

“Moses and Miriam Lead in Praise”

Lesson Text: Exodus 15:1–3, 11–13, 17–18, 20–21 **Background Scripture:** Exodus 14:21–31; 15:1–21

Devotional Reading: Psalm 104:1–9

Exodus 15:1–3, 11–13, 17–18, 20–21 (NIV)

¹*Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: “I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea. ²“The Lord is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. ³The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name.” ¹*

¹⁴*“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. ¹³In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.”*

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.” ²⁰Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. ²¹Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.”*

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To List God’s attributes as sung by Moses and Miriam.
- **Biblical Principle:** To trace the historical elements within Moses’ and Miriam’s celebratory songs of praise.
- **Daily Application:** To write and sing a song of praise to God for His character and deliverance of His people.

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Song

The power of song can transcend ethnic and national boundaries. In every country and every people group, songs are significant. According to many experts, music and singing can improve a person’s sleep, mood, and cognitive performance while decreasing the effects of stress. Not only is it fun to sing along to your favorite song, but it might also contribute to a healthy lifestyle!

Songs can also improve a person’s spiritual health. Through songs of worship, we learn the truths about God and strengthen our faith in Him. Further, such praises have the power to unite the people. Today’s lesson consists of an ancient song that united the Old Testament people of God by remembering His work.

LESSON CONTEXT

The song in today’s lesson comes from the book of Exodus, which is part of the Pentateuch, another name for the first five books of the Old Testament. These books have been traditionally attributed to Moses because he was well-educated (Acts 7:22) and skilled at detailed record-keeping (examples: Exodus 17:14; 24:4; Numbers 33:2).

The events of the exodus are traditionally dated to 1447 B.C. Long before then, God had promised the land of 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. 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. Eventually, 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. 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 a princess of Egypt adopted him, but he had to flee Egypt at age 40 after killing an Egyptian (Exodus 2; see Acts 7:23). Forty years later, Moses encountered the Lord at Sinai. God repeated the promise given to Moses' ancestors and called him to lead the enslaved Israelites away from Egypt (Exodus 3:8). God worked through Moses and Aaron (Moses' brother) to bring about ten plagues that devastated Egypt.

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, but 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 enslaved Israelites were free, beyond the reach of Pharaoh. Moses and the people responded with joyous singing (Exodus 15:1–21).

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 a minor difficulty in finding an appropriate designation for this song. Some students of the song have created designations for this song. These designations include "A Song of the Sea" (compare Exodus 15:1, 4–5, 8, 10), "A Song of Moses and Miriam" (compare 15:20–21), or "A Song of Moses and Israel" (compare 15:1). Another song designated as "A Song of Moses" can be found in Deuteronomy 32 (see the introduction in Deuteronomy 31:30).

The Song Introduced: Exodus 15:1-3

After the triumph and victory was enjoyed, it was natural to sing a praise unto God. Redemption should always lead to rejoicing (Luke 15:1-24).

"This song" of praise to the Lord was for the ways He triumphed over Pharaoh and his army and thereby received honor (see Exodus 14:17–18). The *horse and driver* refer to parts of Pharaoh's army. Although his forces were considered all-powerful in their day, they paled in comparison to the power of the Lord (Isaiah 43:16–17).

The Lord's power was on display by casting the Egyptian armies *into* the waters of *the sea*. Through this powerful act, the Lord eliminated the most powerful military force of that era and showcased His unparalleled greatness (see Exodus 18:9–11). As a result, the enemy was incapable of a return attack on the Israelites.

This hymn of praise has four stanzas: God's victory is announced (Ex. 15:1-5), God's weapons are described (vs. 6-10), God's character is extolled (vs. 11-16a), and God's promises are fulfilled (vs. 16b-18).

1. Why did Moses and the Israelite people sing praises to God? (Exodus 15:1-3)

This verse contains two rhetorical questions that highlight the uniqueness of God. The Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses. However, those "gods" were fictitious and could not provide protection. By asking *who among the gods is like you, Lord?* Moses emphasized the Lord's superiority over these pagan gods. This was a question for which Moses knew the answer: there is none like the Lord God (compare 1 Samuel 2:2; Isaiah 45:5; Jeremiah 10:6).

The second question builds on the first by distinguishing the ways that the Lord is incomparable to all other "gods." The holiness of the Lord describes His moral purity. The Lord God is *awesome in glory* and perfect in every way (Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Samuel 22:31; Matthew 5:48). The Lord is unique regarding His holiness (1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 77:13).

Because the Lord is holy, His people are commanded to have lives of holiness (Leviticus 11:44–45; 1 Peter 1:15–16). As a result, people should honor the Lord and have a willingness to follow his commands (example: Deuteronomy 10:12, 20–21).

The *wonders* of the Lord's work were displayed in His power to lead the Israelites safely across the sea on dry ground (compare Psalm 66:5–6). Even in Heaven is the Lord worshipped for His holy and mighty acts (see Revelation 15:3–5).

2. How did the people describe the uniqueness (character) of God? (Exodus 15:11-13)

What Do You Think?

In what ways is God wondrous in your life?

Digging Deeper

How will you celebrate the wonderful and wondrous ways God has worked?

Verse 12 of today's lesson goes on to praise God for His power; His mercy to deliver, and His wisdom to guide (v. 13).

In biblical times, the *right hand* or being located at a person's right hand conveyed blessing (example: Genesis 48:17–20), demonstrated prestige (examples: 1 Kings 2:19; Matthew 22:44 [quoting Psalm 110:1]), or revealed power (example: Psalms 20:6; 98:1).

This verse uses a literary device called *anthropomorphism*, the practice of assigning human attributes to God (examples: Leviticus 20:6; Numbers 6:25–26; Deuteronomy 11:12). God does not have a physical body (John 4:24). The song uses this literary device to describe how the Lord conveys His power through His outstretched right hand (compare: Psalms 17:7; 138:7). The expression is used twice in this song, once here and in Exodus 15:6 (not in this week's lesson text). In this case, it celebrates God's victory over the Egyptians on Israel's behalf (Exodus 14:21–30).

After redeeming the people, the Lord led them to a *holy dwelling*. The underlying Hebrew word translated *dwelling* elsewhere refers to the tabernacle (2 Samuel 15:25), the city of Jerusalem (example: Isaiah 33:20), or a more general descriptor for the place of the Lord (example: Jeremiah 25:30). God was leading the people to the promised land of Canaan, the land where He would dwell with them (Genesis 17:8). The New Testament presents Christ as our redeemer, paying the price to purchase us from the slavery of sin (1 Corinthians 6:20; Galatians 3:13; 1 Timothy 2:5–6). God continues to lead His people to the ultimate holy dwelling beyond the physical realm (John 14:1–3; Hebrews 11:10).

What Do You Think?

In what ways would (or should) your life change if you spent more time reflecting on and emulating God's holiness?

Digging Deeper

Which of these three texts spurs you most to start doing so today: Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15–16?

The Lord's leading to *bring* the Israelites into the promised land demonstrates His provision and the permanence of His care. The song acknowledges that the people's establishment in the land would come from the Lord's work to *plant them* and not because they made a name for themselves (compare 1 Chronicles 17:9–10; Psalms 44:2; 78:54–55; 80:8–11; contrast Isaiah 37:24–25). The land was an *inheritance* given to them by the Lord. It had been promised to Abram (Genesis 12:6–7) and confirmed to Moses (Exodus 6:2–4, 8). It would be the place of God's blessing to the people (Leviticus 20:24; Deuteronomy 8:7–8).

The land of Canaan is mountainous. Israel settled primarily in the hill regions, and centuries after Moses, Solomon would build the temple (*sanctuary*) of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah (2 Chronicles 3).

Verse 18 of today's lesson repeats the song's central theme: *the Lord* is all-powerful and eternal in His reign. Unlike earthly rulers, the Lord's reign over His people will be forever (Psalms 45:6; 146:10; Revelation 11:15).

3. What did the people of God realize? (Exodus 15:17-18)

The joy of *Miriam the prophet* or prophetess and *all the women* were expressed by their singing and dancing. This is the first explicit reference to Miriam in the Old Testament. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam were a team sent by God to help lead the nation of Israel (Micah 6:4). Earlier God had used Miriam to save her younger brother Moses' life (Ex. 2:1-10).

Timbrels are the equivalent of modern-day tambourines or hand drums. It was customary in the ancient world for women to celebrate various occasions *with timbrels and dancing* (example: Judges 11:34; compare Psalms 149:3; 150:4; Jeremiah 31:4).

The refrain of the women's song celebrated how the Lord cast Israel's foes into the sea. It is very similar to the beginning of Moses' song, which also focused on the mighty acts of the Lord to save the Israelites (see Exodus 15:1, above).

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 of how the most powerful nation in the world at that time was no match for the God of Israel.

4. Who else celebrated and led praise to God? (Exodus 15:20-21)

What Do You Think?

What are some occasions that would be appropriate to label as "a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4)?

Digging Deeper

Why did you, or did you not, include "a church worship service" as one of your responses?

CONCLUSION

Sing to the Lord

Singing helps diminish feelings of stress and anxiety by releasing "feel good" brain chemicals that alleviate pain. Singing also activates the portion of the brain associated with memorization—you can probably still sing the alphabet song!

Our songs of worship do these things and so much more. We sing in worship to the Lord because He is the source of our strength and salvation. Our worship also celebrates and remembers the Lord's goodness and faithfulness. The apostle Paul sang to the Lord in worship, even in imprisonment (Acts 16:25). "Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" along with "making music from your heart to the Lord" are marks of a life filled with God's Spirit (Ephesians 5:19; see Colossians 3:16). While there are specific situations when singing is not always appropriate (examples: Proverbs 25:20; Amos 5:23; 8:10; Ezekiel 26:13), the righteous people of God are called to sing praises to Him (Psalm 33:1–3). Sing to the Lord without hesitation!

PRAYER

Lord God, we thank You for the example of worship and song presented in Scripture. Help us be further attentive to Your Spirit so that we might sing to You in all situations—good or bad. In the name of Your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The Lord has given us a reason to sing!

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Prayers of Repentance and Confession" where we will summarize the circumstances that led King David to write Psalm 51. Study Psalm 51.