

Songs of Praise • Exodus 15:1–21

Robert Ingersoll died in Dobbs Ferry, New York, on July 21st 1899, just short of both his 66th birthday and turn from the 19th to the 20th century.

Ingersoll was quite a remarkable man. He recruited his own large unit to fight in the Civil War, and entered the Union Army as a full colonel. After the Civil War was over he became the Attorney General of the State of Illinois. He was famous for being the outstanding trial lawyer of New York in the later part of the 19th century. He gave the keynote address one year in Illinois to the Republican National Convention. There were some who wanted him to become the Republican candidate for the presidency of the United States.

But he was far better known for his skepticism and agnosticism, and for his speeches and pamphlets attacking the Bible and Christianity.

When he died in July of 1899, the New York newspapers carried his obituary in which they reported all of the amazing accomplishments of Ingersoll's life. The last paragraph of the obituary announced the time and the place and the arrangements of his funeral. The obituary then concluded with the words, "There will be no singing", which seems to me was rather obvious for a man who had no faith in God, no anticipation of life after death. About what could anyone sing at the funeral of someone who did not believe in God?

What a contrast that is to the reports that we read about the deaths of Christians in the early centuries of the Christian church. You recall that the Roman Empire, in it's awful persecution of Christians in those first centuries, brought Christians by the hundreds and thousands out into the Roman arenas where they faced unarmed gladiators who killed them and lions and tigers who tore them apart. Executioners dipped them in pitch and oil and set them afire.

But did you know that one of the typical responses of Christians, as they walked into the arena and as they died, was that they sang hymns of praise to God? It so awestruck the crowds that some historians say that became the turning point, both for the Roman Empire and for Christianity. They could not understand how some people could be so tortured and die and could still sing joyous praises to

God when they were facing such horrors. So it was that the cross of Jesus Christ eventually won out over the scepter of the Caesars.

Christianity has been described as the singiest religion of all the world, and rightly so. We have cause to praise God in song. But the question is, how? How do we do that? How are we to praise God in song? There are some very powerful and practical answers to be found here in the 15th chapter of Exodus.

The first of those answers is that everyone participates, or so it was for the people of Israel. Who was it that marched across the Reed Sea on dry ground? Well, it was everyone. And who had the promise and anticipation of the Promised Land to come? Everyone. And so who should sing the praises of God? Everyone. Not just Moses, the leader, but according to verse 1 everyone sang this song to the Lord. Young and old, rich and poor, men and women, musical and monotone, they were all saved and so they all sang.

That's the way it is to be for us, for we, too, have been redeemed from a different kind of slavery, the slavery of sin. We, too, have experienced a miracle. Not the miracle of walking through the Reed Sea on dry ground. We have experienced the miracle of new life in Jesus Christ. We, too, are on our way to a promised land, not in Palestine but in

heaven for all of eternity.

And if not for those reasons, then simply as disciples of Jesus Christ we have been commanded in the New Testament. In

We have experienced the miracle of new life in Jesus Christ.

Colossians 3:16, we are commanded to "sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." And in Ephesians 5:19, "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord."

I have found that when God's people are singing hymns of praise to God, I cannot keep silent. It is commanded in the Bible, but it is also because I have been redeemed. I've been saved, so I have to sing. It's something I simply have to do because of all that I have received in Jesus Christ.

I'll also admit that there is something that sometimes puzzles me, and that is those who come to a worship service and do not sing. They do not pick up the hymnal. If they do pick it up and open to the

hymn, they never sing the words or even glance down at the page. There are some who seem to be more preoccupied with other things that are going on than they are with the words that focus upon God. I find that strange. I wonder if it is an inability to carry a tune or if it is some medical reason like laryngitis. What's the problem?

In the nation of Israel with its hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of people, there surely must have been a significant percentage of them who were not musically inclined or had laryngitis, but apparently they all sang the praises of God.

It is also a concern that, in our Christian society in America, hymns of praise to God in our worship services are sometimes used as devices to accomplish other things. Hymns become vehicles to finding our places, or they serve as entertainment, or they are merely used as an opening exercise in anticipation for a sermon or speech that is somehow perceived to be more important than talking to God in worship. Maybe it's because we have not fully realized that we have been saved from sin, we have been redeemed by an act of God. And those so saved and so redeemed are those who must sing.

The Danish theologian, Soren Kirkegaard, now long dead, was helpful in an analogy that he gave in understanding worship. Were he here now he would say that many of us have a misconception of what actually takes place when we gather together as they gathered together in Exodus 15. Kirkegaard would say that when we gather to worship God, we are all the performers and the total attendance of the audience is one, God. God and God alone is the audience. We are all the performers who have come to sing his praises and to worship him.

So it was in Exodus 15:1. Moses may have written the song, but all Israel, not just Moses, participated in praise, and Yahweh, the Lord God, was the audience of one. So, how are we to praise God in song? The first answer is that everyone participates.

Answer No. 2 is that we center on the Lord. A lot of us really don't know, in content or procedure, how to worship God because we have never been so instructed. Exodus 15 gives a marvelous outline as to how to center on the Lord. It begins with who God is.

You will find that even though Moses' name seems to punctuate all of the sentences and paragraphs of these first chapters of Exodus, his name is amazingly absent in this hymn of Exodus 15. In

fact, only in the beginning of the first verse is Moses' name mentioned. In verses 2 through 18, Moses' name is not there at all because the worship and praise must be centered upon God and not upon a man. In verses 1 to 18, 14 times we have mention of the Lord or God, and that does not include the pronouns that refer to him. Yahweh is repeatedly praised for the great God that he is.

Check it in your own Bibles. In verse 2. Who he is: "The LORD is my strength and my song." In verse 3. "The LORD is a warrior." Still in verse 3. "The LORD is his name." Verse 11 comes to a crescendo when it says, "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you – majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" And the obvious answer is nobody. Nobody is like God. Nobody compares. No one is as majestic or as holy.

So we begin see that true worship always centers on who God is. That means that in our songs and in our prayers we should focus upon who he is and not primarily on ourselves.

We can compare this to a love relationship between a man and a woman. A man looks his lover in the eye and says to her, "I love you because you make great lasagna." That is nice, especially if she does make great lasagna. How much better to say, "I love you because of who you are. I love you for your gentleness, your kindness, your goodness, your warmth, your spirit. I just love you because you are you."

And so it is with God. It's not that we don't love him for the things that he does, but first and foremost, we love him for who he is. He is worth loving if he never does anything. He's that great, he's that good, he's that wonderful, he's that marvelous. We ought come to him and say, "God I love you. I worship you just because you're you, just because you are who you are, just because you're great and good and kind and wonderful."

But that's not all. When we center upon the Lord, we surely do worship him for who he is, but we also find here and elsewhere in the Bible that we worship God for what he has done.

Historically, in Exodus 15, God has just brought the nation of Israel out of captivity and slavery in Egypt, and now they give to him credit for what he has accomplished. In verse 8 we read, "By the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up. The surging waters stood firm like a wall; the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea."

When the nation of Israel was on the other side

of the Reed Sea, they were scared almost to death by all of the threats of the chariots and horsemen and the horses. It's different in verse 12. "You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them." That's what God did!

But what about what Moses did? Didn't Moses lead them? Didn't he lift up his staff when he was supposed to? Didn't he speak the words that needed to be spoken?

Yes, but you can't even compare that to what God has done. Moses is by comparison so insignificant that there really cannot be any mention of him. Moses isn't even worth mentioning compared to God. God reached out and plucked them out of slavery. God set them free. God rescued them from an impossible bind between an unconquerable army and an uncrossable sea. God redeemed them. Now they're saying, look at what God has done, and they're singing his praises for who he is and for what he's done.

And so it is when we worship him. We praise him and center upon him for who he is and then for what he has done in our lives. And let's not be too trivial about that. Sometimes we praise God because he got us a parking place or because our day went well. But in comparison to what he has done in redeeming us from the clutches of sin and giving to us eternal life, the other things are, indeed, quite trivial. Let us center upon him for who he is and for what he has done and for what he will do.

But worship here, and elsewhere in the Bible, is not only retrospective, it's prospective. God wasn't finished with Israel yet. They were barely out of the land of Egypt, and in front of them were a desert and mountains and hostile armies. There was a nation to be conquered, a land to be filled, hardships and problems to be faced. But there was also hope because the God who had done such great things for them was the God whom they worshiped, not only for what he had done, but for what he would do.

That's explained here in Exodus 15. "The nations will hear and tremble; anguish will grip the people of Philistia," in verse 14. In verse 15, "The chiefs of Edom will be terrified, the leaders of Moab will be seized with trembling, the people of Canaan will melt away; terror and dread will fall upon

them."

God will do that, but keep in mind that just the day before these folk are ready to turn around and go back into slavery in Egypt. They were ready to surrender and give up and go back into the horrors that they had sought to escape for 400 years. Ah, but not now. Now they're praising God for what he will do. Now they're worshiping God for conquering enemies they haven't even seen and winning battles that they haven't even fought.

Is it that way with you? Perhaps you say, "Because of who God is and because of what God has done, I am going to worship and praise him for battles to come this week and month and year. I don't know whom the battles will be against. I don't know where they'll be fought, but I will praise God in advance for what he will do."

Worship centers on who God is. That's theology. Worship centers on what God has done, out of gratitude. Worship centers on what God will do. That's faith. But most important of all, worship centers on God, or it is not worship.

Remember this. What we have in Exodus 15 is a hymn, it's a psalm, just like the rest of the psalms

in the book of Psalms which was the hymnal of ancient Israel. That's why, if your Bible is like my Bible, the type is set different for verses 1 through 18 than it is even for the

rest of the chapter or the surrounding chapters because it's poetry, it's not prose. We're talking here about the singing of a song.

Remember the question? The question is, how are we to praise God? Answer No. 1, everyone participates. Answer No. 2, center on the Lord. Answer No. 3, maximize the worship and not the 'way'.

There are some who say that the only way to worship God is by singing. But look again. Look at the change in the typeface. After verse 18 you go on to verse 19 and there is a switch from poetry to prose. The words through verse 18 were sung, but the words beginning in verse 19 were spoken, although they say essentially the same thing and are still praising God. "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." So it's not just singing, it's also saying.

God and God alone is the audience. We are all the performers who have come to sing his praises and to worship him.

Then there are some who say that worship must be done by men, or certainly led by men. But when we read verses 20 and 21, we find that it was not Moses the prophet leading the people in worship but it was Miriam, the prophetess, who was leading the people in worship.

Or there are some who say that the only way you can worship God is with voice. There must be words articulated. But in verses 20 and 21 it was not just words, it was timbrel and dance. So you see, there are many ways to worship God, and this is a lesson we well need to learn.

Suppose that we were to try this. When we come together for worship, we won't sing any of the hymns. We'll just read them or recite them. We'll speak them instead of sing them. And then, instead of having a man lead the service, we'll have a woman lead the service. Instead of an organ, we'll have a timbrel played. And, of course, no choir. We will have dancers instead of the choir.

If we were ever to try this, that Sunday would be one of the most interesting of all Sundays to stand at the door after the service and talk to people! There would be some people who would not even notice anything any different. Then there would be some people who would say, "That was good! That's the way we ought to do it every Sunday."

The next person out would say to me, "Are you crazy? Do you know what went on in there? If anything like that ever happens again I am never coming back to this church!"

I would say, on the basis of the Bible, that each response would be wrong because the focus would be on the 'way' rather than on the worship. Too often our focus is on the leader or the instrument or the choir or the person or the 'way', but not on the Lord. Too often we are more inclined to be entertained than to worship Yahweh, the God of heaven and earth.

So what is the ideal? The ideal is that we gather together to worship God. That is why we come. So we come anticipating. We are hungry and thirsting after him. It is here that we will meet him. It is here that we will be filled up with him. When we leave, we won't even remember who sang the solo. We won't recall whether the instrument was a piano or an organ or a tambourine or whatever. We won't recall who the leader was or what the leader said or the preacher or any of the other human instruments. When we leave we will say, "I came to meet God, and I did. I met God and I worshiped

him for who he is and what he has done and what he will do.

Now, if that's the ideal, the truth is that we live in a real world and sometimes the ideal is painfully difficult to experience.

None of this is to communicate that soloists ought to be off key or that choirs should mumble their words or that instruments ought to be too loud or too soft or that sermons ought to be boring. In fact, I would argue that, when we are doing it for God instead of for one another, excellence becomes a far greater and more important standard. When God is the audience, we are not seeking, nor do we want, human applause. We are seeking the applause of only one, and that is the God whom we have come to worship and who is our sole audience.

Join with me in a commitment to worship God as we have never worshiped him before, giving priority to him. May we be so centered upon him that our songs and our thoughts and our everything are for the Lord and for the Lord alone.

How are we going to do that? By everyone participating. By centering on the Lord. By maximizing the worship and not the 'way'.

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