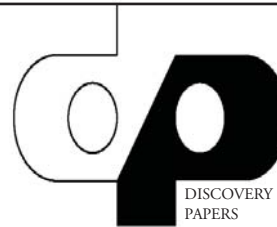


# YAHWEH-NISSI: THE LORD MY BANNER

*SERIES: NAMES OF GOD*



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## The Call: To Make God Known

“When Albert Schweitzer went to Equatorial Africa and began speaking to people about the presence of God, one of the tribal chiefs said, ‘We knew Someone passes on the edge of the forest but we never knew His name.’”<sup>1</sup> Isn’t that beautiful? Imagine how Albert Schweitzer must have felt when he heard these words. Everyone back home thought he was nuts for going to this part of Africa, yet he went because God called him to go, and he heard this beautiful response to the gospel.

God wants to be known. He sent Albert Schweitzer to these African people so that they would know His name. We have a team which just returned from Kenya because God still wants to be known in our world today. He wants to be known beyond the general revelation to which His creation witnesses, or the God consciousness which He has placed in all men (Romans 1). He wants people to know more than the fact that “someone passes on the edge of their forest” or their workplace or their family life. He wants to be known for who He is and what He is like so that He can be at the center of their lives, not on the periphery. He wants His people to know He loves them, and wants to lead them and guide them as their God and be present with them. He does not need us, but He wants us.

## Yahweh-Nissi: The LORD Our Banner

Who God is and what He is like are questions that we have been considering these past couple of weeks in our study. In our text for this morning, *Yahweh-Nissi*, or the LORD our banner, is God’s name which was memorialized in Israel’s first battle in the wilderness. Yahweh has already revealed Himself to be Israel’s Provider and Healer, and now He is going to be her Warrior as she is attacked; not from within by her fears of starvation and thirst, but from without by a marauding tribe of nomads bent on her destruction. Israel has not been faithful in her response to Yahweh so far. Her fears and her physical lusts have driven her to grumble and complain, and she has not turned to Yahweh for His help. He has helped her anyway. Moses has been a faithful shepherd in crying out for Israel and God has graciously answered.

We will be in Exodus 17 this morning. In this passage the young nation Israel will be challenged by thirst once again and they will once again grumble against Moses as they did in our passage from last week (Exodus 15). Even after *Yahweh-Rophe*, The LORD who heals, had miraculously turned the bitter waters of Shur to sweet so Israel could drink, they are still not mature enough in their faith

to trust Him here when the same need for water arises. Now, in Rephidim, they will not only be thirsty and tired but will confront a new enemy—the Amalekites—the first to attack the new nation in their wilderness travels.

Let’s begin by reading Exodus 17: 1-7:

**The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. So they quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”**

**Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?”**

**But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”**

**Then Moses cried out to the LORD, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”**

**The LORD answered Moses, “Walk on ahead of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the place Massah and Meribah because the Israelites quarreled and because they tested the LORD saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?”**

Our missionary to Thailand, Roy Thompson, said there is an expression in Thailand which he found amusing but useful. The Thais would often say in their conversations with Roy, “same-same, but different.” I was reminded of that expression when coming to our passage for this morning. Same-same, but different. The same: Once again the people of Israel are in terrible thirst. Once again they grumble at Moses. Once again Israel’s physical needs drive her to focus all her energies on her fears and wants and not on her God. The same: He has brought relief repeatedly to Israel, providing her with water, special food called manna, and quail on their journey. But there are some significant differences in this morning’s text which shed light on how we handle the spiritual battles that come up in our lives as well.

In verses 1-2 of our passage, Israel is facing the same physical need they have experienced before at the bitter pool in Shur, but in addition to grumbling this time they

have also begun quarreling with Moses and one another. They are not only disappointed and scared by the lack of water as they were by the bitter pool, but now they demand that Moses provide water. So need has turned into quarreling and demand, and Moses now warns them that they are on dangerous ground. He says they are “testing” God. We have seen God testing His people in the past couple of weeks and we explored what that means. God tests His people to strengthen and prove their faith—to show that it is present. To test God is to put yourself above God, as if you had the ability to judge Him and could improve the situation. In addition, they make it worse by accusing Moses, and thereby God, of evil intent.

In verse 3 the Israelites say, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?” Well, this isn’t true of course. Yahweh has led his people into the wilderness to bring them to the Promised Land. The hardships they have endured so far offer them the opportunity to learn that God will provide, heal, and protect them. He has done so all along, but as they continue to focus on their thirst and their fears rather than on the God who is with them their attitude and behavior only get worse. The same is true for us. Where we focus the attention of our hearts will determine if we grumble, quarrel, and complain, or trust God and bless others. The apostle Paul describes this choice as living in the Spirit or living in the flesh. The Spirit brings life, and the flesh (or following our fallen human lusts and desires) brings death (Romans 8). Every day we do battle with the focus of our heart. And if we focus on our lack rather than on God we will get continually worse. Bitterness is a progressive disease. But there is a way out: We see in verses 4-6 that the way out is prayer; it is turning to God. Moses shows Israel and us the way when he once again cries out to God for help.

Have you ever thought to just listen to yourself when you are grumbling? Kind of as a third party observer? I have noticed that usually when I am grumbling it is because someone hasn’t noticed me, or someone has disappointed me, or someone has thwarted my will and I think I am right...if they only saw it my way! What would it be like to ask ourselves when we are grumbling, “Hey, I am grumbling again—what I am missing, wanting, needing? I wonder what God has in mind for me about this? I wonder what He is up to?” Then, ask Him for what you need. The apostle James says “we do not have because we do not ask.”

## God Will Answer

God’s response is once again full of grace. Amazingly, He gives Israel another sign that He is with them. He tells Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, and water would come out to quench Israel’s thirst. Now, notice there is no condemnation for Israel here from God. Later this gets more fleshed out. In Romans 8 the apostle Paul explains that “there is now therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” God knows what we are like, and He provides for His wayward people. This is how He has

behaved toward Israel from the beginning and toward us as well in our time.

In verse 7, Moses does something different than in other memorial passages. He sets up a memorial to Israel’s unfaithfulness, calling the place *Massah*, meaning trial, and *Meribah*, meaning quarrel. Instead of memorializing God’s faithfulness, he memorializes Israel’s unfaithfulness. Maybe we need to know who we are as well as who God is.

The grumbling people of Israel have not learned much, it seems, in these first few weeks of wilderness travel. Although God has been faithful to give them what they need they have nevertheless been stretched to trust him in the wilderness and have proved that they don’t know much about trust yet. This incident is remembered throughout the Old Testament as a warning of how not to behave as the people of God. We are not to put God’s grace to the test. Deuteronomy 6:16 says, “Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah.”

## Jesus is the Rock

I wonder if Moses himself was too focused on the people’s failure of faith and let it overshadow his wonder at God’s provision of water. He could have named this memorial after God’s amazing miracle of the rock, but he doesn’t. I wonder about that, and see in it perhaps a warning that leaders should not give up on the people of God so quickly, for God has certainly not given up on His people. He brings forth water from a rock! Like a lover wooing His loved one, He says, “See, I have provided what you need—can you trust me?”

The apostle Paul, in the book of Corinthians, sheds light on the meaning of this miracle in the New Testament. Paul writes, “...and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” We talked last week about Christ being the living water that fills up the believer and gives him/her life in the Holy Spirit of God. Paul is reminding the Corinthians and us that the same life-giving water which Israel received in the desert, and which we receive at the foot of the cross, comes from Jesus, who is the living water that will quench our thirst forever (John 4:14).

The picture from the Old Testament of the preincarnate Christ following behind Israel as the angel of Yahweh, and God leading in front as a pillar of cloud with Moses His prophet shepherding His people as they go on to the Promised Land depicts God’s care and presence with His people in a powerful way. Israel is hemmed in front and behind by God as her protector and sustainer even if she does not have the spiritual eyes to see it. We don’t always perceive His presence either when we are struggling with our human desires and needs, but He is there nevertheless; our Scriptures reveal it so. “Is the LORD among us or not?” was Israel’s doubting question. The answer is a resounding yes.

It is amazing to realize that Christ is giving His people

water, and protecting her from behind when the Amalekite enemy attacks. Now, the Amalekites made a big mistake! Be encouraged, people of God, Jesus has your back. Let's read about it in Exodus 17:8-16:

**The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some of our men and go out to fight the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand on top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands."**

**So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.**

**Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered and make sure that Joshua hears it, because I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."**

**Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, "For hands were lifted up to the throne of the LORD. The LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation."**

So who are these Amalekites and where did they come from?

The Amalekites were descended from Amalek who was a grandson of Esau. Esau and Jacob were Isaac's sons, but they were very different in nature. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:21-34). That is also an apt picture of his Amalekite descendants. They loved the things of the world and the pleasures of the world and had no use for God. They were a nomadic warlike people who persecute Israel here and will continue to attack her for much of her history. The Amalekites finally meet their end as God promised here, but it takes a very long time. Part of the reason they were not eliminated sooner is that Saul, Israel's first king, did not destroy them as God had commanded. They are a relentless and vicious enemy. We can't really see how bad they are from this initial attack but Deuteronomy 25:17-18 gives a little more detail about it: "Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. When you were weary and worn out, they met you on your journey and cut off all who were lagging behind; they had no fear of God." Who is lagging behind? Women, children, the old, the sick—the powerless. And why did Amalek do it? Because they did not have any respect for Yahweh. As a matter of fact the Amalekites directly oppose Yahweh in the Bible.

What are the implications of this Amalekite enemy for us?

Amalek represents all that is in us and in the world that opposes God. In 1 John 2:15-16 we read the warning, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world." This is who the Amalekites were. They were lovers of the world and haters of God. They tried to thwart God's will for His people. When you hear the word "world" in this text, it does not mean the earth, or the inhabitants of the earth. God created both of these. The "world" in Scripture is a negative term for our fallen human lusts which drive us to selfish pursuits and fulfillments. It describes the way we humans can seek after everything we see to possess it. It is the arrogance of humans who pride themselves on their intelligence, power, or money above all else. It amounts to a compassionless, competitive, and selfish way of life—this is the world system.

This world system is driven by spiritual forces: spiritual forces that wage war against the people of God in every age. Paul writes about it in the book of Ephesians: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Behind the Amalekite attack were these invisible evil forces who were always making war on God and God's people. This battle which Israel fought against the Amalekites is an analogy for our own spiritual warfare.

So how does Israel fight this Amalekite enemy, and how do we apply it to our spiritual battles?

**1. The first thing to note is that Israel does not start this fight.** There are many who love to be right and find themselves in many conflicts. But this is not the way of the people of God. Be sure that you were called to the battles you are waging by God and that they are not just a result of your argumentative need to be right.

You need to know that you will be attacked. Israel is attacked when she is unprepared and weary and tired. And she is attacked at her weakest point: the vulnerable, infirm stragglers. What does that tell us? It tells us that we need to be awake to spiritual attack. Sometimes it comes as a voice of discouragement when you are trying to step out in faith to do a new thing or when you are in the very heart of taking enemy territory. You may all of a sudden experience all kinds of problems coming up unexpectedly. Evil forces do not want men and women to know God and love God. They will fight us in a variety of ways if we are out doing what God has called us to be and do.

**2. Moses reacts immediately to the attack.** He goes up on the hill with the staff of God in his hands. The staff of God represents the power of Yahweh and the presence of Yahweh, and Moses has it in his hands. Moses is going to fight through the power of Yahweh. I think there is something he knows: Enemies that remain unchallenged in our lives get bigger and more dangerous. It is easy to ignore the

sinful attitudes and behaviors that we engage in and keep them quietly to ourselves hoping they will go away. And we also hope attacks we experience outside of ourselves will go away without confrontation. But every minute that the enemy remains is a minute too long. Given time in our hearts, evil can get a foothold. Sometimes enemies from without will not let us have peace—no matter how we try to make peace. As God has to fight for His people because He loves them, so might we someday be called to fight on love's side. This world is a hostile place for love.

A high school girl was recently asked to compete in a National History Day competition and found Irena Sendlerowa's story, bringing it to the attention of the world. Because of the discovery of this heroic story, there is now a new generation committed to this same kind of compassion and action.

Irena was an unlikely warrior. As a social worker in Poland during the Nazi occupation of World War II she had access to the prison camps that were holding Jewish families. To save the Jewish children, she snuck babies out of the camps in potato sacks or boxes and sent older children into the sewers to escape the camps. She did this three times a day. She wrote down the children's names and addresses hoping that they would be united at the end of the war with their families. She put the list of names in glass jars and buried them under a tree in a co-conspirator's yard. She was helped in this saving work by supportive churches and other women. When the jars were opened, it was revealed that she and her fellow workers had saved 2,500 children.

I'm sure she would have preferred peace, but the fight was taken to her doorstep; and so it is with Israel here. Irena couldn't have fought off evil alone; it took a whole community to make the fight effective. And so it is with Moses. He also needed a community to take on this enemy.

**3. Moses doesn't go it alone—he gets a gifted community involved.** He sends Joshua down to fight and lead the physical war, and he chooses some elders in the community to go with him to the top of the hill. Here the gifts of the community of Israel become defined and utilized. As slaves, the Israelites had to do another's bidding, but now as free men, they have to learn to stand up and make decisions. This is the first we see of Joshua, the next leader of Israel. He proves to be a faithful and bold man for God. Moses has also learned, it seems, that he needs other leaders to help him lead this people, so he brings Aaron and Hur to help.

When we are faced with a battle, we are wise to bring others in on it to pray for us and to hold up our faith when it falters. Trying to do it alone is often our first response but it is not the best. We need community to help us fight our battles. They cannot help if we don't let them know what it is we are fighting.

**4. Moses depended on God to win the battle.** He held his hands up with his staff in them (which as I said before represents the power and presence of Yahweh), and as

long as he held them up the people in the valley won the fight, but when he got tired and lowered them the people would lose the battle. Hands are mentioned seven times in this passage and the Amalekites are also mentioned seven times. The number seven in Scripture denotes perfection or completion. What this means is that human hands held up to Yahweh in dependence and trust will win the battle over evil. Don't fight a spiritual battle in your own power. You don't have the power to overcome it, but God does. And don't go it alone! As I said before, Moses had to have Aaron and Hur help him win this spiritual battle. Don't believe it won't be hard to fight your battle; Joshua had to fight with all his might to overcome the Amalekite army, even though God ultimately won it for him.

**5. Moses makes a memorial—this time honoring God's work.** In verses 14-16 of Exodus 17, Moses identifies *Yahweh-Nissi*, The LORD is my banner, as the one who won this battle against the Amalekites. As Yahweh promised to eventually remove the Amalekite threat forever, so *Yahweh-Nissi* will eventually defeat our spiritual enemies forever. Moses makes a memorial to remember how Yahweh gave the victory.

What is a banner? We know Moses held up his staff to win the battle but what is Moses picturing in this banner idea? In ancient days a banner was made of a very tall pole which carried a carved or metal emblem at its top. The emblem represented the nation or person for whom the warriors were fighting. It was carried into battle before them, or was placed on the highest hill around so that they could see their banner and rally behind it. As Joshua and his men fought on the valley floor they could look up and see Moses with his staff held high in his hands. It was a banner signifying that Israel fought for Yahweh and He fought for her. How could Israel lose with God fighting for her?

## Christ, Our Banner

Israel continued to be a grumbling, difficult, stubborn nation in the wilderness. One whole generation almost completely died out by the time they reached the Promised Land. God couldn't take the grumblers into the Promised Land so he gave Israel a severe mercy in her thirty-ninth year in the wilderness. God sent a plague of fiery snakes to bite the Israelites. Numbers 21 tells the story. Israel, beset by fiery snakes, finally comes to Moses and admits her sin. She says, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prays, and God tells Moses to make a bronze standard (same word as banner—*nes*), put a bronze snake on it, and lift it up for the people to see. When they looked at the snake on the banner, they would be healed of snake bite and would not die.

Looking at the banner and being healed is a picture of looking at what God has provided, that is, Christ, and experiencing His salvation. In John's gospel Jesus has a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus—a man well versed in the Moses story. Jesus likened His being

lifted up on the cross to Moses' lifting up the serpent in the wilderness: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." (John 3:14-15). If Jesus didn't make this comparison who would dare to?

What an odd symbol—what does it mean? The serpent, of course, recalls our minds to the Garden of Eden in Genesis, where Eve is tempted by the serpent and she and Adam succumb to the temptation. Eve is promised that someday one of her descendants would bruise Satan, the serpent, on the head (a death blow). The snakes biting Israel in the book of Numbers are her sins killing her minute by minute. The bronze serpent on the banner is Jesus, as we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." All sin was nailed to the cross in Jesus. Jesus took on the serpent so that all of us snake-bitten people might live when we look to him for salvation (Romans 8:3; 1 Peter 2:24).

How do we fight our spiritual battles? By looking to Jesus to save us.

Jesus said, "...In me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage: I have overcome the world." There is nothing that this world can do to us that Jesus hasn't conquered. No Amalekite too strong, nor sin in our hearts too deep, that Jesus can't overcome it, and has already done so at the cross. He rose the third day proving His victory of life over death.

In his book *On a Hill Too Far Away*,<sup>2</sup> John Fischer writes about a church that put a huge, weathered, rugged cross, not in the back of the church as we have it, or on a steeple, but in the middle of the congregation. In order to see the pastor preach on Sunday mornings the congregation had to look around the cross. In order for the pastor to preach, he had to look through the cross. It was a visual reminder to the preacher and to the people that we are totally and utterly dependent on the victory of Christ at the cross to save us from our sins and give us a new life. John writes, "The cross in the middle of my daily life triggers a life in the Spirit. It is a regular reminder. It faces me with my sin and reminds me of my forgiveness and the cost of my salvation. When I think about consciously sinning, I see Christ on the cross and I have to decide if I want to go ahead and contribute to his death one more time..."

Look to Jesus and be saved. He is victorious in battle, He has won the day. The only thing left for us to do, and the greatest thing we can do, is worship Him, for he is worthy.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> M. Craig Barnes, *Sacred Thirst: Meeting God in the Desert of Our Longings* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), page 20.

<sup>2</sup> John Fischer, *On a Hill Too Far Away* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1994).