

No Longer Slaves: the arms of Moses

The passage in today's study is justly famous, deceptively simple, and decidedly problematic. Read it: Exodus 17:8-16.

Some old enemies (Amalekites, semi-nomadic raiders descended from Esau) show up to attack Israel, and Moses, recognizing the need for intercessory prayer, delegates the battle to Joshua and ascends a hill. He raises two arms in supplication ("Come to our aid, Lord!"), or one with the staff outstretched, declaring God's powerful intervention ("Let the armies of God contend with our enemy!"); in either case, God's power is released to strengthen Joshua and his army. But with arms lowered, the Amalekites have the edge. Strengthened by his companions, the upraised arms of Moses are "steadiness until the sun set" (Exodus 17:12). Thus the battle is won, and found to be the Lord's all along (17:14-16). To mark the Lord's intention to wipe out the Amalekites altogether is the first act of writing commissioned in the Bible.

1. Which parts of this story are familiar to you, and which are "new"?
2. What stands out to you most, and why?

We'll pick up the (decidedly problematic!) challenge of God's genocidal intent in a later study (promise!). For now, as we go a little deeper, it's worth recalling the larger picture. Israel have been rescued from slavery in Egypt, but are far from ready to enter the land of promise. In the wilderness God sets about forming them into a people able to inherit the land. Every episode is thus a lesson, certainly for Israel, often for Israel's leaders, and always for us (1 Corinthians 10:1-5). The primary questions are therefore:

3. What is the Lord setting out to teach Israel?
4. What is the Lord setting out to teach Israel's leaders?

The lesson for Israel is stark. Your eyes see only so much. The battle for survival takes place on earth, but is fought decisively in heaven (read Ephesians 6:10-13, 18), where the Lord has his own plan of action. You call on the Lord in prayerful and persistent intercession: you win. You neglect to do so: you lose. Bring the lesson to bear on your lived reality:

5. What are the "struggles for survival" you face, whether individually or with others?
6. What role does intercessory prayer play in the struggle?
7. What would it be like to pray continuously (1 Thessalonians 5:17) alongside the struggle?

One of the striking features of this episode is the division of labour. It seems there is a real partnership between intercessory prayer and the visceral work of battle. All of us are called to prayer - particularly in an age where the Spirit is poured out on everyone in Christ (Acts 2:16-18), not just prophets (Moses), priests (Aaron) and kingly figures (Hur is from the royal tribe of Judah). Nonetheless, there is a special call on leaders to anchor their own work and alongside the struggle of others through intercessory prayer.

8. When do you seek the prayerful support of leaders?
9. How could you encourage your leaders in the work of prayer?

The lesson for leaders then and now emerges from the long day, in which the octogenarian Moses runs out of juice. Leadership is tiring, and the work of prayer is demanding. Though Moses shows wisdom in taking Aaron and Hur with him, he seems intent on doing it all himself, even risking the battle when his arms flag. It is his companions that find him a stone and get him to sit, and only then – when they give him steadfast aid – are his arms “steadiness until the sun set”.

10. Why did Moses insist on standing, and persist so long in keeping his arms aloft by himself?
11. What do you insist on doing by yourself, even if you’re not up to it without help?
12. What would it mean for others to hold your arms aloft?

The lesson, then, for leaders: you’re not enough, and you don’t need to be. Recognize your limits, and let others be a strength to you. In all things, and not least in the work of prayer.

Finish by bringing to the Lord a struggle in your lived reality, whether in your family or relationships, or in your workplace, or in your community, or beyond. Lift your arms up and call on the Lord to intervene. Then stretch out your hand, imagining the scene of conflict, and declare the power of God at work. If you are with others, let them agree with you in prayer, as if you were Moses, and they were Aaron and Hur.