

The LORD is My Banner
Exodus 17:8-16
May 17, 2026

Years ago, one of you told me that the single greatest chapter in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* was the chapter entitled: "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields." And if you've ever read it, it's hard to argue otherwise. I bring it up today—not only because it's about a battle—but because of how many times it references banners, how it portrays what those banners represent, and how those symbols affect those engaged in the battle.

For example, on the first page of that chapter, Tolkien writes that horses "were gathered about the standard of their chieftain." Then, the next sentence says, "And he looked out, and in the growing light he saw the banner of the king."¹ A page or two later, when a particular king died in the battle, we read, "one of the knights took the king's banner from the hand of . . . the banner-bearer." It was then handed to another, who rode off with the banner into battle—a battle they were slowly losing. And then Tolkien writes that "their last hope left them." And *that* was because ships that approached were flying black sails. Nonetheless, they blew the horns "to rally all men to (a) banner."

Banners are everywhere. I'll mention *just* one more. Because as the ships approach, Tolkien writes, "And then wonder took him, and a great joy; and he cast his sword up in the sunlight and sang as he caught it. And all eyes followed his gaze, and behold! Upon the foremost ship a great standard broke."

It's a magnificent scene, a story told with banners, banners that bring courage to those in battle. And, of course, literature captures this because it's been history's reality. In fact, banners were originally used *primarily* in warfare,² serving to identify friend or foe, as rallying points for those in the fray, and often as visible representations of victory. That's been true in both medieval and modern times, in both Scotland and the States, from Inverness to Iwo Jima.

As we'll see today, it's *also* true at Rephidim. After delivering His people, Yahweh led them into the wilderness. And now, as God's delivered people, they're attacked once more.

1. **In the Wilderness, there's a Battle** (vv. 8–9).

As a quick review, Israel has journeyed by stages—that is, little by little—across the wilderness. Of course, they've done so **according to the command of the LORD** (17:1). By the pillar of cloud and fire He's led them. And, repeatedly, He's led them to places where resources are scarce. In last week's text, that parched land was the land of Rephidim.

There, the Hebrews provoked the LORD, *wrongly*. And there, *patiently*, the LORD provided. When Moses struck *the* Rock, rivers of water streamed through the desert.

As we've seen, throughout the wilderness wanderings, the LORD's put the Hebrews in places, and in situations, where they might learn more about Him. At Marah, with the manna, the meat, and—today—as they face malice. Verse 8: **Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim.** First, Amalek refers not to one person, but to the people descended from him, those elsewhere called the Amalekites. According to Genesis 36, the people of Amalek were descendants of Esau.³

There's no indication that the Hebrews provoked Amalek in any way. In fact, Deuteronomy 25 describes the scene like this: **Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you**

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, 114.

² Britannica Editors, "Flag," <https://www.britannica.com/topic/flag-heraldry>.

³ Desmond Alexander, *Exodus*, AOTC, 338.

came out of Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary (Deut. 25:17–18). As you might surmise, there's nothing honorable in what the Amalekites do. They attacked from behind, picking off the weak and weary, those journeying more slowly due to physical frailty.⁴ It's not *just* malice, it's cowardice.

Verse 9: **So Moses said to Joshua, “Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek.”** It's in *this* verse that we're first introduced to Joshua. We're not told a lot about him here, but the Hebrews wouldn't have needed an introduction. He was Moses's trusted associate and, of course, his eventual successor.

But on this particular day, his job was to find men who could fight. It goes without saying, but the Egyptians would *not* have trained the Hebrews in the art of war.⁵ That would've been self-sabotage. Moses didn't charge Joshua to sift through hundreds of ready, available, and battle-tested warriors. Moses charged Joshua to sift through thousands of men who'd *never* been to battle, looking for those with potential for combat.⁶

Then, in verse 9, Moses continues his instruction for Joshua: **Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.** They have one day to prepare, to sharpen whatever weapons they plundered, to practice aiming their bow, and to work through their terror.

Before we get to the actual details of the battle, which—by the way—are quite sparse, we should ask the question, “Why is this battle scene *here*?” It's the *first* time in the Scriptures Israel—as God's delivered people—fight against those that oppose them. Of course, that *doesn't* mean it's the first time they've been attacked. In one sense they'd already *been* victors in a battle. But the last time this happened, Moses didn't tell Joshua to gather some troops. The last time he said this: **Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today . . . The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent** (Ex. 14:13–14).

So, why is *this* here? There is something of a shift. It does *not* mean the LORD is no longer fighting for them. We'll see that clearly in point number 2. However, once they're delivered from Egypt, there's a shift toward the delivered people *not* being as passive as they had prior. To speak generally, though they'd applied blood to the doorposts, during most of the plagues they just sat back and watched. And though they'd put one foot in front of the other, the Red Sea did not part because of their efforts. In their deliverance, they were *recipients*, passively receiving what God purposed for them.

But in the wilderness, there's a shift. Going forward, that shift will continue—from passivity to activity. Little by little, they're being trained,⁷ so that God might use them. And in this battle, though they'd *still* depend upon the LORD for victory, Joshua and his men would have to take up arms.

But maybe you think, “That's why it happened, *not* why it's written down in the book of Exodus.” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 that these things—including the wilderness wanderings—**happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction** (1 Cor. 10:11).⁸ And though we're not parched outside the Wilderness of Sin, the parallels are not *too* far a stretch. The New Testament describes *our* days as being something of a wilderness wandering.⁹ Further, the

⁴ Jeffery Leonard, *The Preacher's Hebrew Companion to Exodus 15:22–40:38*, 69; Alexander, 338.

⁵ Alexander, 339.

⁶ Doug Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC, 394.

⁷ Ross Blackburn, *The God who Makes Himself Known*, 75. In one sense, the wilderness wanderings prepare them for the Law.

⁸ Phil Ryken, *Exodus*, 458 calls this battle a type.

⁹ Hebrews 3–4, 1 Peter, etc.

New Testament is *abundantly* clear that our life in the wilderness is to be lived as if there's something of a battle to be fought. In fact, Andy will preach some of Paul's final words tonight, including this sentence: **I have fought the fight** (2 Tim. 4). Last Wednesday night, we considered this sentence from Jeremiah Burroughs, "We are not only travelers but soldiers."¹⁰

We have to be honest about the nature of our existence, about the nature of life on earth in a creation that groans. Or as Alec Motyer writes, "There is no such thing in the Bible as easy progress, victory without cost, or access on earth to some supposed higher life where striving sacrificially against foes inside and out is a thing of the past. Such will heaven be, but not earth."¹¹ Said another way: in the wilderness, there's a battle.

Now that the scene is set, and the contours of how we might apply this text are set, might we find help for the battle we're in. I have three more points. And all three intend to show us *how* we must fight.

2. God's People Battle in Dependence Upon the Lord (vv. 9–11).

So, to temper any pendulum–swinging conclusions about what was *just* said concerning passivity, there *is* a shift here, in terms of God's people taking on a more active role. However, that shift is *not* mutually exclusive from a whole–hearted dependence upon the Lord's work *in, through, and for* His people.

With that mind, let's again read the end of verse 9. Moses tells Joshua this: **Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.** He says, in essence, find some men who will fight. You'll be with them. I'll be on the top of the hill. And what we'll find is that almost *no* details are recorded about the soldiers Joshua finds.¹² In fact, while they fight down in the "valley," Moses spends most of this text directing our eyes to what happens up on the hill. That's where *he* was, **with the staff of God** in his hand.

Verse 10 tells us what happened upon that hill: **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.** These verses summarize the battle.¹³ Moses can see down in the valley. And he sees the momentum shifting back and forth, over and over again. Sometimes Israel was pushing Amalek back. Then Amalek would push Israel back. And the summary, "so it came about" tells us *why* the battlefield kept shifting. It was **when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed.**

Moses doesn't portray that as correlation, but as causation. And he *doesn't* mean it has a *single* thing to do with his hands. Moses expects that we would read verse 9 before we read verses 10 and 11. And in verse 9 we were told that the hands of Moses were holding, and lifting, **the staff of God.**

The staff of God *keeps* on showing up in the narrative. And it keeps on showing up in powerful ways. So, we'd be wise to *keep* on remembering that the staff of God shows up at these moments in order to show us the power of God.

That doesn't mean that the Lord wasn't working *through* Moses and what he was doing. I do think it's quite likely that when Moses lifted up his hands, he was *also* interceding for God's people.¹⁴

¹⁰ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, 100. Of course, he argues that understanding this is key to learning what it means to be content.

¹¹ Alec Motyer, *Exodus*, BST, 152.

¹² Alexander, 339.

¹³ Leonard, 60. The language, "so it came about" was often used to express frequent or repeated action.

¹⁴ Throughout the Pentateuch, he is repeatedly presented to us as something of a mediator.

Many years back, John Piper's made a compelling connection between the Christian's battle and prayer. He said that prayer is not *merely* a domestic intercom to call upstairs for another pillow in the den; but is instead a wartime walkie talkie.¹⁵ Of course that's not the *only* thing we say about prayer. Intercession is a son or daughter of the King calling out to their Father, One eager to hear. Prayer is an oasis in the desert of this life.¹⁶ And as we call out to him, God renews us, stabilizes us, and strengthens us for whatever we face. However, what we face in this life is never to be considered neutral ground, nor are our opponents taking the day off.

Moses didn't run to the hill to *escape* battle. He went up on the hill *so that* he might enter the fray with them.

Nonetheless, while Moses lifting his hands almost *certainly* involved prayer, something *more* than prayer is happening here.¹⁷ This was a day in which Israel didn't just stand back and watch the Red Sea swallow up their enemies. *This* time they'd taken up arms. But the reason they'd push back their enemies was the same. In fact, Moses writes this battle story down in *this* way because it was vital that the Hebrews always understand that the *only* reason they'd had success, the only reason they were *ever* victorious, was because Yahweh fought for them.¹⁸

It's not one *or* the other. We battle, depending upon the strength of the Lord. We work, knowing that it is God who works in us (Phil. 2).

I have something of a Sunday morning routine before I preach, largely directed by a John Piper acrostic I read 15-plus years ago.¹⁹ The first letter of the acrostic is "A," and that reminder is based on John 15:5, prompted me to admit first, "Apart from Christ, I can do nothing." I've quoted that verse on a Sunday morning more times than I could count.

And honestly, I'm still pretty convinced of it. However, one problem is that's *not* necessarily permeating my routine for Tuesday dinner. I imagine I'm not alone in that self-sufficient posture. That is, I often think I can love my spouse in my own strength. Or that I can parent on my own. I have the vocabulary and the sense to write this email without any outside help at all. I can lead this meeting. I can battle this besetting sin. I can navigate this difficult relationship, and I can do all this depending on the strength I myself have.

God's people battle, in dependence upon the LORD.

3. God's People Battle Alongside One Another (vv. 12–13).

Now, I didn't say God's people battle *with* one another. We *can*, surely. But that's one of the quickest ways to ensure defeat. The people of God, should they aim to honor the Lord, must identify the enemy rightly. And, *with* one another, fight.

Exodus 17 gives us one of the most compelling images of an Old Testament "one-anothering." Verse 12: **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.**

Quite practically, even in a physical sense, this burden was one Moses could not carry alone. In his hands was the staff of God, representing God's power, which was bringing about the defeat of the Amalekites below. Verse 11 already told us, **when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed.** This battle was far from a quick rout. It instead shifted back and forth. And Moses knew

¹⁵ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/let-the-nations-be-glad-session-3>

¹⁶ Chris Willbanks said this recently.

¹⁷ Alexander, 340.

¹⁸ Stuart, 398.

¹⁹ The acrostic is APTAT, which isn't close to memorable. But somehow, it's worked.

why it kept shifting. He wasn't lowering his hands *just to see* what would happen. He was lowering his hands because he was tired. He couldn't stand anymore. He couldn't hold his arms up anymore. Again, this was a burden he could *not* carry alone.

So, Aaron and Hur bore it with him. Verse 12 ends: **Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the swords.** There's little to no confusion concerning what this scene intends to picture. It's not *merely* Moses depending upon the Lord; it's Moses, Aaron, and Hur all doing so *together*.

There's so much more that we might say, but our final point actually gives us some direction into *how* they bore this burden together.

4. God's People Battle Together By Remembering and Reminding (vv. 14–16).

Verse 14: **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."**

This isn't the *first* time we've read about the LORD telling Moses to do something as a memorial. Back in Exodus 12, the *day* of the Passover was to be a memorial to them (Ex. 12:14). As we've said, the word for "memorial" comes from a root word that means "remember." But it does not *merely* mean something that's to be remembered. It is, instead, something *set up* to prompt the mind.²⁰ The purpose of what's set up is to *bring about* remembrance.

At the Passover, a *day* was set up as a memorial. Here, Moses is instructed to write down something intended to prompt the mind. This is the "genesis" of Exodus 17, at *least*. Thousands of years ago, the LORD instructed Moses to write something down. And he wrote down that which we are reading this morning.

Further, in verse 14 the LORD tells Moses to **recite all this to Joshua**. The language literally, means to "put it in the ears of" Joshua.²¹ So, it's not *only* that Moses was to write all that happened at Rephidim down, he was to tell another—another in the battle—what God had done.

This is a central way we do battle together. We remind one another of that which we're to remember. Wednesday night, while discussing Burroughs' book, we reminded one another of the character of God. We, those afflicted by a regular dose of discontentment, reminded one another of God's meticulous providence, that in whatever we face He's not "at a distance." He's not, "outside the fray."²² Practically speaking, this happens all the time. And as we remember those things we *know*, and as we remind one another, we're battling together those things the world offers us, *and* those things that war within us.

Moses wrote. Moses recited what God did to another. And further, for the sake of remembrance, Moses, verse 15: **built an altar and named it The LORD is My Banner.**

So, what's a banner? It's a military standard, a piece of cloth bearing an insignia and raised on a pole. It was something soldiers would've looked to, something that would've been key to their identity as a people, reminding them who they were. On a battlefield a banner would help them keep their bearings, often giving those in the battle courage or hope. So that *as long as* their banner flew, all was not lost.²³

And this is *not* disconnected from what happened during the battle with the Amalekites. Because Moses didn't *merely* hold up a staff. Aaron and Hur didn't *merely* help him hold it up. They

²⁰ Motyer, 133.

²¹ Leonard, 68.

²² Alexander, 340.

²³ Ryken, 466.

held up together something that pointed *beyond* it, that which signified the power of God for a people.

And the LORD tells Moses to build an altar, so that they'd *never* forget, *that which* they were to look to, *that which* was key to their identity, what helped them keep their bearings, what would continue to give them courage and hope—all that was in Yahweh Himself. It was *not* the staff. It was not their own strength. He *Himself* was their Banner.

And He would continue to be. Verse 16 makes that plain: **and he said, “The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation.** And if you know your Old Testament, you know this is absolutely true. God's people would *continue* to have an enemy. However, it would be the Lord's enemy as well. And for that reason, they would never be at war alone.

Conclusion

God's people face God's enemies. As we battle, we're to do so in dependence on Him. But not alone. We're to depend on His strength *together*. And we do so *by* remembering and reminding.

With that in mind, I cannot think of a more fitting conclusion to this sermon than what we're *about* to do at the Lord's Table. This is where we remember who we are, in a memorial meal, instituted to remind us of the One that delivered us—the One who *keeps* delivering us.

Our Banner, the Lord Jesus.