



Catalog No. 1468

Exodus 15:1-21

Twentieth Message

Brian Morgan

December 5th, 2004

SINGING BY THE SEA

SERIES: A THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

We have reached our final study in our series *A Theology of Worship*, from the book of Exodus. Our text, Exodus 15:1-21, is very relevant for the Christmas season. These verses will set the tone for what we should be focusing on during Advent.

If we were honest, most of us would have to admit that the Christmas holidays are more difficult to negotiate and survive spiritually than any other time of the year. There is probably no other season in which the world is so successful in transforming a holy day into a holiday driven by idolatry. I'm sure many of you lament the fact that the North Pole gets more press than Bethlehem, and that the traditional Christmas carols are seldom sung. Today, one cannot even mention the word Christmas in the public schools and be politically correct. Instead, we are relentlessly barraged with the syrupy drone of *Frosty the Snowman* and *Jingle Bells* at public concerts and shopping malls. Worse still is the desecration of worship. The wonder and awe of that silent night has been usurped by a buying frenzy. Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." But during this time of the year, it seems everyone feels obligated to express his or her love to everyone else with a gift.

The weight of that burden can be overwhelming, even in the healthiest families. But where there is discord, separation or brokenness, the holiday only serves to accentuate the pain. I think especially of mothers, who normally shoulder more of the family demands than is reasonable. But at Christmas, they are buried under a tidal wave of expectations. They are supposed to know the right gifts for every member of the family, take the time to buy and wrap them, decorate the house, organize the family photo for Christmas cards, welcome the in-laws, cook endlessly for every occasion, attend all their children's performances, and still maintain some semblance of order in the home, to say nothing of their own sanity. Add to that, as is the case in our home, three family birthdays, and that oft-heard commercial phrase, "Want to get away?" seems very appealing.

Now lest I sound like Scrooge, who stole the magic from Christmas, I'm not suggesting that we totally disconnect and run away. But what I would like to do this morning is to lighten our load by placing before us a vision of what gift we should give to God in response to the gift of his Son Jesus Christ. What does God really require of us? What gift has eternal value such that it stirs his heart and magnifies his person? If you know that, you will begin to understand what makes you human. And after experiencing that, you may discover that all those other voices don't have quite the same pull as before. In the end, I would hope that rather than the culture shaping us with its agenda, we might begin to reshape and transform our culture in this season of all seasons.

What was Israel's response to the mighty, miraculous deeds of the Exodus? Moses and Miriam led all of Israel in a song of praise. Pharaoh is buried in the depths of the sea, and Israel sings. Singing is the sacred response to salvation. This song becomes the capstone to Exodus 1-15. God acts in deed (prose narrative), and man responds with a poem of praise. This pattern of narrative/poetry is repeated throughout the Old Testament¹ and gives us a clue to the spiritual rhythm of our lives and the response that makes our humanity come alive. Brueggemann writes, "The Song of Moses is commonly recognized as one of the oldest, most radical, and most important poems in the Old Testament. It not only sounds the crucial themes of Israel's most elemental faith, but it also provides a shape and sequencing of that faith, which we may take as 'canonical.'"² The poem is as rich in its theology as it is intricate in its structure. One possible reading of the poem is a concentric structure that finds its center in the exaltation and uniqueness of Yahweh above all other gods.

Literary Outline³

- a The Birth of Praise: A new theology, Yahweh is a "man of war"! (1-3)
 - b Victory Song: Described in the past, the Egyptians are defeated (4-10)
 - x The Center: The uniqueness of Yahweh above all gods! (11-12)
 - b' Victory Song: Described in the future, the enthronement of the King in Zion and his enemies terror-stricken (13-17)
- a' The Permanence of Praise: Yahweh is enthroned forever (18)

I would like to highlight a number of observations from the poem that will help us build a foundational framework for a theology of praise.

I. The Birth of Praise: A New Theology (15:1-3)

A. Israel's Praise Is Rooted In God's Saving Acts

Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and said,

**"I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted;
The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation;
This is my God, and I will praise Him;
My father's God, and I will extol Him.
The LORD is a warrior;
The LORD is His name." (Exod 15:1-3 NASB)**

Moses and Israel sing because they have witnessed something brand new in salvation history: the Creator God has come down and fought on behalf of his people. This never happened with their forefathers. And God did not use the conventional weapons of war, but weapons from the natural world: wind, sea, floods,

waters, and the deep. As a result of this new experience, Moses gives God a new name: “The LORD is a warrior” (lit. *man of war*); the LORD is His name.” This new revelation leads Israel to a new and greater commitment of jubilant abandonment into the arms of the Lord, who is named three times as the object of their praise. Israel’s praise is not sung out of liturgical rote, but is born out of a new experience as significant as a new creation. Therefore their praise is done with the whole heart that gives full expression to their trust.

Personally, I have found that when God comes down and delivers us in new and amazing ways, the most appropriate response is a poem read or sung from the depths of one’s being in the presence of God’s people. A new theology is sung with the whole heart. Passionate praise is born out of experience and leads to greater commitment. If I had my way, I would turn us into a congregation of storytellers and poets!

B. Israel’s Praise Is Antiphonal

Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. Miriam answered them,

“Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted;
The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea.” (15:20-21)

The second thing we notice is that Israel’s praise is antiphonal. The women, led by Miriam, echo and reinforce the thanksgiving of the male voices. The important role of women in the story can be seen in the fact that their actions of faith and deliverance in the opening chapters (Exod 1-2) are now framed by their song and dance in this climactic chapter (Exod 15). In like manner, the faith and witness of women frame the gospel stories, as they not only become the vehicle for salvation in the birth narratives (Elizabeth and Mary), but they are also the first to bear witness to the resurrection. It would not be too much to say that one aspect of the role of women in the kingdom of God is to give birth to new things. I am amazed at the large number of ministries that have been “birthed” by women at PBCC. Some scholars think that Miriam’s song was not simply a choral piece, but an actual re-enactment of the victory by the sea, complete with musical instruments and dance by the women, much like our Christmas pageants.⁴ Wouldn’t you have loved to see this dance as centuries of pent-up yearnings were released in ecstatic joy?

The idea of dance as a vehicle of praise may be a hard pill for more conservative Protestants to swallow. Fearful of the influence of the sensual dancing of the world, we sometimes go to the opposite extreme, sitting motionless in narrow pews. When we sing, we sing with about as much expression as a graveyard corpse. But praise is an uninhibited expression of joy, because of the awesome nature of God’s salvation and his abiding presence. In his novel *In the Beginning*, Chaim Potok describes the impact that *Simchat Torah* (Joy of Torah), the celebration of the completion of the reading of the Torah, has upon a Jewish boy named David and his Italian friend Tony. They are standing outside a synagogue watching the people dancing inside: “The little synagogue was crowded and tumultuous with joy. I remember the white-bearded Torah reader dancing with one of the heavy scrolls as if he had miraculously shed his years. My father and uncle danced for what

seemed to me to be an interminable length of time, circling about one another with their Torah scrolls, advancing upon one another, backing off, singing.”⁵ Beneath the night stars, with the reverberation of the music under his feet, David says, “I wonder if the gentiles ever danced with their Bible.” He then turns to Tony and says, “Hey, Tony. Do you ever dance with your Bible?”⁶ Do we dance? Perhaps we should dance, or at least move more than just our mouths when we sing.

Now the poet turns to the main body of his victory song, describing God’s saving act in the past.

II. Description of Praise: God’s Victory In the Past (15:4-10)

“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into the sea;
And the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea.
The deeps cover them;
They went down into the depths like a stone.
Your right hand, O LORD, is majestic in power,
Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.
And in the greatness of Your excellence You overthrow those
who rise up against You;
You send forth Your burning anger, and it consumes them
as chaff.
At the blast of Your nostrils the waters were piled up,
The flowing waters stood up like a heap;
The deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide
the spoil;
My desire shall be gratified against them;
I will draw out my sword, my hand will destroy them.’
You blew with Your wind, the sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.” (15:4-10)

Moses’ praise re-enacts the great battle through metaphor, through which every generation of Israel can enter in and relive the experience as if they were present in this new creation. Israel is not celebrating conventional warfare. This is not sword against sword, chariot against chariot or army against army, but creation itself that drowns Pharaoh’s oppressive regime. The language is so graphic that all our senses come into play as we engage the metaphors: we *see* the approach of the Egyptian troops, we *hear* their arrogant assertions, we *feel* the heat of God’s anger and *tremble* before the powerful wind that holds up the threatening waters of the sea while Israel crosses to safety, and then once again unleashes the towering wall of water to cover the Egyptians in the deep. Brueggemann suggests, “One can hear in the poem the blub, blub, blub of water as the bodies disappear into the depths, defeated and helpless. That graphic picture is voiced in the boldest terms possible, for ‘floods’ (*tehomot*) and ‘depths’ (*mesolot*) are allusions to cosmic waters. By the surging of these waters, the residue of defeated Egypt disappears from creation and succumbs to the resilient, indifferent power of chaos, a power operating here at the behest of Yahweh.”⁷

In this way the battle lines are drawn not along nationalistic definitions, but between the Creator and the demonic idols that drive oppressive regimes. It is to this end, to the destruction of the tyranny of idolatry, that the Creator uses all the forces at his disposal. So after centuries of enduring injustice, on this day it is

as if “God brings the broken creation back into alignment at one historical spot in the world.”⁸ This will have tremendous implications for how Israel is to mirror God’s justice in the law, especially in her treatment of orphans, widows and foreigners.

Perhaps this tells something of the power of the song, that in the singing we are not only brought back to remember an event, but our imagination is so engaged it becomes as real for us, or even more so, than the first generation.

Now we come to the center of the poem, and the core of Israel’s theology: the exaltation of Yahweh above all other gods.

III. The Center of Praise: Uniqueness of Yahweh (15:11-12)

“Who is like You among the gods, O LORD?

Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in praises, working wonders?
You stretched out Your right hand,
The earth swallowed them.” (15:11-12)

God’s saving acts place Yahweh in a category with no one else. Having magnified him by recounting his deeds, we are now left glorying in his person, with no one else on the stage. He is that very personal “You.” No other god works awesome wonders like this. No other god has creation at his disposal to rescue a group of slaves from a tyrannical king. He does so with but a gesture of his hand, and it is finished. Yahweh is so holy that he has no rivals. This is the Creator God who wants a personal relationship with us. That is as awesome as it is humbling to think about.

True praise brings all glory to God and none to man. Our names don’t even appear in the small print of the credits when the movie is over. When we ascribe to God the glory due his name, two things happen. First, God is truly magnified, which means that his holy reputation and majesty are spread throughout the world. Praise impacts God; it stirs his heart. As the psalm says, “You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel” (Ps 22:3). Secondly, as we call attention to God’s glory we also adorn our humanity: we become fully human. There is no greater joy to the soul than acting out what we were created for, rather than usurping some aspect of deity for ourselves. Proper praise does much to lighten our load in life. We don’t have to be the savior or sustainer of the world, our community, or even our children. Instead we are called to “stand still and see the salvation of the Lord,” and then merely sing, rejoicing in what God has done.

Next we find that praise serves another purpose other than communal appreciation: it has an outward dimension as well.

IV. The Confidence of Praise: God’s Victory Over Future Enemies (15:13-17)

“In Your loyal-love You have led the people whom You have redeemed;
In Your strength You have guided them to Your holy habitation.
The peoples have heard, they tremble;
Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia.
Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;
The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them;
All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

Terror and dread fall upon them;
By the greatness of Your arm they are motionless as stone;
Until Your people pass over, O LORD,
Until the people pass over whom You have purchased.
You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance,
The place, O LORD, which You have made for Your dwelling,
The sanctuary, O LORD, which Your hands have established.”
(15:13-17)

Here, Moses’ song takes a dramatic shift in both geography and focus. First, we are transported from the waters of the Red Sea on to the highway to the Promised Land. Secondly, the focus shifts from Israel’s past enemy, the Egyptians, to her future enemies, the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites and Canaanites, who are responding to the dramatic news of Israel’s exodus. Brueggemann calls this genre “a *victory parade, a triumphal procession*, in which the winning God moves in processional splendor to take up his throne. Along the parade route, those who watch the victory parade stand in silent awe, witnesses filled both with respect and dread. These verses portray Yahweh and Israel moving triumphantly on to the land of promise, moving without resistance, because all the potential resisters have seen Yahweh’s great victory and are duly intimidated.”⁹ Just listen to each of the verbs which the poet assigns to these onlookers as the triumphal procession heads toward Zion: *tremble, gripped with anguish, dismayed, trembling, melted*. While the Egyptians sank like stone, these people are motionless as *stone*. It is as if they had front row seats by the Red Sea. There they sit frozen, unable to move until all Israel passes over.

Why should the Exodus have such an impact on the inhabitants of the land? If Israel’s Exodus was merely an isolated story of one oppressed people gaining their national freedom over tyranny, there would be nothing to fear. But if the Exodus is the story of the Creator God who is setting the world right in a new creation, then all the idols of the world and their oppressive regimes ought to melt in fear.

We find the same theology expounded by the prophets. Isaiah’s poetry taught the exiles to sing their victory songs long before the second exodus became history. Drawing on the imagery of the Exodus, Isaiah challenged the downtrodden exiles to sing with the assurance of victory and freedom of a second exodus.

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the LORD;
Awake as in the days of old, the generations of long ago.
Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces,
Who pierced the dragon?
Was it not You who dried up the sea,
The waters of the great deep;
Who made the depths of the sea a pathway
For the redeemed to cross over?
So the ransomed of the LORD will return
And come with joyful shouting to Zion,
And everlasting joy will be on their heads.
They will obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and sighing will flee away. (Isa 51:9-11)
“For you will go out with joy

**And be led forth with peace;
The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of
joy before you,
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (Isa 55:12)**

At the announcement of the birth of Jesus, the powers of this world trembled. They knew that this was no ordinary rabbi: He was the rightful heir of the world who would bring justice to all nations (Isa 42:1-4). Herod was so paranoid he tried to kill Jesus through the slaughter of all the innocent children in Bethlehem. Jesus posed a significant threat to the Jewish authorities as he predicted the downfall of all they represented. Even the demons shuddered and cried out in his presence: they knew that with his coming their time was up.

Singing God’s praises should keep that mind-set before us that we ought not be intimidated by oppressive world authority or demonic forces. Acts records that in the midst of life-threatening situations, the apostles found praise the best antidote to fear. Once, having being severely warned by the authorities not to speak in Jesus’ name, they went home and recited Psalm 2 (Acts 4:24-26). After they prayed, Luke records, “the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31)

So praise is more than communal appreciation, it also has an outward focus of worldwide witness. The song not only has the ability to re-enact the past, it also enables Israel to mysteriously participate in the future, before the events about which she sings become history. Praise grants Israel a vision of life such as no other nation could boast. She sings of the end as if it were as real as the beginning. That is because the beginning of her salvation determines her end. In like manner, as we sing the great hymns of the cross and Christ’s victory over the forces of sin, the world, and devil, we also participate in the glory of heaven. This is the confidence that praise gives us.

V. The Permanence of Praise: Yahweh Is Enthroned Forever (15:18)

“The LORD shall reign forever and ever.” (15:18)

I used to love sports, especially football. But in recent years, my passion has been reduced to near cynicism. There are many reasons for this, but one significant reason is the absolute loss of continuity from year to year. In the old days you knew the players, the coaches, the uniforms and the fight songs. Today, nothing remains the same. Coaches get fired, players flee to the highest bidder, and whole teams move to whichever city will pay the most. My friend Mark Bucko says, “All you are rooting for is laundry!” But even the laundry seems to change weekly. Perhaps our sports world is a microcosm of our culture: with so much emphasis on the newest and the best, nothing lasts. Wouldn’t you like to sing about something glorious that will endure beyond tomorrow?

Egypt enslaved Israel for four hundred years. But in the end, God “has the last word, not to mention the silence after.”¹⁰ When

we sing praises to our King, our singing carries our soul to a place that remains fixed forever. The Lord has taken his throne and his kingdom shall have no end, so the song has no end. Israel cries out in oppression, God reaches down to save, and Moses sings a song: a song that shapes the future as well as the past, because it is about the Creator’s new creation. How long will Moses’ song last? John tells us in the book of Revelation that when time ends and we step into eternity, we will find ourselves not by the Red Sea but beside a sea of glass, singing this song with the “song of the Lamb.” With this in mind, it would do us well to learn the song of Moses by heart.

And I saw something like a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, holding harps of God. And they sang the song of Moses, the bond-servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

**“Great and marvelous are Your works,
O Lord God, the Almighty;
Righteous and true are Your ways,
King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Your name?
For You alone are holy;
For all the nations will come and worship before you,
For your righteous acts have been revealed.” (Rev 15:2-4)**

To those of you who may feel overwhelmed this Christmas, remember all that God requires of you is what Mary did in response to the announcement of the good news that a Savior would be born: she sang (Luke 1:46-55), and her singing shaped history. Why would we want to do anything else? Amen.

1. Man’s first words were poetry, expressing the appreciation over the gift of his wife. See also Judg 4-5; 1 Sam 1-2; 1 Sam 21:10; Ps 34; 1 Sam 18-31; Ps 18; 2 Sam 7; Jonah 1-2, and Isa 38.

2. Walter Brueggemann, “Exodus,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:799.

3. The outline is adapted from Brueggemann “Exodus,” 802.

4. Rita Burns, *Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam*, SBL Dissertation Series (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987).

5. Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 399.

6. Potok, *In the Beginning*, 400.

7. Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 799-800.

8. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 170.

9. Brueggemann, “Exodus,” 801.

10. This is John Felstiner’s comment about Shulamith in Paul Celan’s poem *Deathfugue*. He writes: “Darkened by ash, ‘Shulamith’ ends the poem holding onto what Nazism tried to erase: a rooted identity. Archaic, inalienable, she has the last word, not to mention the silence after.” John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 41.