THE LORD IS MY BANNER

Exodus 17:1-18:27

Key Verse 17:15 “Moses built an altar and called it ‘The LORD is my Banner’.”

Last week we studied when the LORD God rained down manna from heaven for the Israelites and fed them in the desert for 40 years. We call this “the LORD provides”, ‘*Jehovah-jireh*.’, and the Israelites called the bread from heaven ‘manna’, which means “What is it?” in Hebrew. Manna is the bread which came from heaven for his people. This incident is the foreshadowing of Jesus’ feeding 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish in John’s gospel. After Jesus fed the five thousand, the crowd demanded of him to give them more signs so that they might believe in him, as Moses fed his ancestors with manna in the wilderness. (Jn 6:31). Jesus said to them, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*.” (Jn 6:35) Jesus said that he himself is the bread from heaven for eternal life. He continued. “*I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever*…” (Jn 6:48-51b)

The book of Hebrews often describes Jesus as the new Moses, who would deliver his people from the power of sin and death, as Moses delivered the Israelites from out of Egypt. As God provided manna for the Israelites in the wilderness through Moses, so Jesus provided bread and fish for 5,000 people on a hill. In today’s passage the LORD God provides water and victory for the Israelites in the desert. In the same way, Jesus provides living water for eternal life and victory for his people in their spiritual battle. Through the window of Jesus, we can see how God through Moses helped his people who were in the wilderness.

First, the water gushed out from the rock (17:1-7). Look at verses 1-3. “***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***?” Since the Israelites came out of Egypt, God led them to a place for them like a GPS. They didn’t have to worry about where to go and where to stay because they traveled as the LORD commanded. The place where God led was the best place for them to stay. We don’t have to worry about where to go and where to live because the place and the city where God provided and guided are the best places for us. The Israelites arrived at Raphidim, which was known as a large wadi in the southwest of Sinai. The Israelites hoped to find water at Raphidim, but the wadi was already dry. So they quarreled with Moses, saying, “***Give us water to drink***.” Not long before they came to Raphidim, they already met *Jehovah-rapha* and *Jehovah-jireh*. They experienced how God had healed the water at Marah and how he had fed them with manna in the morning and quail in the evening. They forgot all the things which God had done for them. As soon as they were thirsty, they complained to Moses and grumbled against him. In verse 2 Moses asked them why they put the LORD to the test.

What did Moses do in this situation? He prayed. He brought the problem to God in prayer. One of the great characteristics of Moses’ leadership was his humbleness. Whatever happened to him and whatever problems arouse he brought them to the LORD. He knelt down before God and prayed so that God might help him and solve the problems. He did not quarrel with his people in physical, but struggled with God in spirit. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the power of darkness and against the spiritual forces of evil. (Eph 6:11) Moses cried out to the LORD, “***What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.***” (4) God answered Moses’ prayer. Look at verses 5-6. “***The LORD answered Moses, “Go out in front 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.”*** The LORD God did not send rain for them so that they might drink the water from the wadi. Instead, the LORD asked Moses to strike a rock at Horeb. From a scientific viewpoint and from a rational approach, it was impossible to get water by striking a rock unless the rock was a huge water balloon. It could be possible only when God intervened. Yes! God intervened. Our God is the Creator God who made everything out of nothing. With him all things are possible. Nothing is impossible for God who opened the Red Sea and provided manna from heaven. A miracle of water gushing out of a rock is only done by God’s intervention. God’s interventions go beyond science and human reason.

Recently the rock called “Meribah’s Rock” was found in Saudi Arabia near Mount Horeb. The rock was split in two from top to bottom, and there was lots of evidence of erosion from massive water flowing. Can you imagine massive water from the rock on the top of the hill? The Israelites drank the water from this rock and quenched their thirst.

The incident of water from the rock was repeated at the same place in Numbers 20:11. At that time Moses stroke the rock twice and the water gushed out of the rock. God’s provision of water from the rock was recorded and praised by the Israelites in various places in the laws, psalms, and prophecies. (Deut 8:15; Ps 78:15,16,20; 105:41,114:8; Is 43:19, 48:21, 1 Co 10:4) In Deuteronomy 8:15 Moses commanded his people, “*He led you through the vast and dreadful wilderness, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock*.” Psalm 78:15-16 says, “*He split the rocks in the wilderness and gave them water as abundant as the seas; he brought streams out of rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers*.” The prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 48:21, “*They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and water gushed out.*”

The Israelites drank the water and their thirst was quenched. But they were thirsty again. They ate manna in the wilderness and died. The water and the manna which were provided by God in the wilderness couldn’t save them from death. They all drank, ate, and died. But Jesus said that he is the bread of life which came from heaven, and that whoever believes in him will never die. The Apostle Paul described Jesus as the spiritual rock which provides spiritual water which leads us to eternal life. In 1 Corinthians 10:4 Paul said, “*and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ*.” Jesus himself invites thirsty souls to drink and promises them living water welling up to eternal life. Jesus said to a Samaritan woman, “*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*.” (Jn 4:13-14) Some Bible scholars explain the living water as the Holy Spirit. Here Jesus himself is the living water for our eternal life.

During the Festival of Tabernacle, there was a water drawing ceremony in Jerusalem in Jesus’ day so that the Jews could commemorate the water which came out of the rock. People drew water and remembered God who had brought water out of the rock in Moses’ day. In John 7 on the last day of the Festival of Tabernacle, Jesus stood at the temple and said in a loud voice, “*Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them*.” (Jn 7:37-38) Jesus invited people to come to him and drink the living water freely and abundantly. Indeed, those who drink the water from Jesus will never be thirsty again. Amen!

Look at verse 7. “***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?***” The word Massah means testing, and Meribah means quarreling. Both names are disgraceful to the Israelites because they tested the LORD and quarreled with Moses. I pray that we may get rid of three M’s from our hearts; “Marah (bitter), Massah (testing), and Meribah. (quarreling) The LORD God has been with us and among us. There is no doubt about this. Without God’s providence and protection, we couldn’t have survived in this world. Instead of testing God and quarreling with people, let us trust in *Jehovah-rapha* and *Jehovah-jireh*. Amen!

Second, the LORD is my banner (*Jehovah-Nissi*) (17:8-16) Thus far the Israelites had to struggle with basic physical needs, such as thirst and the shortage of food. Now they confronted the threat of the hostile neighboring tribes in the desert. The Amalekites were the first enemy whom the Israelites had to confront. Verse 8 says that the Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim. The Amalekites were known as the descendants of Amalek, who was the grandson of Esau. The word ‘Amalek” means “lick blood”. So the Israelites were terrified by them. But Moses told Joshua to choose some of their men and go out to fight them. Moses said, “***Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hands.***” (9) So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill. (10)

Look at verses 11-13. “***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 Amalekites army with the sword***.” While the Israelites were fighting their enemy, Moses held his hands up, supported by his two aides, until they overcame their enemy. What did Moses’ hands being up mean? This was the act of Moses’ prayer to the LORD, who is the Lord of war. Moses prayed for God’s help and victory for the battle. Two hands up symbolize surrender. When we hold our two hands up, we surrender to God, who is the Sovereign Lord of our lives and the ruler of human history and destiny. This also means our total dependence on God and complete trust in his will. “Lord, I am nothing. You are everything. Please help me and save me, Lord!” We sometimes need to pray by raising two hands up as the expression of our complete surrender and trust. When Moses prayed, the Israelites won the battle. When he stopped raising his hands, his enemy won. We must not stop praying for others in their spiritual battle. We must support our children, brothers and sisters to fight the good fight to the end through our intercessory prayer. We must support them through our consistent intercessory prayer.

When Moses saw how God delivered his people from the Amalekites, he built an altar. Building an altar indicates thanksgiving to God for the victory. Moses called the altar ‘*Jehovah-nissi*’, which means “***The LORD is my Banner***.” (15) A banner is the symbol of identity and the emblem of glory. The American anthem is the Star-Spangled Banner. The lyrics of the Star-Spangled Banner were written by Francis Scott Key, a young lawyer, who was inspired by the American flag with 15 stars and 15 stripes, which was flying triumphantly above Fort McHenry for the US victory over the British in the Battle of Baltimore in 1812. Ironically, this poem was set to the tune of a popular British song written by [John Stafford Smith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Stafford_Smith). Do you remember the first verse of the Star-Spangled Banner?

“O say can you see, by the dawn's early light,  
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming,  
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,  
O'er the ramparts we watched, were so gallantly streaming?  
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air,  
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there;  
O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave  
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

The American navy fought against the British until they won the victory for the freedom of this country. The banner was flying through the night until they won the battle. Moses raised his hands up until the Israelites won the battle. His hands remained steady till sunset. This picture looked like the Star-Spangled Banner, which was supported by the six American marines on the top of the Mount Suribah on the island of Iwo Jima in 1945 during World War II. In order to raise the leaning flag, the six marines worked together so that they were still fighting and conquering the land. Likewise, a banner is the symbol of victory and glory for all nations and for all generations.

Moses’ raising two hands up on the top of the mountain foreshadows Jesus’ death on the cross. Just as Moses raised his two hands supported by his two aides, Jesus was crucified on the cross along with two other criminals on top of the hill, with his two hands stretched out, bound and nailed. Jesus, even though he is the Son of God, shed his precious blood for our sins and died for our salvation. His suffering and death looked like failure and defeat by his enemy, Satan. But that is not true. His cross is the emblem of victory over Satan and glory for God the Father and for his people. So all those who look up to the cross of Jesus are healed, restored, and redeemed. “*At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, And the burden of my heart rolled away, It was there by faith I received my sight, And now I am happy all the day*…”(Hymn 229) “*On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame….So I’ll cherish the old rugged cross, Till my trophies at last I lay down, I will cling to the old rugged cross, And exchange is someday for a crown*.” (Hymn 233) The LORD is my Banner. The cross of Jesus is my Banner. As long as we hold the cross of Jesus in our hearts, God will give us victory over the power of sin and death. As long as we fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, we will run the race to the end with perseverance. (He 12:2,3)

In chapter 18:1-27 Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law visits him and gives him advice for the effective work of God as a leader. When Jethro saw Moses serving his people as a judge all by himself from morning till evening, he had compassion on Moses and his people. The people had to wait all day long until their turn came. They came to Moses seeking God’s will and right judgment among them. (15,16) This job was too much for Moses to handle alone and it was too long for his people to wait. So Jethro said that what Moses was doing was not good and advised him to divide his job and to work together with other leaders of people. Moses could have been upset by Jethro’s advice, even though he was his father-in-law. But Moses humbly accepted Jethro’s advice and did what he was advised. (24) Here we learn about Moses’ leadership. His leadership came not from his authority, but from his humility. His leadership brought partnership. So it opened the door for everyone to work with him.

In today’s passage we learned that Jesus is the living water welling up to eternal life. He is the bread of life who gives us eternal life. He is our banner who gives us final victory. As God raised Moses as the banner for the Israelites, he raised Jesus as the banner for all people who believe in him. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus who is the living water, the bread of life, and the banner for our victory and glory. Amen!