

The LORD Is My Banner

In the name of him who trains our hands for war, dear friends in Christ: War ... now there's a topic that makes Christians uncomfortable, especially when the Lord is involved in some way. Over the years I've many times heard people complain that the Old Testament seems to be little more than one bloody battle after another; and can't we just skip all that unpleasantness and get to the good stuff, you know, like God's love and blessings and everything happy-clappy and hunky-dory? The answer is yes we can – but only if we want to pretend that we live in a make-believe world that doesn't exist. (Yes, that was redundant; but I wanted to emphasize the point.) The real world has in it real enemies whose existence poses a real threat to God's people, especially to the weak and vulnerable. These enemies must be dealt with by force, yes, deadly force. Nor you can't study human history without talking about real wars with real battles because they shaped a lot of that history.

That being said, it may surprise you to know that Joshua's fight with the Amalekites that we're considering this evening is only the second battle mentioned in the Scripture. The first was when Abraham led a small force that defeated the army of the five kings who had taken his nephew, Lot, into captivity. That battle is described in just one verse: "[Abraham] attacked them at night, he and his servants, and he defeated them." It's hardly what I would call a lot of gory detail. Nor do we get any of it in the account of Joshua's battle that we just heard. Maybe the accusation that the Old Testament is nothing but stories of bloody warfare is overblown.

With that preamble, we rejoin our traveling companions, the Children of Israel, on their journey in the desert. They are camped not far from Mt. Sinai at Rephidim, where they so recently lost faith in the Lord and complained about the lack of water. The Lord relieved their sorry situation by having Moses strike the rock of Horeb with his staff which gave birth to a bubbling stream from which they could drink. So, all is well – at least for the time being.

It's worth noting that since leaving Egypt, Israel's greatest enemy has been itself. They have seen the Lord's mighty power. They know he is leading them along the way, and that he has promised to see them through to the journey's end. Yet every time they come upon a threat or inconvenience – one planned by the Lord as a test of their faith – they fall apart. They lose all hope. They charge Moses with bringing them out into the desert only watch them to die by the Egyptian army, by thirst, by starvation, whatever. They whole thing is an evil plan to kill them, a rather elaborate evil plan at that. Each episode, though, provides the Lord with another opportunity to show them, no, I've got this. You can trust me. Egyptian army? No problem. Watch me drop an ocean on them. No water? How's this: we just have Moses do the ol'whack a rock. No food? Look outside your tent in the morning: it's an all you can eat buffet. Every day. I really do have you covered. The Lord is using these events to teach his people trust, to woo his way into their confidence.

Having thus resolved their internal enemy problem (at least to some degree), they now face an external foe. They are the Amalekites, a tribe of desert raiders who see Israel as easy pickings. They are actually distant cousins of the Israelites. Their forefather, Amalek, was a grandson of Esau, who was the twin brother of Jacob (or Israel). You may remember there was some bad blood between the twins for some time. And now, some 400 years later, and especially from the perspective of the Amalekites, that hostility has reached the boiling point.

Esau forgave his brother. But this tribe of his descendants despises Israel. And for that reason, they have earned for themselves a special place in the God's Anger Hall of Fame.

As I said, they are desert raiders rather than the kind of organized armies that you'd find in Canaan or until so recently in Egypt. Their methods are more like plains Indians attacking covered wagon trains. They sweep in making quick strikes to plunder goods and capture women, children, and livestock – wherever they see a weak point or target of opportunity. And they are good at it. It's how they've learned to survive in this hostile desert environment.

Amazingly, what we don't hear in this account is a total collapse of faith on the part of the Israelites. I suspect that's because the Amalekites are seen as a major nuisance rather than an existential threat to them. Still, they have to be dealt with. Moses directs his young aide de camp, Joshua, to organize a fighting force. As it turns out, it will be good practice for him, because he will (much) later command the armies of Israel in the conquest of the Promised Land. For now, though, he has another problem.

The Amalekites are trained fighters and they are well armed. Many are likely mounted on camels. The Israelites, on the other hand, have been slaves. Masters typically don't let their slaves have weapons. (It's why we have the 2nd Amendment.) So Israel is armed only with farm tools and bronze butcher's knives. They also have no training or organization. They've never fought a battle before. And they are all afoot. No cavalry on our side. The odds are not in Israel's favor. And you can almost see the Amalekites sizing up the situation and laughing among themselves when they see what they're up against. "You're going to try to fight us with *that*? This is going to be a massacre."

But the Lord has a solution for this. As Joshua and his rag-tag fighting force marches forward to face the enemy in battle, Moses, Aaron, and Hur climb to the top of the hill – presumably the hill that the rock of Horeb sits atop. That's significant because, as we saw in a previous devotion, that rock represents Christ who was struck by the Law to bring forth the water that gives life to God's people. That happened at our Lord's crucifixion. The Christological connection is important because now Moses, the deliverer of God's people and therefore another "Christ figure" in the storyline, spreads his arms wide. As long as he does, Joshua's pathetic little army prevails in battle over the enemy. Whenever his arms get tired and he lowers them, the battle turns in favor of the enemy. So Aaron and Hur are enlisted to hold Moses' arms in place. They hold Moses like that all day long.

The imagery could not be more clear: God grants victory to our side over the enemy when Moses, the deliverer, is held as if being crucified himself. Or to say it another way, Joshua and his comparatively weak and ill-equipped force wins when fighting the enemy in the shadow of the cross. This is further emphasized when, after the battle has been won, Moses builds an altar, that is, a place of sacrifice, on the site where he stood and calls it "the Lord is my banner". Aaron and Hur held Moses as the banner under which Israel fought; but Moses foresaw the Lord himself being held in the same posture not by hands but by nails. He foresaw the cross of Jesus being the true banner of God's people under which we win the victory.

In making application of this to us in our day, we need to understand that our battles are not against flesh and blood enemies like the Amalekites, but rather spiritual forces that seek to destroy our faith or lead us astray from the truth of the Gospel by which we are saved. Central to that Gospel is the cross of Jesus and what he accomplished on it by suffering and dying for our sins. Therefore the enemy's goal is always to undermine that central truth, to get Moses to lower his hands, so to speak. And this is what we see in every major heresy and false teaching.

It's always an attack against the cross, be it to deny it, or to weaken it, or to change it, or to push in into the background with some other idea more central. We can't let it happen, for that is the formula for disaster. We need to keep the crucified Lord Jesus as our banner. And it's why we sing, "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before." In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!