

“SETTING UP THE BANNERS”

(Psalm 20:1-9)

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[PROP NEEDED: PPT OF IWO JIMA PHOTO]

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–I–

1. **[Traditional AND Contemporary Service:]** Read Text (NRSV & MSG): Psalm 20:1-9 and Pray.

2. **[IWO JIMA STORY]**

As early as February, the South Pacific is a sweltering oven of heat and humidity. And in 1945, this heat, along with the gun-fire of nearly 25,000 Japanese soldiers, became a formidable enemy to an the American military invading a small island 100 miles off the coast of Japan. Over 6,000 Americans died taking the 8 square miles that comprised Iwo Jima, along with all 25,000 of her Japanese defenders.

And yet, in addition to the valor and courage of those who fought and lost their lives there, Iwo Jima is also remembered for something else, as well: on the southern-most tip of the island lies Mount Suribachi, an ancient volcano, and the highest point on the island. For the Americans, its capture sealed the fate of the enemy.

There on the summit of Suribachi, four Marines raised the American flag as a symbol of their victory -- a victory which was not yet won, but was assured to be theirs. And a picture of that moment won several Pulitzer prizes, and was eventually cast in bronze and became the Marine Memorial in Washington, D.C.

[SHOW PICTURE OF PHOTO AND/OR MONUMENT ON PPT]

3. You see, that raising of the flag – the setting up of the banner – symbolized the American victory over its enemies that day.

A–Well, today’s scripture (Psalm 20) is essentially a Hebrew prayer in which the people are asking God to grant their king success in battle, so that he, too, might be able to (in the words of Verse 5) “*set up the banners*” of victory.

B–Now, like the Marines on Iwo Jima, and like the Hebrew prayer in Psalm 20, each of us has “enemies” that we have to face today, as well.

1–Oh, they may not be countries or military foes, but we all have things in life that are “enemies” to our happiness and contentment – things that keep us from fulfilling our God-given potential.

2–Things like... out of control debt; broken relationships; addictions and cycles of dependence we can’t seem to break; death and disease; loneliness; fear of the future, the present, or of not being accepted by others; & the list could go on.

C– And as with any soldier, when we try to fight these things alone, instead of setting up "banners of victory," we all too often end up sending out white flags of surrender.

1–Instead of being the *victor*, we end up as the *victim*;

2–Instead of being the *conqueror*, we end up as the *conquered*.

4. So how DO we keep the “enemies” of life at bay, and gain victory over them?

A–Well, not only does today’s scripture contain a *prayer* for victory, but I think in it we also find a three-fold strategy for *gaining* it – for “setting up the banners” of victory in life.

B–Let me talk briefly about each one (Find these three “A’s” in your bulletin sermon notes).

–II–

5. First, I believe it teaches us **AWARENESS** of where (or more properly WHO) true victory comes from.

A–Listen to several of today’s verses again...

1–Verse 1: “*The Lord will answer you in the day of trouble...*”

2–Verse 2: “*He [will] send you help... and give you support from Zion*”

3–Vss.4-5: “*He [will] grant your heart’s desire, & fulfill all your plans... & petitions*”

4–(Verses 7-8): “*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God. They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright.*”

B–In other words, victory over the “enemies” of life comes *not* from ourselves, or from the powers and resources of *this* world, but from *God alone*.

C–You see, I believe these verses are not (as some have interpreted) a call to nuclear disarmament or conventional arms reduction, but for us to recognize that *whoever* and *whatever* our “enemy” is (whether physical or spiritual), true victory comes only from God. ¹

1–For example, when we’ve just lost our job, this says that *only God* can order things so that we can either find more work, or so we’ll be able to make it without work...

2–...That when our spouse has cheated on us, or a family member has hurt us deeply, *only God* can heal the hurt and give us strength to move on,...

3–...That when a loved one has just passed away, or some tragedy has struck, *only God* can give the ultimate comfort and peace that we need to make it through.

D–So, whatever “enemy” it is that you’re facing today, let me ask: WHO/WHAT are you trusting in to give you victory? If its anyone/anything but God, victory won’t happen.

6. A second thing we learn from today's scripture is a reminder that we can claim **ASSURANCE** of ultimate victory if we're looking to God as its source.

A—Verse 6 says, *“I know that the Lord **will help** his anointed; he **will answer...** from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand.”*

B—Now, notice it *doesn't* say *HOW* or *WHEN* or *in what MANNER* that “help” or “answer” might come, only that God *will help*, and *will answer* when we call.

1—In other words, when we look to God as the source of our victory, we be assured that God *will* give victory, but *not always* in the method /manner *we want/pray* for.

2—We may experience times and situations that *seem* like failure and defeat – like God is *ignoring* our prayers.

3—But don't be fooled:... just because things don't turn out the way *we* think doesn't mean that God isn't working for our *ultimate* good, even *through* those things.

C—In fact, the truth is that *ultimate* victory is rarely achieved without *first* going through setbacks and hard times along the way:

1—Remember: the victory at Iwo Jima was only won after the U.S. first went through the humiliations of Pearl Harbor, Corregidor and Bataan (in the Philippines).²

2—Jesus' resurrection victory was only won after he first experienced the agony of the cross.

3—And victory over the “enemies” of *our* lives are often likewise only gained after we experience occasional setbacks and hard times getting there.

4—Author Michael Green once said...

“The person who succeeds is not the one who holds back, fearing failure, nor the one who never fails...but rather the one who moves on in spite of failure.”

D—You see, our faith in the **assurance** of God's *ultimate* victory is what can sustain us even *through* difficult or trying experiences.

7. And yet, if we want to achieve victory over the “enemies” of life, we can't just rest on our awareness and assurance and do nothing. No, we must also (#3) *plan for and take **ACTION***.

A—Verse 4 implies that before the king's army went out for battle, not only were they to *Pray*, but also to *Plan* – to develop a *strategy* to defeat the enemy and then put it into *action*; to be *PROactive*, instead of being *REactive*.

B—Remember that the invasion of Iwo Jima didn't just “happen” all by itself, but was instead the result of careful and deliberate planning, *followed by* action / implementation.

1—Likewise, the “enemies” of life (like addictions, debt, loneliness, despair, etc.) *cannot* be defeated merely by praying and hoping they go away – don't get me wrong: prayer is powerful; but it's *never* an excuse for laziness.

2—No. *In addition to* prayer, we *also* need to ask God to help us *develop* an action plan that we then *act upon*.³

C—For example, if we want to defeat the “enemy” of addiction or nagging sin, then we need to pray (yes), but we may also need to join a weekly accountability/support group.

1—If we want to defeat the “enemies” of sickness and disease, then we need to exercise our bodies, and practice good eating habits.

2—If we want to defeat the “enemy” of debt, then we need to first *learn* and then *apply* biblical financial practices.

3—If we want to keep our relationships with *others* strong, then we need to be people of forgiveness and grace, offering and accepting it freely, like oil lubricating gears.

4—And if we want to keep our relationship with *God* strong, then we need to regularly practice means of grace like prayer, Bible study, small group participation, public worship, and the sacraments [like we're going to do in a moment today].⁴

D—You see, victory can only be achieved when we have a strategy that we then *act upon*.

–III–

8. The bottom line for all of this is that *whatever* the “enemy” is that keeps us from God's ultimate plan and purpose for our lives, this Psalm reminds us...

A—...To have an **AWARENESS** of God as our *source* of victory,...

B—...To claim God's **ASSURANCE** of our ultimate victory when we trust in Him,...

C—...And to be sure to plan for and take **ACTION** so that these first two can happen.

9. And when you and I learn to follow this Godly strategy found here in Psalm 20, I believe we'll be able to “*Set Up The Banners*” of victory in our daily lives.

10. [HOLY COMMUNION & ALTAR PRAYER TIME]

11. [TRADITIONAL CLOSING HYMN: #370, Victory In Jesus]

ENDNOTES:

1. After all, we might use our military to kill all terrorists, but our military can't protect us against the unseen "enemies" of things like fear and despair.
2. And even then, remember that the raising of the American flag over Mt. Suribachi did NOT signal the end of the fighting or the final victory, but merely the American's faith in the *promise of ultimate victory*.
3. After all, it's been said that "*when we fail to plan, we plan to fail.*"
4. This is precisely why each of us needs to be in worship & S.S. every week – *not* to "see and be seen," but to "stock up" on what God desires to give to help us guard against things which threaten to overwhelm us.