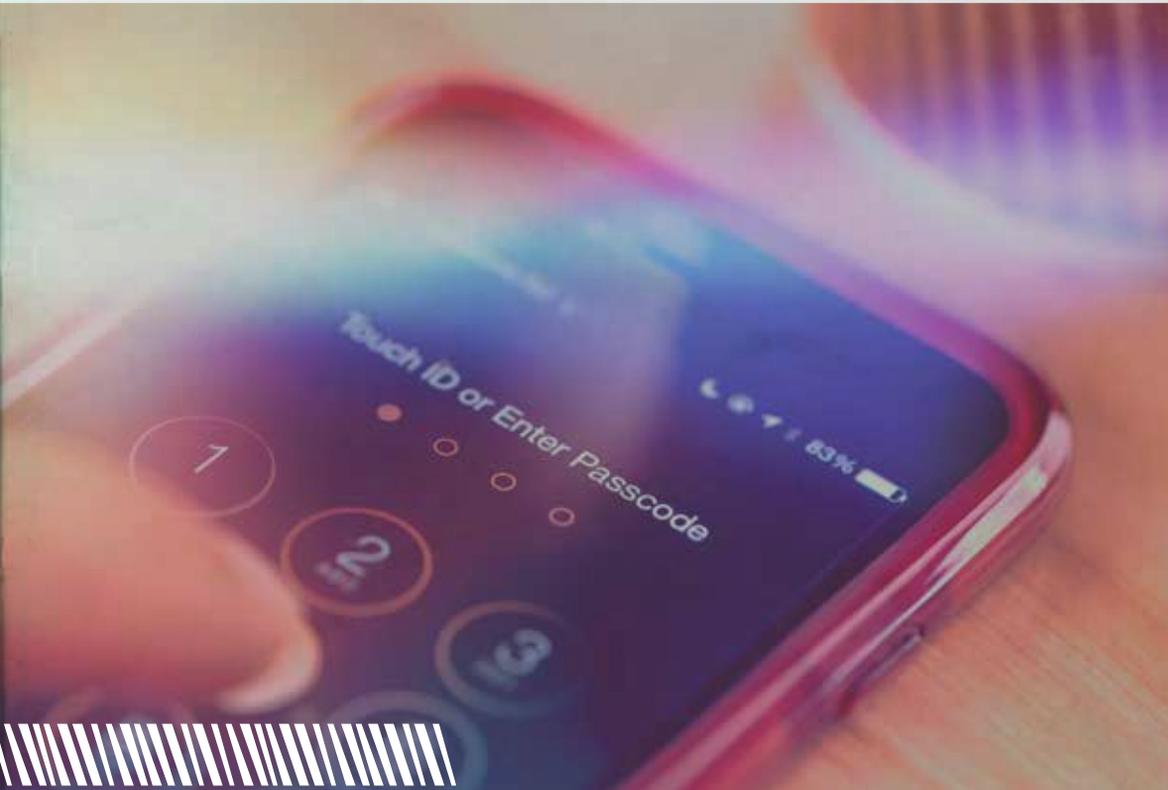


3

Our Banner



What are some things we rely on for protection?

QUESTION 1

We are always covered by God's protection.



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 US 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.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Exodus 17:8-10 (CSB)

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.

The Israelites were now camped at Rephidim, and again the people had no water to drink (Exodus 17:1). Unfortunately, the people responded in their usual way: they grumbled. Although they were testing God, the Lord provided water by instructing Moses to strike the rock with his staff. This was nothing new. As we saw in the previous session, when the people also complained about an earlier water problem, God had miraculously provided (Exodus 15:22-27).

The Israelites were about to face a new—and perhaps greater—challenge to their faith. Thirst was the least of their worries because the Amalekites confronted them there at Rephidim. The Israelites and the Amalekites had been enemies for generations.

The enmity went all the way back to Jacob and Esau, the twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau had been the firstborn, but the intrigue began in earnest when Esau sold Jacob his birthright for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:27-34). Esau saw no need in preserving a future blessing when he had such a pressing need: hunger. Years later, when Isaac was old and wanted to pass on his blessing to his elder son, Jacob deceived their father and stole Esau's blessing (27:1-29). As a result, Esau resolved to kill his brother as soon as their father died, and Jacob fled from the wrath of his brother. The enmity that began that day had persisted generation after generation.

The Amalekites were the descendants of Amalek, a grandson of Esau (36:12). Even though the Amalekites were direct descendants of Isaac, they became enemies of Israel, a constant and prevailing threat to their spiritual and national life. The Amalekites came to represent the forces of evil which stood in opposition

What daily challenges can make us feel like we're in a battle?

QUESTION 2

to God's people. Forty years after the events in Exodus 17, Moses described the Amalekites as people who "did not fear God" (Deuteronomy 25:18).

It was obvious how the Amalekites viewed God because they attacked His people all along the way after they left Egypt. Clearly, however, God was with the Israelites. He had performed miracle after miracle in His work of delivering the people from slavery. God's hand was on the Israelites, but the Amalekites didn't care. They still attacked.

Exodus 17:11-13 (CSB)

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.

The battle plan to defeat the Amalekites may seem a bit unorthodox, but it was certainly effective. Moses commissioned Joshua to select men to join him in battle as they confronted the enemy. While Joshua was leading the troops, Moses, Aaron, and Hur stood on the top of a nearby hill. Moses had God's staff in his hand.

Nothing indicates any fear or confusion, which might have been expected among the Israelites as they faced Amalek. These were wandering people, ill-equipped for battle. They were little more than an inexperienced mob wandering about the desert, yet as long as Moses held up the staff, Israel prevailed. But when his arms grew tired and he let his hand down, Amalek had the upper hand. Ultimately, Aaron and Hur supported Moses' hands "so that his hands remained steady until the sun went down" (v. 12). As a result, "Joshua defeated Amalek and his army with the sword" (v. 13).

How can we maintain our reliance on God's power when the battle is long?

QUESTION 3

What made the difference? It was not simply Moses' visible presence and dramatic posture on the hilltop with his hand in the air that inspired confidence in his troops; it was that he was holding up God's staff. Though this staff was likely nothing more than a shepherd's staff, God used it as an object lesson to show all Israel His power to accomplish His work.

It is entirely possible that the staff Moses held aloft is the same one that had been in his hand since God called him while tending sheep. When God first called Moses, Moses objected that no one would believe him. God instructed Moses to throw the staff in his hand on the ground, and it became a serpent. He then told Moses to pick it up by the tail, and once he did, it became a shepherd's staff again (Exodus 4:1-5). This staff became a visible sign that God was with Moses. This simple staff became the staff of God that Moses used to bring various plagues, part the Red Sea (14:15-16), and strike the rock to provide water for the thirsty Israelites (17:5-6).

The staff in Moses' hand was an ordinary implement any shepherd would carry. It had nothing magical about it and no inherent power in it. It was simply a sign of God's presence and power to accomplish His work among His people. Israel prevailed in battle when Moses' hand lifted up the presence of God for all to see.

We must never underestimate the craft and cunning nature of our spiritual adversary nor overestimate our own strength. We cannot win spiritual battles in our own strength. We can walk in victory over sin only when we stand under God's banner of protection.



Exodus 17:14-16 (CSB)

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."

After the victory, God's first command was for Moses to write and recite to Joshua His declaration: "I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven" (v. 14). The Israelites would have other encounters with the Amalekites, whose atrocities were such that God later commanded King Saul to completely annihilate them. Unfortunately, Saul was disobedient (1 Samuel 15:2-9). The Amalekites were not completely defeated until the eighth century BC, in the days of Hezekiah (1 Chronicles 4:41-43).

In response to God's work, Moses built an altar and called it "The LORD Is My Banner" (Exodus 17:15). God had showed Israel yet another aspect of His character. Israel had already discovered that God was their healer (Jehovah-Rapha) when He had turned the bitter waters into sweet at Marah (Exodus 15:22-27). Now they understood He was also their banner of protection—their Jehovah-Nissi.

We might be surprised to find a shepherd's staff depicted as a banner. A banner in ancient times was not always a flag or cloth banner as we think of them today. Often it was a bare staff or a staff with a shiny metal ornament that would glisten in the sun. The staff or banner in Moses' hand was a visible image of the protection and the power of God, who provided the victory over Amalek. The Israelites were to understand that their victory was because God was a banner over them. He was their protection.

Jesus, of course, is our ultimate banner of protection. "On that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will look to him for guidance, and his resting place will be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10). Jesus is our Banner who provides forgiveness of sin and eternal life. He "covers" us with His protection and victory.

What does God's banner of protection look like in your life?

QUESTION 4

How can our actions and attitudes demonstrate that we follow the God who protects?

"The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock where I seek refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

PSALM 18:2

QUESTION 5

GOD OUR BANNER



In the two columns below, list a few ways God provides for His people.

Physical Protection

Spiritual Protection

Circle ways God is currently providing this protection for you. Underline some areas where you desire protection and healing. Pray throughout the week thanking God for your circled items and asking God for protection in your underlined items.

LIVE IT OUT

How will the truth that God is our Banner make a difference in your life?

- » **Trust.** Have you accepted Jesus as your banner of forgiveness? If not, commit your life to Him and trust Him for salvation. Talk with your group leader or pastor about your decision.
- » **Memorize.** Write Exodus 17:15 on an index card and place it some place you will see often. Use this as a prayer each day, asking God to help you trust Him to be your protection and provision.
- » **Be bold.** If you're facing a difficult relationship or assignment from God, step out in trust because He goes with you. Rest confidently in His presence.

Challenges and dangerous experiences will come. Thankfully, God Himself stands over the world, and He stands over every single battle we face. **God is a banner over us, covering us with His protecting presence.**



My thoughts