

SESSION 3

OUR BANNER

▶ ***The Point***

We are always covered by God's protection.

▶ ***The Passage***

Exodus 17:8-16

▶ ***The Bible Meets Life***

The United States flag represents a lot of things to its citizens: freedom, democracy, justice, and home. Seeing the flag unfurled inspires a feeling of patriotism in many of us. For so many who served in the military or who lost a family member in war, the flag reminds them of courage and sacrifice. For American citizens abroad needing assistance, the American flag also represents protection. When an American citizen steps onto the grounds of the U.S. embassy, the stars and stripes remind them they are now under the protection of the United States. We face times when life throws us such a curve that we can feel alone and exposed—even when we're surrounded by others. In those moments, we feel vulnerable and under attack. In one moment of Israel's history, they too were vulnerable and under attack. But God Himself showed that He was on their side; He was their Banner, standing over them with His sovereign protection. We are not alone. We stand under another flag, a banner of protection: God Himself. He stands over every issue we face. God covers us with His protection.

▶ ***The Setting***

Moving on from Elim, the Israelites journeyed to the Wilderness of Sin, where they again fell into grumbling against God's spokesman, Moses, and his brother, Aaron. In their hunger, they complained that Moses and Aaron had led them out into the wilderness to die of starvation; they also longed for their former life in Egypt where there was plenty to eat. God mercifully provided the Israelites manna to eat. (See Ex. 16.) They then traveled on to Rephidim, where they again grumbled against Moses and complained of a lack of water. (See 17:1-3.) But in spite of the people's insults and testing of the Lord, God again graciously provided for their needs. (See vv. 4-7.)

What does the Bible say?

Amalek (v. 8)—Amalek was Esau’s grandson. His descendants, known as Amalek or Amalekites, were nomads who ranged across the northeast part of the Sinai peninsula from the Negev to the border of Egypt.

The LORD Is My Banner (v. 15)—Banners were used to identify families and tribes. Having the Lord as their banner associated the Israelites with their covenant God, Yahweh.

Exodus 17:8-16

⁸ At Rephidim, Amalek came and fought against Israel.

⁹ Moses said to Joshua, “Select some men for us and go fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the hilltop with God’s staff in my hand.”

¹⁰ Joshua did as Moses had told him, and fought against Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

¹¹ While Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, but whenever he put his hand down, Amalek prevailed.

¹² When Moses’s hands grew heavy, they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat down on it. Then Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other so that his hands remained steady until the sun went down.

¹³ So Joshua defeated Amalek and his army with the sword.

¹⁴ The LORD then said to Moses, “Write this down on a scroll as a reminder and recite it to Joshua: I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven.”

¹⁵ And Moses built an altar and named it, “The LORD Is My Banner.”

¹⁶ He said, “Indeed, my hand is lifted up toward the LORD’s throne. The LORD will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

Exodus 17:8-10 Commentary

[Verse 8] God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt. Delivering them from slavery, God had demonstrated that through His power, protection, and provision the Israelites could stand against those who sought to harm them. As the Israelites journeyed through the wilderness, God kept them both fed and safe from harm. However, despite having seen and experienced God's protective care time and time again, the Israelites still had not learned to trust God completely for the protection and provision they needed.

The people of Israel were camped at Rephidim, the area where God had instructed Moses to strike a rock in order to provide water for the people. (See Ex. 17:1-6.) This is the last site mentioned before the Israelites came to Mount Sinai. (See 19:1-2.) While they were at Rephidim, they were attacked by a tribe of people known as **Amalek** (or the Amalekites). Genesis 36:12 contains a list of Esau's descendants and mentions Amalek as one of his grandsons. Though the tribe who attacked Israel is identified as Amalek (see Ex. 17:8,10-11,13), these people are clearly the descendants of Esau's grandson. They were nomads who ranged across the northeast part of the Sinai peninsula from the Negev to the border of Egypt. The biblical text gives no reason for the Amalekites' attack on Israel, but they may have wanted to drive the Israelites from the wilderness sources of food and water, such as at Elim (see Ex. 15:27), to keep from having to compete for resources.

[Verses 9-10] Joshua, who would later lead the Israelites into the promised land as the leader of God's people and the successor to Moses, is mentioned here for the first time in the Old Testament. Scripture describes him as Moses' assistant. (See Ex. 24:13; Deut. 1:38.) Moses told Joshua to gather some of the men in the camp and prepare to go into battle against the Amalekites the next day. Though previously in the Israelites' journey Moses had always been the leader in front of the people, he told Joshua that he was to lead the army in this battle. Instead of going out with Joshua, Moses said he would go up on a nearby hill with **God's staff** in his hand. This was the staff God had told Moses to use to convince the people that He had sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt. (See Ex. 4:1-5.) God had also told Moses to use the staff to initiate several plagues against the Egyptians (see 9:22-23; 10:12-14) and divide the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could escape from the Egyptians. (See 14:15-16.) God referred to the staff as "your [Moses'] staff" (v. 16), but now Moses referred to it as "God's staff," perhaps in acknowledgment that it was always God's power, not a stick of wood, that had accomplished the miracles.

The next day Joshua led his soldiers into battle while Moses walked up the hill accompanied by his brother Aaron and another leader named Hur. This is the first time Hur is mentioned in Scripture. At a later point in Israel's journey, Moses left Aaron and Hur in charge of the camp while he and Joshua went up onto Mount Sinai to meet with God. (See 24:14.)

Exodus 17:11-13 Commentary

[Verse 11] Joshua obeyed Moses' order and led the Israelite army into battle in the valley against the Amalekites. As the battle progressed, it became clear that Joshua and the Israelites prevailed not because of their own strength, but because of God's presence and power. As Joshua and the army fought, Moses stood on the hill with God's staff in his hand. As long as Moses held up the staff, Joshua and the Israelites successfully pushed forward against the Amalekites.

However, the battle lasted until sunset. Obviously, Moses could not hold up the staff all day. When his arms became tired and he lowered the staff, the Amalekite army would start overcoming Joshua and the Israelites.

[Verses 12-13] In order to enable Moses to continue holding up the staff, Aaron and Hur placed a large stone into position so Moses could sit on it. To provide the additional support Moses needed, Aaron and Hur stood one on one side and one on the other side of Moses to help support his arms as he held the staff in the air. Finally, the army of Israel was able to overcome the Amalekite army.

Why did God command Moses to go up on the hill and hold up the staff in order for the Israelites to defeat the Amalekites? Did the sight of Moses holding up the staff provide some kind of emotional or psychological boost for the Israelite army? No. Was there something special about this wooden staff? No. As previously stated, it was just a stick of wood. In order to understand the meaning of God's command to Moses to hold up the staff during the battle, we need to recall Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush. (See Ex. 3:1–4:17.) After God told Moses that He had chosen him to go to Egypt and lead His people to freedom, Moses had expressed concern that the Israelites might not believe him when he told them that God had appeared to him. (See 4:1.) God responded by asking Moses, "What is that in your hand?" (v. 2). Moses replied, "A staff" (v. 2). It was nothing more than a piece of wood that had been crafted into a tool which Moses used to guide and protect his sheep. God told him to throw the staff down. When Moses obeyed, the wooden staff turned into a snake. Then God told him to pick the snake up "by the tail" (v. 4), not usually a wise thing to do with a snake; but, Moses obeyed and the snake turned back into his staff. God was not putting on a magic show: He was assuring Moses that His power was unlimited as well as giving Moses a sign to use to convince others that he came at God's command and spoke with God's authority. (See v. 5.)

In a similar way, the staff was a symbol of the power that God had supplied and would continue to supply to enable the Israelites to conquer their enemies and take control of the promised land. It was an object lesson for the Israelites that dependence on and trust in God, not their own strategies or strength, was what would win their battles.

Exodus 17:14-16 Commentary

[Verse 14] Through their victory over the Amalekites, God had demonstrated to the Israelites that He is forever over His people as their banner of protection. To emphasize this, the Lord commanded Moses to write on a scroll, **“I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven.”** God gave two reasons for His command. First, His words were to serve as a **reminder**. While on this particular occasion the army of Israel defeated the army of the Amalekites, the Amalekites continued to be major adversaries even up to the time of King David. (See 1 Sam. 30:1-17.) God’s promise to erase the memory of the Amalekites served as both a reminder and hope that the Israelites would be victorious over this enemy through God’s power and protection. God’s words were also to be recited to Joshua, a reminder for the future leader to guard against further assaults by the Amalekites.

[Verse 15] After such a great victory, Moses built an altar which he called **“The LORD Is My Banner”** (*Yahweh Nissi*). This altar served as a memorial for the people of God. In this time period a banner might have been a flag or some kind of image carved in wood or metal, like the bronze serpent on a pole which God ordered Moses to make later in the exodus when the Israelites sinned and God sent serpents to punish them. (See Num. 21:4-9.) Banners were used to identify families and tribes. (See 2:1-2; 10:11-28.) They were also used as signals to call people to action. (See Isa. 13:2; 49:22.)

Through the building of this altar Moses was teaching the people that **The LORD** was the One—the only One—who had done all these things for the Israelites. God did not need a physical **banner** to identify His deity and sovereignty, but the Israelites needed to be frequently reminded that, as the psalmist wrote, “My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:2). All the people had to do was to trust God for all their needs and to obey His commands.

[Verse 16] In the first part of verse 16, Moses added to his declaration about the Lord being his (and Israel’s) banner: **“Indeed, my hand is lifted up toward the LORD’s throne.”** The Hebrew text is difficult to translate. Some interpret the Hebrew words to mean that Moses was saying that his hand was lifted toward God’s throne in heaven in continued prayer. Another option is that Moses was saying lifting up the staff during the battle was symbolic of the presence of God on His throne being with the Israelites, through which they had won the battle. A third option is that the Hebrew could be translated, “the hand is against the throne,” suggesting Moses was talking about the hand of the Amalekites being against God Himself as they attacked His people. Perhaps this view is better in light of the remainder of the verse that describes the continuing warfare between Israel and Amalek: **“The LORD will be at war with Amalek from generation to generation.”** Whatever the interpretation, the emphasis is that though the fighting of this initial battle and future battles involved the Israelites, God Himself would be fighting on their behalf against the Amalekites.

Read the article “Literacy in the Ancient Near East” in the Spring 2018 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles “Who Were the Amalekites?” (Summer 2016), “The Staff: More Than a Walking Stick” (Spring 2014), and “Ancient Altars” (Winter 2006-2007) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.

