

# Exodus 15

## You only sing when you're winning?

### Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

**Main point:** God's people praise him in song for his saving judgments and anticipate the fulfillment of his promises. They fail to trust his provision for the journey, so God graciously gives them a taste of the future.

**Main application:** Praise God this week for his saving judgments and believe he will provide for you on the way to "Eden".

If you have been following the whole of this series in Exodus you'll know that, in each of the talks, I've tried, as we always do here at Christ Church, not merely to explain what this 3,500 year old text meant to the people who were alive when Moses wrote it. Because, as useful as it might be to understand ancient history, my belief, my conviction is that these passage, and indeed the whole of the Bible, speaks today to people like you and me about the most important realities of life.

If you are a visitor here this morning you need to know that, as a church, we believe this book, the Christian Scriptures, is not simply an interesting collection of historical documents (though it is that!) but, is also a revelation from God of his character, of the nature of human beings and of God's plan for the human race and, indeed, for the whole universe. Since we believe that we are always seeking, in our meetings here on Sundays, to engage with the kind of questions that people who read the Bible today have about it.

If you've been here for this whole series, or if you've read Exodus before, you'll know that we've been through passages that describe God sending terrible plagues that brought destruction and death on the people of Egypt. You'll know that in the passage immediately before this God orchestrates the drowning of thousands of men.

Yet, although we've touched on the subject here and there, I haven't in this series of sermons dealt with the most common objection to the God portrayed in the Exodus events: the objection that the God of Exodus seems, to many people today, to be really horrible.

Even if you haven't been at any of the other talks, and you've never read Exodus before you may well have felt somewhat disturbed as Kath read the passage to us. What kind of bloodthirsty people is this, who celebrate the anger and wrath of their God? Would you really want to follow a God who seems to find satisfaction in sinking people like lead or burning them like stubble?

Well this morning we are going to face that question head on. We are going to think about the Lord, the God of the Israelites. What kind of God is he? What is he like? Is he a God you would want to follow? Or is he, as a member of my family said to me recently, a "vile" God?

Well this morning I hope I am going to be able to persuade you, from Exodus 15, that the Lord is not "vile" at all. I hope I am going to be able to show you two vital truths about God, and convince you that both of them are things to celebrate and rejoice over.

In this passage we are going to see two aspects of God's character, which are stated quite plainly for us at the beginning and end of this chapter in Exodus. The first comes near the beginning of the chapter in v4 where Moses says that "The Lord is a warrior." The second comes near the end of the chapter in v26 where God says that "I am the Lord, who heals you."

#### 1 God is a soldier – praise him for your security (15:1-21)

The first part of this chapter is presented to us in the form of poetry. And we know, from v1 and v21, that it was originally set to music. Immediately after the Israelites had crossed the Red Sea, on a path through the waters miraculously created by the Lord, Moses composed this song and, even without the help of Cowell, Minogue, Cole and Walsh, it was an instant hit – picked up by Miriam and Israel's women and re-released in cover versions right through the Bible from here to the very end of the story in the book of Revelation. It's a song that celebrates the rescue God achieved for the Israelites by drowning the chariots and officers of Pharaoh's army in the sea. It's a song that celebrates a great battle that the Lord won as a soldier, as a warrior. And that is a very important image.

I don't know how many soldiers you have met. I have been friends with quite a few people serving in the British and other armed forces over the years. And, again and again, the thing I've been struck by talking to army corporals and Navy Lieutenants helicopter pilots is that none of them really like war very much. Sure there are probably some gungho idiots in every nation's armed forces. There will be guys who join up at 16 thinking it'll all be very glamorous – I had a couple of those guys in my class at school. But all the professional soldiers I have met who have actually served in battle don't like war. They believe it's sometimes necessary. They believe that, overall, they make a difference for good in the world. They are very happy to win the battle. But they don't like war very much.

There are many clues in this passage, and in the story leading up to it, that the Lord is much like those men. He is soldier. He will fight when he has to. But God's joy, and the joy of his people, is not in the destruction of men, but in the achievement of justice, righteousness and rescue.

#### a) God is a patient soldier

When we get to the events recalled in this chapter, the destruction of the Egyptian army, it is more than eighty years since the kings of Egypt began their, fortunately

largely unsuccessful policy, of drowning all Israelite baby boys to keep the population down. The people of Israel have endured centuries of slavery and forced labour. God sent nine very clear but non-lethal signs of his judgment on Pharaoh and his people, signs that were patiently explained by Moses, who demanded nothing more than the release of his people from slavery so they could depart the country. They didn't want to take over. They didn't want to steal the Egyptian crops or their money. They just wanted to be free to leave.

The God described in this chapter is not a God who suddenly comes over all vengeful and takes out a nation's army. He is a God of immense patience in the face of terrible provocation; as he sees the strong persecute, exploit and murder the weak.

To those who question the integrity and justice of the Lord I think we need to say: what would you think of a God who didn't intervene in such a situation? Actually we don't need to ask that question do we? Because we know exactly what people think. Every time there are people being oppressed and made to suffer in our world there are people asking "why doesn't God do something?" But, such is the perversity of human nature, that, when God does justly and decisively intervene, like he does here in Exodus, people condemn him as violent and capricious!

God is a patient soldier. If he appears slow to intervene and bring justice to the world it is a mark of his forbearance.

#### **b) God takes on those who seek to destroy the defenceless**

Sometimes people portray the God of Exodus as if he is a playground bully, taking delight in squashing the Egyptians who are helpless before his power. But that's not what is happening here. It is the Egyptians who are the bully. It is their soldiers who are proud and arrogant.

We get an insight into their thoughts in v9. They plan to pursue and overtake the Israelites – a ragtag group of 1 million men, women and children, fleeing with animals and tents but no weapons. They plan to divide the spoils and gorge themselves on the Israelites – they will take the stuff they want – the healthiest to be slaves, the best stuff – and kill, rape and destroy the rest. The Egyptians plan to use their massively superior weaponry to massacre the Israelites.

God is not the playground bully. God is the head teacher. God is the one who shows that the Egyptians are not as impressive as they think they are. The Lord exposes that the weapons the Egyptians have are actually pathetic and puny before his much superior power. The Lord is not, here, destroying the innocents. He is standing up to those who destroy defenceless, frightened refugees.

#### **c) God exalts himself by saving others**

The thing people find most difficult about passages like Exodus 15, and there are quite a lot of them through the

Bible, is that quite a lot of it is about God bringing himself glory by defeating his enemies.

But, when you actually stop to think about it, this too is a good thing. The God who created the universe, the God who made and runs everything in it, could demand honour and respect from people merely because of the fact of his ownership.

But the God of the Bible is glorified not only by his creative power, but by rescuing the weak, the helpless, the persecuted and the oppressed. Like the best of soldiers the Lord is cheered through the streets, not because he has the biggest gun but because he uses his power in the cause of righteousness. His main aim, the thing he seeks most, is not to destroy Egypt, but to rescue, v13, the people he has redeemed, bought back, from slavery.

For the people of Israel the good news in this passage is that the Lord is not just a one hit wonder. He isn't going to win just this one famous victory and then retire. Instead, v18, the Lord will reign for ever and ever.

So this slave army can be confident that God will keep his promises to them to make it, through the desert they are about to enter, to a land of promise on the other side. Because God will fight for them they can be utterly confident, v14 says, that the other strongly armed people – the Philistines, Edomites, Moabites and Canaanites – will not defeat them any more than the Egyptians could.

In fact, in the original Hebrew, this entire section is written to show us that, although these events lie in the future, they are so certain that they can be spoken of as if they are already happening:

*The peoples have heard; they tremble;  
pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.  
Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;  
trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;  
all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.  
Terror and dread fall upon them;  
because of the greatness of your arm*  
15:14-16 (ESV)

The Lord is committed to fighting so that he can rescue his people from those who would oppose and oppress them.

But for many people today that is the thing that sticks in the throat. Why should God fight only for one group of people? Isn't it fundamentally unjust and unfair that God should choose the Christians and therefore be against the Muslims, the Buddhists and everyone else?

Well no, it isn't. Because the option to join this people, to be rescued by God, was open to all. And, indeed, Exodus 12:38 tells us that many other peoples, those oppressed and enslaved by the Egyptians, indeed probably some Egyptians kept in poverty and servitude by their fellow citizens, joined the family of Abraham in their escape.

At the very end of the Bible, in Revelation 15, where another song, described there as "the song of Moses the

servant of God” is sung one of the key lines is that “all nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

God is not a soldier who fights only for those from a certain country or ethnic background. He is not, as lots of religions would give you impression, a soldier who fights only for those with the money to pay him back by erecting temples or cathedrals. The Lord is a soldier who will protect anyone who comes to him for shelter. The destruction of the Egyptian army in the sea was a powerful work of God’s justice protecting the weak and helpless who followed him. But the events of Exodus 15 are, for us, just a picture of a greater victory that the Lord will win for anyone who acknowledges their helplessness before the power of evil. At the end of time there will be a final and decisive battle. Not between the Lord and the Egyptian army. Not even between the Lord and the gods of Egypt who the Egyptians imagined they were pleasing by enslaving the Israelites. But between the Lord and Satan.

Satan, the Bible teaches us, is the evil one who stood behind Pharaoh’s wickedness at the time of the Exodus. He is the great destroyer who stands behind evil in the world. He is the one who would deceive us into believing all sorts of lies; anything so that we do not discover the truth that the Lord is the true God and that his plan is to protect and rescue anyone who will come to him for shelter. One day, though, Revelation 20 tells us that the devil, who deceives, will be thrown, by the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, into a sea of burning sulphur. He will be utterly destroyed. On that day those people from every nation who put their trust in the Christ will cry out in the same way as Moses and his people – the Lord will reign for ever and ever.

I do not think the warrior God, the true God, the Lord, is vile. I think he is wonderful. I think it is amazing to live in a world where everyone who perpetrates violence and injustice will face judgment.

This morning, if you have come to the Lord for protection, if you have put your trust in Jesus Christ as the great king of the universe who will bring justice and righteousness you too can sing. We’re not really in to corporate singing in our culture any more except at team sorts events – we tend to leave it to other people and then listen to their music. But singing is still a very powerful way of expressing joy.

If God is a warrior and you have come to him for safety you can sing because you are secure. Perhaps you’re here this morning and you are troubled by the fact that somebody senior in your workplace seems to have it in for you. Perhaps there is somebody on your course at university who is manipulating situations so that it looks as if you are unpleasant and intolerant when you aren’t. Whatever the injustices you struggle with in your life if you are one of God’s people, if you have put your hope in Jesus, you can sing because you are secure. The Lord, who is a great warrior, fights for justice for his people. God is a soldier, praise him for your security.

But perhaps you are here this morning as a guest or a visitor. Maybe this is your first time at Christ Church, or possibly you’ve been coming for a while but have never actually committed yourself to being one of those who, as Exodus puts it, goes up with, joins, becomes part of, God’s people.

If you choose to do that this morning, and I hope you will, you need to know that the Lord won’t necessarily fight for you just when you want him to. The Israelites waited decades in Egypt before God acted decisively for their rescue. And still today many wrings go unrighted in this life.

But if you choose to join God’s people this morning, to accept his free offer to become part of his global family by putting your trust in Jesus then I promise you that he will be a warrior for you. That he will finally destroy all the forces of evil in the world, that every wrong will be put right and that no crime will go unpunished. Because God is a soldier. But he is not just a soldier – God is also a doctor.

## **2 God is a doctor – trust him for your health (15:22-27)**

When you begin to really think about this the hard part isn’t so much that God comes in judgment on wickedness and evil – because the more you think about it the more of a good thing that seems. The thing that is difficult is that we have to wait. After all the Israelites, by God’s mercy, got justice at the time. But for full redress of all the evils in the world we will have to wait, Revelation says, until Jesus returns.

That’s quite frustrating isn’t it? Adolf Hitler took his own life at the end of the war. He never faced a trial. His millions of victims will have to wait for justice until Jesus comes back. Pol Pot, author of the Cambodian massacres that killed 3 million people died in his sleep aged 70, just hours after it had been announced he would be handed over to face trial. The people of Cambodia will have to wait till Christ returns for justice. Slobodan Milosevic, Joseph Stalin and many less famous but still deeply cruel men and women have never been tried for their crimes. Each of us, I imagine, can think of wrongs perpetrated against us that have never been dealt with. For full redress you will have to wait.

But actually that is a good thing. Because each person in this room, each person in this world, is not merely the victim of injustice but also the perpetrator of injustice.

That was certainly true of the Israelites. On Sunday morning they are singing the praises of God and lauding Moses, the man the Lord appointed to lead them out of slavery. They are singing confidently of the way that God will bring them victory in future and keep all his promises to them. 72 hours later, on Wednesday afternoon, they are, vv23 and 24, bitter towards God and grumbling against Moses.

When Moses first went to speak to Pharaoh and tell him that the Lord demanded the release of the Israelites, Pharaoh responded that he would take no notice of this because he did not know the Lord. In these verses the Israelites prove that they are, basically, just the same. They are not willing to trust God and they treat Moses really badly.

The Lord, who is a great warrior, would be fully justified in bringing upon them the same judgments that he brought on the Egyptians for their rejection of him and cruelty to others. But, instead of terrible judgment, he miraculously provides clean drinking water. Instead of waters of death the Lord gives them waters of life. The people are bitter in their hearts. But God gives them sweet water to quench their thirst. He also gives the Israelites a warning. He tells them that they need to listen, v26, to what he says. They need to take notice of his commands in order that they should not suffer any of the plagues God brought on the Egyptians. If they do not listen, the implication runs, they will suffer God's judgment. But, you might be wondering, what has such a terrible threat got to do with what God says at the end of v26 – "for I am the Lord who heals you?" What kind of a doctor is it who warns his patient of the deadly consequences of living in particular ways? Actually that would be a good doctor! A good doctor tells his patient when they are sick, prescribes appropriate medication and tells his patient what part they have to play to make sure their lifestyle and behaviour changes to give them the best chance of health.

That's the kind of doctor God is! Each one of us, you and I, is a perpetrator of injustice as well as a victim of injustice. Each one of us, to use the military analogy, is an enemy of God the warrior. Each one of us, to use the medical analogy, is sick and in need of healing.

The people of Israel needed to listen to the instructions of the Lord who heals them so they might not have to face the judgment of the Lord when he comes as a warrior. God showed them that his intentions for them were good and kind by bringing them, not merely to a place where there was a purified well they could drink from but to an oasis in the desert (picture). The oasis is described like Eden, the perfect garden God made for humanity at the beginning of time, or like Canaan, the place he was leading the Israelites too. He is trying to show them that although they do, indeed, need to learn to trust him, his purpose for them, his plan, is to heal them, to protect them and to bring them, in safety, to the place he has promised them.

In the book we're going to be looking at next term, Luke, who was himself a medical doctor, as well as being one of the writers of the biographies of the life of Christ that we call the gospels, records these words of Jesus: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

Dr Jesus comes to heal the sick. Who are the sick? Everybody who is a sinner – everybody who is a perpetrator of injustice as well as a victim of it. That

means everyone. But, of course, not everybody realises they are sick; not everybody realises that we are all wrongdoers in need of the healing medicine of grace, mercy and a new heart that only God can provide. Jesus heals only those who recognise the sickness of our sin, and he heals all those who recognise the sickness of our sin.

He does that, the Bible says, by taking up our infirmities and carrying our sorrows. In this respect Jesus is a unique doctor. Because he is able to cure our sin by taking it upon himself as he died a sinner's death on a cross, though he himself was the only human being ever for whom such a death was utterly undeserved.

Jesus Christ is the Lord who heals anybody, from any race or nation, who will come to him. In return he asks, not for obedience to a long list of religious rules, not for a life devoted to a narrow set of religious activities but simply for our trust. He asks us, even when situations look difficult, even when it looks as if we will run out of things we think we need for life, to believe that he will bring all his people through the deserts of life to a place which is much better than the springs of Elim, much better Canaan, much better even than the garden of Eden. Jesus Christ asks merely that we would remember on Wednesday afternoon the great truths we sing about him on Sunday morning, and continue to live by them.

It is good news that God is a soldier – because there are many wrongs that need to be righted in this world. And it is good news that God is a doctor – because you and I are responsible for many of those wrongs and we need the healing, the forgiveness, that only God is able to offer.

If you believe only in a God who is a soldier you will probably end up like the Pharisees of Jesus day, and so many millions of religious people today, who think that God's role in the world is only to judge the wicked – by which they usually mean anybody who does things that religious people disapprove of.

If you believe only in a God who is a doctor you will probably end up like those in our secular society who refuse to blame anybody for anything or hold anybody to account for their own actions, who think that God's role in the world is only to dispense forgiveness.

This morning I want to appeal to you to believe, instead, in the God of the Bible. I want to ask you, whether for the first time in your life or the thousandth time, to respond to God's word this morning by putting your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. The one who has come to heal the sick by calling sinners like you, and me to repentance. The one who is coming in glory to judge the living and the dead.

This week, if you are trusting in Jesus, you can praise him for your security, because he is a soldier. This week, if you are trusting in Jesus, you must trust him for your life, because he is a doctor.

*Andrew Evans, November 2010*