

# Deliverance From Slavery

Message 11

## *Victory Song*

Exodus 15:1-21

### *Celebrating Victory*

I suppose every nation has at least one song that celebrates its victory over enemies. The French national anthem, “La Marseillaise”, celebrates the French victory over the Prussians in 1792. Our own national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner,” was written after Fort McHenry in Baltimore survived an artillery bombardment during the War of 1812. We do not seem to have many qualms about celebrating military victories – especially wars of independence. July 4<sup>th</sup>, the date upon which the Continental Congress declared our independence from Great Britain, is the most important national holiday in our calendar. Many countries mark their independence or the decisive defeat of a deadly enemy with special holidays. So it is not surprising that the Israelites celebrated their escape from Egypt with a song.

Christians also mark important events in our lives with holidays, and these all come with special songs. We celebrate the birth of our Savior at Christmas. Last month we remembered Jesus’ death with a solemn Friday service, and then we celebrated His victory over death on Easter Sunday. The most important Christian celebration is the Lord’s Day. Every Sunday is reserved for celebrating our salvation, which we do at worship that includes singing and feasting. Of all people, Christians should be the most joyous, and our songs should be the most exuberant – for our salvation is the greatest deliverance any human being has ever experienced. We have not escaped all human suffering, but we have been rescued from slavery to the sin within us and God’s judgment in eternity. That is really something to sing about!

Our scripture tonight is the victory song that the Israelites sang when they escaped from the clutches of Pharaoh. You can understand their joy and join their celebration. For 100 years they had been enslaved in Egypt. As time went on their conditions got worse and worse. The Egyptians feared the Hebrews, so they tried to suppress them by making their lives miserable. When that did not work, they attempted to kill all the baby boys. Then when Moses announced God’s demand that the Hebrews be released, Pharaoh forced them to continue their building projects without giving them the raw materials. It was cruel and diabolical. So when Pharaoh finally allowed them to leave, they were overjoyed. Then came the horrifying moment when they were trapped in front of the Red Sea. But God used that dangerous situation to lure the Egyptians to their death. Now, as the corpses of the Egyptian army wash up on the shore, the Israelites sing a song of victory over their vicious oppressors.

But when we actually read the song, we find it rather disturbing. Not only does it celebrate freedom from slavery – it also celebrates the death of the Egyptians. It might be understandable for the Hebrews who had suffered so much, but is this a song we should sing, too? And the more you look at the song, it gets positively bloodthirsty. It is not enough simply to celebrate the victory over their enemies, this song dwells on the details. Line after line tells how the Egyptians were drowned in the sea. It glories in the death of the enemy army. And it gets worse. This song ascribes all this to God. Verse seven says God was furious with the Egyptians, and verse three calls Yahweh a man of war. The end of the song rejoices in the effects of this holocaust. All the other nations will be terrified of God as a result of this event. If anyone wants to make a case for the God of the Old Testament being a bloodthirsty God, this is the place to go!

By contrast we are accustomed to thinking of God as a loving Father who cares for His children. We remember Jesus teaching us to do good to our enemies. Can you think of any place where Jesus says to go out and kill your enemies? Did Jesus ever tell us to rejoice in the carnage? Is this song a relic of the ancient world, irrelevant to ours? Or is this God the same God who loved us and died for us?

### ***An Angry God***

First let us deal with God's anger. Verse seven says, "In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries; you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble." Some translations have "wrath" or "anger" instead of "fury." God was angry with the Egyptians – furiously angry. This troubles us, and the reason this troubles us is that the only anger we know firsthand is human anger.

Human anger, twisted as it is by sin, always contains elements of selfishness and hatred in it. Think of it – when do you get angry? When someone cuts you off in traffic? When your professor gives you an unfair grade? When your boyfriend forgets something important to you – like your birthday? When your parents do not listen to you? Do you see the common thread here? Do you recognize that essentially all occasions of human anger are motivated by nothing more than selfishness? You want something, and when you do not get it, you become angry. You have been doing this since you were two years old and you threw a tantrum because your mother would not buy you a lollipop at the grocery store. Now, you might argue that it is possible, at least sometimes, to be angry with good cause. Is it not right to be angry at social injustice? Should we not be angry at poverty, and prejudice, and rape? The short answer is "yes," but even these angers are tainted by sin. People are rarely content to offer themselves sacrificially to alleviate these problems. They want someone else to suffer, too. Especially they want the pleasure of seeing the offenders suffer. Even in our best moments, which are rare, human anger is polluted by selfishness and damaged by sin.

When you read about the sufferings of the Hebrews, and if you put yourself into their shoes, you become angry. The Egyptians were so cruel, so awful – they deserve to die! And after all you have been through, a peaceful death is just too good for them. If you had been a Hebrew, your anger against the Egyptians would have been hateful and vindictive. This is the only anger you can imagine. And this is what you think when you read that God was angry.

This is not the anger of God. There is no sin in God, so God is never selfish, hateful, or vindictive. God's anger troubles us because we imagine God as a huge version of ourselves. We picture an all-powerful being who loses His patience and lashes out in frustration at people who fail to toe the line. Like a father who at last notices that one of his children has been breaking the china, he explodes in anger, hurls harsh words, and wallops the kid for dear life. Man's anger is volatile, irrational, and unpredictable. It is a fierce emotion which leads to violence. Proverbs 20:2 says, "The terror of a king is like the growling of a lion; whoever provokes him to anger forfeits his life." But God's anger is steady, rational, and predictable. God's anger is never a sudden outburst, but a fixed reality.

Let us consider these three qualities of God's anger. First, it is constant. That is because God is never surprised. He knows all things, and He knows the future. So while God's anger may be more or less visible on any particular occasion, it never flares up suddenly.

Second, God's anger is rational. He is always angry with good cause – and that cause is sin. Now, most people will think this means God is angry merely because we do not toe the line – we do not keep all those laws He gave us. People see God as a spoiled king, who enjoys the pleasure of seeing his subjects doing his bidding. But that is to misunderstand God's law and to trivialize sin. Sin is breaking God's law, but it is more than that. At heart sin is rebellion against God. It is not like a son who cuts corners on the house rules. Sin is open rebellion against our father. Sin is hatred which ultimately leads to murder. Scripture says that those who do not worship God hate Him. They would kill Him if they could. Sin also leads to desecration of creation. God made the universe, and creation shouts His glory. This is hateful to sinners. So part of their war against God is attacks against nature. And the place where God's glory is most evident is in man, made in God's very image. All creation reveals God's character, but man reveals God's glory and presence. So sin leads to attacks against man – persecution, murder, rape, war, abortion, euthana-

sia, etc. The population control movement is an attempt to limit the glory of God on earth. In this light we can see God's laws as rules for limiting the devastation of sin and for preserving the human race. God is angry against sin because it is a personal offense against Him, but also because it destroys His creation – particularly the people He made in His image, to show His glory.

Because God's anger is rational, it is also predictable. You do not need to wonder when God might become angry. You know for certain that God is always angry with sin. He does not always act on that anger. As we have seen in Exodus, God is merciful and patient. He may allow sin to flourish for a while. But His anger against sin is a constant reality.

This leads us to remind ourselves that anger is only one of many characteristics of God. God is merciful, loving, holy, patient, good, kind, etc.. When we accurately see the condition of mankind, the surprise is not that God is angry. The surprise is that God so seldom expresses His anger. If we had to evaluate God on the basis of how often His character traits are expressed, mercy, patience, and love are far more evident than anger. Although mankind is engaged in an intergenerational campaign of rebellion against God, God pours blessings on us day by day. An occasional tornado or hurricane is devastating to us, but 99.9% of our days God enables us peacefully to go about our business – whether to serve Him or to rebel against Him.

So now we return to Exodus, and we can see that God did not suddenly wake up and notice the horrible things the Egyptians were doing. He did not lash out in uncontrolled anger. He did not lose His patience and overreact. No, God was angry with the Egyptians all along because they were unjustly attacking Him and His creation. For 100 years God kept sending them the sun and watering them with the Nile. God gave Egypt peace and prosperity. For His trouble they shamefully rejected Him, worshiped stupid idols, and attacked His people. God was angry with the Egyptians for 100 years. For 99 years He was patient, kind and merciful – even while angry. But it had to come to an end sometime. Judgment is an inevitable reality, and in judgment God's anger become visible.

### ***Angry Christians***

If this is the case, how do we reconcile this view of God with the New Testament teaching? And does this mean that Christians should be angry?

It is curious how many people can see no mercy in the Old Testament and no judgment in the New. Read the Old Testament. On every page you will see people doing things worthy of God's anger. Occasionally God acts on His anger, but usually God shows His patience and mercy by withholding the judgment people deserve. And if you read the whole New Testament you will find the same mixture of mercy and judgment. People say that Jesus is merciful because that is the trait they want to see in Jesus. But the harshest words in the Bible are the warnings Jesus gave to the Jewish leaders. Jesus spoke more about hell than about any other topic. And the book of Revelation is a huge celebration of God's judgment on the wicked. Revelation makes the song of Moses look positively peaceful!

But Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, and in Jesus we see mercy and justice perfectly wedded. Let us read Mark 3:1-6 to see this in action.

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there with a withered hand. And they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man with the withered hand, "Come here." And he said to them, "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately held counsel

with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.

Here we have some people who hate God, and consequently hate His people. They would rather this crippled man remain crippled than to break the laws they made up. And when Jesus had the temerity to confront them, they began to plot His death. This is sin – hatred of God which results in hatred of God’s creation, particularly mankind. The text tells us that Jesus was angry with these people. He should be, don’t you agree? But Jesus was also grieved for them – because these people, twisted by sin, were also His own creatures. Isn’t this a marvelous description of God’s love and anger at work? Jesus was simultaneously angry and loving. So we see that Jesus embodies the qualities we have noticed in God throughout Exodus.

Jesus is our model. The Christian ideal is to be angry with sin and simultaneously compassionate on the sinner. We fail miserably at this. Some of us are angry with sin because we hate the way it ruins our world. Some of us enjoy the adrenaline rush that angry emotions produce. Some of us approve anger toward sin because it makes us seem more holy. Others of us are compassionate with sinners because we do not have the courage to condemn sin. Some of us feel the weight of sin so keenly that we cannot bear to dwell on it. Some of us confuse compassion with indulgence, and end up approving sin. There is such a thing as righteous anger, but it is very hard to achieve. Pray for God to deliver us from sinful anger, and from lazy indulgence.

### ***Salvation Through Judgment***

Now it should be easier to understand verse three, where God is called a “man of war.” The word used here is not the word for soldier, and in this regard the NIV and NASB are misleading. The Hebrew text says exactly “man of war.” God is not a professional warrior – He is more like a citizen soldier. Or perhaps more accurately, He is not a rapacious empire builder, but a righteous king who will fight to protect His citizens. And God will fight. God is not lazy, cowardly, or unconcerned. When necessary – when His people are oppressed, persecuted, and attacked – God will not let events unfold and hope for the best. God knows what to do. He rolls up his sleeves, takes up His weapons, and goes into battle.

Again we find that some people are uncomfortable with this militaristic language. They think of God as a loving Father and Jesus as our big Brother. God certainly is our Father, and Jesus is our big Brother. Moreover, God is sometimes described in feminine terms. In Psalm 91 God is described as a protective mother bird.

For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler  
and from the deadly pestilence.  
He will cover you with his pinions,  
and under his wings you will find refuge... (Psalm 91:3-4)

Jesus picked up this image and used it to describe His own attitude toward His people. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matthew 23:37) This is a tender image, but did you ever notice what happens when a hen’s chicks are threatened? She will viciously attack the enemy of her children. This most peaceful of animals can become hostile against anything that would harm her own.

As we said last week, we too often misunderstand evil. Evil is not a substance that can be sealed in a can and locked in a cabinet. Evil is not a principle that we can analyze in philosophy class. Evil is a personal condition. It is rebellion against God. This root rebellion issues in all the evil conditions we see in this world – disease, hate, murder, pollution, divorce, theft, etc. All these evils stem from the root which is rebellion against God. If there is to be any hope of peace and love in this world, evil must be destroyed. That

means that rebellion against God must cease. The happiest way this occurs is when the rebels lay down their arms and surrender to God. They cease being enemies and turn into allies, servants of God. This is what we mean by repentance. Repentance is saying, “I was wrong to fight against you, God. I give up! I will serve you from now on.” But what of those who refuse to surrender? What of those who fight and fight and fight? What of those who hurt God’s world and God’s people day after day after day? Well, God has a choice. He can either allow them to continue hurting His people. Or God can forcibly subdue them.

The sad reality is that as long as people rebel against God, as long as there is sin in this world, there will be conflict. People will get hurt. The only question is which people will get hurt. If God will rescue His own people from harm, He will need to fight those who attack them. It is a wonderful thing that a mother hen will fight anything that attempts to harm her chicks, and it is a wonderful thing that God will fight those who seek to harm His people. “Man of war” is not the only title God holds, but it is a great comfort to know that when we are overwhelmed by enemies, God will come to our rescue – and will fight, and win.

All that we have been discussing tonight comes together in Jesus Christ. We already saw how Jesus embodied the love and anger of God in His ministry among the Jews. But the love and anger of God radiate most brilliantly from the cross. It was love that sent Jesus to the cross. We, the human race, were enslaved to sin and oppressed by the wickedness of our own hearts. We all were those rebels who hated God and longed to put an end to Him so that we might be gods of the universe. But God loved us in spite of our hatred for Him, and He came to earth and became a man to save us from our own rebellion. It was love that moved Jesus to take upon himself our guilt and die for us so that we might go free and live. And on the cross we see the anger of God against sin. As Jesus hung there bearing the guilt of rebellion against God and all the evils that proceed from that rebellion, God poured out His anger on His own precious Son. His Son, whom He loved, received the full force of God’s fierce anger against all the sins of His people through all the centuries. And when God’s anger was fully exhausted on His Son, there is none left for those who believe in His Son. Now all who call upon Jesus for salvation enter the peace of God, and claim Him as their protector from all who remain in rebellion.

### ***Is the Lord Your God?***

Is this the God you want to worship and serve? Or does this God offend you? Do you want a God who never becomes angry, or who never does violence? Or do you want a God who will become aroused at sin and fight those who would destroy you? In verse two Moses declared His allegiance. “This is my God, and I will praise him,” said Moses. Can you say that? Can you say with enthusiasm, “This is my God, and I will praise Him?” Are you proud to have Yahweh as your God, or are you embarrassed at His anger? Are you delighted in His love and anger? Are you excited that you serve a man of war, who is also a prince of peace? If so, this is your song! You should take this as your own and sing along with Moses.

If this is not your God, you are on the wrong side of the war. And there is a war on. You can deny it, you can pretend that it is not true, you can hope for peace. But until everyone serves God, there is perpetual conflict. The good news is the Jesus died so that you might live. Jesus offers you peace, if you will trust Him and serve God. If you do not believe in Jesus, you are on the losing side. Do not be a fool. Come on over and follow Jesus.

There is an amazing scene late in the scripture, of the ancient saints singing before the throne of God. Revelation 15 shows the early followers of Jesus who died for their faith singing, and they are singing a combined song – the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. It goes like this:

“Great and amazing are your deeds,  
O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways,

O King of the nations!  
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)

Amen. Praise the Lord Jesus, the conquering Lamb!

C. David Green  
Lehigh University  
April 15, 2008