

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, November 19, 2017**

ARM LIFTERS NEEDED

Exodus 17:8-16

Like many of you, I love history. Not just learning the facts, but going beyond the names and dates and events of history to their meaning and significance. Unlike some of you, I'm not an expert in military history. But I was thinking this week about some of the most famous and most important battles in American history.

Among those likely to be included in just about anyone's list are:

- The Battle of Gettysburg, the pivotal battle of the Civil War.
- The D-Day Invasion of Normandy, which began on June 6, 1944.
- The Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which marked the entrance of the U.S. into World War II.
- The Battles of Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1775, the first military engagements of the Revolutionary War (the War of American Independence).
- The Battle of Yorktown in 1781, which led to the British surrender and the end of the Revolutionary War.

Others we might include in our list are the Revolutionary War Battle of Trenton, which took place the day after George Washington famously crossed the Delaware River; the British attack on Fort Mchenry during the War of 1812, which spurred Francis Scott Key to pen "The Star-Spangled Banner;" General Andrew Jackson's victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815; the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, which marked the beginning of the Civil War; the first Battle of Bull Run, which was the first major military engagement of the Civil War; the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest single-day battle in American history; the Battle of San Juan Hill in 1898, in which Teddy Roosevelt led his Rough Riders in the charge up San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War; the World War II battles of Midway, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Guadalcanal, and the Battle of the Bulge.

ISRAEL'S FIRST BATTLE

The list could go on and on. What prompted me to think about such things is that today's Scripture reading from Exodus 17 records the first military battle in the history of the nation of Israel after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. The people of Israel were at Rephidim, where, as we saw last Sunday, they grumbled against Moses because there was no water to drink (17:1-3). The Lord, in His mercy, provided water for the whole community from a rock – another miracle of His power and grace (17:5-6).

While they were encamped at Rephidim, before setting out again for Sinai, they were attacked by the Amalekites, a nomadic tribe of marauders who conducted frequent raids on different tribes and settlements in order to enrich themselves. It was an unprovoked attack that earned

for the Amalekites a judgment from God so severe that God promised to “blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (17:14).

Later on, as Israel was soon to enter the Promised Land (after their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness), Moses reminded the people of Israel of what the Amalekites had done to them. In Deuteronomy 25:17-18, Moses said to them: “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.” They targeted the weakest members of the nation of Israel – the elderly, the sick, the weary. God was not pleased.

Amalek, you may know, was the grandson of Jacob’s twin brother Esau (Genesis 36:12, 16), which means that his descendants, the Amalekites, were actually distant cousins of the Israelites. That didn’t stop them from trying to take advantage of the Israelites, or trying to keep the people of Israel from their promised inheritance in Canaan.

In response to the attack, Moses commissions Joshua to gather some fighting men and to lead them into battle against the Amalekites. This passage – this account of Israel’s first military battle since crossing the Red Sea – is the first time Joshua is mentioned in the Bible. He will take on an increasingly important role, of course, as one of the 12 spies sent by Moses to check out the land of Canaan and report back on their discoveries, and as God’s designated successor to Moses as the leader of Israel. After the death of Moses, it is Joshua who will lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land and oversee their conquest of it.

Here, Joshua assumes the role of commander and leads the army into battle against the Amalekites, while Moses goes to the top of a hill overlooking the plain where the battle takes place, accompanied by his brother Aaron and Hur, who, according to tradition, may have been married to Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. Moses takes with him the staff (or rod) of God, which he had used previously at God’s direction in several of the plagues against Egypt and in parting the waters of the Red Sea so the people of Israel could cross over in safety. The use of the staff signifies that the defeat of the Amalekites, like the Exodus itself and the crossing of the Red Sea, will be the Lord’s doing.

In this case, the Lord will use both the sword and the staff. He will use the army of Israel to serve His purpose, and He will intervene directly to ensure the fulfillment of His purpose for Israel. Exactly how the sword and the staff fit together is something of a mystery. We are left with questions that may not have satisfactory answers. But, as Old Testament scholar Walter Kaiser writes: “Once again divine sovereignty and human responsibility (are) linked in carrying out the will of God” (Kaiser, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Exodus*, 408).

Divine sovereignty *and* human responsibility. It is not one or the other. It is both-and. This intersection of God’s sovereignty and our human responsibility touches on the question of who does what in salvation. If God in His sovereignty has elected (predestined) some to salvation, as the Bible teaches – read Ephesians 1, for example; you can’t miss it – how are we to understand the role of free will, of our responsibility for our personal response to the gospel? God *is* sovereign. And we *are* personally responsible for the way we respond to the

salvation offered to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. How it fits together remains a mystery. But we can be assured that it is not a mystery to God. And because of all that He has revealed of Himself and His ways to us, we can trust Him for the things He has chosen not to reveal to us, things that are beyond the ability of our minds to compute or understand.

Are you OK with that? I hope you are. It is not a dodge or a cop-out. It is simply a confession that we can't always figure everything out to our satisfaction.

What takes place during this battle with the Amalekites is hard to figure out. It sounds simple, but exactly what it means may not be so clear.

HANDS LIFTED UP

While Joshua and the Israelite army are engaged with the Amalekites, Moses is at the top of the hill with Aaron and Hur. When Moses' hands are up, holding the staff of God in the air, Israel is winning. When he gets tired and lowers his hands, the tide turns and Amalek gains the upper hand. Like a championship football game or tennis match, the battle goes back and forth. Seeing this, Aaron and Hur bring Moses a rock to sit on, and they hold up his hands, one on each side, all the live-long day until the sun goes down, which results in a dramatic and decisive victory for Joshua and the Israelites over the Amalekites.

The question is: What exactly are Moses' raised hands supposed to represent? One possibility is that his raised hands, holding the staff, was meant as a signal to Joshua and his army. Whenever Moses' hands were raised, it was a signal to attack, to take the offensive, to go forward in battle. And whenever his hands were lowered, it was a signal to retreat. It is not likely that this is what was going on. At least, the Bible does not indicate that this is the case.

PRAYER

Another possibility (the more traditional explanation) is that Moses' hands were raised in prayer. But again, the Bible does not specifically say that Moses was praying. If he was praying, are we to understand that he was praying only when his hands were raised? Can a person pray without lifting his or her hands up in the air? Why is it necessary for Moses to keep his hands raised all day?

It is true that David speaks of lifting up his hands in prayer. In Psalm 63:4, he says to the Lord:

I will praise You as long as I live,
and in Your name I will lift up my hands.

In the New Testament, Paul writes in 1 Timothy 2:8: "I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without anger or disputing."

But Paul does not mean that lifting up our hands is a necessary or required part of prayer. In many other places where he urges people to pray, he says nothing about the need to lift up our hands as we pray. So there is no inseparable connection between the two.

If the lifting up of Moses' hands does symbolize prayer, then to lower his hands would mean to stop praying and, consequently, to cease to depend on God for help.

If it *is* a symbol of pray, then it ought to teach us about the importance of prayer. Sometimes, if we're honest, we view prayer as a kind of last resort, the thing we do when we've tried everything else and there's nothing left to do. We should know better than that. We should know the importance, the value, and the power of prayer. But sometimes we live as if prayer doesn't really matter.

Instead of our last resort, we should view prayer as a first resort. It should be the first thing we do. And it should pervade all we do, as we trust the Lord to work in and through all the details of our lives and the lives of those we love.

Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6 that prayer is part of the arsenal God has given us for the spiritual battles we encounter in this world. He tells us to "be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power" and to "put on the full armor of God" to "stand firm" against the devil and all the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." He gives us "the belt of truth," "the breastplate of righteousness," the shoes of "the gospel of peace," "the shield of faith, with which to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one," "the helmet of salvation," and "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (6:10-17).

But Paul does not stop there. He goes a step further. He says: "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions, with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind," he continues, "be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints" (6:18) – by which he means one another, our fellow followers of Jesus. Then he pleads for prayers for himself and the ministry of the gospel entrusted to him: "Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I may fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should" (6:19-20).

NEVER A TIME WHEN IT IS NOT TIME TO PRAY

What Paul is saying is that there is never a time when it is not time to pray. He is saying that prayer is one of the means God sovereignly chooses to use to accomplish His good and perfect will in our lives. It is an essential weapon in the arsenal He has given us. And it reminds us that we are at every moment and in all things dependent on God for all things. If God should ever turn His back on us (He will not), or if we should ever turn our backs on God (may we never do so), it will mean catastrophic defeat for us. So we must never forget, and never let one another forget, that our hope and strength and victory are in God alone, who has already won the ultimate victory for us in and through Jesus His Son.

With respect to Moses, we have to admit that we don't know for sure what his upraised hands signified or what (if anything) he was doing while his hands were raised. We can't say for

sure why having his hands raised in the air had the effect it did. We don't know because the Bible doesn't tell us.

ONE ANOTHERING

But one thing is clear. Moses, Aaron, and Hur all recognize the apparent connection between the raising or lowering of Moses' hands and the fortunes of Israel in the battle. So Aaron and Hur spring into action in support of Moses. They come to Moses' aid in the most practical of ways. They know he is becoming weary, so they find a stone he can sit on. And when his arms get tired, they hold his hands up – which, in His providence, God uses to give His people a great victory.

At the risk of oversimplifying this, I want to suggest to you that everybody needs an Aaron and a Hur in their lives. Everybody needs somebody, or more than one somebody, to come alongside them when life gets heavy. Everybody. Which includes you. And me.

There are – and will be – times when you and I are more like Moses, and we feel weary or worn out from the burdens we carry. And there are – and will be – times when, like Aaron and Hur, we can be the ones who give encouragement and strength to another by being there, by simply caring, and by offering whatever practical help we can.

By coming alongside Moses and serving as his “arm lifters,” Aaron and Hur were engaging in what we might call the ministry of “one anothering one another.” The New Testament contains something like 59 verses that describe this ministry of one anothering, from Jesus' command to His disciples to “love one another” (John 13:34, 35; 15:12, 17), to Paul's instructions to:

- Be devoted to one another in brotherly love (Romans 12:10);
- Honor one another above yourselves (Romans 12:10);
- Live in harmony with one another (Romans 12:16);
- Serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13);
- Carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2);
- Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32);
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32);
- In humility consider others better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3);
- Bear with each other (Colossians 3:13);
- Encourage each other (1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11).

In addition to Paul, other New Testament writers urge us to:

- Encourage one another daily (Hebrews 3:13);
- Spur one another on toward love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24);
- Pray for each other (James :16);
- Love one another deeply, from the heart (1 Peter 1:22);
- Live in harmony with one another (1 Peter 3:8);

- Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling (1 Peter 4:9); and
- Use whatever gifts we have received to serve one another (1 Peter 4:10).

Sometimes, what someone needs is simply for someone else to be with him or her. Do not “misunderestimate” (I choose this word intentionally) the power of the ministry of your presence. Do not underestimate the power of simply coming alongside another person to be there with them or for them. Do not underestimate the power of praying for and with another person who is going through a rough time, or fighting a hard battle, or dealing with some hard news, or carrying a heavy load of responsibility. Like Moses on the hilltop, everybody needs somebody to come alongside and lift up our arms when we get tired.

Jesus wants you and me to be like Aaron and Hur. It is really as simple as that. When we find ourselves in a situation where we feel like Moses and we’re weary and beginning to falter, Jesus wants us to let our friends, our church family, our sisters and brothers in Christ, come alongside us and help lift our arms. Lest we become discouraged and lose heart.

All of this is to say that relationships matter. In the family. In the church family. We need to be there for one another. We need to allow one another to get close enough to be there for us.

Andy Crouch tells the story of his friend David Sacks, only in his 40s, whose body was ravaged with cancer. After a grace-filled year of life made possible by medical treatment, David’s illness outran the drugs. In the final days of his earthly life, David lay in bed, his body unbearably weak and thin. He was tech savvy, and loved to be connected, but now he was beyond all of that. No more text messaging. No more email. No more Facebook. No more social media. But, as Crouch says, David was still there, still with us, still able, just barely, to hear us praying and singing, as a small group of family and friends gathered around his bed in his last days.

Being there, says Crouch, was “one of the hardest places I have ever been. It was one of the most holy places I have ever been. It was one of the best places I have ever been” (Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 203-205).

We are not meant to go through the hard times, the painful times, even the good times, alone. We are meant, as Aaron and Hur were for Moses, to be there for one another. With one another. We are meant to lift up one another’s arms. We are meant to spur one another on. We are meant to run the race of this life together. In Jesus’ name.

Whatever else you take away from this message, do not miss this: Make it your aim, in the name and power of Jesus, to be an arm lifter. Let others be arm lifters in your life when you need it. Don’t let pride or false humility keep you from asking for and accepting loving help from one another. Make it your aim to come alongside people in your life, including your sisters and brothers in the faith, whose arms – and hearts – are weary from the battles they must fight.

Lord, let it be so in us. In Jesus’ name. Amen.