

My Father, God of mercy and truth, to Your mercy do I look for deliverance from sin and death. Your mercy will I plead before Your judgment seat. Your mercy will I sing all the days of my life. Have mercy upon us, and forgive us our transgressions, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Savior. Amen. (Reading the Psalms with Luther, CPH, Ps. 136 p 327)

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?" So Moses cried to the LORD, "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, "Is the LORD among us or not?" Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

In Christ Jesus, who alone is the Church's Banner of Merciful Victory, dear fellow redeemed:

The Canaanite woman in our Gospel saw in Jesus the Banner of the Lord's mercy, despite what face He presented her. At first Jesus' face appeared to be one of ignoring, then dismissing and even finally "demeaning". But she trusted the Banner of Mercy was true and

faithful, despite what she saw and heard. So she continued to call upon the Lord's mercy in behalf of her demon-possessed daughter. Her persistent faith was acknowledged by Jesus commending her faith and was rewarded through His powerful healing.

We shall see in our text through Israel's faintheartedness and bold trust in this very same banner, we too have every reason to find strength and courage in our many challenges to our faith and life as the people of God. Let us by God's grace learn well that when **Facing Any Foe, Faith Declares: "The Lord Is My Banner"**.

## I

Who of us have not been tempted and even succumbed to complaining and despairing of God's love and care for us in this life? We hear of Israel setting up camp, but there was no water to drink. They quarreled with Moses. "Moses said to them, 'Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?' ... the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'"

We can identify with such a response in our days of lack and need. But what compounds this response is that these same people had witnessed many miraculous deliverances in their many needs already. They were there when they were led out of their state of slavery in Egypt because of the blood of the Passover Lamb; when Pharaoh's army was held at bay by the pillar of fire; when the Red Sea was parted and they crossed on dry ground, and then when the pursuing ferocious army was drowned by those very same waters. In truth, they were not expressing their disapproval of Moses, but God Himself, through His representative.

You have seen God's many acts of rescue and deliverance in your lives of faith. Recount some of those tonight before you say your bedtime prayers and extol your Lord's many merciful acts of love for you and your family. And in addition, contritely confess your most recent sins of grumbling and despair in your time of lack and need. Then trust that He forgives you by the blood of the Lamb of God.

Moses does not show forth great unwavering faith in this first incident. He said to God: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me." And the LORD said to Moses, "Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink." In faith, perhaps wavering faith, Moses prayed to the Lord and the Lord gave him protection as Moses passed on

before the people and by striking the rock with his staff as the Lord commanded. Water came forth. Their thirst was satisfied.

## II

Immediately after having that urgent need met a new challenge arose – the Amalekites attacked Israel. Truly this was a formidable situation, the defenseless children of Israel without a trained army, now faced a trained military force. Moses responded in faith this time giving the battle plans out by commanding Joshua: “Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.”

Joshua, without question did what was commanded. Moses ascended the hill overlooking the battlefield with Aaron and Hur. When Moses held up the staff, Israel prevailed. But when he became tired and lowered the staff, the Amalekites prevailed. Aaron and Hur then provided a place for Moses to sit and held up his arms all day until the setting of the sun. Israel was victorious. But it was not the power of Moses, nor the power of the staff, but the power of God at work among those who trusted in His mercy and grace. God did not deliver them however without a testing of their faith. This is how God repeatedly worked with His people then and even today.

Things can seem so dire and our enemies tempt us to despair, lose all hope, in our merciful and gracious Lord. What are your spiritual enemies putting before you these days, which has you questioning the love of God, wondering if He has abandoned you? Maybe it concerns the Coronavirus scare these days. Do your prayers at times seem to go unanswered? Or worse yet are you experiencing like the Canaanite woman an apparent answer of “No!”?

Yet you like the children of Israel have an altar placed before you with the message that declares the same thing for you today: *“The Lord is my banner.”* Throughout history, a banner was vital to the battlefield. It is a rod or flag that the army would rally behind. If a soldier became separated because of the frantic pace of battle, he knew to gather back around the banner. There could only be one banner. For an army to have more than one would only bring confusion and disarray.

The Lord remained the banner of God’s people throughout their entire wandering in the wilderness leading them to the promise land. Yes, temptations would still come to abandon that holy Banner, just as we find in our journey today. But we rally around the altar that we know to be “The Banner of our Lord.” There we proclaim the Lord’s death until He returns to rescue us and to take us into our everlasting promise land. That table is set with the very body given

and blood shed, so that the hunger and thirst of our souls for righteousness are met and we are strengthened for the many battles we face with our foes as we fulfill our vocations.

Consider the many flags of Christian countries, and banners placed in the outward Church today, what image is most often found on it? It is an instrument of execution. The instrument is that which was used against our Savior – the cross. While it was there upon the cross our Lord died, the battle against our foes was accomplished there. By His resurrection sin, death and hell are all defeated. The victory is won! Our sin and death was all swallowed up by our God-Man Savior, so neither has any claim on us. Even those sins of doubting and losing heart in the face of your many challenges to your faith are all forgiven. So to us who believe in the all-merciful Lord God do not see in that cross a gruesome instrument of torture, pain and death, but we see the loving saving act of our Savior.

Face your many foes in this life recognizing that Jesus is your Banner. In Him the battle is done and the victory is won. Your foes can only scream out empty threats. They are all defeated in Christ Jesus your Lord. Journey on, firm in your faith in Him. Amen.