

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SEA

SERIES: PRAYERS FOR THE
MOMENT



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Exodus 15:1-18
First Message
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Exodus 15:1-18

Today we begin an eight-week series we're calling "Prayers For The Moment." The prayers featured in the series are imbedded in biblical stories. In these passages, people pray in response to the stories they're living.

We will thus be encouraged to pray in response to the stories we're living. We will cry out to God, and we will praise God—for what he has done, for what he hasn't done, for what we want him to do, and for what he will do.

Each of us has a story. Parts of it are wonderful. Parts of it are not so wonderful. Sometimes, it's a confusing mix of both. We have episodes and images and fragments, many of which seem disconnected from each other. Throw in our ever-shifting emotional reactions to everything that's swirling around us, and it's a wonder that so many of us manage to hold onto our sanity.

What is life? Shakespeare's Macbeth, at the end of his life, concludes: "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Is there a way for us to make sense of it all?

The story

Today we consider the prayer of the Israelites in Exodus 15. The prayer is based on the story of the exodus, which recounts how the Lord rescued the Israelites from bondage in Egypt. The Lord delivered the Israelites by afflicting Egypt with ten plagues. In the tenth plague, the Lord instructed the Israelites to sacrifice lambs and mark their doors with their blood. He thus spared the firstborn of the Israelites but killed the firstborn of the Egyptians.

With the tenth plague, Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, finally released the Israelites. However, he later had a change of heart and pursued them. The Egyptians seemingly had the Israelites trapped, but the Lord parted the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to pass through on dry ground. When the Egyptians followed, the Lord released the waters, killing the Egyptians.

The exodus was the seminal event in the history of Israel. In many ways, it marks the birth of the nation of Israel. The writers of the Hebrew Scriptures never tired of referring to the exodus. It is not too much to say that the exodus was Israel's most important story.

The prayer

On the other side of the Red Sea, Moses, the leader of the Israelites, and the rest of the Israelites pray what came to be known as "the Song of Moses." The prayer remembers the victory of the Lord over the Egyptians, anticipates his victory over future enemies, and envisions the Israelites' establishment in the Promised Land. The prayer is a carefully crafted poem, marked off near the end of its three stanzas by the words "like a stone," "as lead," and "as a stone," respectively.

Let us join the Israelites on the other side of the sea, so to speak, and use it as vantage point for reflection, prayer, and worship.

Exodus 15:1-18:

Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying,

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;

the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

**2 The Lord is my strength and my song,
and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.**

**3 The Lord is a man of war;
the Lord is his name.**

**4 "Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.**

**5 The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.**

6 Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power,

your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.

7 In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;

you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.

8 At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;

the floods stood up in a heap;

the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

9 The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,

I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.

I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’

10 You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;

they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

11 “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

12 You stretched out your right hand;

the earth swallowed them.

13 “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;

you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

14 The peoples have heard; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.

15 Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;

all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.

16 Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone,

till your people, O Lord, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.

17 You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain,

the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode,

the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.

18 The Lord will reign forever and ever.”

The journey of the Israelites

The Israelites hail the Lord as “a man of war,” which may offend modern sensibilities. We must remember, however, that the Lord, ever since evil entered the world, has been intent on defeating it. Evil—Satan, sin, and death—is no small matter. Sin is phenomenally destructive, far more than we know. At this stage in the human story, the Lord deemed it necessary to be this kind of warrior in order save his people from the evil Egyptians, ultimately in order to save the world from every evil.

If the Lord is a warrior, his weapons were the wind and the sea. He used the wind to part the sea and collapse the sea. Pharaoh’s vaunted chariots and his best warriors, his “chosen officers,” were no match for the Lord.

Although the Lord liberated the Israelites from Egypt, other pagan nations stood in the way of their entry into, and possession of, the land of Canaan, which the Lord promised to his people. However, those nations and their leaders will hear of the Lord’s victory over Egypt and worry that they and their gods will also be overthrown. In the prayer, the Israelites anticipate the defeat of Philistia, Edom, Moab, and the inhabitants of Canaan.

Finally, the Lord will lead the Israelites into, and establish them in, the Promised Land, which is called his mountain, his place, and his sanctuary, descriptions that will be filled out by the city of Jerusalem, which was built on Mount Zion, and the temple, which was built in Jerusalem.

The prayer is poetry, not prose. Poetry is the language of the heart. As such, it employs metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech, which can unlock deep emotions. The poetry of the prayer thus enhances its celebratory nature. The Lord has won a great victory, which anticipates future victories culminating in the establishment of his people in a new home. On the other side of the Red Sea, the Israelites celebrate.

Can we also celebrate?

Demons meet their demise

The New Testament employs language from the Song of Moses to offer that God has effected a new exodus. Consider, first of all, a story that’s found in Mark 5.

A collection of demons that said its name was “Legion” possessed a Gentile man who lived among the tombs in Gentile territory. A legion, in military terms, constituted up to six thousand troops. The legion of demons was reduced to begging Jesus to send it into a herd of nearby swine.

Jesus granted the request, and the two thousand swine, under the influence of the demons, ran into the sea and were drowned. Unable to destroy the man they occupied, the demons instead destroyed the swine. The demise of the swine demonstrated the destructive intent of the demons and constituted an observable victory over them. It also cleansed the land of idolatry, inasmuch as pigs were used in pagan sacrifices. Moreover, the drowning of the swine served as a sign to the man that his tormentors were gone.

Note: Pharaoh’s army drowned in the sea. Note: The swine, carrying Satan’s army, drowned in the sea. In the first exodus, an army of pagans met its demise, and in the new exodus, an army of demons met its demise.

By and large, Israel in the first century was hoping for a new exodus that amounted to victory over Rome, which was oppressing it, just as Egypt oppressed it in days of old (Isaiah 63:11-12). Israelites resented the presence of the Roman legions that occupied their land and wanted their God to push them back to the Mediterranean Sea. If the Romans drowned in the sea, like the Egyptians of old, so much the better. In Mark’s story, however, demonic legions—not Roman legions—pose the real threat.

The new exodus defeats demons, not humans. In fact, it rescues not simply Israel, as in the first exodus, but also Gentiles. The man who called himself Legion because he was possessed by a multitude of demons is the first Gentile to be liberated in the new exodus.

New exodus

God has effected a new exodus, not solely for the Israelites but for all people, and not from Egypt or any other human oppressors but from Satan, sin, and death. He did so not through the blood of lambs or the death of Egypt’s firstborn but through the blood of Christ, “our Passover lamb,” through the death of his Son, “the firstborn of all creation” (1 Corinthians 5:7, Colossians 1:15).

In the book of Revelation, the Song of Moses is also called the Song of the Lamb and has been reinterpreted to invite the nations to worship the Lord:

“And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and amazing are your deeds,

O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways,

O King of the nations!

4 Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come
and worship you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed”
(Revelation 15:3-4).

The Israelites sang that the Lord “has triumphed gloriously.” Paul writes, “He [God] disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him [Christ]” (Colossians 2:15).

The Israelites sang, “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed.” Paul writes, “He [God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

The Israelites identified themselves before their God as the people “whom you have purchased.” Paul writes on two occasions in 1 Corinthians that “you were bought with a price”—the price being the blood of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23).

Remember redemption

If you believe in Jesus Christ, the Song of Moses first of all encourages you to remember that God has redeemed you—rescued you from Satan, sin, and death and ultimately from hell—through the blood of his Son. Remember: how did you come to faith?

Even if you were reared in a faith environment, lots of things had to happen, and happen at just the right time, long before you were even born, for you to come to faith in Jesus. The exodus was more than four hundred years in the making. In the end, it took not just one plague but ten plagues. Even after ten plagues, it took the parting of the Red Sea and the collapsing of the Red Sea before the Israelites were finally free.

I was not reared in a faith environment. On the verge of my sixteenth birthday, I decided to go to my

first high school dance, all by myself. I'm not sure why I hadn't gone to a dance until then. I'm also not sure why I decided to go then. And I'm not sure what I expected to do there: dance (dance with whom?) or hang out on the fringes (hang out on the fringes with whom?).

I'm not sure what I expected to do there, but I didn't expect to meet some people who were part of a church youth group—but that's exactly what I did. Those people, it turned out, introduced me to Christ.

Remember redemption—and give thanks.

New wilderness

In the wilderness, after the Israelites were released from bondage in Egypt, they anticipated victory over future enemies. Now, after being released from bondage to sin, in the wilderness of this world we anticipate future victories, not over pagan nations but over the enemies behind the enemies: “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). Our fight is against Satan his demons. Moreover, our weapons are far from conventional: “For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds” (2 Corinthians 10:4).

The Israelites sang regarding their enemies, “The peoples have heard; they tremble.” James writes concerning our enemies, “Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19)

The Israelites sang regarding their enemies, “Terror and dread fall upon them; / because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, / till your people, O Lord, pass by, / till the people pass by whom you have purchased” (Exodus 15:16). Jesus says regarding his followers, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:28). Paul writes, “The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Timothy 4:18).

Expect victory

First, remember redemption. Second, expect victory.

One of the striking things about the prayer in Exodus 15 is what's not included: supplication. There are no

requests. Moses and the Israelites don't ask the Lord for anything. They know that more enemies are in their future, but they express confidence that the Lord will defeat them all, just as he defeated the Egyptians.

There is a place, of course, for letting “your requests be made known to God,” especially when your faith is flagging (Philippians 4:6), but there is also a place for trusting the Lord with your future, especially inasmuch as he has already seen you through so much. He will not abandon the people he has purchased with the blood of his own Son.

If you believe in his Son, he will take care of you. You may lose everything, but you will not lose him. He will take care of you. Believe it.

At this time, especially, we need to have confidence in the Lord. We need to connect with and celebrate his power and his goodness. If an addiction to the news is bringing us down, then we need to pull back from the news, spend some time in a text such as Exodus 15, and renew our confidence in the Lord.

When I was a reporter, I went on a ride-along with a California Highway Patrol officer on Highway 17, a treacherous stretch of road, in order to learn more about the beat I was covering. Before I got into the car, the officer told me, “If we get into a chase, don't panic. You have to trust me.” The “if” sounded more like a “when.” About then I began wondering why I volunteered for this mission.

Sure enough, not long into our excursion, he took off after someone in a high-speed chase, siren screaming and lights flashing. I panicked. Plastered to the back of my seat, I managed to peek at the officer. He was as calm as could be, weaving in and out of traffic on the curvy mountain road at ninety miles per hour. He was a man in control.

The road ahead may be treacherous. Who knows what's around the bend? Who among us expected a pandemic? But the Lord is driving the car, so to speak. You have to trust him.

New Promised Land

Just as the Israelites envisioned being established in the Promised Land, we envision being established in the new Promised Land: the new heaven and the new earth.

The Israelites sang, “You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, / the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, / the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established” (Exodus 15:17). John, envisioning the future, writes, “hen I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:1-2).

The Israelites sang that the Promised Land was the place the Lord made for his “abode.” John, in reference to the new heaven and the new earth, writes, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:3).

The Israelites sang, “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). John, anticipating the new creation, writes, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15).

Envision eternity

First, remember redemption. Second, expect victory. Third, envision eternity. Frederick Buechner writes:

*The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.*¹

It's worth hearing again: “The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best.” If that's the case, then it matters little how bad things get because the last thing, the new world, is the eternal thing. This is also worth hearing again: He will reign forever and ever.

Larger story

Moses and the Israelites sang the song to the Lord, but when they sang, each of them used the first-person singular pronouns “I” and “my,” not the first-person plural pronoun “we” and “our”: “I will sing to the Lord”; “The Lord is my strength and my song”; “and he has become my salvation”; “this is my God, and I will

praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.” Each of them connected his or her own story to the stories of thousands of others, and all of them connected to the larger story of the people of God.

Each of us has a story. How do we make sense of it? Your own story is too small. Your heart yearns for a larger story. If you believe in Christ, you're part of a larger story—the largest story. It is the ancient and eternal story of the people of God. It is, above all, a story of redemption, stretching all the way back to creation, passing through the exodus and the new exodus, and reaching forward to the new creation. God is even drawing up the earth-shattering events of this year into this cosmic story of redemption. Can you believe it?

You can breathe in this story. You can stretch out your arms in this story. There is room for your heart in this story. Oh yes: celebrate! “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? / Who is like you, majestic in holiness, / awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?”

The Lord does wonders. For a moment, stop analyzing and instead get lost in the wonder of it all—the wonder of the amazing story we're a part of, the wonder of God. It will do you good.

Even if you can't make sense of your story, if you're part of God's story, then you know your story is heading in a good direction and has a good ending—which, in effect, makes sense of your story!

If you do not yet believe in Jesus, may I ask you: are you tired of trying to make sense of your story? The events of this year are revealing to us that humans need a Savior. Thankfully, God has given us one. Do you want to be part of a larger story, the story of God? You can, you know. Simply confess your sins—that is, your decisions to turn away from God and make life work on your own—and accept the forgiveness he has for you in Jesus Christ.

In my story, I decided to go to a dance. I didn't know it at the time, but God was writing me into his story. My little story is caught up, along with the rest of you and all of your stories, in the biggest story imaginable.

I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously. The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation. This is my God, and I will praise him. The Lord will reign forever and ever.

Endnotes

1 Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

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