

Exodus 17:8-16 (1984 NIV)
Lifted Hands of the Redeemed

Introduction

I have titled my sermon “Lifted Hands of the Redeemed”. The raising of hand(s) can have very different meanings:

- If you are driving and a traffic policeman raises his hand before you, it means he wants you to stop.
- If you are fighting a war and an enemy soldier drops down his rifle and raises both his hands before you, it means he wants to stop fighting and surrender.
- If you are trying to do something but fail repeatedly, and you finally throw up both hands, it means you are so frustrated that you are now giving up.
- If you are an abused person and when you see a raised hand, it may remind you of an abusive parent/spouse.
- If you are a much loved person, a pair of raised hands may remind you of the times when you were embraced or hugged by a caring person.

So, the lifting up of hand(s) can have very different meanings.

We’ve been following Israel as they make their journey out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness beyond. Israel learnt new lessons at each new stage of the journey. These lessons often need to be repeated and reinforced, for (like many of us) the Israelites were slow to learn and quick to forget.

When we come to Ex 17, the Israelites were at Rephidim. In the 1st half of Ex 17 (i.e. vv. 1-7), they faced another water crisis, and had to learn again what it meant to trust God to provide. In the 2nd half of Ex 17 (i.e. vv. 8-16), they faced opposition from without for the first time since crossing the Red Sea.

The Amalekites launched an attack against them in Rephidim. This was the very first battle that the Israelites would be fighting since leaving Egypt. In fact, for all the Israelites at that time, this was the very first battle that they would be fighting in all their lives so far. Why? Because for all their lives in Egypt they were slaves, not soldiers. They had totally no experience in fighting as a people. Yet surprise! Surprise! They won the battle against the Amalekites decisively. They won it with lifted hands.

In Ex 17:8-16, we read of the lifting up of hands many times as the Israelites battled the Amalekites.

What do the instances of lifted hands mean in Ex 17:8-16 and even for us today as Christ’s disciples?

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I. The Lifted Hands of Joshua and His Men (vv. 8-9, 13)

8 The Amalekites came and attacked the Israelites at Rephidim.
 9 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."
 13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Who were the Amalekites who attacked Israel? Amalek was Esau's grandson (Genesis 36:12), so the Amalekites were descendants of Esau, and distant relatives of the Israelites. They were a rapacious people who lived by attacking other people and plundering their wealth. They had no fear of God before their eyes.

Verse 9 says: "Moses said to Joshua ..." We haven't heard about Joshua before. There's no introduction of him, so he must have been a very well-known person when this was written. Indeed he would succeed Moses 40 years later.

Moses said to Joshua, "Look, you need to find some soldiers." They had not done this before. They had been slaves. Slavery was terrible, but at least you didn't have to go out and fight battles. You stayed back and built storehouses for Pharaoh. Now, Joshua got to go find some men. So he went round asking, "Can you walk? Are you strong? Are you of age? Do you have a sword? Do you have anything you can use to fight and kill?"

I can imagine some of the people complaining to Moses (as usual): "Wait a second. Isn't God going to do all the fighting for us? He did it for us in Egypt. He protected and provided for us all the way from the Red Sea to the Desert of Shur to Marah to Elim ... Isn't God going to do all good things for us and we are just to relax and let God do it all?"

But God's way and will would be quite different. He's saying to Joshua and the people through Moses, "Yes, I'm going to fight for you. The victory will be mine, but Joshua, you need to get some soldiers ready. You need to get out there and fight."

And if the Amalekites were symbolic of the wickedness of that time, the Lord would then be calling the Israelites not to be cowed by the evil of their time, but to fight and overcome it in His power.

Might there also be a lesson for us here? Though the church of Jesus Christ will have opposition from without, I think the biggest battle that the church has to fight in any generation is not against some established authorities, some other religions, or enemies of the faith, but our love affair with the ways of the old life in the flesh.

You remember what happened in the Garden of Eden. The evil in the form of a serpent came to tempt Eve to sin; she fell and then Adam who should know

better, followed in her steps. When the Lord questioned Adam about his misdoing, he pointed the finger at the woman whom he stressed that God had put her there with him (Gen 2:12). When God questioned Eve, she blamed the serpent for deceiving her (Gen 2:13). So we see the human tendency to self-justify and shift blame. Put in another way, the biggest threat to our living the new life in Jesus Christ is not what is outside of us, but what is inside of us. To win it out there, we must first win it in here—the heart. We are often our worst enemies. And we become our worst enemies when we are flirting with, instead of fighting against, the old life in the flesh.

Israel had been delivered from the old life of oppressive slavery in Egypt. After crossing the Red Sea, they were to live the new life of obedient service as God's people. But such a transition from the old to the new would not be automatic or smooth. Many times they would have to fight hard to do it and keep it, for many wicked forces would want to subject them to the old life of being oppressed again. This battle with the Amalekites was the first of many such fights to come.

It is the same with us today as Christians. Forces are out there to tempt us to flirt with the old life in the flesh. And we become our worst enemies when we give in to these temptations instead of fighting them in the power of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The New Testament tells us to fight the good fight. Of course, we don't fight physical battles using guns or even boxing gloves. Jesus told Peter to put away his sword (John 18:11). Paul says our battle is not against flesh and blood (Eph 6:12).

The fact of life is that all of us are in some kind of battle.

- There are some who are in a health battle. They are not completely well physically. It is a constant battle for them to even make it through a full day without some form of pain/ache in the body.
- There are some who are in a family battle. They are fighting for their marriage; fighting for their children. There is a constant struggle to get along with one another in the home.
- There are some who are in a financial battle. They can't seem to get a handle on their money, and they are struggling to make it.
- There are those who are in a faithfulness battle. They have found it difficult to maintain a strong walk with the Lord.

But when you are in battle, remember this—God hasn't left you by yourself. He is there with you.

The Lord had led the Israelites out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and into the wilderness toward the Promised Land. Now they had to fight. It would take faith as well as action and energy. Sorry, the Lord did not promise a "let go and let God do everything" model as a way of life.

Yes, there will be times when God will say, "I'm going to do it all. You just have to march around and play your musical instruments, and the walls will come down." But there are also lots of times when God will say, "You are going to have times when you feel hungry, tired, and thirsty. But I don't want you to grumble and complain. Yes, I will do something, but I'm going to do it through you. Now, you have to get up and fight."

In this battle with the Amalekites, Joshua and his fighting men lifted up their hands not in timid surrender, but in courageous combat with whatever weapons they could hold in their hands ... because they knew it was the Lord's call for them to fight.

It was the summer Olympics of 1992. It was the quarter finals of the 400-metre sprint. British athlete Derek Redmond was one of the favourites for the gold medal. The starter's gun fired and the athletes burst out of their blocks.

Halfway through the race Derek Redmond was leading. Then disaster struck. His hamstring torn and he collapsed on the track. The agony on his face was both physical and mental. It was a crushing blow.

Medical attendants ran to assist him. Derek waved them away. He came to race and he was going to finish it. He got to his feet and started hobbling down the track.

The crowd was stunned. Officials didn't know what to do. And then an older man ran onto the track. He brushed off the officials who tried to stop him. He ran up beside Derek and placed his arms around him.

The man was Derek Redmond's father, Jim.

"Son, you don't have to do this," Jim said.

"Yes, I do" Derek replied.

"Then we'll finish this race together," the father responded.

Arm in arm, with agony on Derek's face, tears on his father's, Derek and Jim continued down the track. Derek buried his face in his father's shoulder. His father's strong shoulder supported his son physically and emotionally.

Finally, accompanied by a now roaring crowd, standing on their feet and applauding, Derek Redmond crossed the line with his father. It became the defining moment of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

Our Heavenly Father has called us to run and finish our faith race for Him here on earth. He knows it is not going to be easy. There will be many forces that will tempt us to quit and give up trying.

But when we tell Him, “I am not going to quit. I want to keep on running so that I can finish the race you have set for me,” He will reply, “Then let me run with you as you fight on and finish it.”

Yes, the Lord does not merely call us to run a race for Him. When we go down and then get up again to fight on, He comes alongside and He runs with us.

(<http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/finishing-the-race>)

To grow as Christ’s disciples, we must not give in conveniently to the old life in the flesh, but courageously fight it because the Lord has called us to.

II. The Lifted Hands of Aaron and Hur (vv. 10-12)

10 So Joshua fought the Amalekites as Moses had ordered, and Moses, Aaron and Hur went to the top of the hill.

11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.

12 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.

We hear of Hur for the first time in verse 10. Hur is also mentioned one more time when he was left in co-charge with Aaron over the Israelites when Moses was away on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:14).

According to Rabbinic tradition, Hur was the son of Miriam, thus the nephew of Moses and Aaron. However, the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, identified Hur as the husband of Moses’ sister Miriam. Though Hur’s relationship with Moses might not be clear, he was without doubt a close supporter of Moses.

The sudden disappearance of Hur from the narrative of Exodus is explained by the Rabbinic claim that Hur was killed when he tried to prevent the making of the Golden Calf.

But what is important here is that Aaron and Hur were there to support Moses—to strengthen the tired hands of Moses.

This is also what we need to do as Christians today. We strengthen one other and hold up one other. Perhaps some of you today are feeling like Moses because you have become stressed, stretched, drained and tired out in what you are doing or what you are facing. That’s when we need one another to hold up one another.

Maybe God is calling some of you to be Aaron and Hur. Now we may not be sure if that Moses we are called to support would say, “Quick! Get me a rock to sit on! Can’t you see I am dead tired?!”

The picture we see here is that of Aaron and Hur, sensing that Moses was struggling to stand up and to hold up his hands, immediately got him a stone to sit on, and hold up his tired hands, one on each side.

Human nature is such that asking for help can be hard to do for some people. Somehow it makes them feel diminished if they ever tell you that they need anything or any help.

So God may be calling you to be Aaron or Hur as you sense someone who needs help, and you take that initiative to come alongside by saying, “I know you’re going through a lot. I want to help. Now tell me how I can help lift up your arms.” If nothing else, that person may say, “Thank you, just lift up your hands to God and pray for me.”

If we are to be a community of people with authentic relationships, then let’s ask the Lord to help us ...

- Learn to be honest and humble to ask for help to lift up our tired hands.
- Learn to be sensitive and responsive to lending a helping hand to someone who’s struggling with tired hands.

There is one interesting thing to note as we look at Moses, Aaron and Hur. It is interesting to me that Moses as the leader of the Israelites was not in the thick of battle—i.e. not in the valley leading his troops in actual combat as common for commanders/kings to do so in ancient warfare, but on safe ground at the hill top.

Now I believe Moses was at the hill top not because he was afraid to fight and wanted to be a combat deserter. He was up there because of God’s role for him. In fact, God had different roles for Moses, for Aaron, for Hur, and for Joshua.

- God’s role for Moses was to bring His presence and authority before the people as His representative with the staff in one hand.
- God’s role for Joshua was to lead the Israelites in actual fighting against the enemies. In fact, when the people finally entered Canaan, it was Joshua who would be leading them to fight all the battles there, not Moses (he was not even allowed by God to cross over the Jordan with them – Deut 3:23-29).
- God’s role for Aaron and Hur was to support Moses so that he could do his God-given role well, never to take over from Moses.

Imagine this—instead of letting Moses sit on a stone and holding up his tired arms, Aaron said this to Moses: “Moses, you have held the staff in one hand and lifted both arms for the past three hours. I can see that you are now tired. Tell you what. Let’s take turns. Pass the staff to me, and I will hold it for you and lift up my arms for the next four hours. One hour longer than you, but it’s OK because I am younger. After me, I will pass the staff to Hur and he will do the same for five hours because he is even younger. So, let’s do shift duties and before we know it, it will be sunset already. Now isn’t that a great idea?!”

Creative idea indeed, but no, this was not what Aaron and Hur did. Why? This is because God’s role for them was to support Moses in his God-given role, not to take over his staff or to take over from him.

What is God’s role for you in church, at home, in school, in your workplace? Know that role and play it well—be it leading, supporting, following, witnessing, or testifying.

Charlie Plumb, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate, was a fighter pilot in Vietnam. After 75 combat missions, his plane was destroyed by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb ejected and parachuted into enemy hands. He was captured and spent six years in a communist prison. He survived that ordeal and now lectures about lessons learned from that experience.

One day, when Plumb and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, a man at another table came up and said, “You’re Plumb! You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. You were shot down!”

“How in the world did you know that?” asked Plumb.

“I packed your parachute,” the man replied. Plumb gasped in surprise and gratitude. The man shook his hand and said, “I guess it worked!”

Plumb assured him, “It sure did—if your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man. Plumb says, “I kept wondering what he might have looked like in a Navy uniform ... I wondered how many times I might have passed him on the Kitty Hawk. I wondered how many times I might have seen him and not even said ‘Good morning, how are you?’ or anything because, you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor.”

Now Plumb asks his audience, “Who’s packing your parachute? Everyone has someone who provides what they need to make it through the day.”

Our church, calling, and gifting—Charlie Plumb’s experience reminds us that the Body of Christ needs every person playing their part if it is to function well. Some of those parts will be the glamorous roles, like the fighter pilot, while others will be behind the scenes, apparently unimportant jobs like parachute packing. But all are significant and crucial.

(storiesforpreaching.com)

God has given different people different roles in life. This is because no one person can or should do everything. Aaron and Hur were on the hill top with Moses to help him hold on to the staff of God and keep both his hands lifted up. They knew their God-given role was to support Moses in his God-given role, not to take over from him.

To grow as Christ’s disciples, we must identify and play our God-given roles because God calls us to work with one another and we need one another.

III. The Lifted Hands of Moses (vv. 9, 11-16)

9 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.”

11 As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning.

12 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.

13 So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

14 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.”

15 Moses built an altar and called it The Lord is my Banner.

16 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.”

Much has been preached about the power of prayer as symbolized by the lifted hands of Moses. I believe Moses did pray as the battle raged on. After all, the Hebrews raised their hands in prayer with palms towards heaven to signify that they were coming to God with clean hands and pure heart. But then, why the need for Moses to hold the staff in his hand when he was praying? Isn’t it less cumbersome to pray with raised hands and with the staff on the ground?

Here we read of Moses lifting up his hand as the battle raged on. When his hands were up, the Israelites had the upper hand, but when his hands were down, the Amalekites had the advantage. I believe what's just as significant, if not more significant, was the staff that Moses held in his raised hand.

I believe the staff in Moses' hand would symbolize the presence, authority and power of God to the Israelites. If Joshua had said to Moses when called to lead in the battle, "We don't know how to fight. We're not trained soldiers. We don't have too many strong, young men," Moses would have said, "But we have the staff. It means we have the Lord with us and we fight with His authority and power."

In the year 2000, there was a Hollywood movie titled "The Patriot". It was about the American Revolutionary War against the British in the 1700s. The hero in the movie was played by Mel Gibson.

I especially like movies that are based on some true/historical events. So I watched "The Patriot". And in the final battle scene, the American colonists were very much at the losing end—many were shot down and others were beginning to make a hasty retreat with the British troops pursuing them relentlessly. Worst of all, the one carrying the flag of the American colonists were fatally injured and was about to collapse and drop the flag.

On seeing this, the hero played by Mel Gibson fought his way bravely to this dying comrade, took the flag from him, and began to wave the flag furiously high up in the air. And when the retreating American fighters saw their flag waving high up in the air, they got the message. It was not a call to retreat, but it is a rallying call to regroup and fight to the last breath.

This renewed fighting spirit immediately turned the tide of the battle. Now the British troops began to panic as they faced their enemies who turned back to fight them like men possessed.

Of course, you know who won the battle eventually.

What I am trying to illustrate is that the flag in the movie is like the staff of the Lord in Moses' hand as the Israelites battled the Amalekites. It's to draw attention to the presence, authority and power of God with them. You can say the staff is like a "war flag" to Israel in this battle—it serves as an emblem to rally or to regroup during a battle, or to declare to the troops of victory after the battle is fought and won. When it's raised high up, it sent this message to those who were fighting—"The Lord is with us. We rally to Him. We fight for Him. And He fights for us."

Finally in vv. 14-16, we come across a passage that may look vindictive. We're told that God's people were explicitly called to remember both God's deliverance and His judgment of the wicked. If you look at v. 14, God

pronounced a harsh judgment on the Amalekites. God was so serious about this that He told Moses—“Write this (i.e. the battle against the Amalekites and how they were defeated) 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 expanded on this in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 – “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. When the Lord your God gives you rest from all the enemies around you in the land he is giving you to possess as an inheritance, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!”

And Joshua was to be especially reminded of this. Why? Because he would be the one who would lead Israel into the Promised Land one day to fight the enemies of God’s people. These enemies would seem like giants to the people and they would be tempted to say, “We can’t fight them.” And so Joshua would need to remind himself and the people that the Lord was with them and would enable them to fight with and in His power as He had similarly done it for them at Rephidim.

In v. 15, as a testimony to the Lord’s power and providence, Moses erected not an altar of sacrifice, but a commemorative altar. It’s meant to remember the Lord’s work. And Moses named that altar as “The Lord is my Banner”—Jehovah Nissi (hapax legomenon—i.e. used only one time here in the whole OT). This name would serve as a constant reminder to the people that it was the Lord who fought for them and with them at Rephidim lest they forgot.

When Moses named the commemorative altar Jehovah Nissi—“The Lord is my Banner”, it was an affirmation that the Israelites were aligned with the Lord, that they fought under His authority and in His name, and that by His power and His strength they had attained the victory.

So, Jehovah Nissi presents us with the necessity and the challenge to define our allegiance:

- Are we living and serving under His authority, or are we not?
- Are we depending on His power, or are we fighting our battles in our own name, in our own strength, and under our own banner?

But there is also in Jehovah Nissi an anticipation of Jesus Christ to come.

Isaiah 11:10 says: “In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.” “Root” means descendant, branch of the family or stock. The Messianic king was to be of the family of Jesse the father of David. Jesus is a branch or descendant of the family of Jesse, as well as of David.

So here we understand that Jesus Christ is our “banner”. We belong to Jesus. We name Him as our Lord. We identify ourselves by His name. His name means salvation, security, victory and rest for all who acknowledge Him, and judgment for all who do not.

V. 16 reads: “... The Lord will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.” God reminded the Israelites that He would always be at war with the Amalekites. This battle at Rephidim was not going to be the last battle with them. Saul had to fight the Amalekites; David had to fight the Amalekites.

Amalek can represent the flesh, the world, and the evil one. This means you and I have to fight attacks from these sources as well.

To grow as Christ’s disciples, we must be united in and allegiant to Christ because He rallies us under His banner to battle and final victory over the “Amalek” of our time.

The victory and supremacy of God is fully and finally realized in Jesus Christ: in Him God is shown to have the supremacy and the victory over all that is opposed to Him.

Conclusion

Ex 17:8-16 is not an old battle story that is historical but of no relevance today. Rather, it is an old redemption story that is true and bears relevance for us today as the people of God in Jesus Christ.

The lifted hands of God’s redeemed people in today’s text remind us of three things as we live as Christ’s disciples:

- We need to resist the godless and the ungodly. Most of all, we need to fight the old life in the flesh within ourselves.
- We need one other to encourage and to support one another as we fight the good fight for the Lord and with the Lord.
- We need the Lord if we are to prevail. We rally under the banner of His name so that we can fight with His presence, with His authority, and with His power.

We will experience victory in the Lord when we live in obedience to Him, in partnership with His people, and in dependence on His power.

Amen!