

The Song of the Redeemed

Exodus 15:1-21

Why does the church sing? Have you ever thought about how weird it is that whenever Christians gather on Sunday morning, and sometimes in other venues throughout the week, we spend at least a third of our time singing together? No other community gathering really does that. A summer camp might include a few cheesy camp songs, or maybe you're part of a choir that exists primarily for singing. But when you gather for a staff meeting at work, your boss doesn't pass out song books and lead you in a rousing chorus of "We Are the Champions." You don't start your school day by singing the glories of Natick High or Framingham High or whatever school you attend. You might listen to music at a restaurant or at the gym, but you don't stand and sing together. Even attending a concert is more about watching someone else perform more than participating ourselves.

So why do Christians sing? It's not because we're all musicians. Some of us are, but some of us can't carry a tune in a bucket. That doesn't stop us from singing our hearts out—nor should it! It's not because we really like music, though I suspect many of us do. It's not even because the church has always done this. Congregational singing actually fell out practice prior to the Reformation; it was Luther who reintroduced it to the church.¹

The truth is, there are several reasons we spend a significant amount of our time together in song.² But some of the most fundamental reasons are what we see here in Exodus 15: we sing because we have been saved, and we can't help it. We sing to remember our salvation. And we sing because God our Savior is uniquely worthy of our praise.

These are the reasons we find Israel singing on the shores of the Red Sea in Exodus 15. If you're just joining us, we've been working our way through the book of Exodus, and last week we witnessed God's decisive defeat of Egypt. God's people Israel had been enslaved by Egypt for centuries—tortured, beaten, forced into hard labor, systematically murdered. But God came down to rescue them. He raised up his servant Moses to lead them out. He humbled Egypt through great signs and wonders, a series of plagues. He redeemed his people, protecting them from the judgment he poured out on Egypt by giving them the Passover Lamb. And as we saw last week, he saved them in order to demonstrate his own glory and power. God led them to the edge of the Red Sea, where it looked like all hope was lost as the Egyptian army caught up to them and pinned them down. But God parted the sea, where Israel went through on dry ground, and Egypt followed, only to be drowned when the sea came crashing back down. As ch. 14:30-31 summarized, "Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and

¹ See Collin Hansen, "[The Reformation Changed the Way We Sing](#)," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, Feb. 8, 2017.

² A few helpful summaries include Paul S. Jones, *What is Worship Music?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010); Keith Getty, "[Why Congregational Singing Matters Now More than Ever](#)," *The Gospel Coalition Blog*, Jan. 14, 2017; Bob Kauflin, "[The Three R's: Why Christians Sing](#)," *Desiring God Blog*, March 30, 2011.

Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.”

And what happens next in the story has been accused of being a later addition, or an awkward insertion (what’s a poem all of a sudden doing in a narrative?). But in reality, what happens next is the *only* thing that ought to happen next: Israel sings praise to God.

This morning I want to look at both why Israel sings and what Israel sings, and then how that guides and motivates us today. We’ll start with why Israel sings.

Why Does Israel Sing?

Bob Kauflin, a worship leader and author of several of the songs we sing on Sunday mornings, offers three reasons for why Christians sing: to remember God’s Word, to respond to God’s grace, and to reflect God’s glory.³ These are helpful categories, and we see them all in Exodus 15.

The most immediately prominent reason is Kauflin’s second: singing helps us respond to God’s grace. Look at Exodus 15:1: “Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying, ‘I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.’” This song is a direct response or reaction to God’s saving work for Israel. Phil Ryken explains,

Chapter 14 is the story of Israel’s salvation: the flight from Egypt, the passage through the sea, and so on. But salvation always demands a response—a response of praise that is most suitably expressed in song. Therefore, the Song of Moses—the song of salvation—was not merely appropriate at this point in the exodus—it was mandatory.⁴

Israel sings in response to God’s great work of salvation. They can’t help but praise him.

And praise is quite natural. C.S. Lewis wrote, “All enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise unless . . . shyness or the fear of boring others is deliberately brought in to check it. The world rings with praise—lovers praising their [sweethearts], readers their favourite poet, walkers praising the countryside.”⁵ Vaughan Roberts adds, “The Christian’s praise of God should be just as natural. We should be so excited about who God is and what he has done for us that we want to tell others.”⁶

If your tire blows out on 128, and a patrolman pulls up behind you to protect you from traffic, and then changes your tire for you, you don’t have to be told to say thank you; it just comes out. If you get caught in a rip tide at the beach, and a lifeguard rushes in after you and pulls you to safety, what’s the first think you do when you see a friend? Tell them about it—how awesome the lifeguard is. You’ll probably post a selfie on Instagram, together with the lifeguard, your hero. You don’t have to be told to praise when someone saves you. How much more when God saves us from sin, evil, and hell?

³ Bob Kauflin, , “[The Three R’s: Why Christians Sing](#),” *Desiring God Blog*, March 30, 2011.

⁴ Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 368.

⁵ C.S. Lewis, as cited in Vaughan Roberts, “The Place of Music and Singing in Church,” *The Theologian*, 2005.

⁶ Roberts.

And so praising God is a natural, really non-optional response to God's saving work. It gives a collective voice to the community of the redeemed. That was true for Israel at the Red Sea; it's true for us before the cross. And one of the most appropriate and meaningful ways of expressing our praise is through *song*. Again, Roberts writes, "If it is natural to praise, it is also natural to sing. James writes [in ch. 5:13]: 'Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise' (Jas. 5:13). Singing is one of the ways in which we express our emotions."⁷ Emotions of gratitude, humility, joy, and love, as we respond to God's grace.

Kauflin's first reason is also true of Exodus 15, that "singing helps us remember God's Word." As we're going to see, the Song of Moses here is not just a declaration of how great God is; it's also a rehearsal of what God has done. The song tells the story. And in telling the story, we not only praise God for it, we remember it. We pass it on to the next generation. Think how much easier it is to remember something when we learn it to song. Sometimes things we want to forget, but can't, because the song gets in our head. Most of us learned the ABC's not by memorizing a chart, or drilling with flashcards, but by singing. So it is with the faith. Singing helps us remember God's Word.

Kauflin's third reason applies, too, and is really the most important: "singing helps us reflect God's glory." It is a way of magnifying God, of giving him the glory he deserves. We sing because we have been saved, to remember that we are saved, but ultimately because God our Savior is *uniquely worthy of our praise*.

And that gets at the heart of what praise is. Praise is not just saying the phrase "praise the LORD." We do that a lot ("praise God!"), which is fine. But the phrase, "praise the LORD," which is a translation of the Hebrew *hallelujah*, is actually a command. It's not really an expression of praise, but a command *to* praise—that is, to describe what God is like (his worthiness and his attributes) or to declare what God has done (his works or his acts).⁸ That is praise—describing what God is like and declaring what he has done in order to make much of God and his reputation.

We sing to God to reflect his glory. Which is what we were made to do. Again, Roberts writes:

When we praise God we are engaged in the activity which is most authentically human, for we are doing that for which we were created. We are made in God's image to reflect his majesty. God's goal in calling us to belong to him as Christians is that we might be "for the praise of his glory" [Eph. 1:6, 12, 14]. . . . 'A song of praise is like a mirror we hold up to God, reflecting his glory back to himself.'⁹

Why does Israel sing? Because they can't help but respond to God's saving work, because they want to remember his saving work, and in order to ascribe to God the glory he deserves.

But *what* does Israel sing? In what does their praise consist? Let's take a closer look at ch. 15 and the words of the song itself.

⁷ Roberts.

⁸ These categories are derived from a lecture on Psalm 113 by V. J. Steiner, Lincoln, Nebr., Jan. 29, 2003.

⁹ Roberts, citing Richard Simkin.

What Does Israel Sing?

The song itself flows more like a hymn than a modern chorus; there's no repeated refrain or chorus you keep coming back to. There do seem to be four "verses," if you will—four stanzas. The first is very much an introduction to the song, vv. 1-3. The second stanza rehearses the story of God's recent triumph over Egypt in saving his people (vv. 4-10). The third stanza is really the centerpiece of it all, the crescendo; it's a burst of praise for God's unique majesty and power to save (vv. 11-13). Then finally the fourth stanza looks forward in anticipation of God's triumph yet to come, when Israel enters into the land God has promised and God's reign is established forever (vv. 14-18). And then there's an encore performance as the women reprise the song in v. 21, led by Miriam, Moses' sister.

And as we'll see, each stanza, in giving praise to God, either describes what God is like (his worthiness and attributes) or declares what God has done (his works or acts), and sometimes both, with the whole thing focused on the triumph of God.

But here's the deal: songs are meant to be sung, not explained. This is the language of the heart as much if not more than the language of the intellect. And so I'm not going to kill the song, treating it like a specimen on a lab table, dissecting and explaining every little detail. We're going to sing it in a little bit. A friend of mine, who preached through this song several years ago, set the words to an existing hymn, and we're going to sing that hymn together at the conclusion of the sermon.¹⁰

But with any song, it's important to think about what we're singing. It does the heart little good to sing if the mind doesn't understand what's being sung. And so I want to offer a few brief comments on the meaning of the song, with a few reflections on how that guides and motivates us today, before we lift our voices together once again. First, the melody . . .

The Melody: The Strength and Majesty of God

The melody of this song, the main theme that holds it together and flows throughout each stanza, is the strength and majesty of God. Those are notes that you hear repeated over and over again:

- "I will sing to the LORD, for he has *triumphed gloriously*" (v. 1)
- "The LORD is my *strength* and my song" (v. 2)
- "The LORD is a *man of war*" (v. 3)
- "*Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy*" (v. 6)
- "In the *greatness of your majesty* you overthrow your adversaries" (v. 7)
- "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, *majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?*" (v. 11)
- "You stretched out *your right hand*; the earth swallowed them." (v. 12)
- "you have guided [your people] *by your strength* to your holy abode" (v. 13)
- "because of *the greatness of your arm*, [the nations] are still as stone" (v. 16)
- "The LORD will *reign* forever and ever" (v. 18)

¹⁰ See Douglas Sean O'Donnell, *God's Lyrics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

This is what God is like: unparalleled in his strength, unique in his majesty, unmatched in glory, triumphant over his enemies. This is the song of the redeemed. It's not focused on us; it's focused on God. He wrote the plan, he did the work, he gets the credit and glory.

The Accents: Judgment and Mercy

But there are two ways in which this melody is accented in the song. Two ways that God's majesty and strength are illustrated or described—by his judgment and his mercy. And of those two, judgment is the overwhelmingly predominant accent here.

We see it in the introduction, v. 1: "I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; *the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.*" We see it in the entire second stanza, vv. 4-10, where the story we just read is recounted in poetic form.

Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,
 and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.
 The floods covered them;
 they went down into the depths like a stone.
 Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
 your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.
 In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;
 you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.
 At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;
 the floods stood up in a heap;
 the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea. (vv. 4-8)

And lest we forget why, v. 9 reminds us of Egypt and Pharaoh's arrogant presumption not only that they could steal God's children and enslave them, but that they could defeat God himself in battle. "The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, *my* desire shall have its fill of them. I will draw my sword; *my* hand shall destroy them.'" Pharaoh thought he was God.

But the LORD demonstrates his unique majesty and strength through judgment. "You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters" (v. 10; cf. v. 12). And he is worthy to be praised for that. Which feels kind of strange for us. We don't sing about God's judgment very often. And if our goals were to gloat over our enemies, or to revel in revenge, or tear others down in order to feel better about ourselves, it would be completely out of place. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us (Matt.5:44).

But praising God for executing judgment is not the same as wishing it upon specific people. It is to long for justice in this fallen world, for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, and to exalt in the only God who has the strength and majesty to establish it. Evil will not win; praise God for that! The songs of Scripture do all the time (e.g. Jdg. 5:31; 1 Sam. 2:3-4, 10; Hab. 3:6; 2 Sam. 22:44-51; Lk. 1:51-55; Rev. 18:20; 19:1-5). Violence, abuse, greed, racism, oppression, selfishness, slander, idolatry, malice, exploitation, envy, and all forms of evil *will be brought to rights*. They will come under judgment, either in the end when Christ returns, or in advance through the blood of the cross. In the cross God was judging sin, and Christ took that judgment

in our place. Just like the Passover Lamb taking the place of the firstborn. The melody of God's majesty and strength is accented with a declaration of just judgment.

But don't forget that in judging Egypt, God was saving Israel. In the cross, as God judged sin, he was saving sinners. And God's majesty and strength are also accented by his mercy. We see this in v. 2: "The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him." We see it in v. 13: "You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode." And Israel saw God's mercy not just by looking back to the exodus, but by looking forward with the eyes of faith to what God will yet do for them in his power—v. 17: "You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established."

The Coda: The Legacy of God's Majesty and Strength

And that brings us to the coda, if you will. The fourth stanza is a bit like a coda to the song—an addition to the basic structure that brings it all to conclusion. Again, the melody dominates: God's majesty and strength are on display. But we see them not only by looking back, but also by looking ahead, as God leads his people through the wilderness to the place he is giving them, the place where he will dwell with them and make his special presence known.

God's reputation precedes him. It's not just Egypt and Israel who have seen it, but the surrounding nations will all hear of what God has done and will tremble. "Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased" (v. 16). His plans will succeed; he will plant his people on his holy mountain. And his kingdom will reign forever and ever (v. 18).

Sometimes our praise declares what God has done; sometimes it declares in faith what he will yet do, with the confidence from what he has already done. Not unlike some of our songs today—"On Jordan's stormy banks I stand, and cast a wishful eye to Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie. I am bound for the promised land."¹¹ "When we've been there 10,000 years, bright shining as the sun; we've no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun."¹²

Israel sings because they have been saved, and can't help but praise. They sing to remember their salvation—describing what God is like and declaring what he has done, and will yet do through his own strength and glory. And they sing because the LORD is uniquely worthy of praise for his triumphant act of salvation.

Why We Sing

And it's for the very same reasons that God's people still sing today. To respond to God's grace. In Christ, we have been saved. We who were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we once

¹¹ Samuel Stennett, "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," 1787.

¹² John Newton, "Amazing Grace," 1779.

walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. . . . But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved . . . through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:1-5, 8-9).

Jesus Christ did for us what we could never do for ourselves in living a righteous life on our behalf, then giving that life for us on the cross, and then taking it up again for us in the resurrection. And so we sing!

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?¹³

We sing because we have been saved. And we sing to remember our salvation. To tell the story. The story of Christ:

In Christ alone, Who took on flesh,
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
Scorned by the ones He came to save.
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied;
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live.¹⁴

We sing the story of Christ. And we sing the story of our salvation in Christ.

I once was lost in darkest night
Yet thought I knew the way
The sin that promised joy and life
Had led me to the grave . . .
But as I ran my hell-bound race
Indifferent to the cost
You looked upon my helpless state
And led me to the cross
And I beheld God's love displayed
You suffered in my place

¹³ Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be," 1738.

¹⁴ Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, "In Christ Alone," 2001.

You bore the wrath reserved for me
Now all I know is grace¹⁵

We sing because we've been saved. We sing to remember our salvation. And we sing because God is uniquely worthy of praise, in all his majesty and strength.

Crown Him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon His throne;
Hark! How the heav'nly anthem drowns
All music but its own!
Awake, my soul and sing
Of Him Who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity.¹⁶

And for these reasons the church will keep on singing, even into glory. In Revelation 15, the Song of Moses is still being sung:

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed." (Rev. 15:3-4)

And so we sing it today: "My Strength, My Song, My Salvation."¹⁷

I sing unto the Lord for He
has triumphed gloriously,
the horse, the rider, He has thrown
into the blood red sea.

My strength, my song, my salvation,
this is my God "the LORD."
I will exalt Him, praise Him till
His name be all adored.

Our enemies went down unto
the depths just like a stone.
But You, O God, have raised us up
unto Thy mountain throne.

They tremble (all the nations do).
They melt before His fame.
But we with one voice shout aloud,
"Our Lord will ever reign."

¹⁵ Jordan Kauflin, "All I Have Is Christ," 2008.

¹⁶ Matthew Bridges, "Crown Him with Many Crowns," 1851.

¹⁷ Douglas O'Donnell, 2007.

Has not the Christ so rescued us,
and saved us from the flood,
of judgement from the hand of God,
with hands that flowed with blood?

Great and amazing are Your deeds.
Let all the nations see.
O Lord Almighty, just and true,
to You we bow the knee.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. If you brought a friend one Sunday who had never once been to church, and they asked you why so much of the service was singing together, how would you explain it?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What happened before our passage that helps us understand what's going on here?
3. According to the song itself, why is Israel signing?
4. What is Israel singing about? What words or ideas are repeated in this passage that might help us understand what the author is emphasizing?
5. What would you say is the main point or theme of the song?
6. How would you break down the structure of the song (think stanzas or verses)? How is the main point emphasized uniquely in each stanza or verse?
7. What does this song teach us about God?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. What surprises you about the song? What resonates with you?
9. How does this song relate to what God has done for us in Christ?
10. Spend time in prayer (or song) praising God together—describing what he is like (his worthiness and attributes) and declaring what he has done (his work or acts).