

The LORD Is My Banner

Exodus 17:8-16

“For the third year in a row, the modern persecution of Christians worldwide has hit another record high.”¹ This was the finding of the 2017 “World Watch List,” published by the advocacy group, Open Doors, who “identified 2016 as the ‘worst year yet’” for persecution . . . in modern history.² What are we talking about?

We’re talking about the two suicide bombings at Coptic Churches in Egypt on Palm Sunday just a few weeks ago, where 49 people lost their lives.³ We’re talking about 12 Nigerian Christians killed on Easter Sunday, a week later, while worshipping at church.⁴ We’re talking about persecution of Christians in North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Iraq. In any given month, we’re talking about 322 Christians being killed for their faith, 214 churches and Christian properties being destroyed, and 772 forms of violence committed against Christians.⁵ And those are just the substantiated reports; there are all sorts of incidents that go unreported or are difficult to verify.

We’re talking about the erosion of religious liberty in the modern world. In its 2017 report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom “concluded that the state of affairs for international religious freedom is worsening in both the depth and breadth of violations.”⁶ Just this week they added Russia to the list of “countries of particular concern.”

We’re incredibly blessed to live in a country where any religious persecution we might experience is typically a matter of inconvenience. Though it is getting worse. If you believe what the Bible teaches about morality, or human sexuality, or the uniqueness and supremacy of Jesus, or heaven and hell, then you risk being socially marginalized today. Your faith will cost you friends. It can get you fired.⁷ It can get your business shut down by the government, if you do not deny your religious convictions and get in line with the new sexual orthodoxy.⁸

¹ Jeremy Weber, [“‘Worst Year Yet’: The Top 50 Countries Where It’s Hardest to Be a Christian.”](#) *Christianity Today*, Jan. 11, 2017.

² Weber.

³ [“Egypt’s Coptic churches hit by deadly blasts on Palm Sunday,”](#) *BBC*, April 9, 2017.

⁴ [“Nigeria: bishop blames government after 12 killed in Easter rampage,”](#) *World Watch Monitor*, April 20, 2017.

⁵ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/>.

⁶ [“USCIRF Releases its 2017 Annual Report,”](#) April 26, 2017.

⁷ E.g., Brendan Eich. See Conor Friedersdorf, “Mozilla’s Gay-Marriage Litmus Test Violates Liberal Values,” *The Atlantic*, Apr. 4, 2014. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/mozillas-gay-marriage-litmus-test-violates-liberal-values/360156/>.

⁸ See the numerous examples of these kinds of lawsuits in the Alliance Defending Freedom’s *Protecting Your Ministry from Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Lawsuits*.

But none of this really new. As bad as things are globally, and as bad as they may someday get in the U.S., there have always been those in the world who see God as a problem, his promises as a threat, and his people as prey. The question is, how will we respond when the world turns against us? Around what or whom will we rally for protection, and the preservation of God's promises and plan? Will we give up? Conclude that God doesn't keep his promises after all? Will we turn to a strong man, a powerful leader to be our hero and save Christianity? Or will we rally around God himself as our banner, the standard of the cross lifted high?

This is a question that ancient Israel was forced to wrestle with shortly after they left Egypt. Last week we picked up our series through Exodus, following Israel out of Egypt and now into the wilderness, where much to their surprise they found themselves faced with trial—hunger and thirst—and not too happy about it. As Pastor Bruce showed us, there was purpose in their trial—to teach them to glorify God. There was a pathway God gave them, his Law. And underneath it all, there was the hidden source of their life—Christ himself.

But Israel didn't see that immediately. They spent their energy grumbling about their difficult circumstances and blaming God and Moses for it. They would have rather died in Egypt as slaves than starve in the desert as a redeemed people. Three times they complained, and three times God both rebuked their unbelief, but also met them with grace, providing for their needs. And he did it through Moses. One of the lessons Israel will have a hard time learning during their wilderness journey is that God really is with them, and that he is leading them through his servant Moses. And one of the signs of God's presence and power so far has been the staff in Moses' hand. The staff God with which he struck the Nile, turning it to blood (7:17); the staff with which he parted the Red Sea (14:16); the staff with which he struck the rock that water might pour out (17:5-6).

As we come now to our story this morning, it takes place in the same location as Israel's most recent complaint: Rephidim, where Moses struck the rock (17:8, cf. v. 1). And it involves another significant trial, not of thirst, but of safety. But the message is actually very similar. Here we have another example of Israel's wellbeing resting more in the staff in Moses' hand than in the swords in their own, the reminder that God himself provides the strength to protect his people and accomplish his plans.

The Threat to God's People: Amalek (17:8)

It begins with a surprise attack by the people of Amalek. Verse 8: "Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim."

Historically, Amalek was the grandson of Esau, Jacob's brother (Gen. 36:12, 16). So a distant cousin to Israel. But that doesn't stop them from seeing God's people crossing the wilderness, coming out of Egypt, and deciding to take advantage of them in their journey. Perhaps they thought they were a threat. More likely, they were easy pickings. As Moses later reflects on their attack, he says in Deuteronomy 25: "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" (25:17-18). Similarly, Psalm 83 looks back and says,

They lay crafty plans against your people; they consult together against your treasured ones. They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!" For they conspire with one accord; against you they make a covenant- the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, Moab and the Hagrites, Gebal and Ammon and *Amalek* . . . (Ps. 83:3-7)

This is not a misunderstanding, or a territorial dispute. This is the willful exploitation of God's people at their most vulnerable. Like a lion looking for a stray cub, unprotected by the pack, they single out the weak, those lagging behind. It's an attempt, as Psalm 83 puts it, to wipe out Israel as a nation. But that means Amalek's war isn't just with Israel; it's with God. It's just like Pharaoh all over again. Just as Pharaoh's attempt to stop Israel from multiplying in his land was a direct opposition to God's promises to his people, (Exod. 1:7-12; cf. Gen. 12:1-3), so Amalek's attempt to wipe out Israel on their way to the promised land is not just an assault on them, but an attack on God and his promises. And so while the story starts by saying that Amalek fought against Israel (17:8), notice how it ends in v. 16: "*the LORD* will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." When the world treats God's people as prey, they are opposing the plan and promises and rightful rule of God.

In the same way, when Christians are persecuted today, whether in violent ways or less extreme forms of marginalization, the world is not just treating us as prey, they are opposing the plan and promises of God. Remember what Jesus said to Paul (who was called Saul at the time), on his way to Damascus in order to arrest the Christians there? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Saul attacks the church; Jesus says you're attacking me.

So how do we respond? How does Israel to respond?

The Defense of God's People: Sword and Staff (17:9-13)

In vv. 9-13 we see their battle plan form and unfold. Verse 9: "Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.'" This is the first time that we meet Joshua in the story of Scripture, and he's going to go on to play a big role in the story ahead, as Moses' successor who eventually leads Israel into the promised land. We're not sure how old he is here, but we see that Moses certainly trusts him. He instructs him to gather an army to fight against Amalek.

That's quite different from what we saw at the Red Sea. If you remember, the last time Israel faced an army, it was the Egyptians about to overtake them at the Red Sea. There Moses said to the people, "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (14:14). Here they are instructed to engage in the battle themselves. But that doesn't mean the victory is up to them; quite the opposite. Because while Joshua leads the troops on the ground, Moses will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in his hand. The staff that parted the sea; the staff that struck the rock.

And notice which part of the battle plan the narrator is more interested in. We're given *zero* details about the clash on the ground. The critical factor in the victory is what happens on the hill with Moses and his staff. Verse 11:

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. ¹² 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.¹³ And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. (17:11-13)

So what's the deal with Moses' staff? This is strange. This feels like something you might see Gandalf do in *Lord of the Rings*, or something you might read in *Harry Potter*, but what's it doing in the Bible? What is Moses doing when he lifts the staff, such that if he lowers it Israel begins losing, but if he raises it, they start winning?

The traditional answer has been that this is a sign of prayer.⁹ Elsewhere in the Bible people lift their hands in prayer, and so Moses is praying, and prayer is what wins the battle. The problem with that reading is not that prayer is incapable of such great things, but that the story doesn't talk at all about prayer. And nowhere in any of the other great acts Moses does with the staff is he told to pray. Moreover, to suggest that his prayer only worked when his hands were up, makes prayer a rather mechanical, even magical system—you do it a certain way and it will work.¹⁰

Others suggest that when the soldiers would look up to the hill and see the staff raised high, it would give them motivation to fight.¹¹ It was their banner, their military standard—the signal flags that armies would use to communicate in battle. If you think of the movies where someone is stationed on a hill, signaling to the troops below using different flags, telling them what to do. So the staff was like a signal that God was on their side, inspiring them to fight harder. That's getting closer, but still doesn't make sense. For starters, God's the one who gets the credit for the victory, not the soldiers and their resolve. Moreover, they haven't taken God's presence very seriously yet; why would they start now?

The simplest explanation is that God was exercising his power through the staff, just as he had at the Nile, the Red Sea, and the rock. Not that the staff was magic; it had no power in and of itself. It was simply the instrument through which God exercised his power in the hands of his servant Moses. And just as God's power parted the Sea, so it gave Israel the strength to defeat Amalek. It just took a lot longer.

Which means that, as the instrument of God's power, that Moses lifting up the staff was in fact expressing his reliance on God. And that the staff does in fact become a kind of banner or standard around which the troops might rally—just not merely for inspiration. And both these ideas are captured in the conclusion to the story, in vv. 14-16, where Moses commemorates the victory, and God promises to bring Amalek to justice.

The Standard of God's People: The LORD is my banner (17:14-16)

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." 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." (17:14-16)

⁹ E.g., Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005, 2015), 424.

¹⁰ See Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 193.

¹¹ E.g. Fretheim, 193.

We see two things here, both of which have to do with God's commitment to his people—to avenge them on the one hand, and to defend them on the other. First is God's resolution to avenge his people, not in the sense of petty revenge, but in the sense of bringing evil to justice. He announces before Moses and Joshua that he will in fact bring Amalek to a full end for their crimes. Then Moses reiterates it in v. 16: "The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." This event becomes the origin of God's commitment to bring Amalek down, something reiterated several times in the Old Testament until it finally happens (e.g. Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15:2-3).

The seriousness with which God judges evil sounds harsh to our modern ears. God will "utterly blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven." Yikes. But remember that Amalek's goal is to wipe Israel out. "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!" (Ps. 83:4). God's judgment is just. What they sought to do to his people, he will do to them in return. Moreover, not only does justice require dealing with their sin, his judgment is a necessary part of defending his people. When a judge sentences a violent criminal to a long stay in prison, he's not only dealing justly the person's crime, he's also protecting the victims. In judging Amalek, God defends his people, and makes way for fulfilling his promise to bring Israel into their land.

God's power to defend his people is the second thing we see emphasized in Moses' response to their victory. He builds an altar to worship God in celebration, and then names it, "the LORD is my banner," my signal, my standard. Again, it's the imagery of a flag, flying high, communicating a message to an army or a kingdom. Isaiah uses this imagery a lot, such as Isaiah 13:2, "On a bare hill raise a signal; cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles," as God summons his mighty men to execute his anger on Babylon.

So around what or whom should they rally when under attack? Around the LORD himself. He is their banner, the signal of their security, lifted high. Apart from him they can do nothing.

Moses reinforces this when he explains the name of the altar in v. 16: "A hand upon the throne of the LORD!" or perhaps "up to the throne of the LORD."¹² God chose to exercise his power through the staff in Moses' hand. For Moses to grip that staff was like gripping the throne of God. His royal power, his authority over his enemies. His presence to defend his people and avenge their enemies. The LORD himself is their banner.

And so there is in which Moses lifting up the staff was an expression of his reliance on God. Even if he wasn't explicitly praying, he was certainly trusting in him for the victory.¹³ And the staff was in fact a kind of banner or standard around which the troops might rally—not merely for inspiration, but as the expression of God's power and presence among them. And so this story, these events, are a lesson to Israel, that while God did include them in the fight, the

¹² While there have been suggestions to emend the text to read "a hand upon the banner of the LORD," (e.g. Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* [OTL; WJK, 1974], 312), the complete lack of manuscript evidence, combined with the fact that "throne" is the more difficult (and therefore more likely original) reading suggests we read this as a reference to God's throne (see W. C. Kaiser, Jr. "Exodus" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 409).

¹³ See Kaiser, 408. See also Ryken, 424.

strength to protect them and preserve God's promises came not from the sword in their hands, but the staff in Moses' hand.¹⁴ The LORD is their banner.

The Rally Point of God's People Today: the Cross

So what about us? How do we respond when the world turns against us? Around what or whom will we rally for protection, and the preservation of God's promises?

Do we rally around our laws? 'What we need is more religious liberty protection in this country.' Now that's a good thing, and we should work hard for that as a basic human right. But does losing religious liberty protection destroy the church? You know where the church is growing faster than anywhere else in the world right now? Places where it's illegal. You know where it's been fading for the last century? The West.

Do we rally around a hero, a strong man, a powerful leader who will take charge and save Christianity at all costs? That's a huge temptation, to put our hope in political leaders or celebrity personalities, both in and outside the church, as our advantage in the culture war. And we need gifted leaders to stand up for the truth. But they will let us down, and sometimes, lead us astray.

Do we just give up? Go underground? Or do we throw in the towel on God all together?

Or do we rally around God himself as our banner, which today, means rallying around the cross?

Just as the world's malice toward God's people is not limited to day, so God's promise to defend and avenge his people is not limited to ancient Israel in the wilderness. In fact, later in Isaiah, God promises to raise a signal for all people to rally around him. But this time it's not a staff; it's a person: Isaiah 11:10: "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious." Isaiah looks forward to a day when God will establish justice and peace on earth, a day when his scattered people will be gathered again. And the banner he will raise in that day is the root of Jesse—the father of David, upon whose throne Jesus now sits.

Jesus is the banner, the signal, the sign of God's commitment to deal justly with sin while defending his people. And so God calls us today, when under attack, to rally around and lift high the cross.

Think about what God accomplished on the cross. On the cross, God judged sin. The full weight of his holy anger against human rebellion and sin, from the white lie we told at breakfast this morning, to the genocidal ambition of a people like Amalek, the full weight of God's wrath was poured out on Christ. Yet in dealing with sin he also defends his people. Jesus shields us from the wrath we deserve by taking it on himself. And we do deserve it. At the end of the day, Israel was no better than Amalek, and neither are we. Of course I hope nobody here is plotting genocide of any sort. But in the light of God's holiness, even anger in our hearts toward someone is akin to murder (cf. Matt. 5:21-26). We all fall woefully short of God's glory. And so we need not only to be defended from our enemies, but from the sin in our own hearts. We need Jesus.

¹⁴ See Bush: "The whole narrative . . . conclusively shows that God designed to teach Israel that the hand of Moses, with whom [Israel] had just been chiding, contributed more to their safety than their own hands; his rode more than their weapons." As cited in Kaiser, 408.

And listen to what Jesus himself says about his offer of forgiveness through the cross. John 3: “And 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” (Jn. 3:14-15). And again, John 12:32: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Jesus deals with our sin, and defends his people. He is the banner that God lifted up, around whom we rally.

So what does that mean for interacting with our enemies? For how we respond to those who would seek to thwart God’s plans by harming his people? Turns out, Jesus died for them too. And so in Christ, we have a very different posture toward those who are against us. Unlike ancient Israel, the church is not an agent of God’s judgment. God does not send his church to exact vengeance for sin. He leaves that to Jesus. And all sin will be brought to justice by Christ in one of two ways—either through the cross, where Christ paid the price and we are forgiven, or through the final judgment he will render when he comes again.

So for us to rally around the cross in the face of opposition is to do two things. It’s to recognize God is at work in us. That by sharing in the sufferings of Christ he is making us more like Jesus. Peter says in 1 Peter 1, “In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:6-7). God is at work through our suffering.

Second, to rally around the cross, to lift it high, it’s to rely on Christ’s power for our defense and vindication. To know that our strength and security lay not in our own hands, but in God’s hands and the victory he secured through Jesus. The cross frees us to love our enemies and pray for them, and leave vengeance to the Lord. The apostle Paul summarizes it well in Romans 12:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:14-21)

How does this help us? Several ways. First, knowing that God *will* judge sin, he will bring wrongdoers to just—either now through the cross, or in the end through final judgment, frees us to forego retribution or revenge, to offer love instead, leaving the results in God’s hands. So if someone is opposing you for your faith, what if instead of asking how we can protect our rights or preserve our reputation or our job, we asked ourselves, what does it look like to love this person with the love of Jesus? How can I serve them, even though they don’t deserve it?

The second way Romans 12 helps us is to remind us that while we enjoy relative safety and peace in the West, hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters around the globe are being attacked for their faith. Paul says to “rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who

weep.” And so this is an invitation to weep with our persecuted family. To share in their sufferings in some way. To be completely honest, I’m not sure what that looks like. There are organizations like Open Doors and Voice of the Martyrs that can help us. But at a bare minimum, we must pray. Not only for their safety, but for perseverance in the faith, and for the gospel of Jesus to be on display. Pray for the faith to rally around the cross.

In the days after the Palm Sunday attacks on the Coptic churches in Egypt, the wife of one of the victims was interviewed on TV.¹⁵ Her husband was the security guard who prevented the bomber from entering the second church, so that he blew himself up at the gate, killing the guard and eleven others, but sparing many, many inside. His wife said in the interview, “I’m not angry at the one who did this . . . I’m telling him, ‘May God forgive you, and we also forgive you. Believe me, we forgive you. You put my husband in a place I couldn’t have dreamed of. Believe me, I am proud of him. And I wish I was there beside him.’” At that point in the interview, the television host was silent for about ten seconds, until he finally exclaimed, “The Egyptian Christians are made of steel! . . . And oh, how great is this forgiveness that you have??? . . . If it were my father, I could never say this. These people have so much forgiveness. But this is their faith and religious conviction. These people are made from a different substance.”

That is the power of the cross. That is our rallying point, our banner, our flag, when the world turns against us. God himself provides the strength to protect his people and accomplish his plans. So may we rally to the cross, and lift it high, that others might see the power and presence of Christ.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. Have you ever been mistreated because of your faith in Jesus?
 - What happened?
 - What did you feel?
 - How did you want to respond?
 - How did you actually respond?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. Looking back at the previous couple chapters, what has Israel’s experience in the wilderness been like so far? What challenges have they faced? How have they responded? How has God responded?

¹⁵ “Copt’s forgiveness of husband’s killer stuns broadcaster,” *World Watch Monitor*, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/coptic-widows-forgiveness-husbands-killer-stuns-broadcaster/>

3. What is the new problem according to v. 8? How do passages like Deuteronomy 25:17-19 and Psalm 83:1-8 help us understand what's going on?
4. What is Moses' battle strategy according to vv. 9-13? Why do you think the author focuses all his attention on what Moses is doing on the hill, as opposed to what's happening with Joshua and the troops on the battle field?
5. What is the significance of Moses lifting the staff? Why do you think that is the critical factor in the battle?
6. How do the LORD and Moses memorialize the victory?
7. What do you think Moses means by naming the altar "the LORD is my banner?"

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. What main lesson do you think God wanted Israel to learn through this event?
9. How does that lesson apply to us today when we find ourselves under attack?
10. How is the way we react to persecution different than how God called Israel to react, now that Jesus has come? (Hint: read Romans 12:14-21)
11. How does the cross help us love our enemies and overcome evil with good? What makes that hard? What does that look like practically?
12. In light of this study, how might you have responded differently to the experience you shared at the beginning of our study?