

The Songs of Moses and Miriam

Exodus 15:1-21

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Exodus chapter 15. Verses 1 through 18 of this great chapter record for us the song of Moses and the people of Israel. Verse 21 is ascribed to Miriam and the women folk of Israel who apparently sing an antiphonal response to Moses and the men. Collectively this whole song from verse 1 to 21 is known as the song at the sea. The *Shirat ha-Yam* or the *Shirah* to the ancient children of Israel. Verses 19 and 20 are the only prose portions of this passage. They reflect on and recount what Moses said from verses 1 through 18 and they introduce the poetic rendering we find in verse 21. Miriam's brief song, you'll notice in verse 21 is identical to the opening lines of Moses' song, and it may well be short hand for a complete repetition of the song of Moses and the men. Let's look at the contents very briefly to give you an idea of the flow of this great song.

Verses 1 through 12 deal with the exodus event itself, now past. The children of Israel have been brought through the waters in the greatest single event showing forth the redemption of God in the old covenant period, and so those verses concentrate on that even which has now come to pass. Then verses 13 through 18 look forward to God conquering the land of Canaan and bringing the children of Israel into that land. That is a future event, it has not yet occurred at the time that the children of Israel sing of it.

Now outlining the passage is somewhat of a challenge, but again look at the content. If you look at verses 1 through 10 you'll see an emphasis on God's great triumph over the Egyptians. In verses 11 through 13 we have an emphasis on the incomparability of God, in verses 14 through 16 Moses sings of the impact of the deeds of God on the peoples around them, the Philistines, the Moabites, the various peoples of the land trembled when they see the deeds of God. Then in verses 17 and 18 he points to the future things that the Lord is going to do for Israel.

If we were to look at this passage purely from a poetic perspective, it seems that verses 1 through 6 are the first stanza, verses 7 through 11 are the second stanza, verses 12 through 16 are the third stanza. Verses 17 and 18 give us an epilogue to the previous three stanzas, and verses 19 through 21 provide the refrain. It's that five part outline that I am going to us as we go through this

passage tonight, verses 1 through 6, the first stanza, verses 7 through 11 the second stanza, verses 12 through 16 the third stanza, then 17 and 18, the epilogue and 19 through 21 the refrain. That, as a little bit of background for introduction, let's turn to God's word and hear it.

You know many of us have favorite hymns, some of those hymns are great hymns of church history, like "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" based on Psalm 46, others of them are gospel songs of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. One of the big differences between a traditional hymn and a gospel hymn is that a gospel song often times focus on our experience, where as hymns are intentionally God's word. That is, the focus of the hymn is to give praise to God, to give the focus of the singer upon the nature, the person, the actions, the promises of God. Whereas gospel songs often meditate upon our own experience, they talk about the benefits of the Lord to us; they talk about our experience of the Lord.

Well, if we were going to characterize the contents of this song it would certainly be a God-ward hymn. The song at the sea is a song that is essentially about God. Often times when we are reading the great literature, especially of the early medieval period, when we're reading classics of our western tradition, and great victories have been won, various epic poems will be written to celebrate the exploits of some great hero, whether it be Beowulf, or perhaps Henry V, or whether it is some other great leader. It's interesting that there is no mention of Moses in this song. This is not merely an epic written by Israel about the chief human actor in God's work of redemption. In fact, Moses never features in this song. This song is about God, its contents are about God, its context is about God, its focus is on God and its reason is founded in God. It is radically God-centered and its thrust and goal are the honor and glory of God. I'd like to walk through this great song with you tonight because I think there are several great lessons to learn about our redeemer and His redemption.

I. Redemption ought to move us to praise.

The first thing I want you to see, you'll find in verses 1 through 6. Here again Moses emphasizes that the Lord alone is redeemer and God. In verses 1 through 6, Moses emphasizes in this song that the Lord alone is our redeemer and God. Redemption ought to move us to praise just as in the song, which the ensemble sang, "How can we keep from singing when we see the redemption of our God?" This is precisely the response of the children of Israel. This is the first recorded song of the Hebrew nation and it is a song about the defining event of the Hebrew nation, it is a song sung by the redeemed to the Redeemer about the redemption. This is not only informative, but also controlling for our own worship. Moses, far from being an object of adoration or an object of admiration in this song, Moses is the chief worshipper. He is deflecting any attention away from himself and he is focusing that attention on the one who is the true source of the

deliverance of Israel and that is God. The singers, who comprised the redeemed, we are told if you look at verse one, sing to the Lord, the central person of this song, the Lord himself. The Lord himself is central to this event of praise. Worship, you see, is about God and that's a message that is often lost in this day and time.

I have a dear friend who ministers in Savannah, Georgia at the Independent Presbyterian Church. Terry Johnson grew up in California and he grew up in the Bible churches that were influenced by John MacArthur and there was a wonderful emphasis on expository preaching. But the worship services were basically focused upon evangelism. And so Terry had in view that what you went to worship for, what you went to church for, was to evangelize. And then he became part of broadly charismatic seeker churches where fellowship was the main reason you went to church. Then he went to England and he began to study at Trinity College in Bristol and over the course of a semester he attended an Anglican church with a very formal liturgy and he hated it. He said to several of his friends, "No wonder there are not very many people in England who go to church with a boring service like this." Then he said after about six months it dawned upon him as he was again reading from the common book of prayer, that the reason that you go to church is to worship God. He said, "I felt like I was a novice. I felt like I was years and years behind because that was so obvious, but it had eluded me entirely in my Christian experience." Well, this song is a song that calls us to that reality. The reason that we gather as the people of God is to worship the living God.

Notice again in verse 1 that we're told why the Lord is worshiped. The Lord is praised for His redemption. "I will sing to the Lord for He is highly exalted. The horse and rider he has hurled into the sea." That, for us, is how the psalms always introduce to us the reason why we praise God. This morning we opened our worship with number 1 in your hymnals. Take it out and take a look at it. This is a metrical rendering of Psalm 100. I want you to look at the fourth stanza because it's catching this very point. This is how the Psalter renders this line from Psalm 100. "For why?" Now what's that question? The question is why should we praise the Lord? Why should all people that all people on the Earth do dwell sing to the Lord with cheerful voice? "For why? The Lord our God is good, His mercy is forever sure His truth at all times firmly stood and shall from age to age endure." That's why, for why is a beautiful way to render this very term that we find here in verse 1 of Exodus chapter 15. We praise God because He is highly exalted in His victory over Pharaoh and his army and his chariots.

This verse, if we go on to verse 2, connects this confession of God with praise. Look at the language, "the Lord is my strength and song and He has become my salvation. This is my God and I will praise Him. My fathers God and I will extol Him." So, Moses acknowledges God as his strength. God alone has won the battle and he acknowledges God as his song, the reason for, the object of his joy, and he acknowledges God as the cause. He's the source of deliverance and

redemption, and in response to this confession, he gives praise, he renders up a doxology and he says, not only is this my God, but this is my father's God.

Now, remember this is an important assertion for the children of Israel because he is connecting the worship of the God of Israel with the worship of the patriarchs all the way back to Abraham. This is not some new god who has never been heard of before. This is the same one true God who revealed Himself to Abraham and Isaiah and to Jacob and now to us here at the Exodus and these realities are followed up with this doxology, this praise of the God of the Exodus. "He's the same God our forefathers worshiped and I'm going to worship Him too," Moses says.

In verse 3, Moses acknowledges God to be a warrior and he affirms that His name is the Lord. This is an ironic declaration, because you'll remember all the way back at the beginning of the exodus experience, Pharaoh said, "You know I've never even heard of the Lord, who is this Lord that you're talking about?" Well, now Pharaoh has learned that this Lord is a warrior and this Lord is God and Moses is declaring it. By the way, notice again in verse 4 that throughout the song, and especially in verse 4, Moses declares God to be the soul source of victory over Egypt at the sea. This song is about Him; the redemption is about Him.

Verse 5 recounts the fate of the Egyptians and it uses language that reminds us of the depth of the abyss mentioned back in the creation account in Genesis chapter 1. And once more Moses wraps up this stanza in verse 6 by asserting that the right hand of the Lord, that is, the might of the Lord, the power of the Lord has accomplished all this. So, realizing that the Lord alone is Redeemer, realizing the Lord alone is God, prompts the praise of Moses and Israel. They can not but sing to the Lord because of who He is.

How much greater should the response of God's people be to His redemption. Because He alone is redeemer, because the redemption is accomplished by Him alone, because salvation is entirely from Him alone, the people of God praise Him.

II. Redemption ought to move us to meditation on and utter loyalty to God

In verses 7 through 11, we see a second thing, here the truth that the Lord is incomparable is stressed. Redemption ought to move us to meditate on God; it ought to move us to utter loyalty to God. Moses says in verse 7 that because of God's excellent greatness He overthrows the rebellious. His activity in this exodus event, the fact that He is the moving force, is emphasized throughout verses 7 through 11. In verse 8 especially, I want you to see, God Himself is pictured as the source of the east wind that had opened the sea. This is no naturalistic event, this is an action of God's miraculous and divine providence,

and notice also the irony of the vow of the enemies of Israel in verse 9. The enemy's vow is ironic. Egypt did pursue and did overtake Israel, but Egypt did not spoil or gratify his desire, or destroy Israel. In fact, Israel did all three of those latter things to Egypt, though Egypt had boasted that she would do it to Israel. The emphasis throughout, then, is on the incomparability of God, there is nothing like Him. God's work of redemption shows Him to be unlike any other god, not just in His majesty and in His holiness, but in His aid to His people. He cares about His people, and surely above even this, the display of God's majesty and His excellence, and His holiness in the sacrifice to the Lord Jesus Christ manifest that there is no god like Him. There is no story like the gospel, there is no reality like the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it provokes the praises of Israel.

III. Redemption focuses us on God's love.

Look at verses 12 through 16, and we'll see a third thing. Here a very important assertion is made about the source of salvation. Moses sings that the loving kindness of the Lord is the source of our redemption. Redemption, you see, focuses us on God's love. The Egyptians, we are told, they are gulped down by the earth in verse 12, but in verse 13, what is the source of the salvation, what is the source of the redemption of Israel? It is in God's lovingkindness, God's *chesed*, God's covenant love. You'll find the Bible translations in the Old Testament grasping to try and do justice to that great word. Sometimes they'll call it His everlasting love, sometimes they'll call it His unending love, sometimes they'll dump the words loving and kindness into one another and call it, lovingkindness, sometimes they'll call it covenant love, but it speaks of that love of God which is incomparable. It is God's unending covenant love for His people, and the reality of that love is fleshed out in the rest of verse 13.

Notice that He leads His people like a Shepherd. He redeems His people as if He were *goel*, their kinsman redeemer. He guides His people by His strength, and He leads them to His dwelling place, first, Mount Sinai where He meets with them, eventually Zion itself and the Promised Land. The result of all this, Moses tells us in verses 14 through 16, is that the people around fear God. We know this is the case, because in Joshua chapter 9, the Gibeonites confessed to Moses, or to Joshua and the children of Israel that indeed all the peoples in the land of Canaan had trembled when they heard what God had done at the Red Sea. But Moses' point here is that God's covenant love is the soul source of salvation for His people. His love is His relentless commitment to fulfill His promises and to show His goodness to His people, and this song focuses on God's love.

IV. Redemption itself manifests the Kingship of God and commits us to acknowledge it.

In verses 17 and 18, the kingship of the Lord is asserted, and Moses makes it clear that the Lord Himself is King. In redemption the kingship of God is manifested and that manifestation of the kingship of God commits us to acknowledge it. Moses in verse 17 speaks of the Lord bringing the children of Israel into the land and granting them their inheritance. He's looking forward, of course, to the land of Canaan and even to the establishment of the temple. Notice that God in salvation doesn't just bring us out, He also brings us in. His concern is not merely to bring us out of the world, but into the kingdom of His marvelous light. Not simply to separate us from sin, but to unite us to Himself and to His people that we might partake of His blessings and His holiness. So there is always that two-fold aspect of redemption, being brought out of sin, out of the world into His kingdom, into holiness, into fellowship.

But in verse 18, Moses asserts that the Lord reigns and His reign is unending. This is an explicit exertion of the kingship of the Lord. Have you ever wondered why Samuel was so upset when the children of Israel said to him, "You know Samuel, we've noticed that all the countries around us have a king, we'd like to have a king too." Have you ever wondered why Samuel was so upset? Well, he was so upset because God was the king of Israel, and for Israel to say, "You know Samuel, we'd like to have a king like them." Well, as far as Samuel is concerned, that is a tacit rejection of the reign of the Lord in Israel, and isn't that what the whole exodus event was about? Pharaoh wanted the children of Israel to serve him, but God liberated the children of Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh so that they might serve Him in freedom. So, the whole exodus was about the kingship of God, that God would be Israel's king. It shows His care and His concern for His people and it highlights this issue of our service, so Moses sings of the kingship of God.

V. Redemption is the vehicle for the display of God's glory.

Then finally in verses 19 through 21, we see, again, the Lord manifesting His transcendence in His deeds of redemption. Redemption is a vehicle for the display of God's glory. Verse 19 recapitulates and summarizes the song that has been sung in verses 1 through 18, and once again Moses contrasts the forces of Egypt, arrayed against God and shows the victory of God over Egypt.

Then we're told in verse 20 that Miriam and the women sing and dance. She's called a prophetess, although that word is not explained here, that's a term that's used for Deborah and for Holda, and for other women in the Old Testament. She brings out a timbrel. It's a very interesting name for this instrument. By the way, you know that the Hebrews had a pension in their naming of instruments for onomatopoeia, it reads like it sounds. Well, the name of this instrument is literally in Hebrew, *the thump*, and so you get of idea that this is some sort of tambourine, it's some sort of a skin stretched over an instrument and it makes a

thumping noise. It's sort of a hand drum of some sort. And she and the women come out and they dance. Dancing was common at occasions of victory in the Old Testament, though not in worship occasions, very interestingly. In times of national victory there would be dancing along with singing, but not in liturgical occasions in the Old Testament.

At any rate in verse 21, Miriam focuses on the Lord and on His greatness and on His redemption, because God's works of redemption not only serve to bless His people, but they serve a greater end to exhibit His glory. Our redemption, marvelous as it is for us, has an even greater goal, and that goal is to display the glory of God. And He manifests that glory; He is highly exhaled even in His work of redemption for His people. This is the outline of this great song. We can't do justice to it tonight, but it provokes us doesn't it? To go again and to reconsider that central act of redemption in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and to heed the exhortation of the psalmist to sing to the Lord a new song.

Isn't it interesting this very song, we are told in the book of Revelation, will be sung in Heaven, but when this song is sung in Heaven, it will be accompanied by a new and a greater song, which is the song of the lamb. We will hymn Him as He sits in the center of the throne and receive the accolades and the honor of the nations. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, You are our strength and song. In those moments when we doubt that, we pray that You would bring to mind this Your word, and by Your spirit that You would strengthen our faith to believe and that You would grant us the grace to sing to the Lord the new song. In Jesus name. Amen.

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