Moses continued to hold up the staff.

This battle wasn’t decided by those who were fighting. The winners and losers weren’t determined by their own skill or power. Rather, the key was Moses’s posture with the staff of God—could he keep it raised, or would it be lowered? How the armies fared in the valley wasn’t tied to their education, finances, or notoriety. Instead, it was inseparably tied to what Moses did on the mountain. People often respond with one of two extremes when fighting for something valuable, such as a marriage, family, child, health situation, work situation, or destiny. In one extreme, some people fight from the mountain only. They say, “I’m just going to trust God and talk to Him, and He will fix everything.” Other people go to the other extreme, seeking to win the battle in the valley and forgetting all about the mountain. They look to their own skills, willpower, determination, and resources to overcome whatever they’re facing, all the while neglecting to look to God. Only when we bring the valley and the mountain together will we experience victory. As believers in Christ and followers of God, we have a responsibility to do all we can do in the challenges and trials we face. Yet unless God also supports and engages in the victory, our efforts won’t be enough.

On one hand, we trust that God is going to fix it. Yet on the other hand, we must also do everything God commands of us to fix it. If we spend all of our time reading our Bibles, praying, and sitting in church, yet spend no time doing the practical things that must be done to overcome our trial, we give God nothing to work with. Moses didn't stand on the mountain and raise his rod while Joshua and the boys drank tea. Joshua and the Israelites had to do their part in the valley to win that war. We can't shift our responsibilities to God. But at the same time, we can't shift God's responsibilities to ourselves. Both must always be held in tension and in play. Joshua fought, and Moses raised the rod. If we don't make contact with heaven for our battles on earth, we'll be wasting our energy.

For example, we can't say we're trusting God to find us a job unless we cooperate by looking for jobs and filling out applications. Trusting God for spiritual victory in our lives without doing what's in our power to do in the valley won't accomplish much. We must combine the valley with the mountain to usher heaven down to visit earth.

As Paul writes (2 Corinthians 6:1 KJV), "We then, as workers together with him..." Some people will say they're waiting on God to do something when He's actually waiting on them to walk by faith. Of course, sometimes God has instructed us simply to wait. I'm not saying that doesn't happen. But sometimes we use theological verbiage to validate our irresponsible inactivity. Scripture shows the balance.

- "I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread." (Psalm 37:25) NKJV.
- "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:10) NIV.

There must always be a balance between what God does on the mountain and what you and I are responsible for in the valley. We're never to excuse our irresponsibility in the name of God. Yet our personal responsibility alone is not sufficient to achieve all that God wants to do in the midst of our conflicts

In this particular story of the battle between the Israelites and Amalek, Amalek represents the forces of evil. In our own lives, evil forces are those that stand in opposition to God's purposes for us. Anything in our life that blocks us from doing what God wants done—that's our Amalek. It's that thing that keeps us from doing better, going further, and living out our spiritual destiny. Amalek may look like a physical opponent, challenge, or trial, but it's rooted in the evil that seeks to defeat us in the valley of Rephidim. Amalek represented more than the people opposed to the Israelites. It represented the evil of the people. Often, our problem isn't simply our problem. By that I mean the problem we see isn't all there is. In fact, if all you see is what you see, then you're not seeing all there is to be seen. The battle you face may be a person, place, thing, stronghold, idea, or even yourself...but if it's something that's wrong, then evil is at the root of it. To address the problem without addressing the evil root is to fail to address the entire problem.

In order to address the evil, you must address the spiritual reality behind the physical expression you're facing. You need to address the satanic influences behind it. In the valley, you fight the physical. On the mountain, you fight the spiritual—and only your connection to God can fight the spiritual and win. If your Amalek won't go away, could it be because you think your actions will determine the outcome? What you're doing is important, but it's never sufficient on its own when an evil root is behind the issue at hand. Getting up early or staying up late won't solve the

problem because we aren't wrestling against flesh and blood. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Many of us don't realize that most of the problems we face have less to do with people than they do with demons. Many of the trials, conflicts, and issues that arise in our lives are demonic attempts to keep us from our destiny. Yes, people are involved, but often they're not the root of the problem. And unless we deal with the root on the mountain in combination with our responsibility in the valley, we will not win this war.

Spiritual Battles Are Tiring

Spiritual battles can be tiresome. "Moses' hands were heavy" as he held the staff high on the hill (Exodus 17:12). He grew weary. He began to lose strength. The battle waged on long and hard, and Moses held his staff up in the air for so long that the weight began to accumulate. The staff didn't weigh any more than it did at the start, but he had held it up for so long that it felt heavier than before. Maybe this has happened to you. When the trial goes on indefinitely, you begin to lose interest in reading your Bible. You find it hard to pray one more time. Holding out hope through trust in God seems like work. The problem for Moses and the Israelites was that Moses got weary. As his arms drifted down, Amalek prevailed. So Aaron and Hur came up with a plan. 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 (Exodus 17:12-13).

Aaron and Hur's job was to support Moses's hands. They were responsible to maintain the spiritual power by lifting up Moses's tired arms.

One of the reasons I love God's creation of the church is that it provides us with a place to find our own Aarons and Hurs. When life makes you tired, someone can come alongside you there and lift up your weary arms. Or you can come alongside someone else who's ready to throw in the towel and give them the strength to keep connected with God. I often call that piggybacking on someone else's faith when you are weary. That's the ministry of the body of Christ to one another, just as Aaron and Hur aided Moses on the mountain while the men battled in the valley.

Unfortunately, some people in the body of Christ are too proud to accept the assistance of an Aaron or Hur. They think they can take care of things themselves. But battles can wear down even the strongest person, and everyone needs an Aaron or a Hur who will keep their spirit focused Godward and not allow them to lose sight of heaven in the midst of earth's problems.

Sometimes we just need an Aaron or a Hur to help us reconnect with heaven. When we lose contact with the spiritual, we easily become defeated in the physical. Yet when we maintain contact with the spiritual, we prevail in the valleys of life. Some of us are throwing in the towel when we've never raised the staff. We're quitting the battle when we've never raised the bar. Joshua fought in the valley and Moses on the hill. As a result, "Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword" (verse 13). They prevailed over their enemies, just as you can prevail over yours.

Never Settle for a Halfway Victory

After the victory, God instructed Moses to write an account as a memorial. He wanted him to make a record of what had just happened. In this record, God made it clear that He would blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven entirely. He didn't want the Israelites to be satisfied with a halfway victory, just as no doctor would want a cancer patient to be satisfied with a halfway cure. A halfway victory simply means there will be another battle to fight up ahead.

This is an important principle because far too many of us are content with halfway victories. We don't mind hanging around with a little bit of evil, or we don't mind if we give it visitation rights from time to time. The problem with evil, though, is that visitation rights soon become squatters' rights, and soon we're faced with a full-fledged war. An alcoholic isn't content to hang out with a little bit of alcohol. In order to kick that habit, an alcoholic usually needs to go all the way.

This is what God sought for the Israelites with regard to the Amalekites. He wanted to erase their memory from the earth. Unfortunately, the Israelites didn't keep their end of the agreement, and God had to later send the prophet Samuel to Saul, the king of Israel, to rebuke him for not carrying out His commands to annihilate the Amalekites entirely (1 Samuel 15:10-11). In a bit of poetic irony, an Amalekite later aided in Saul's death (2 Samuel 1:8-10).

After the victory of Joshua in the valley and Moses on the mountain, Moses built an altar and gave it the name we've learned about through these principles in this chapter—Jehovah Nissi. This name means, "the Lord is my banner." 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." Moses built an altar and named it The LORD is My Banner [Jehovah Nissi] (Exodus 17:14-15).

For many of us, holding up a banner is akin to holding up a flag or piece of cloth or material. But in biblical times, a banner could refer to any number of items. In this case, the banner was Moses's staff of God. Most of us don't have a staff of God. Yet God has given us a banner to use in our own day to deal with the realities and challenges of life.

Stuff in life can get so confusing that we don't know whether we're coming or going. We don't know whether we're in or out, up or down—it gets crazy sometimes. We need a standard outside of ourselves that can tell us what is real and what is not. We need something outside of us to help us interpret reality and make decisions. We need an objective standard that isn't tied to our emotions, thoughts, or desires. That standard is Jesus Christ. He is our banner.

In Numbers 21, we read an interesting story that foreshadows the banner of Christ. The people had rebelled against God, so God sent poisonous snakes that bit them. Many of the Israelites died. It didn't matter where they went for help because what they were facing wasn't a physical issue—it was a spiritual issue. Their disobedience led to a physical consequence, and they began to cry out to God for mercy. In answer to their cries, God instructed Moses to put a bronze snake on a stick and hold it up high. He told Moses to let the people of Israel know that whoever looked at the snake on the stick (the banner lifted up) would live. But everyone who looked to their own solution or cure died. This is because God had lifted up just one banner, and only those who looked to it lived.

Our Nissi today is Jesus Christ. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Whoever looks to Jesus, our banner, will live. Regardless of how good you are, how much

you try, how much money you earn, how hard you work...all your good efforts will result in nothing if you don't look to Christ, our banner, for your eternal victory.

Even if you're doing everything you believe you're supposed to do on earth, unless you are pointed toward Jesus Christ and operate under His will, His Word, and His standard, you won't have the spiritual help you need to deal with the battles you face in the valley. If Jesus is just an addendum to your life and not the standard by which you determine reality and make decisions, you can do the best you can in the battle but still lose.

The solution too many of your Amalek problems is right in front of you. You might have been working for years, trying to solve something God can solve in a day. Yet He won't solve it until you look to Him as your banner. Your hands may get heavy, and the devil will make you weary, but never be too proud to let Aaron and Hur come alongside you and help you lift them back up toward Jesus Christ. And even though God may not always change your situation, He will change you in your situation so that you will have peace where there seems to be no peace. You will experience joy where you didn't think you could have joy. You will know power where you thought there was no power, and patience when you didn't think you could be patient. And when you would normally quit, you will continue on because when you look to Jehovah Nissi—Jesus Christ—His spiritual power will infuse your physical reality. Jesus is our staff (Isaiah 11:1,10).

Before you give up, look up. Fix your eyes on Jesus, your Nissi. Your victory has already been won. Like pro wrestlers who fight from a predetermined victory, you will always triumph (2 Corinthians 2:14) as Jesus leads you because He's already defeated Satan by His work on the cross (Colossians 2:15). He has made us more than conquerors regardless of what life brings our way.