

Sermon Given by

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Exodus 15:1-21 - "Something to sing about"

I should start by apologising to any guests or visitors because you're joining us for the last in a sermon series in the book of Exodus. Let me very briefly put you in the picture. When Moses and Aaron, the leaders of the Israelites, had first gone to Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt – then the mightiest empire in the world, to ask that he release the Israelites Pharaoh had replied back in 5:2 *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go."*

By our passage - chapter 15, that question of Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord?" had been answered in no uncertain terms. Look down with me at v3 *"The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea. The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone."* V11 *"Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"* If you want to show that you're the best tennis player in the world today, you must beat Nadal on clay and Federer on grass. To show you're the best cricket team in the world, you must consistently beat the other best teams Australia, India, South Africa - home and away. In the Middle East in 1200 BC if you wanted to show you're the greatest power on earth you take on Egypt. The ancient world at that time was in terror of the Egyptian Army. But not any more. V6 *"Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy."* Like a precious vase is dropped to the floor and it shatters, so God had shattered the Egyptian Army. Pharaoh had had his question answered in no uncertain terms – he now knew that God was a warrior. He wouldn't be thwarted by Pharaoh or any other ruler or power that lined up against him.

Well what does chapter 15 add? After all the story has already been told – if you were here last week you'll know we've just heard about the passing through the sea and then the massive watery judgement on the Egyptians. What does it add? I've got 3 main things that it adds. The first is something we've already seen in part in the earlier chapters of the book but chapter 15 highlights it and that is that:

God's judgement on Egypt is righteous

A couple of you came up to me after last week's sermon and understandably said, "what about the poor Egyptians – isn't it unfair that they are judged like that?" This chapter reminds us that the Egyptians got what they deserved. We've seen already something of Pharaoh's arrogance and defiance against God. Remember his sneering question: "Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go?" We've seen his stubborn refusal again and again to obey God's clear command through Moses.

But in chapter 15 the arrogant and evil nature of the Egyptians is highlighted. Look with me at v9 – in v9 the scene shifts to the Egyptian camp on the eve of battle and you can imagine it – you can picture the soldiers in their chariots, cigarette in one hand, mug of coffee in the other as they contemplate the action of the next day. V9 *“The enemy boasted, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake them. I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them. I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.’”* They were after Israelite blood and they arrogantly presumed they would get it. But v10 *“you blew with your breath and the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters.”*

So, I hope you can see that God’s watery judgement on the Egyptians was no arbitrary fit of rage on God’s part. Pharaoh and his armies were the epitome of evil – not only had they stood against God shaking their fist in his face, standing against him over and over and over again. Not only that but the Egyptians had also engaged in the systematic oppression of God’s people. God is a God who stands against evil in this world – he punished the Egyptians and he is committed to ultimately destroying evil so that ultimately no one or thing will stand against Him. The more aware of evil we are and the more it pains us to see God defied and rejected, the more we will rejoice and delight in the fact that God is a God who judges his enemies. So we see that God’s judgement on Egypt is righteous. We see secondly in chapter 15 that it adds singing. That’s our second heading...

The Place of Singing

V1 *“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.’”* Actually the Hebrew clarifies that it’s the men singing to start with – they’re on the beach looking back at the Egyptians - their former captors and oppressors lying dead – and as they’re on the beach we might all them the Beach Boys. The women aren’t to be outdone though, they too must sing God’s praises and at the end of the passage they join in with a descant - we might call them Girls Aloud. Can you see that v20 *“Then Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.’”* At a time of great emotional stirring and excitement, ordinary prose is insufficient. V19 tells us what happened in prose but that isn’t sufficient – their feelings were at maximum pitch so they turn to music and song and dancing. Singing is a right response to God – to who he is, to what he’s done – to the great saving work that he has achieved. In the last book in the bible – book of Revelation, the apostle John, the writer of the book keeps getting these pictures, these glimpses of heaven. And wherever John turns in heaven he hears singing, because heaven too rejoices in the wake of a great victory. For example, Rev 5:9 *“And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...”* Moses and the Israelites praise God for his great victory at the Red Sea and the song of heaven is praise resulting from Christ’s great victory through the Cross and Resurrection.

It’s natural to sing in victory isn’t it? What does Jenson Button do when he crosses the line to win the motor racing world championship – he bursts into song, “We are the champions”. Your football team wins and the fans start chanting, “2 – 0, 2- 0” or slightly more taunting,

“what’s the score, what’s the score?” Heaven will be full of singing because people will only be in heaven because of what God has done for them – because of Christ’s victory on the Cross – in fact we’re told in Rev 15:3 that one of the songs of heaven will be a song of Moses. Christians have been called the “singiest” of all religions – no other religion bursts into song in the way Christians do. The longest book in the Bible - Psalms is a book of songs – 150 of them. Christians love to sing and it’s good and right to respond to God in song. And yet, it’s worth saying a few things about singing.

The first is that it’s not essential. When the missionaries were driven out of China in 1951 – for the next 30 years until China opened up a bit in the 1980s, there was virtually no singing. The Christians had to be very subtle and unobtrusive as the church went underground and so they didn’t sing out loud. And yet in that time God wonderfully grew the church from roughly 1 million protestant believers to nearer 50 million. It is possible to have a great movement of the spirit without songs. So singing is not essential but it is healthy and a great blessing to the church.

It’s worth pointing out secondly that no particular style of music is intrinsically more spiritual than another. In February we’re going to have a TNG service at one of the 6 O’clock and I’m planning on playing some Christian rap music that I’ve come across recently. I know full well that some there won’t like that style but others will and the words are great and punchy. We all have our own particular musical tastes and preferences - be it modern choruses, more reflective tunes – Taize or Iona style, choral, gospel, the old hymns, classical and we’ll all be tempted to think that our preferred style is where God is really at – the Holy Spirit is at work in a special way when we have those songs with that particular musical accompaniment. That is simply not true, the style itself is a matter of personal taste. No particular style of music is intrinsically more spiritual than another.

The third thing to say is that in Scripture the purpose of singing is primarily to express an experience of God NOT to generate an experience of God. There’s a subtle but very important distinction – the primary purpose of singing in the bible is to express an experience of God not to generate one. Did you notice how much of Moses’ song is concerned with what God had done – v1-12 and with what God had promised that he would do v13-18. The song expressed the people’s thanks and praise and adoration in response to God’s deeds and words. This means that the content of what we sing will always be very important. It means that the most important faculty for singing spiritually is not a tuneful voice, wonderful as it is to have plenty of those in our midst but a good memory and a lively heart love for God because of who he is and what’s he done and what he’s promised. The Israelites burst into song because they had seen God’s mighty hand at work in saving them – if we want to sing spiritually and with passion remember that God has saved us from slavery.

I think the music and singing at All Saints is very good and as someone who’s not gifted in this area I’m very grateful for all that the musicians do in leading us in song Sunday by Sunday. Of course the music could be better and if you play an instrument and would like to play on Sundays please let us know – we’d love to hear from you. It’d be brilliant to have a drummer now and then, some more brass and wind instruments. Please let us know if you’d like to play.

But actually, if you're finding it hard to sing, if you're finding it a struggle to rouse yourself to sing – the main solution to your vocal lethargy if I can put it like that is not that we need a drummer or more old hymns but that we need to refresh our memories. We need to be regularly gazing at God as he has revealed himself in Scripture - marvelling at who he is, delighting in what he's done and being strengthened and encouraged by what he's promised.

Chapter 15 helps us to see that God's judgement on Egypt is righteous, it also adds singing. Lastly we're going to see that...

It Clarifies the Nature of Freedom

The story of the exodus is not so much the story of a great escape but a great rescue. V1-12 celebrate the fact that God had smashed the Egyptian tyranny over Israel. For example V7 *"In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble."* The Egyptian bondage had been smashed – the people of Israel were free but in what sense were they free? What is it to be free? We were thinking about freedom last week and that deep down longing people have to be free - you remember those words of Freddie Mercury, "I want to break free!" What is true freedom?

Israel had been rescued from their slavery in Egypt but that did not mean that they were now in a vacuum. God hadn't just said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go" – that wasn't all he said was it? No, he said, "let my people go so that they may worship me." The Israelites no longer belonged to Egypt but that didn't mean they belonged to no-one, or that they belonged to themselves in some free self autonomy – they weren't free to join with the Rolling Stones in singing, "I'm free to do what I want any old time". No, they belonged to God, they were his people, he was their Ruler, he was the one they were to worship. Notice how God's sovereign will over them is asserted in the 2nd half of the song. V13 *"In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your dwelling."* V16 *"By the power of your arm they (that is the enemies of God's people) will be as still as a stone – until your people pass by, O Lord, until the people you bought pass by. You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance – the place, O Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands established. The Lord will reign for ever and ever."*

God was their Ruler – as He is for the Christian today. A very basic definition of a Christian is someone who has Jesus as Lord – that is they seek to live their lives as Jesus would want them to, obeying him. That, though it can be hard at times, is the best way to live, that is true freedom. The person who is a slave to Christ enjoys wonderful freedom. Jesus knew this – this is what he claimed. He says in John 8:36 *"if the Son sets you free you shall be free indeed."* He says in Matthew 11:28 *"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Jesus knew this and everybody in this building this morning who has come personally to Jesus Christ for salvation and has accepted him as Lord – you too will know it.

Sadly though so many people don't know it and in their honest moments they cry out with Freddie Mercury for freedom. They've looked to all sorts of things or people or experiences to be free: career, sport, sex, drugs, fame, family, friends, money, living a good life - but whatever it is they all have one common problem – they're all found wanting – they don't deliver.

I'm sorry I couldn't find it to show you on the screen but there's a great Gary Larson cartoon - 2 goldfish are in a goldfish bowl with the skeletal remains of a 3rd goldfish lying on the carpet beneath the bowl. And one of the goldfish in the bowl says to the other: "I guess he made it – it's been over a week now since he went over the wall." A goldfish's freedom is in water. It may think that freedom is getting over the wall but it isn't – it's created to be in water – that is where it finds freedom. It's the same for human beings, we are created beings, given our lives and our world and every good thing that we enjoy by God. Our true freedom is found as we trust in Christ and so know perfect forgiveness and a loving relationship with our Creator God. That's what we're designed for, that's what we're hardwired for. Living with Jesus as Lord, we discover not the freedom to do what we want when we want, indulging every whim and passion but rather we discover freedom to become who we were created to be – the sons and daughters of God whose service is perfect freedom. And to look for true freedom in any other thing or person will leave us ultimately dissatisfied and like the goldfish damaged and ultimately doomed.

As I say, many of you will know that freedom already. Rejoice and delight in it. Join with Moses in singing to our great saving God. But if there is someone here who doesn't can I urge you to come to Christ that you might know this freedom. I've got a little booklet that explains how you can do that; there's a pile of them on the table at the back, please do take one. If you don't quite feel ready for that, you'd like to find out more then we run a course called Christianity Explored where over 6 or 7 weeks we meet over a meal and look together at the basics of the Christian faith from Mark's gospel. Please let us know if that's something that you'd like to do.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)