

The Banner of the Lord

(Exodus 17:8-16)

I A banner is a symbol of identity. (When Moses said, the Lord is my Banner, he meant to express his own identity as God's prophet, and to extend that identity to the Children of Israel as a people who belonged to and served the Lord. Now before we proceed further let us say clearly that the Lord, and not the altar or staff or the rock he sat on, He was the banner. It might give us a little bit of intellectual trouble, to think of God Who is spirit, as a material presence like a banner; but it need not distract us for very long. If Jesus can be Manna to eat and Water to drink, then God can be the Banner by which Moses, and by extension, Israel, could identify themselves.)

A The Amalekites have a reputation for cruelty and cowardice. (Amalek, the patriarch of the Amalekites, was a grandson of Esau, the older twin brother of Jacob. We might gather from Genesis 33 that Esau forgave Jacob for stealing his birthright, but a careful reading of 27:38-40 will give us a clue about the future behavior of Esau's descendants. It may well be that the Israelites had no first-hand experience with the Amalekites before Exodus 17, but it is equally true that they will never forgive them for their behavior in this first encounter. In every future reference to Amalekites in the Bible, they are the enemy and they seem to be determined to cause trouble for the Children of Israel—but for now, let us focus on what banners are and how they are used.)

B God intended to reveal His glory to and through the Israelites. (What do we think of, when we say, *the glory of God*? Perhaps the beauty and majesty of Heaven come to mind, or the difference between the holy and the profane and between righteousness and worldliness. What of the difference between the sinner and the saint, especially the Saint of God who allows the Holy Spirit to conform him or her to the image of Jesus Christ? All of this, and more, are included in the

Glory of God. To these we ought to add the Grace of God, which is the point of God's character from which compassion and mercy extend. God arranged to redeem humanity from sin because of this mercy; and God chose one part of humanity, the Children of Israel in particular, through whom to express His sovereign grace to all humanity. They did, eventually, in the person of Jesus Christ; and here we will note again that God can accomplish His Will with our co-operation or without it: for in this case, the Children of Israel were the human family of Jesus, and thus they revealed God's Christ to the world, even though that was not their purpose in crucifying Him. Now we should note as well that the glory of God is not the death of Jesus, because all men die; but the glory of God was the sacrifice of Christ in atonement for sin, and the glory of God was the Resurrection of Christ, for the justification of our faith in His Grace.)

II A banner advertises things, about a businesses, for example. (Now the advertising of business lies in the domain of business management, not in the preaching of the Word of God, yet we can take some useful illustrations from it all the same. When businesses invest in advertising, one very effective way to advertise is to create a banner and fly it from your windows, or hang it on your building. The internet is peppered with advertising banners, so much so that you can visit a website by a hyperlink imbedded in them, and some businesses have information retrieval programs that can extract a lot of useful business information from your computer just by your using their banner to visit their websites. Churches are not businesses, but we still need to publish the Gospel by every means available, which is the purpose of www.pgrmk.org.)

A Banners display logos, by which we can identify a business. (Automobile manufacturers distinguish themselves from one another by logos; so do soft-drink bottlers, and insurance companies. They do this so that the consumer will not

confuse one manufacturer or one product or service with another; and we (the consumers) can often distinguish good products from bad ones by their logos. Sometimes, Christians try to use denominational labels or church names for the same purpose; but it is sad that we have no way to distinguish good churches from bad ones by some similar, readily identifiable mark. From God's point of view, the sign that hangs over the church door is not important. It is not even a good indication of doctrinal integrity any more. The only thing that matters to God is how we live out our daily lives once we leave that place, and we should know that good and bad behaviors arise from the presence or absence of godliness in our character; it is not a function of where we attend church, or from which seminary its pastor graduated.)

B Banners advertise contact information to observers. (Businesses put phone numbers and addresses on their banners, alongside their logos. If there is a special business promotion or discount sale, they advertise it too. Now in the case of churches, a Roman Catholic who wants to go to confession looks for a crucifix and a statue of the Virgin Mary; in a similar spirit, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Mormons avoid any church that does not advertise their own denominational preference. So, whom do we hope to contact, when we enter a church? Let us recall that believers are part of the Royal Priesthood of Christ, and that a priest is the contact person between God and men. The Bible tells us that there is only one God and one mediator between men and God, Who is the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5); so let us strive to make a capital-C Church, which will be a place where men meet Jesus. Nothing else is a church; and Jesus will be little more than a reluctant spectator where they advertise anything else.)

C Banners indicate authenticity and integrity. (There are civil and criminal laws to protect commercial businesses from fraud and counterfeit. So is there not

some law that protects believers, from counterfeit churches, where sons succeed fathers to leadership the same way princes succeed kings, and protect us against fraudulent church leaders, who hide spiritual incompetency behind academic qualifications? There is. It is the Law of Righteousness, which is the New Testament Covenant of justification by faith in the Grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a law by which our righteousness is imputed by faith. It is the law written in the heart and mind of every true believer, as we read in Hebrews 10:16, *I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them.* We shall have to wait for the return of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to judge all the living and all the dead, to see the enforcement of this law. At that time, the angels of God will separate the sheep from the goats, or in another parable, gather the wheat into the barn and burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. If the Lord is our Banner, then we must be very scrupulous about the authenticity of our message and the integrity of our righteousness, because God is. Moses was careful about these things, and he knew that the Children of Israel must be too; and again we say, so must we all be.)

III National flags are banners. (The colors chosen for flag design are specific to cultural, rather than to general psychology, and so while yellow or green might mean something different on the flag of one country than on that of another, the colors have symbolic meaning in all cases. Colors represent altruistic principles that are considered to be integral parts of the national identity of the country that uses the flag. We should note that when Moses said, “The Lord is my banner” that there was no flag. So, could Moses use “The Lord is my Banner to symbolize some principle? Let us recall then that God is Spirit; God is love; and God is holy. God is many other things too, but these statements should sufficiently embody the altruistic principles Moses memorialized by building that altar.)

A Colors and designs have symbolic purposes. (We have noted that Moses used no flag, so there were no logos or colors. The events that transpired immediately before and immediately after the construction of the altar, then, will have to serve the same purpose as the principles represented by colors and logos. First there were the complaints about food and water, and God's miraculous providence. Then came the testing of God, when the Israelites asked, "Is the Lord among us or not?" Next came the Amalekite attack and the day-long battle in which Israel prevailed as long as Moses' hands were lifted up toward Heaven. God told Moses to write it down and make sure that Joshua heard the story, implying, at least for Moses, that Joshua would execute the wrath of God against the Amalekites. Finally then, Moses built an altar and called it, that is, the altar, The Lord is my Banner. In each of these stories, God revealed His Glory to and through the Children of Israel, and Moses memorialized it all by building an altar. Now we know what altars are used for: they are places to worship God by making sacrifices. So let us state this principle very plainly: God proved Himself to be God and Moses built an altar to worship Him; which symbolized for Moses what a flag symbolizes for any modern nation-state.)

B The presence of a flag indicates government presence. (We find embassies and consulates in foreign countries by their national flags; and we identify office buildings of government agencies by the flags in front of them. Now while the Children of Israel were not yet a Kingdom, God intended for them to become one; God intended to be their King, and He intended for His Priests to be their governors and His Law to be their legal code. Did God know that no one would be able to obey His Law perfectly? Of course He knew. As we shall see, the Ten Commandments define man's unrighteousness, not his righteousness. So in what sense would God be King and the priests be governors? It would be in the sense

that it had always been since the first sacrifice of the first animal in the Garden of Eden, only with a little more formality, (since God intended to use the Children of Israel as evangelists, for preaching the Old Testament Covenant to the whole world). God would order perfect righteousness, and people would fail; then God would be merciful, and the sacrifice of animals would symbolize vicarious atonement for sin until the Grace of God should be revealed in the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. This was God's plan; but the Children of Israel interpreted it through the filter of their humanism, which distorted the plan into the nationalism of Old Testament Israel (and, incidentally, 20th century Zionism). Let us reflect, momentarily, on how things might have been different: "The Lord is my Banner" was the name of an altar, and the purpose of an altar is to worship God by making sacrifices to Him. If we compare the Glory of God as revealed to and through the Children of Israel with the wrath of God as revealed against the Amalekites (and others, later), then we would have a vision of the Banner to which Moses referred.)

C "The Lord is my banner" represented all of this for Israel. (Moses spoke for all Israel in the pronoun "my". No doubt he used the singular pronoun because he was the Prophet of God who represented God to all Israel and all Israel to God. (The role of prophet and that of priest would remain undifferentiated until the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests for Israel.) That altar represented the special relationship between God and Israel. The relationship was special because no other people could share in it. God was the source of material provisions for them; God was the strength of their army; God was the object of their worship; and the character of God was the principle embodied in their national identity. Moses understood all that, and we understand it too, by our reading of the rest of the Bible. We know that the Children of Israel did not have the rest of the Bible

to read, they didn't even have the Ten Commandments yet; but we do, so we are without excuse on any pretext. Then let us use God for our Banner, and properly.)

IV Banners inspire leaders, and followers. (Commercial businesses represent a wholesome kind of pride in their products and services with their banners. Often, discriminating consumers look for the logos of their favorite brands in markets, as businesses hope they will do. Also, national leaders try to invoke a patriotic spirit in support of their pronouncements, by standing in front of flags as they speak. There is a story from the American Civil War, that tells how a soldier who was carrying the national flag in the front rank during a battle was shot dead, and the flag fell to the ground. Another soldier picked up the flag and waved it to rally the army, which then re-grouped and won the battle. That second soldier received the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism, and his son, General Douglas MacArthur, was admitted to the West Point Military Academy on the merits of his father's battlefield virtue. So let us turn to how "The Lord is *my* Banner" inspired Israel.)

A God singled out Joshua for special instruction. (Joshua needed to know full well about God's intention to annihilate the Amalekites, because as future leader of the Israel, would not be able to completely make good on God's promise to destroy them. So he would need to communicate God's intentions to succeeding generations. For their part, the Amalekites were a nomadic people with no fixed capital city to conquer, but as relatives of the people of Edom, they could find sanctuary there between their periodic guerrilla-like raids they mounted against Israel. Joshua (and his companion, Caleb) would turn out to be the only members of the generation of the Children of Israel that left Egypt, who would survive to enter the Promised Land. So his role as an elder statesman, so to speak, will be very important to God's purposes concerning the Amalekites.)

B Mt. Sinai and Elijah's cave are nearby. (An American archaeologist found them, in the 1990s, in northwestern Saudi Arabia. You can see its location on Google's Map page. Someone in facebook sent me a link to a video of about it, which is on youtube; and I'll be happy to send you a link in e-mail if you want it. Besides the fact that these two places still exist and are nearby the location of the altar of Moses, there are some Biblical scholars who think that this is the place in the desert to which Jesus, and later, the Apostle Paul, were led by the Holy Spirit, where they prayed and fasted for 40 days. We cannot authenticate visits by Jesus or Paul, but we can note how banners inspire leaders and followers with devotion to principle, and how one principle in particular —the future leadership of Israel by Joshua— will use this event as a sort of touch-stone for the collective memory of Israel, of their first encounter with the Amalekites, and of God's promise to destroy them. This altar, "The Lord is my Banner", has such a potential to inspire the collective memory of the Hebrew people that the Saudi government removed all the stones from the site that had Hebrew inscriptions on them. Arabs cannot risk allowing archaeological artifacts from within their own borders to furnish Jews with any evidence by which to claim legitimacy.)

C What inspires us, as believers? (Now we must interrogate ourselves, about ourselves, and about our motives. Are we inspired to emulate the character of God, by our careful and prayerful reading of the Bible, or to imitate the behavior of Christ, by New Testament accounts of His life and work? Are we inspired by the apologetics of the Apostles Paul, Peter, and John, to preach the Gospel of Salvation by Faith in Jesus simply and plainly? Perhaps historical accounts of how Roman Catholics persecuted Protestant Reformers inspire us to *contend earnestly for the faith once delivered to the Saints*, as Jude put it. Regrettably, contemporary Christianity is inspired more by Schofield's notes and Hal

Lindsay's movies than by Matthew 24, 1 Corinthians 15, and 2 Peter 3. We embrace post-modern doctrines about material prosperity and ecumenical brotherhood, but we completely miss the point about the new birth, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit. And don't you know that we will continue to miss the point until the Lord is our Banner, too?)

V Deuteronomy 25:17-19 tells us how the Amalekites earned so much disfavor from God. (It might be interesting to explore the ancestry of Agag, the king who was defeated and then spared death by King Saul (which created yet another problem for him with God), only to be reminded of his shameful heritage by the Prophet Samuel just before he finished the job Saul didn't finish; or of the messenger who brought news of the end of Saul and Jonathan to King David, thinking that he should have been rewarded for delivering the coup de grace to the old king, only to be executed by David because he had killed "The Lord's Anointed"; or to examine the heritage of Haman, the villain in the Book of Esther. All were Amalekites; all were guilty of cowardice and treachery; and by the way, Mordecai, the hero in the Book of Esther, was a distant cousin of King Saul, another descendant of a Benjaminite named Kish. These bits of Biblical trivia might, as we say, be interesting, but only marginally relevant to the point, that Moses named his altar "The Lord is my Banner."

A (The point is this.) Every Biblical appearance of Amalekites is an instance of cruelty and cowardice. (Amalekites are the very antithesis of what God wanted the Children of Israel to become and all believers to be. The Amalekites were wicked and treacherous; God wanted the Children of Israel to be virtuous and faithful. God intended to destroy the Amalekites because of what they did; He intended to reveal His Glory to and through the Children of Israel because of who they were, and who they would become. To call the name of his altar "The Lord

is my Banner” an open acknowledgement and embracing of the vision of God for the future of Israel.)

B “The Lord Is My Banner” is about the Glory of God in His Victory over evil. (In this particular instance the victory was complete; but in a broader sense, future appearances of Amalekites as tormentors of the Children of Israel points out to us that every victory we win is only temporary. There would always be a new challenge for Israel, to be faithful to God rather than to be distracted by their humanism; and there will always be a new challenge for us as believers, too, to overcome yet another temptation to sin in a new or different way than we ever did before. The Children of Israel never completely overcame their humanism, and it was a perpetual obstacle over which they stumbled in their service to God; and we are no better, for we, too, are too easily distracted from our service to God by temporal and secular amusements. The Glory of God was that it was not necessary for Israel to win any victory by their own strength; nor is it necessary for us to win any victory in our own strength, either. God won their victory as Moses held up his hands toward Heaven; and we won our victory when Jesus rose from that tomb, on the first Resurrection Sunday. It is left to us, then, to appropriate that victory of Christ for ourselves, by the decisions we make moment by moment and day by day, until all evil is finally defeated by our Lord Jesus Christ, when He comes to earth again, when all sin and all sinners, and finally even death itself, are all burned up in the Lake of Fire, at the end of the world and the Beginning of Eternity. May the Lord be our Banner too, until then!)