

Moses and Miriam Praise God

Lesson 1: September 5, 2021

Bible Background • EXODUS 14:1–15:1-21

Printed Text • EXODUS 15:11–21 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 105:1–2, 37–45

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will EXPLORE why and how Moses and Miriam praised God; REFLECT on the actions of God that are celebrated through music, dance, and words; and CELEBRATE God’s faithfulness with joy.

In Focus

“FIRE DEPARTMENT, CALL OUT!”

“Over here!” Ramona cried, coughing.

The smoke stung her eyes and was so thick that she couldn’t see where the voice was coming from. The disaster had been sudden. One moment, she was typing away at her desk. The next, there was a quick rumble from the ground that shook the floor and shattered the floor-to-ceiling windows. Part of the ceiling frame fell to the floor, dragging down tiles and light fixtures. Some of the sprinklers came on and drenched everything nearby, but others were broken. The way to the exit stairs was blocked with flaming debris. Ramona prayed, “Heavenly Father, please bring me to safety.” She could hear the firefighters crashing through the wreckage to get to her. “OVER HERE!” she shouted again. Ramona could see the shapes of the firefighters coming forward in the dark, knocking aside desks and chairs and filing cabinets. The water sprayed from their hoses sizzled and turned to steam as it hit the flames, adding to the chaotic scene. But after a moment, two of them emerged like ghosts and crouched next to her.

“Praise God! I am so grateful to see you!” Ramona cried.

One firefighter said, “Just stay close.” The other firefighter slid his arm around her and

stood up. “We’ll get you out of here. Stick with me.”

In between coughs, Ramona said, “Thank you! God is good! God is so good!”

When have you spontaneously praised God after an emotional event?

Keep in Mind

“Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?” (Exodus 15:11, KJV)

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV).

Printed Text • EXODUS 15:11–21 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 105:1–2, 37–45

KJV Exodus 15:11 Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

12 Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them.

13 Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.

14 The people shall hear, and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina.

15 Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away.

16 Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O LORD, till the people pass over, which thou hast purchased.

17 Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O LORD, which thy hands have established.

18 The LORD shall reign for ever and ever.

19 For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the LORD brought again the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

20 And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

21 And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.

NLT Exodus 15:11 “Who is like you among the gods, O LORD—glorious in holiness, awesome in splendor, performing great wonders?

12 You raised your right hand, and the earth swallowed our enemies.

13 With your unfailing love you lead the people you have redeemed. In your might, you guide them to your sacred home.

14 The peoples hear and tremble; anguish grips those who live in Philistia.

15 The leaders of Edom are terrified; the nobles of Moab tremble. All who live in Canaan melt away;

16 terror and dread fall upon them. The power of your arm makes them lifeless as stone until your people pass by, O LORD, until the people you purchased pass by.

17 You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain—the place, O LORD, reserved for your own dwelling, the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.

18 The LORD will reign forever and ever!”

19 When Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and charioteers rushed into the sea, the LORD brought the water crashing down on them. But the people of Israel had walked through the middle of the sea on dry ground!

20 Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine and led all the women as they played their tambourines and danced.

21 And Miriam sang this song: “Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; he has hurled both horse and rider into the sea.”

People, Places, and Times

Miriam. The sister of Aaron and Moses and the daughter of Amram and Jochebed. When Moses is placed in a basket in the Nile as a baby, Miriam watches over her brother and volunteers her mother as a wet-nurse when

Pharaoh’s daughter decides to keep the child. She is also one of the people sent by God to lead the Israelites. Miriam leads the people in a joyous victory song after they cross the Red Sea out of Egyptian slavery. Much later while journeying through the wilderness, Moses married an Ethiopian woman and Miriam did not approve, rebelling against Moses. She and Aaron spoke against Moses, but God heard them and rebuked them. God struck Miriam with leprosy. Moses prayed for her and she was quickly healed.

Background

Over roughly 400 years, the 70 members of Jacob’s family who had moved from Canaan to Egypt had grown to over 600,000 strong (Exodus 12:37). They lived freely in Goshen until a new pharaoh came to power. He was unaware of the life-saving role that Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons, had played in saving Egypt and surrounding countries from famine. Threatened by this growing population, Pharaoh tried to decrease their numbers through genocide and enslavement. The people prayed for salvation from oppression. God answered, upholding the promise He had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel. Through a man called Moses, God performed ten mighty acts that forced Pharaoh to end the Israelites’ slavery. But Pharaoh couldn’t accept the fact that he had been defeated by the God of slaves. He set out to find and kill them. In an epic act of salvation, God walled back the waters of the Red Sea, giving the Israelites safe passage across the final barrier that blocked their exodus. The same waters drowned their oppressors. To memorialize God’s phenomenal intervention on their behalf, Moses and Miriam led the Israelites in a song of exuberant praise.

At-A-Glance

1. Sing to Gain Strength (Exodus 15:11–13)
2. Sing to be Heard (vv. 14–18)
3. Sing to Remember God’s Goodness (vv. 19–21)

In Depth

1. Sing to Gain Strength (Exodus 15:11–13)

The Egyptian culture was known for its numerous gods and goddesses. There was a sun god who was responsible for light and a goddess who was in charge of fertility. Another goddess brought the rain and Pharaoh himself was believed to be the god who had power over all the inhabitants of the land. But for the people

who had just experienced deliverance and witnessed the annihilation of their oppressors, no god surpassed their God. He was unrivaled, not only in His power but also in His holiness and His worthiness to be praised. God had wiped out their enemies and that new reality gave them the courage and strength to sing about a future, unlike their past. This song of praise was also a song of hope. They looked forward, confident that their victorious God would guide them and bring them to a place where they would dwell in God’s holy presence.

How has a past experience with God shaped your outlook about your future?

2. Sing to be Heard (vv. 14–18)

On their journey, the formerly enslaved people were going to meet people from other nations. News of God’s mighty acts would have reached these nations before the Israelites actually arrived. How would the Canaanites respond? Would they realize that God was God? Or would fear lead to violent actions? The fitting response when learning about God’s manifested power and goodness is holy reverence. Such an example is Rahab, the prostitute who protected the spies sent to assess Canaan. By the time the Children of Israel reached Jericho years later, she was able to recount the incident at the Red Sea (Joshua 2:9–11). The testimony embedded in this song had preceded the spies and secured their safety, and the safety of Rahab and her family. The song at the Red Sea was a testimony meant to be shared so that others would hear, trust, and worship God.

Name a time when your faith has been strengthened by someone’s testimony.

3. Sing to Remember God’s Goodness (vv. 19–21)

Miriam was Moses’s sister. She was a courageous woman who, as a child, defied Pharaoh’s horrific decree to kill male babies. When her mother, Jochebed, placed her brother, Moses, in a water-tight basket and put him in the Nile River, Miriam kept an eye on the basket and when Pharaoh’s daughter found the baby and wanted to keep him, Miriam, with the daughter’s consent, ran to get her mother to nurse him. Jochebed was able to rear Moses and share with him his true heritage. Now years later,

Miriam was at her brother's side. She could trace God's deliverance in the past to the joys of freedom she and all Israelites were experiencing that day. Using the unique gifts God had given her as a prophetess, musician, and dancer, Miriam led a chorus of singers and dancers who recounted the triumphant victory of their God.

What are some ways you have celebrated God's liberating grace in your life?

Discuss the Meaning

Victory for the Israelites also brought about the annihilation of others. Egyptian families lost loved ones that day. In Matthew 5:43, Jesus tells His listeners that they are to love their enemies and pray for those who despitefully use and persecute them.

1. Compare and contrast the context and attitudes toward violence between today's text and Jesus' words in Matthew 5:43-45.
2. In our modern context, how are we to respond when our enemies fall into unfortunate situations?

Liberating Lesson

In *Harriet, the Moses of Her People*, biographer Sarah Hopkins Bradford, states that one of the favorite songs of abolitionist Harriet Tubman was "Swing Low Sweet Chariot." Coded in its verses was a message of salvation from oppression. The Underground Railroad, a network of places and people who helped enslaved African Americans escape the horrors of the South, was the sweet chariot that would be swinging low or coming to the South. It was going to carry home or take to the North, those willing to get on board. Listening with hope, enslaved men, women, and children set out on a journey toward freedom for themselves and their descendants. What songs can you share with others that offer a message of the hope and freedom found in Christ?

Application for Activation

Songs are often used to help shape a people's identity. The song in today's lesson helped formerly enslaved people to see themselves as victors. They could advance, knowing that their unrivaled God would guide them into the land he had promised their forefathers. Another song, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," had a similar impact. Written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson and set to music by his brother, John Rosamond Johnson, it helped African Americans to see the gains made despite great adversity. While recognizing the past, it continued in hope, anticipating increased goodness from the God who had brought them thus far on the way.

Consider memorizing all three stanzas of "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," and as a class, perform it at a church service, nursing home, or shelter for formerly incarcerated men or women.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do?

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned?

More Light on the Text

Exodus 15:11–21

The Israelites' exit from the land of Egypt was one of the foundational events of the Old Testament. Departing Egypt in this massive exodus were 600,000 men plus their families (Exodus 12:37). Additionally, there were large droves of livestock and various kinds of flocks and herds of animals. The exodus through the Red Sea marked the liberation of God's people from 430 years of oppressive slavery in Egypt and created the powerful gratitude and a desire to celebrate God (Exodus 12:40; Acts 7:6). Exodus 15 is called "The Song of Moses."

The song is composed of poetic praise for God's Omnipotence (all power) displayed in the destruction of Egypt's army, and the prophetic promise of God's establishment of Israel and His Kingdom. Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord. Miriam joined him and led the women playing tambourines and dancing (v. 20).

African Americans can relate to this jubilation and celebrate God's liberation from the brutal bonds of slavery in the 1860s. They too sang a song that could be heard across America called "Go Down Moses": "Tell ol' pharaoh to let my people go..." These spirituals that represent freedom from the bondage of slavery are still sung today. The song of Moses is a spiritual song of roaring power and tender feeling, unforgettable for its biblical meaning and enduring poetry.

11 Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders?

Verse 11 is a confession of God's infinite perfection, transcendent and unparalleled. This verse asks the rhetorical question "Who is like God?" and multiple Scriptures respond, "I am God and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:5, 18, 22; 46:9). The term "among the gods" refers to the many false gods and idols the Egyptians and other pagan nations worshiped in vain. Whether the word "gods" referred to mighty giants (cf. Genesis 6:4), or angels (Psalm 29:1), or idols (Isaiah 46:1), no one is like the Lord. The glorious holiness of God cannot be imagined without the deepest reverence and fear, even by angels, who veil their faces before the majesty of God (Isaiah 6:2). It is only through Jesus that we can come boldly before the throne of grace with our prayers (Hebrews 4:16). We cannot fathom the wonders of God, His creation of the universe, and His care of all that exists. Our God is to be worshiped and adored as our only God of infinite perfection. No one is comparable to Him. God is holy and worthy to be praised.

12 Thou stretchedst out thy right hand, the earth swallowed them.

While God does not have a physical body like human beings, the right hand of God is often used figuratively in Scripture to refer to a position of power above all other powers. For example, Jesus is at the right hand of God today, perfectly reigning with God the Father and God the Spirit in community and power (Colossians 3:1; 1 Peter 3:21–22). In this verse, the right hand represents the strength of God. The second part of this verse referred to Pharaoh's army being swallowed up in the mud at the bottom of the sea, by the power of the outstretched, right hand of God.

13 Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed: thou hast guided them in thy strength unto thy holy habitation.

The next section of the song is prophetic, a prediction of future events (vv. 13–18). This begins with a powerful verse that demonstrates the vastness of God's mercy for His people and what He did to miraculously redeem them (v. 13). It is a reflection of God's love for us and the extent He will go to (sending Jesus to die for us) to redeem our souls. As God delivered Israel from Egypt with a strong hand, He would guide and direct them onward in their journey. In the same greatness of His strength, He would bring them to the place chosen for His habitation with them.

The word "guided" (Heb. *nahal*, naw-HALL) implies guiding to a place of rest. The holy habitation of God was the Promised Land and was consecrated by God as a sacred dwelling place for Jehovah among His people. It was the land promised to the patriarchs (Deuteronomy 26:9; Jeremiah 11:5; 32:22). God's promise of a specific land for His people was first made to Abraham (Genesis 15:18–21).

God also confirmed his promise to Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 26:3; 28:13). The Promised Land spread out wide to house God's people. Today, this land covers modern-day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. This verse is a reflection of how God guides us today, with His strength, mercy, and grace. He provided His holy habitation with us, through the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit in our hearts upon acceptance of Christ.

14 The people shall hear, and be afraid: sorrow shall take hold on the inhabitants of Palestina. 15 Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away. 16 Fear and dread shall fall upon them; by the greatness of thine arm they shall be as still as a stone; till thy people pass over, O LORD, till the people pass over, which thou hast purchased.

The people of other nations heard the report of plagues ordered by the God of the Israelites. Word reached every country about the horrified Egyptians who suffered plagues and finally, in pursuit of the Israelites, drowned in the Red Sea. Terror became even greater when they heard about the parting of the Red Sea so the Israelites could cross on dry land (cf. Joshua 2:10; 1 Samuel 4:8). The greatness of Egypt had been destroyed, her land ravished, her army destroyed, and her people left in mourning. These events, orchestrated by God, struck fear into the hearts of everyone, particularly those in the path leading to the Promised Land.

Palestina was a land that adjoined Canaan. The Palestinians' location caused them to become some of the first to be panic-stricken. Edom (southwestern Jordan today) was located south of Canaan. The Edomites are the descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother, so their strife with the descendants of Jacob began as sibling rivalry (see Genesis 25:19–34). The prophesy of this song took place as Moses told

them, “Ye are to pass through the coast of your brethren the children of Esau, ... they shall be afraid of you” (from Deuteronomy 2:4).

Moab (west-central Jordan today) was immediately to the north of the Promised Land. Moabites were decedents of Moab, the son born to Lot and Lot’s oldest daughter in the aftermath of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:37–38). The Moabites were perpetual enemies of the Israelites. When the Israelites were faithful to God, their enemies feared them and they were victorious. Moses’ triumphal song assured the people that God would bring His people into the Promised Land safely and victoriously.

17 Thou shalt bring them in, and plant them in the mountain of thine inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which thou hast made for thee to dwell in, in the Sanctuary, O LORD, which thy hands have established. 18 The LORD shall reign for ever and ever.

Given the huge population of the Israelites, it took a vast amount of land to form a dwelling place for them, but God in His wisdom created that place for His children as their inheritance. Yahweh will not be limited to the one mountaintop, however, unlike other false gods of the surrounding nations whose power was regional. God created a “Sanctuary,” (Heb. miqdash, meek-DOSH) meaning a sacred and holy place, a place that was specially dedicated and consecrated for communing and fellowshiping with God. God established this Sanctuary with His own hands, not needing any worshipers to make it for Him. Rather, this sanctuary was for His people. It is so important, because it serves as a “example and shadow of heavenly things” (from Hebrews 8:5).

These verses are also prophetic and represent how God will establish a place for us in His Kingdom, He reigns throughout eternity. As Christians, we too are heirs and have an inheritance, that is incorruptible, imperishable, and eternal (1 Peter 1:4). It is waiting in Heaven for us. Jesus said He will go and prepare a place for us, so we may be where He is (John 14:3). This great future is the object of our hope in Christ.

19 For the horse of Pharaoh went in with his chariots and with his horsemen into the sea, and the LORD brought again the waters of the sea upon them; but the children of Israel went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

The event at the Red Sea, when the Egyptian army was drowned, was celebrated as a great military victory achieved by God (Exodus 15:1–12). Given today’s powerful weapons of war, we often overlook the magnitude of the mighty chariots and horsemen of that time period. Egyptian war chariots originated about 1500 BC and were heavy vehicles with solid wheels and strong frames. Transportation-type chariots were light and fancy, but weighty military chariots were used to crash into infantry lines of soldiers. The armed chariot runners were equipped with bows and spears. The horsemen of ancient Egypt were muscular soldiers skilled in the art of war. Egypt was a dominant power in the world and used horsemen and chariots to conquer their enemies. Chariots and horsemen were the super-weapons of that day.

This event revealed a new dimension of the nature of God to the Israelites and demonstrated the necessity of forcefully taking possession of the promised land by means of military conquest. Moses described the Egyptian pursuers as being thrown into the sea (Exodus 15:4). The same image describes Pharaoh’s earlier order to throw the Hebrew babies into the Nile River (Exodus 1:22). God did to the Egyptians what they had done to the Israelites.

This single verse of prose sums up the occasion for the hymn of praise, identifying God's Red Sea Deliverance as both the reason for the song and the occasion of the singing.

20 And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. 21 And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, is the first woman mentioned in the Bible as a "prophetess." She is called a prophetess because she received revelations from God (Numbers 12:1–2; Micah 6:4). She also had musical skills.

Prophecy and music have been closely related in the Bible (1 Samuel 10:5; 1 Chronicles 25:1). Music played an important part in Israel's worship and celebration. Singing was an expression of love and thanks, and it was a creative way to pass down oral traditions. During the times of African American enslavement, few Black people were allowed to learn how to read, so songs were used to transmit customs, traditions, and even oral history. Some say the Song of Moses is the oldest recorded song in the world; it certainly is the oldest in Scripture. It was a festive, epic poem celebrating God's victory.

This song lifted hearts and sent encouragement, in the form of voices, outward to the people, and upward to God. The mention of dancing refers to the custom of religious dances, also prevalent in the times of David. In many Black churches today, teams of praise dancers lead congregations in song and perform dances as an act of worship to God. They play tambourines (timbrels) and other instruments of music. It should be noted that some Christian denominations view dancing and certain musical instruments as secular and exclude them from worship services. But all Christian churches believe in singing to the Lord. For Christians, the Song of Moses is far more personal than the commemoration of Israel's deliverance, it is a biblical reminder that we too will join in the singing of the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb, as included in the book of Revelation: "And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (15:3).

Thus, when the saints of God gather in God's eternal kingdom, they shall sing both the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb. How wonderful that Moses' song gives us a foreshadow of our final and eternal deliverance from sin and continual worship and praise to God.