

“Jehovah Nissi”
Exodus 17:7-16
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Exodus 17:7-16 “And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?” Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. 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 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. 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.” 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.”

What a marvelous incident in the lives of the Israelites. What a tremendous victory over an enemy that was out to destroy them. What a powerful reminder of the presence of God in their midst. And God told them to remember the event with a memorial altar. So Moses properly named the altar “Jehovah Nissi” translated as “The Lord is my banner.”

Moses took the “staff of God,” as he called it – that staff God used in Moses' hand to inflict the plagues on Egypt and the staff that Moses extended over the Red Sea as God parted the waters for the Israelites to escape the pursuing Egyptians. Moses took that staff and lifted it up as banner, a standard, a flag, around which the troops rallied in battle. I'm

certain you have seen battle scenes from the Revolutionary or Civil War where the nation's banner went with the troops into battle and as long as that flag was flying they knew victory was still possible. For Israel, that "staff of God" was symbolic of God himself in their midst and fighting for them. Jehovah Nissi, God is their banner, leading them to victory. During the Crusades and at other times, some Christians used the Cross as their banner, their standard – indicating their belief that God was with them.

Since all Scripture is useful for our instruction, what does this incident in Israel's life teach us? In the mid-1800s a song was written that became popular, even to today:

"Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war,
with the cross of Jesus going on before.
Christ, the royal Master, leads against the foe;
forward into battle see his banners go!"

"Jehovah Nissi" – The Lord is our Banner." **Is that the lesson - with God on our side we can't lose?** In one very important way that lesson is true – we can't ultimately lose. But I wish to come back to that later. But in another way we might naively take the "we can't lose" lesson and misunderstand it in ways that cause more harm than good.

The first way we can misunderstand it is to assume a triumphalist attitude. For centuries some Christians have taken a prideful attitude about "Jehovah-Nissi" assuming that in their personal lives, their church life and even in their civic life God would lead them to a casualty-free victory over every perceived enemy. They assumed God would protect them from any physical harm, heal all their diseases and provide the income they wanted. They assumed God would bless their calling in life. In our day they assumed God would help them win elections, correct injustices, and even overcome public immorality. After all, "God is their banner."

It's easy to get caught up in that kind of thinking; we would like it to be true. And so we sing:

"Onward then, ye people, join our happy throng,
blend with ours your voices in the triumph song.

There's nothing wrong with the lyrics of the song and there is certainly nothing wrong with the marvelous truth that God is our banner **but we can seriously misapply it.** You don't have to have been a Christian very long before realizing not "everything is coming up roses." The story of the Israel's victory over the Amalekites is more than an unrealistic spiritual pep-talk.

But the second way we can misunderstand it is to simply moralize the narrative, turning the story into a lesson on what we need to do to be better Christians. It is true that in the story, the people of God are commanded to fight, to resist the enemy. Likewise, we are taught to resist temptation in our own lives, to fight against injustice, and even to storm the strongholds of Satan to preach the good news of salvation. It is also true that through Moses the people of God were to exercise prayerful dependence on God as symbolized by Moses lifting up his hands to God even as Joshua and the soldiers fought the Amalekites. Likewise we are to be men and women who understand that prayer is a primary means God has commanded us to use in our physical and spiritual protection and our work for God's kingdom. But, from the way the author tells the story, it seems inadequate to simply moralize that Christians must fight better and pray more.

So if we are **not** to turn the story into a promise of victory in every circumstance of life on the one hand and we are **not** to turn it into a lesson on how to be better Christians on the other, how **are** we understand this event? As we look at the whole story again, I think we see, as we do with many stories, a prologue, then the story itself and finally an epilogue.

First the prologue: After their escape from Egypt, and God's destruction of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, Moses led the people into the desert on their way to the Promised Land. But immediately they ran into trouble.

Exodus 15:22-23 "For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water...So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?" So God made the water drinkable.

Exodus 16:1-2 "The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert ... In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron" about no food. So God gave them Manna.

Exodus 17:1,3 “They camped at Rephidim... But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” And God gave them water to drink.

But the text says in Exodus 17:7 “And (Moses) called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, **“Is the LORD among us or not?”** This is not a very happy bunch! Now I have some sympathy for their attitude about camping BUT over and over again they question the goodness and power of God. When they faced difficulty and they couldn’t see a solution, it seems their first inclination was to question God. Maybe they’d pray for a while then when things didn’t resolve themselves, they grew impatient and, as it says, “they tested the LORD saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not?’” **They were questioning the character of God.**

Chad committed his life to Christ when he was in his mid-teens. What he called fun was different now. And now he also took life seriously realizing that he wanted his life to count for God. He even took school more seriously and after high school he went to college and two years of graduate school to prepare to work with disabled children. He sensed this was God’s calling on his life.

By 2010, when Chad finished his graduate studies, he was married to a great Christian girl and they had had their first child. Life was good and the future seemed even better. But within a year he wasn’t as optimistic as he had been. He had borrowed a great deal of money to complete his education but he couldn’t find a decent paying job anywhere. Their child developed a life-threatening problem with his lungs that required his wife to quit her job to care for the child. Bills mounted, income was minimal, and the worry about their baby was constant. They had always prayed and even more so in the past year but nothing seemed to change.

It wasn’t long before they were desperate and he began to wonder, “Is God with us or not?” In the midst of financial and physical crises there was also a crisis of faith, “What does God want from me?” Or as the text says, in

17:7, “Is the LORD among us or not?” If you have lived very long at all, you probably have had some of those same thoughts.

Now if I **mis**applied this story of the Israelites defeat of the Amalekites, I might say one of two things to Chad: First, in the morality lesson way, I might say, “Chad, you need to pray more and you need to try harder.” Or second, in the triumphalist way, I might say, “Chad, cheer up, if you just believe sufficiently, in due time, “Jehovah Nisi, God is your banner” will intervene and make your child well and give you the job you desire.”

But what does this text teach? In the story itself, it seems there are four elements:

1. There are real enemies doing real damage.
2. There is a responsibility to resist, to fight, the enemy.
3. There is a responsibility to pray, continually requesting and depending on God.
4. Lastly, there is a victory brought about by God’s grace.

So first, there are real enemies doing real damage. According to the Deuteronomy description, Deuteronomy 25:17-18 “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt? When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God.”

When you read that and you think about the hand to hand combat indicated in our text, you realize Israelites were wounded or killed or taken captive. It wasn’t as if God’s people came through the battle unscathed. Those who were “cut off” were someone’s parents or children or friends. Even when the battle was won, there were still casualties.

Remember Chad who I was telling you about? Over the next five years Chad’s child got marginally better but will always be physically limited and require his mother’s full-time attention. Chad gave up looking for work with the disabled and took two part-time laboring jobs to make ends meet.

Not every sickness is overcome and not every dream is fulfilled in real life.

Jehovah-Nissi is not a promise of instant gratification. Chad's life changed from what he expected and with it came a great deal of disappointment with which he had to deal. The story of Chad, I've just told, is a composite of several people and situations I have heard about over the years. I've told it because the situations and outcomes are truer to life than many of the "happily ever after" stories we sometimes hear. There are real enemies doing real damage. Even when we win a battle, there may well be casualties.

Remember God's word to us in 1 Peter 5:8 "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. The Lord said to Cain in Genesis 4:7 "Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you." **Enemies were out to destroy the people of God in Moses' day and they are still at it.** We too often think the greatest battles of our lives are for our financial security or our physical health. We often hear of celebrities who become gravely ill and are said to be "in the battle of their lives." But there is another battle that is much more serious – the battle for our souls. And we are sometimes our own worst enemy - we hold the burning embers of lust, anger or bitterness to our chests as if they will not burn us. We forget the clear warning of God in 1 Peter 2:11 "abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." Foolish, foolish is the man or woman who forgets this – who forgets that the enemies of God and hence the enemies of the church, the enemies of our souls, are actively working to bring us down. Even while the Apostle Peter was taking communion in that first Lord's Supper, even in that great spiritual experience, Jesus looked at him and said, Luke 22:31 "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat" – to destroy you as he has Judas.

The financial and physical are not most important because unless Christ comes first, our bodies will die and our wealth, such as it is, will be given to another. But we, our souls, are forever. Oh, there is a real battle alright! And it is being waged every day and often in seemingly little ways.

The second element in the story is our responsibility to resist the enemies of our soul. 17:8-10 "Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and **fight** with Amalek... So Joshua did as Moses told him, and **fought** with Amalek..."

It is instructive to note that sometimes the Lord does it **all** without our involvement **at all**. When, just a few weeks earlier, the Egyptians were pursuing the Israelites and had them cornered at the Red Sea God said this: Exodus 14:13-14 "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; **you need only to be still.**"

But in our text, when the Amalekites attack, the people of God are told to take up arms and fight. In the Bible, among other things we are told to do, we are told to flee immorality, to resist the devil, to put off the old sinful habits of life and put on new ways of acting and responding, and we are to hide God's word in our hearts that we might not sin against God. Over and over again throughout the OT and NT we are given instruction as to what we are to do in the battles. Christians are not passive, but active, in the battle against the sin that Satan would use to destroy us. Listen to Charles Spurgeon on this subject:

"Christian, you will have a life of warfare, rest assured of that. You would never be told to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ if it were not so... When we are delivered from bondage, although it is God's work to help us, we must be active in our cause. Now that we are alive from the dead we must wrestle with principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness if we are to overcome. "Go fight," is the command. Do not many Christians act as if sin would be driven out of them through their sleeping soundly? Let them be sure that a slumbering spirit is the best friend that sin can find. If your lusts are to be destroyed, they must be cut up root and branch by sheer force of personal exertion through divine grace, they are not to be blown away by languid wishes and sleepy desires... We shall see our sins die (only) while our minds are thoroughly active against them, and resolutely bent upon their destruction. "Go, fight with Amalek." Spurgeon MTP V12 Sermon 712 p558, 662

Do we again need to be reminded that in this battle there will be wounds, there will be casualties? We fight against real enemies - **the world, the flesh and the devil**. The bible teaches we live in a world that has been radically altered by sin. (Chad's little boy wasn't sick necessarily because

Satan attacked him but more likely because, since the Fall of Genesis 3, he lives in a world with disease and tragedy. AND while Chad's underemployment could have been caused by poor choices more likely it was the result of sinful choices made by others in business and government years earlier resulting in an economic downturn.) There is a sin-ravaged world that battles against us. The Bible also teaches, as the Spurgeon quote noted, we fight against our own sinful desires AND we fight against unseen demonic beings striving to ruin what God is doing in the world and in us. God has not yet eradicated the power of all those enemies – there will be disease, children will die, plans will be altered, dreams will be derailed, and at times we will sinfully fail in living the life God has called us to. **But we are commanded to fight on!**

Now the third element in the story is prayer. We are called on to express our dependence on God by prayer. Imagine the scene: Joshua and others are doing battle and at times they are winning while other times they are losing. The author specifically indicates a direct correlation between Moses' hands and that winning or losing. When Moses' hands are raised, Joshua is winning. When Moses' hands are lowered, Joshua is losing. Nothing in the text explicitly says that Moses was praying but everything in the story connotes a conscious dependence on God and God's faithfulness to provide. I'm convinced this is Moses praying and prayer is the highest expression of dependence on God. Again from the quotable Spurgeon: "It matters not how loudly Joshua shouts to his (soldiers), unless Moses fervently cries to his God." Spurgeon MTP V12 Sermon 712 663

Yes, we are called on to fight but God clearly ordained prayer as the other means by which the battle is won. Please notice I said prayer is the "means" by which God would win the battle; God determines the outcome but he commands us to use the means he provides. People sometimes speak of the power of prayer almost as if prayer were magic. And sometimes we speak of the power of prayer as being vested in the one who prays – as if by our greater sincerity or by our longer praying we accomplish the task. The power is not in the prayer or the pray-er but in God. Praying is the means of expressing our dependence on God. And so when we pray we come to God. We aren't just saying words that contain some code to unlock God's benevolence. We come to him; we come as supplicants to a father who loves us more than we love ourselves. AND we come **seeking him** even more than we seek our own desires because we trust him and his answers to our needs even more than our answers. When

I come to God in prayer with my mind made up about what God should do in the situation, I run the great risk of judging God deficient when he chooses to answer differently. **We are called on to express our dependence on God by prayer.**

The fourth element in the story is the defeat of the enemy: Exodus 17:13 “And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword.” That one sentence describes the resolution of the matter – Israel wins.

But it is the epilogue to the story that I think shows us the fuller lesson of this event. Exodus 17:14-16 “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.” 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.”

Moses’ words in verse 15 make it clear that he fully understood the battle belonged to the Lord. He has no illusions about the ability of their military or the worthiness of their prayers to accomplish the task. Remember it says when Moses hands which contained the staff of God, the banner of God, were raised they would win and when they were lowered they would lose? The soldiers fought just as hard either way. No one missed the point – it was God who made the difference. And here in the epilogue Moses sums up the whole matter: God is my banner – God has intervened on our behalf.

But there is, in the epilogue, another important reminder that keeps us from being triumphalist even when a battle is won. “The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” This **battle** was won but the **WAR** was not over! There will be other battles and more casualties. The Israelites would be har’assed by the Amalekites 1500 years later when Herod, an Amalekite descendant, ordered the slaughter of the infants at the time of Jesus’ birth.

We are in this experience called Christianity for **the long haul**. There will be many battles. The enemies are real and dangerous. The means God has commanded us to use in the battle are to actively resist evil and to prayerful depend on God. And the good news is **not** that there will be no casualties in the **battles** but that **God will win the war**. Exodus 17:14

“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.” This story is far better than an unrealistic spiritual pep-talk about how God will keep us healthy and wealthy if we fight hard enough and pray fervently enough. This story is about a God who is with us in the real battles of life and who promises, that in spite of the casualties we experience here and now, the final victory is certain.

There are too many of us who don't distinguish well between a battle and the war. If we have casualties in the battle we think we failed or God failed. As with the Israelites, if we don't get the water or food (or healing, or a job, or a spouse or whatever else it is we think we need *WHEN* we think we need it, we question the character of God. Is God really good, wise and powerful? **When the casualties of life come, and they will, I don't want us dropping out of the war.** Instead, I want all of us to have a realistic perspective on life and a growing confidence in the providence of God. “The providence of God is his completely holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing every creature and every action.” No matter the battle, no matter the current casualties, I trust God to lead us to the **WAR'S** end. Jehovah Nissi - God is my banner.

"Even If" (Kutless)

Sometimes all we have to hold on to
Is what we know is true of who You are
So when the heartache hits like a hurricane
That could never change who You are
And we trust in who You are

Even if the healing doesn't come
And life falls apart
And dreams are still undone
You are God You are good
Forever faithful One
Even if the healing
Even if the healing doesn't come

Lord we know Your ways are not our ways
So we set our faith in who You are
Even though You reign high above us
You tenderly love us

We know Your heart
And we rest in who You are

Even if the healing doesn't come
And life falls apart
And dreams are still undone
You are God You are good
Forever faithful One
Even if the healing
Even if the healing doesn't come

You're still the Great and Mighty One
We trust You always
You're working all things for our good
We'll sing your praise

Even if the healing doesn't come
And life falls apart
And dreams are still undone
You are God You are good
Forever faithful One
Even if the healing
Even if the healing doesn't come

You are God and we will bless You
As the Good and Faithful One
You are God and we will bless You
Even if the healing doesn't come
Even if the healing doesn't come