

September 5 Lesson 1 (NIV)

Praise with Music

Devotional Reading: Exodus 15:11–21

Background Scripture: Exodus 14:1–15:21

Exodus 15:11–21

11 Who among the gods

is like you, Lord?

Who is like you—

majestic in holiness,

awesome in glory,

working wonders?

12 “You stretch out your right hand,
and the earth swallows your enemies.

13 In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.

In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.

14 The nations will hear and tremble;
anguish will grip the people of Philistia.

15 The chiefs of Edom will be terrified,
the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,
the people of Canaan will melt away;

16 terror and dread will fall on them.

By the power of your arm

they will be as still as a stone—
until your people pass by, Lord,
until the people you bought pass by.
17 You will bring them in and plant them
on the mountain of your inheritance—
the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling,
the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.

18 “The Lord reigns
for ever and ever.”

19 When Pharaoh’s horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. 20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. 21

Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

Key Text

Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?—Exodus 15:11

Celebrating God

Unit 1: God’s People Offer Praise

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HOW TO SAY IT

Canaan

Kay-nun.

Edom

Ee-dum.

Megiddo

Muh-gid-doe.

Moab

Mo-ab.

Philistia

Fuh-liss-tee-uh.

Sinai

Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.

Introduction

A. Rescued in the Sequel

Once upon a time theaters had special movies for Saturdays. There was usually a feature film, followed by one episode of a serial movie. Each segment was designed to leave the hero or heroine in an impossible situation, the intended goal being that the viewer would return the following week to see the resolution of the cliffhanger.

Back before World War II, I went with my visiting uncle to see a feature film that was followed by a serial movie about Dick Tracy. As the episode ended, Tracy was in a diving bell, and the air hose was cut by the villain. There was no way Tracy could survive. My uncle's visit came to an end, and I never saw the sequel! I never found out how the famous Dick Tracy was rescued.

Moses led the Israelites into a similar cliffhanger situation (Exodus 14). Though freed from bondage, they found themselves trapped between the Egyptian army and the Red Sea. The Israelites seemed doomed—except for the fact that God was with them. Though I don't know what happened to Dick Tracy, I do know what happened to Israel. Today's lesson about a song in that regard teaches us important things even some 35 centuries later.

B. Lesson Context

Long before the exodus of 1447 BC, God had promised Canaan to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Genesis 13:14–15; 26:3; 28:13). The

fulfillment of the promise seemed to be in jeopardy when Jacob and his family moved to Egypt because of a famine in Canaan. Still, God worked through Joseph, a son of Jacob, so that the family could have all it needed during the years of famine (41:53–54).

Over the centuries, the Israelites witnessed significant leadership changes in Egypt, from native Egyptians, to foreign intruders, and then back to the Egyptians again. These intruders are sometimes called Hyksos or “shepherd kings,” but the word more likely just means foreigners who ruled Egypt. This caused the Egyptians to develop an even greater dislike for shepherds (compare Genesis 46:34), something that became very significant in the history of the emerging nation of Israel.

Finally there came a new king to whom Joseph’s reputation meant nothing (Exodus 1:8). The original favor Jacob (Israel) and his sons experienced changed into servitude and oppression. Measures were taken to subdue the people and slow their population growth. After the Israelites spent 430 years in Egypt (12:40–41), God was ready to act to fulfill the promises (2:23–25).

It was during this time that Moses was born. It is well-known that he was adopted by a princess of Egypt, but he had to flee Egypt at age 40 after killing an Egyptian (Exodus 2; the age factor for this event is found only in Acts 7:23). Forty years later Moses encountered the Lord at Sinai. God called Moses to lead his enslaved people away from Egypt, and the promise was repeated (Exodus 3:8). God worked through Moses and Aaron (Moses’ brother) to bring about nine plagues that devastated Egypt. The tenth plague took the lives of all the firstborn except among the Israelites.

At that point Pharaoh expelled the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 12:31–33). It had been 430 years to the day since Jacob and his family entered

Egypt (12:40–41). As God’s people left Egypt, they were reminded again that their destination was Canaan (13:5, 11).

Pharaoh, however, changed his mind and decided to bring his labor force back (Exodus 14:5–8). The Egyptians pursued Israel to the edge of the Red Sea. It seemed that the Israelites were blocked by the sea and victory for the Egyptians was assured. God had other plans.

The Israelites crossed the Red Sea safely after the waters parted, but the Egyptians drowned when they tried to follow. The God of Israel was superior to any of the fictitious gods of Pharaoh! The crossing of the Red Sea was pivotal in the history of ancient Israel. The slaves were free, beyond reach of Pharaoh. Moses and the people responded by bursting forth with joyous singing (Exodus 15:1–21).

The printed text for this lesson concerns their song. The first song in the history of this new nation is a song of rejoicing because of the victory that the Lord has obtained for the people. We note in passing that there is a minor difficulty in finding an appropriate designation for this song. It is sometimes called a Song of Moses and Miriam (compare Exodus 15:20–21) or a Song of Moses and Israel (15:1). A Song of Moses already exists in Deuteronomy 32; see 31:30, which introduces the chapter that follows as a “song” of Moses.

I. Song, Part 1

(Exodus 15:11–19)

A. God’s Preeminence (v. 11)

11. Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?

These two rhetorical questions point to the uniqueness of God. The Egyptians had hundreds of gods and goddesses. Though some of the

plagues might have been considered attacks on specific gods (like darkness explicitly challenging the sun god Ra; see Exodus 10:21–23), we know for sure that the plagues were a judgment on all the Egyptian gods (Exodus 12:12; Numbers 33:4). So-called gods that were conceived in human imaginations and created by human hands were no match for the Lord.

The second question builds on the first, focusing on the Lord's great attributes that set him apart from other "gods." Emphasis on God's holiness begins in the book of Exodus (see Exodus 3:5) and continues through Revelation (example: Revelation 15:4). In a way, to call God holy is to call him unique. He is totally unlike any false deity that has ever or could ever be imagined to exist. Because the Lord is holy, he also commands his people to be holy (Leviticus 11:44–45; compare 1 Peter 1:15–16). Only by being unique in ways similar to God's character can his people be a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:1–3).

The final phrases of the verse declare that the Lord is to be held in reverence for his praiseworthy deeds and for the wonders he has done.

B. God's Power (vv. 12–13)

12. "You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies.

The right hand of God often refers to his great power to deliver his people (examples: Psalms 17:7; 139:10). In this case, it celebrates God's victory over the Egyptians on Israel's behalf (Exodus 14:21–30). Given that the earth swallows their enemies, however, it seems that this verse is also pointing to future events. The Egyptian army was swallowed up by the sea, after all.

In the not-too-distant future, Israel would see Korah and 250 like-minded rebels swallowed up when "the earth opened its mouth"

(Numbers 16:32). In that instance, as when the sea swallowed the Egyptians, it was a sign of God's judgment on wickedness and delivering his people. Deliverance was from the evil influence of Korah and others among the Israelites (16:1–31).

13. In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

The verbs in this verse and the next are past tense in the Hebrew, even though the thoughts in view are for the future. Speaking about a future action as though it has already happened makes the certainty of the coming event seem rock solid because it is already being spoken of as accomplished. When speaking about what God will do, those events really are assured of happening.

God's faithfulness to his promises prompted him to redeem the people of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 2:24). Although we often think of redemption in almost purely spiritual terms, Israel's leaving Egypt is one prime physical example of the concept. God spoke of it to Moses as delivering Israel from Egypt (3:8). Our spiritual redemption mirrors this: we are God's people led out of sin and into new life (Colossians 1:9–14).

God was taking the people to the promised land. Canaan was the place God chose as his holy dwelling (see Genesis 28:16–22; Psalm 78:54). The tabernacle would travel through the wilderness with the people as a symbol of God's presence (Exodus 29:44–46). When they were settled in the land, God would allow Solomon to build the temple in Jerusalem as a permanent reminder that God chose to dwell with his people (2 Chronicles 6:1–11).

C. The Nations' Fear (vv. 14–16)

14a. The nations will hear and tremble;

The emphasis changes from how God protects Israel to how others will respond when they hear of his power and mighty acts.

14b. anguish will grip the people of Philistia.

The Hebrew word translated anguish elsewhere describes the pain of childbirth (Psalm 48:6; Jeremiah 22:23; etc.). In this context, it probably reflects the magnitude and acuteness of the pain of the people of Philistia. Elsewhere these people are called simply Philistines (example: Joshua 13:2–3). The land is called Palestine today, located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

15a. The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling,

The land of Edom was south and southeast of the Dead Sea. Its inhabitants traced their lineage to Esau (Genesis 25:30; 36:1). Moab lay east of the Dead Sea. Genesis traces their parentage to Lot by his older daughter (19:36–37). As the Israelites were ending their 40 years in the wilderness, they were instructed not to provoke either Edom or Moab because of the inheritance God had given those nations' forefathers (Deuteronomy 2:5, 9).

The Israelites even went around Edom, for the Edomites refused to let them pass through the land (Numbers 20:21; 21:4). This was evidence of the fear of the leaders who led the nation. The amazement and trembling of the rulers of these two nations are emphasized; certainly their reactions to God's mighty works for Israel influenced both nations in their entirety.

15b. the people of Canaan will melt away;

Jericho was located in Canaan and is a prime example of the consuming terror the people felt. Forty years after singing this song (see Numbers 14:34), Joshua sent two spies to the city of Jericho (Joshua 2:1). Rahab,

a Canaanite woman herself, reported that the people of the land were terrified of Israel. One reason that she gave was that they had heard about Israel's crossing of the Red Sea (2:9–11, 24).

16. terror and dread will fall on them. By the power of your arm they will be as still as a stone—until your people pass by, Lord, until the people you bought pass by.

Given that Moses and the Israelites had very recently escaped Egypt into an uncertain nomadic existence, it is not surprising that terror and dread of them did not spread immediately among the hostile nations. Nomads were not necessarily cause for concern, though a large group was worth keeping track of. Not even the Israelites themselves were convinced they would survive in their new unsettled existence (example: Numbers 20:3–5). But 40 years later, when Israel camped on the east side of the Jordan, opposite Jericho, the tides turned toward fear (Deuteronomy 2:25; 3:4).

Once again a metaphor, this time regarding God's arm, celebrates the power of the Lord in working on behalf of his chosen people (compare Exodus 15:12, above). Though the other nations would resist the Lord, their efforts would be as effective as if they stood as still as a stone (compare 1 Samuel 25:37). This state of affairs would last until the Lord had established in the land his people, whom he had bought (compare Exodus 15:13, above). This is consecration language, most recently seen in God's declaration that the firstborn of animals and humans were his (with provisions for redeeming them; see Exodus 13:11–15).

D. Promises for Israel (vv. 17–19)

17. You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.

Once again Moses spoke of God's settling the people in their promised land, this time referring specifically to the mountain Zion (Psalm 2:6; Daniel 9:16; etc.). The sanctuary refers specifically to the future temple, which would be built on Zion (2 Chronicles 5:2–7).

18. "The Lord reigns for ever and ever."

In the book of Numbers, some people challenged the Lord's reign by challenging his chosen leader Moses (compare 1 Samuel 8:6–9). As a result, some were swallowed by the earth; others were consumed with fire; and 14,700 died in a plague (Numbers 16:32, 35, 49). In another incident many died after being bitten by serpents (21:8–9; see John 3:14).

19. When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

Chariots had been introduced into Egypt as instruments of war by the Hyksos, who ruled Egypt for a time (see Lesson Context). Previously, chariots were used for ceremonial purposes. The Egyptians quickly discovered their military usefulness and added many chariots to their armies.

The Egyptians lost 600 chariots as a result (Exodus 14:7, 28). In a battle several years before, the Egyptians had captured hundreds of chariots from Canaanite forces at the Battle of Megiddo. Neither the destroyed chariots nor their drivers were easy to replace. We may also note the 900 iron chariots mentioned in Judges 4:3, which form the power by which the Canaanites oppress the Israelites roughly two centuries later. A song is also written about their defeat (Judges 5).

The verse before us summarizes the song of Exodus 15. It describes the contrast in the outcomes for the two groups. Both the Egyptians and the Israelites experienced the depths of the sea. For God's people, the depths were just dry ground. But those same depths became the final resting place for the Egyptians, who had been their taskmasters.

II. Song, Part 2

(Exodus 15:20–21)

A. Miriam's Example (v. 20)

20. Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.

Miriam and both of her siblings are designated as prophets (see Exodus 7:1; Deuteronomy 18:15; 34:10; compare Micah 6:4). (The Hebrew word translated prophet has a feminine ending in this verse. Therefore, the use of prophetess would be appropriate when referring to Miriam.) She is one of several women in the Bible who are designated as prophetesses (Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; Luke 2:36).

Based on Miriam's comments in Numbers 12:2, her role as a prophetess is appropriate, for she indicated that the Lord had also spoken through her (although at that time she was misusing the fact). Exodus 7:1–2 provides an illustration of the function of a prophet as one who gives voice to the commands of God.

This is the first reference to Miriam by name, and Moses identified her as a sister to Aaron, instead of to himself. Perhaps this is meant to remind the reader that, while Miriam and Aaron grew up in the same household together, Moses was raised in Pharaoh's house with limited access to his birth family (Exodus 2:8–10). Miriam is usually thought to be the older sister of Moses, whose task was to see what would happen

to her baby brother when he was placed in a basket at the bank of the Nile River (2:3–4).

Miriam and all the women use their timbrels (small drums) and rhythmic dance to provide accompaniment to the song of Moses. How the second part of the song is worded is our next verse.

B. The Exaltation of God (v. 21)

21. Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.”

The refrain that Miriam and the women sang is very similar to how the song began (see Exodus 15:1, not in our printed text). The implication may be that Miriam is the one who leads the other women in a type of antiphonal rendition. (That’s when one group answers another.) In any case, their words are a final reminder on how the most powerful nation in the world at that time was no match for the God of Israel.

Conclusion

A. In Context

Our songs always come with context. For instance, the story behind “Amazing Grace” adds depth to the lyrics of the song itself. (Look it up online.) Its long history in England and especially in North America has shaped how we hear or sing it today. The situations in which we have heard it played or sung change how we process the lyrics. Different arrangements let us hear the song afresh.

Like the song that Moses, Miriam, and the people sang, our songs come from specific situations: of deliverance, of healing, of crossing from death into life. When we sing, with whom we sing—these things matter! Therefore, let us do as the psalmist challenged us and “sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things” (Psalm 98:1).

What song will you sing as a result of God's character and work in your life—in your family, church, and community?

B. Prayer

Almighty God, as we face trials this week, we commit ourselves to remember that in you we have victory. In Jesus' victorious name we thank you. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God always wins.