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God is my Banner

Exodus 17 v 8-16

Introduction

Gaius Marius was a general in the Roman army around a hundred years before Christ. He reformed the army in many ways, and one of those was the Eagle. Each legion was given a silver eagle, lifted up on a pole. This was to be the focus of the legion. It was one soldier's job to carry the eagle, and where the eagle went, the legion went. It symbolised their pride in their strength and they guarded it with their lives. The worst thing that could happen to a legion was for it to lose its eagle. It was their banner.

Tonight we're going to look at one of the names of God: God is my Banner. We'll see how this reflects something of God's character, what it meant to the Israelites and what it means to us.

Let's look over the passage again. The Israelites were camped at Rephidim, and there God had given them water after Moses struck a rock with his staff. The Amalekites approached and prepared for battle. Moses instructed Joshua to pick an army and get ready to fight the next day. Moses, Aaron and Hur would climb up the hill there and he would hold up the staff of God. As they did so, they found that while Moses' hands were in the air, the Israelites prevailed in the battle, but as soon as his hands fell the Israelites started losing. Moses sat on a rock and Aaron and Hur held his hands up until the sun set and Israel won the battle. To remember this great victory Moses built an altar, and he called it Jehovah Nissi - God is my Banner.

What can we discuss from this passage?

The Israelite army? A bunch of slaves without weapons or armour to speak of? And yet they manage to hold their own against a warlike clan on their own turf. How amazing is God's enabling power!

Or the Amalekites? Amalek was Esau's grandson, Esau the brother of Jacob who rejected his birthright, the original antagonist of Israel. Time and again we find them opposing Israel, opposing God. Until God promises to wipe them out. Later on He would command King Saul to do this and Samuel was angry on God's behalf when he found that Saul had spared Agag, the Amalekite king. Years later while the Jews are in exile we find that

a man wants to wipe out the whole Jewish race, a man called Hamaan, an Agagite. We see in ourselves the side of us that always wants to oppose God, to have our own way. And we battle this part of us again and again.

But I don't want to talk about these things.

What about the lessons of friendship, as we see Moses weaken and his two friends Aaron and Hur help him to keep the staff raised. We can learn that we are weak, that we need the help of others who God puts in our path.

But not that either.

I want to talk about the name Moses gives to the altar that he builds after the victory. The Lord is my Banner - Jehovah Nissi.

A Banner

What is a banner? It's a sign of what side we're on. When we see a football crowd it might not be obvious which side they support, especially if they all have coats on in our rainy climate. Until they hold up their scarfs. Red, white and blue. Green, white and orange. Claret and amber. We can tell right away who they are for.

Think of the last presidential election in the USA. Two main sides with two main candidates. They both had signs and slogans, they had their policies and they had reasons why the other person wasn't up to the job. I'm not going to start talking politics, but I'll tell you what: one side definitely had the better banners. When you saw a crowd all wearing those red baseball caps you knew which side they were on. Maybe they made a difference.

So what should a banner be?

A banner must be visible. Moses stood on a hill and held up the rod of God, so that all could see. The Israelites could see it and remember how great their God was and be encouraged. The Amalekites could see it and perhaps recall the stories they had heard of the Israelites' escape from Egypt.

A banner must be identifiable. There was no mistaking what Moses was holding up. It was the rod of God and those who fought under it were God's people. They were fighting in God's name and by his power.

A banner is unifying. The Israelites might have had different feelings about their identity, their tribe, their nationality, their relationship with God. But when they saw that banner they were united under one name. They were not fighting for themselves or their families but for the Lord God.

Their Banner

As the banner was raised the Israelite army found themselves winning the battle. We can attribute some of that to morale or to cohesion as a fighting force. But really they still wouldn't have stood a chance without the Lord fighting the battle for them. As they fought under his banner he won the battle. And so when Moses set up the altar it was to God, their banner, who won the day for them.

The power behind the banner. You see the main thing, the important thing about a banner, isn't its colour, its design, how much it is loved, but the power behind it. There are plenty of lower league football clubs with great flags, scarves, strips and supporters. But they're not going to get anywhere unless they have a great team. The Roman legions found their standards made them proud but they won battles because of their training, their weapons and their tactics. It wasn't Moses' staff that won the battle for the Israelites, it was their God. The altar Moses built was not dedicated to him, or his staff, but to the Lord who was their banner.

Another Banner

As I think on that hilltop sight with Moses, Aaron and Hur, I can't help but think of another hilltop scene. A man between two others, lifted up, fighting a battle. In this case though, the two men on either side of him could offer no help. They were nailed to their own crosses. They each had their own condemnation and each had no hope. And yet one of them had a future in paradise. It was the one who called on the man in the middle for help.

And that man in the middle with his arms held up, he had a banner placed above him, which was there for all to see. It was high up to be visible. It was written in three languages so it was obvious what he stood for. It pronounced him to be Messiah, king of the Jews. The promised one who had come to save his people. And it was true.

Our Banner

Who is our banner? What side are we on? Is it obvious to those around us? Is it clear who we stand for, who we live for? Does it unify us with other believers?

Watch the people walk down Paisley Road West on a Saturday when a match is on. You'll see the scarves and hats and know what team they follow. Then think about those watching you walk to church on a Sunday morning. Can they see who you follow? Maybe your clothing doesn't give it away, though you might be carrying a Bible. Or you might have a fish symbol on your car. But what really speaks to others is your life. If God is our banner it

will be visible, in how we walk and talk. It will be identifiable - the true Christ should shine out. And it should bind us together as a church.

What does the New Testament have to say about this?

Matthew 5v14:

[14] "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

You see what Jesus was saying to his disciples? Their lives should shine out: visible, identifiable, unifying, because all who see them will give glory to God.

So we might hold up our banners on Sunday, but what about during the week? When we're at work, or with family, playing football, discussing politics; is the Lord our banner at these times?

Remember the important thing though, the power behind the banner. Our God is able to overcome all the enemies in our lives. As we live for him and stand for him, as we shine for him, we will find that he will win the victory for us. Give him all the glory.

And what about those Roman eagles? Those banners for the legions that were their symbol of strength, their pride in the greatest fighting force the world had ever seen? Not one of them is known to exist any more. We only have pictures of them. The mighty Roman Empire is mighty no more, because it was built on human strength. However, the power behind our banner is eternal. The same God who defeated the Amalekites fights for his people today. He gives power and authority to words spoken in his name. He gives strength to those who seek to live holy lives as a witness to the world of his mercy and grace. And those lives declare "the Lord is our banner".