

Sermon 46, The Song of the Sea, Exodus 15:1-21

Proposition: The song of the sea celebrates Yahweh's victory and Yahweh's rule, thereby teaching us to do the same.

- I. Who Should Sing?, vv. 1, 20
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 - B. Israel's Sons
 - C. Miriam the Prophetess
 - D. Israel's Daughters
- II. How Should You Sing?, v. 20
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Song of the Sea is one of the four major songs in the Pentateuch, and the only one that does not speak of the latter days. The other songs are the blessing of the patriarchs in Genesis 49, the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32, and the blessing of the 12 tribes in Deuteronomy 33. The first and last songs in the Torah, then, are about the twelve tribes and what will befall them in the latter days. The two middle songs, of which this is the first, sing about God and His glory and might. This song, in particular, is a song of praise to Yahweh for His victory at the Red Sea, and it climaxes in a celebration of His rule. This is the first time the Bible says that the LORD reigns — but it is not the last. Because this song celebrates Yahweh's victory and Yahweh's rule, it teaches us to do the same.

We're going to look at this song under the headings of who, how, what, and why, particularly as they apply to singing to the LORD, with the bulk of the sermon dedicated to the actual content of this song as a model for our own songs.

I. Who Should Sing?, vv. 1, 20

So first, as the text directs us, we need to look at who sang. When God delivered them from the waters of the Red Sea and from Pharaoh's horsemen and chariots, we are explicitly informed that three different individuals or groups participated in singing God's praise.

A. Moses

The first of these, of course, is Moses. Moses sang this song. What does this tell us? That the leaders of the people of God have a primary responsibility to sing the praises of Yahweh! There

has not arisen since a prophet like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face. You can hardly elevate Moses too highly. The gospels are magnificent books, but without the five books of Moses they would make little sense. Without Moses, everything else being equal, the Exodus would never have happened. And this is the one who stepped up to the microphone first and said “We are going to sing.”

Pastors, you need to sing! Elders, you need to sing! Parents, you need to sing! If you are someone with some authority or responsibility in the kingdom, be like Moses and teach your people to sing.

B. Israel’s Sons

Furthermore, the sons of Israel sang this song. You may say “I’m nobody special. I’m not Moses, I’m not a leader, not an officer, not a Sunday School teacher. I’m not even the secretary or janitor!” Well, you still need to sing. The sons of Israel, ordinary Joseph Israelite, sang lustily right along with Moses about God’s victory and God’s reign. And that means that you need to do so too.

C. Miriam the Prophetess

But it wasn’t just Moses and the sons who sang. It was also Miriam, the prophetess. Why is she called a prophetess here? Perhaps to indicate that it was she who composed the song. Notice how Aaron is mentioned, so that he too gets a little of the glory of leading the Red Sea crossing. But Miriam sang. And ladies, you need to sing too. Prophetesses or not, all the women went out after her.

D. Israel’s Daughters

Though Moses does not explicitly say it, I think he implies that all Israel’s daughters also sang, because they were dancing and playing instruments and Miriam answered them.

And so the whole congregation, men and women, leaders and followers, is described here as singing this song of praise to God for bringing them through the Red Sea. The whole crowd, all 2 million of them, was singing praise to God. As one commentator mentioned, forget the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. This choir is orders of magnitude larger, and it was composed of the whole congregation. And they were all singing about what God had done, His victory and His reign.

Well, that settles it. You are beneficiaries of an even greater redemption than Israel experienced. And therefore, you should be singing an even greater song than Israel sang.

II. How Should You Sing?, v. 20

How did Israel sing this song? The text tells us two things.

A. With Instruments

The first is that they used the instruments they had available, specifically a hand drum. It was probably not like the modern tambourine. It was a small drum, held in one hand and beaten with the other (so the method of playing was like the way a tambourine is played today). Does that mean that we ought to use this exact instrument? Not necessarily. The example of how the Israelites celebrated here does not apply directly to our corporate worship. It is, rather, an example of how God-fearing people celebrate redemption in their everyday lives. So this passage

does not directly address the question of instruments in worship. It only addresses the question of instruments in daily life, and answers it with an emphatic “yes!” Yes, you and I should use musical instruments to praise God according to our time, skills, and abilities.

B. With Dancing

The same goes for the whole human body. All the women, including Miriam, were beating drums and dancing in order to celebrate the salvation God had given them at the sea. As I said a moment ago, this is not talking about “Then they built the tabernacle and made dancing a key part of the worship rites there.” No. It’s saying that in their daily life, in ordinary time, the women of Israel danced in praise to God. And yes, if you have the ability to dance, you should do it in praise to God — not in church, but as you celebrate in your daily life His victory and His reign. I will point out that it doesn’t say that the men danced; indeed, throughout the OT it is exclusively young women who are depicted as dancing. That doesn’t mean that it’s wrong for men to dance. It’s just that most dancing as praise to God was done by women, then and now.

III. What Should You Sing?, vv. 1-18

Well, the major meat of the passage is obviously the body of the song itself. Let’s look at this and see what we ought to sing.

A. Exalt Yahweh for His Victories, vv. 1-10

First, brothers and sisters, you need to exalt Yahweh for His victories — His victory at the Red Sea, and His greater victory at the cross of Jesus Christ. This should be a major theme of your songs, around the house, in the shower, alone in the car, riding your bike, stuck in traffic, or wherever your activities take you. It is NOT fine to sing bawdy, rude, and suggestive songs. Those things should not even be named among Christians; if the world (not even the church; the world!) has labeled items on your playlist “explicit,” you are dishonoring God by what you’re choosing to sing and to listen to. Sexual immorality and impurity should not even be named among you, much less exalted by giving them elaborate musical, lyrical, choreographical, and cinematic settings!

In other words, the content of this song is a rebuke to our playlists. Whether you like highbrow sexual immorality (opera), or lowbrow (Eminem), you need to repent and start singing about the glory and praise of God. Notice what Israel sang about Him.

First, they announce that they will sing to Yahweh. He is the primary audience for their song. They sing about His victory over horse and rider (or driver, for you pedantic wretches out there). We sing to Yahweh because He won. Now, it’s fine to have compassion for the underdog, and God Almighty shares that compassion to some extent. Otherwise He would never have sent His Son to save you. But that compassion definitely has its limits too. After all, God is the ultimate winner, and He is also the one to whom our ultimate allegiance belongs. The greatest human skill in music, dance, choreography, and cinematography should be lavished on glorifying the name of Yahweh, who triumphed gloriously. In this regard, I highly recommend to you Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*, which contains a full choral setting of the Song of the Sea. It is magnificent, and it shows what high art in the service of the name of God can sound like, what

glories it can achieve in sounding the glories of the one who cast Pharaoh's army into the Red Sea.

Israel sang of Yahweh as their strength and song. We know what it means for God to be our strength. That is a declaration that whatever power we have comes from Him, and that without Him we are helpless. But what does it mean for Him to be our song? It means that He's the one who makes your heart sing. He's the one who makes you eager, ready, and willing to burst into song. How does Maria put it at the beginning of *The Sound of Music*? "My heart wants to soar like a bird that flies." That is what it means for God to be your song — in addition to, or rather, as a psychological dimension of the literal statement that God is the one you sing about.

Notice, too, that Israel claims Him. They name the terms of the covenant and claim its promise for themselves: "He is my God." Is He your God? Do you sing about how the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has become yours in His Son? Do you recognize that His covenant runs in families, that ideally if He is your God He will be your childrens' God too?

Then sing about how the LORD is a man of war. He is a mighty warrior— far mightier than the handpicked troops of Egypt, far mightier than the legions of Rome, far mightier than the forces of chaos and evil. It's proven by His act of casting Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen into the Red Sea and making them sink like stones. It was done by God's right hand. He separated the waters, congealed them, and blew with His wind-Spirit to cover the enemy with water once again. The waters of chaos are no match for Yahweh — but the Egyptians are no match for the waters of chaos.

The enemy is scary. Do you fear persecution? Do you self-censor in an effort to avoid persecution? Don't. Look at all the things Pharaoh was going to do. This is "me me me" all the way, five "I's" in a single verse. But God simply sunk them in the sea and led His people out on dry land.

B. Exalt Yahweh for His Protection, vv. 11-16

And then, as you're singing, pull out for a cosmic perspective. Forget God being mightier than Egypt; He is greater than all gods! The question "Who is like you?" is a superb question, because no matter where you look or how hard you search, you will find no one like Yahweh. He is irreplaceable. There is no substitute for the living God. Certainly among the other things that humanity has worshipped none can begin to compare to the living God. He is glorious in holiness. He is fearsome in praises. He does wonders. He protected Israel from Egypt, and He is leading them to dwell in His house forever. The down payment on that promise of heaven is the possession of Canaan, the Promised Land. Four different residents of some corner of Canaan or other — Philistia, Moab, Edom, and Canaan proper — are listed. And then the song announces that God is going to deal with all of them. Egypt sank like stones; the residents of Palestine will be still as a stone. For instance, in the days after crossing at Jericho, Israel was circumcised. They were helpless; a well-organized campaign by two or three Canaanite cities would have crushed them. But God ensured that that didn't happen. Yes, obviously the song is poetically exaggerating the passivity of the Canaanite nations. They were not pleased, and they tried to attack Israel in many different ways. But the point of the poetic expressions is that none of these

attacks was strong enough to be successful. God weakened the Canaanites to the extent that their puny forces were not an existential threat to the people of God.

God will deliver you from any threat, any persecution, any problem, if He so chooses. He has not promised that you'll have an easy life; in fact, He has promised the opposite of an easy life. But nonetheless, He is well able to deliver you and me from any threat or danger. The bigger point here is that no spiritual threat could prevent Israel from coming safely to Heaven, and no spiritual threat can stop us either (again, in both cases, not without our consent).

C. Exalt Yahweh for His Promise of Heaven, v. 17

And so, exalt Yahweh for His promise of Heaven! The song indicates that there is no question about the purpose of the Exodus. The commentators spend time talking about whether the mountain of God's inheritance is Sinai, Zion, the whole Promised Land, or what. I truly don't understand why none of them identify it as Heaven, the sanctuary made without hands. That statement is explicit. Moses says it in so many words! The goal of the Exodus was not to get to Canaan. The goal of the Exodus was to get to Heaven. That was what God was all about. He was going to bring them to a better country, a temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. And that promise still stands for us today. So don't let the enemy get you down; you will dwell in the house of the Lord, His Heavenly temple made without hands. And you'll do so forever. So open your mouth and sing!

D. Exalt Yahweh Because He is King, v. 18

The song climaxes with the declaration that Yahweh is King and that He will reign forever and ever. There is no question about it. Because He reigns, He can and will get you through the wilderness of this world, past every trial and temptation, and into His heavenly palace. That's a promise. And so why wouldn't you sing about that? You have the greatest of all kings. You may have problems with the current U.S. president. You most likely have had problems with every single U.S. president under whose administration you've been privileged to live. But God's reign is not like that. It's better than any Democrat or Republican administration ever has been or could be, and it's not limited to 8 years. It has been going on from all eternity, and God will continue to reign forever and ever. Believe Him; trust Him.

IV. Why Should You Sing?, v. 19

And above all, sing to Him. Why should you sing? Because Pharaoh's army went into the Red Sea and never came out. Because Satan is going into the bottomless pit and never coming out. And because God is leading you through the wilderness of this world — a wilderness from which you're definitely coming out, and going straight to Heaven afterwards to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Does your heart want to sing when you get a 5% raise at work? When you get a new car? When your favorite food is being served for dinner? Well, those things are fine. But there is no better news than the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ. Sing to Him, about Him, for Him. Amen.