



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Song of Moses and the Lamb Revelation 15

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There is a long history of songs sung by the people of God in praise of his faithful deliverance. His people experienced the problems of life, they knew that this is not how things are meant to be, they knew also the promises of God to set things to right, and that sang out his praises. Sometimes it was in response to his mighty and saving deeds. Other times it was in faithful anticipation of what they knew he *would* do, because of his past history of faithfulness. These songs often begin with the big picture of the Lord's deliverance of Israel, then they narrow their focus. If the Lord has such love and shows such care for Israel, he will also show his love and will care for me. Hannah, for example, sings of the greatness of the Lord, she alludes to his past faithfulness to his people, and then praises him for meeting her own need, for giving her a son, before singing again of the Lord's judgement, which extends to the ends of the earth. Or Mary's *Magnificat*, in which she too sings of the Lord's faithfulness, this time beginning with herself—"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden."—and then expands as she sees what he has done for her as part of his faithfulness to Israel: "He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel; as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed, for ever." The Bible is full of these songs that praise the Lord. They praise him for his faithfulness, but they see that faithfulness manifest in his judgement—in his vindication

of the righteous and his punishment of the wicked.

These songs give us a sense of the plight of God's people and of what justice looked like for them. Poor Hannah not only bore the shame of barrenness, but also the daily contempt of her husband's other wife. Mary's song gives us a general sense of the difficult state in which Israel found herself: The humble and meek under the boot of the prideful and strong. The rich full and satisfied, while the poor hungered. Both songs echo the words of many of the psalms. Think of the final words of Psalm 96 we sing each day in Morning Prayer: "For he cometh, for he cometh to judge the earth; and with righteousness to judge the world, and the peoples with his truth."

Think of the daily injustices that people like Hannah and Mary and the people of their villages faced. This man's property marker was moved by his neighbour. Another man's sheep was stolen in the night. An old woman was taken advantage of by a shady workman. One of the merchants in the market had two set of weights and was ripping off people who didn't know better. These were all things the provincial judge would set to rights when he made his rounds and held court in the village.

But then there were the things the judge would not fix, because he was part of the system that itself was the problem: The tax collector who took and took and took, far above what was actually owed. The Roman soldier who raped a local girl. The rich man who manipulated the poor to put them in debt, then took their land in payment knowing that the jubilee would never be observed or enforced, so he'd never have to give the land back. The Romans and their rich and powerful friends just took and took and took, all while mocking the God of Israel. It wasn't right. The world wasn't supposed to be this way.

But it wasn't just in Israel. John has given us a good view of the plight of the people of God, in these little churches, trying to get by and be faithful to Jesus in the midst of the wider world of the Greeks and Romans. Even far away from Jerusalem, on the west coast of Turkey, they found themselves at the mercy of local Jews who rejected Jesus. As Jesus warned in our Gospel today, "They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). First it happened in Jerusalem, but even in the Greek cities, Christians were facing tribulation. If they were lucky it was just being kicked out of a trade guild for refusing to worship false gods. At worst they were dragged off to the arena to be eaten by lions. Again, it wasn't right. The world wasn't supposed to be this way.

But the Lord is God and justice will be done. Someday Jesus will set everything to rights and wipe away every tear. We know it, because he was raised from the dead and set the wheels of re-creation in motion. We've tasted this new world ourselves in the pouring out of God's Spirit on us. It's begun, the hardest part has been accomplished, so we know that God will finish what he's begun—and we live in hope and faith because of that. Last Sunday, in Chapter 14, we saw those First Century Christians, the ones who had been through that time of great tribulation, standing before the heavenly throne singing a song that only they could sing. They were the blameless ones, the firstfruits of the redeemed, who had refused to compromise with the beast. They had remained faithful to Jesus, because they, too, knew that what Jesus had started he will surely finish, they had tasted it, and they wanted to be part of it. Three angels announced their vindication and the judgement to fall on Babylon, on Rome. This morning we're looking at Chapter 15, where this scene continues. In verse 1 John writes:

Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

In Chapter 14 the announcement was made. One angel proclaimed the message: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made the nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.” Another announced that anyone who had drunk of that wine “also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger.” The wickedness of the nations has been put into the Lord’s winepress and the angels have trod it. Now the wine of wrath is prepared: seven plagues. Seven seals and seven trumpets have announced the wrath of the Lord so far. Now there are seven plagues. John writes that this is the culmination of God’s wrath. That doesn’t mean God won’t ever act again to bring judgement and justice. Revelation shows us the early church vindicated over against unbelieving Israel and the pagan Greco-Roman empire. That’s the context here. And the plagues call back to the Lord’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt—the prototype for his deliverance and salvation. That gives us a sense of what’s going on and we’ll come back to it in a few verses. First, there’s more imagery borrowed from the exodus. Look at verse 2:

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

The martyrs, the faithful people of Jesus who had faced the great tribulation and stood firm, now appear again. In Chapter 14 John saw them before the throne singing. Here they are again. These are those whom the

world despised. The gears of wicked Jerusalem and corrupt Rome had ground them up and spit them out and their enemies had declared, “Good riddance!” Just like the wicked people who had crucified Jesus and thought they’d won, these people thought they’d done away with these weirdos, these deviants who refused to worship the beast. But anyone who was paying attention that first Easter morning knows that’s not how it ends for the God of Israel, for his Messiah, or for his people. Now they stand before the Lamb and, writes John, beside “a sea of glass mingled with fire”. What does that mean?

I think there’s a two-fold explanation to this imagery. As these saints stand there, they sing and in verse 3 John says they sing the song of Moses. Remember Moses and the Israelites praising the Lord after he led them through the Red Sea and drowned the chariots of Pharaoh? Something similar is happening here. Like Israel in the Exodus, these saints have been delivered by the Lord. He’s led them through their own Red Sea waters and now they stand on the far side, and even though they’ve died, they have experienced the deliverance of the Lord—like Israel did in the Exodus, but in an even more spectacular way. This is the exodus for which the old Exodus was merely a type and shadow. This is the exodus towards which all of redemptive history had been moving. They stood firm. These men and women have conquered the beast. The Lord has delivered them. And now they stand by sea and sing his praises.

But, too, the word for “sea” is the same one used in the Greek Old Testament for the laver, the basin in the tabernacle and later the temple, where the priests would purify themselves. In the tabernacle it was fairly small, but in Solomon’s temple it was a massive basin of water that sat on the back of four great bulls. That sea in the temple was symbolic of the

Red Sea, through which the Lord had purified his people and purchased them for his own. And something similar has happened here with these saints who have passed through this great tribulation. Here they have been purified and made God’s people. I think, too, that there’s some sacramental imagery going on. Repeatedly in Revelation, the Lord has paused before acting out his judgements, paused so that he can mark out his people. A Passover of sorts, as when the Israelites marked their homes with the blood of the lamb so that the Lord’s judgment would pass over them. Repeatedly, too, John uses the imagery of the beast’s mark—an anti-sacrament, which marks out the wicked as belonging to the beast. So here, the saints are marked by their baptism as belonging to the Lord and judgement passes over them. They have passed through a baptism of fire, and just as Pharaoh’s army was destroyed by the same sea through which Israel was delivered, the fire through which the saints have been delivered is about to be poured out on Rome in judgement.

Look now at verses 3 and 4:

**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!
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.”**

The saints here don’t literally sing the same song that Moses sang, but they sing something that gets at the same themes as the song of Moses and the Israelites in Exodus 15. You all know the song of Moses—or at least parts of it. “I will sing to the Lord, for he has

triumphed gloriously, the horse and his rider he has thrown in to the sea” (Exodus 15:1). The first half of that song is all about God’s defeat of the Egyptians. That’s the part we sing in Sunday school. It’s the—for lack of a better term—the “theological” part that follows that we don’t know as well, which is ironic, because that’s what explains the whole thing.

The second half of Moses’ song highlights two important things. The first is that the Lord does these things because he is holy and just. “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?” sings Moses. The Lord cannot and will not allow injustice to continue forever and to go unjudged. Second, the Lord does these things and his people proclaim them *so that the nations will take note*. So that the nations will fear the Lord, and come to him in repentance and faith. Moses sings, “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.”

Brothers and Sisters, the Lord’s purpose in calling Abraham out of the pagan nations and then, through him, creating a people for himself, was that through that people, he would make himself known to the world. In everything he did with and for his people, whether it was blessing or judgement, deliverance or discipline, the Lord’s goal was to draw the nations to himself. And the song of the saints here in Revelation 15 is full of these same themes. “Great and amazing are your deeds,” they sing. “Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations.” “All nations will come and worship you, *for your righteous acts have been revealed*.” That’s always been the Lord’s

purpose—when he acts and for his people. He desires to make himself known. And the purpose of his people, whether the old Israel or the new, has always been to witness his mighty deeds. It’s interesting that it was on the other side of the Red Sea, at Mount Sinai, that the Lord gave his people instructions for building the tabernacle, the place where they would witness or meet with him. Now, with that in mind, look at verses 5-8.

After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

The heavenly tabernacle which the earthy tabernacle and temple were but a shadow now opens. Seven angels emerge and they carry with them seven golden bowls containing seven plagues. These bowls are the heavenly counterpart of the bowls used in the earthy tabernacle to present and pour out drink offerings. As John wrote in the last chapter, the wicked were to “drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger”. In the next chapter the angels sing, “For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!” (16:6).

In the daily service of the tabernacle, just as here in John’s vision, the trumpets are blown and then the bowls containing the drink offering were poured out. It was the last ritual act that completed the service of the altar. And, again, I think John has the

imagery of the sacraments in mind. The sea, an image of the Red Sea, before which the saints stand recalls the deliverance of Israel and now their baptism into Jesus and the Spirit, into the life of God. But it also recalls the reversal of those saving waters to drown the army of Pharaoh. Now I think we also see the Lord’s Supper in the bowl or chalice that carries the drink offering—the blood of Jesus given for the redemption of the world, but which, when poured out, also bears the wrath of God for the wicked who have unjustly spilled the blood of both the saints and of Jesus.

And then John sees this awesome image of the glory of the Lord as the heavenly tabernacle fills with smoke. It was this awesome cloud of glory that consumed the sacrifices. It was this awesome cloud of glory that led the Israelites in the wilderness. It was this awesome cloud of glory that descended to fill the tabernacle and later the temple. And it was the sign of the Lord’s presence with is people—a source of comfort and of hope—but in its awesome terribleness it was also a reminder of his absolute holiness—a holiness to make sinners tremble before it. No one could bear the weight of that holiness when it was present. So, once again, the Lord is here, he is present, for his people in the midst of their tribulation, but he is also present to pour out his wrath and judgement on sin. Brothers and Sisters, if we sinners, broken by the fall, can so easily look at the world and know that things are not the way they should be, how much more is the one who created all things and grieves its corruption aware of the problem? He who loves his creation and loves his people, he who gave his only Son for our sake, he who is supremely righteous, will surely see that justice is done and that all is set to rights.

For those saints living in the First Century, who knew first-hand the persecution of both Jerusalem and Rome, many who died rather than

renounce the Lord Jesus, vindication and justice were coming. The heavenly tabernacle was opened. And just as the Lord's righteousness was once poured out on Egypt, it was once again about to be poured out on the nations. As they sang: His righteous acts were about to be revealed" with the result that "all the nations would come and worship him". And, once again as we've seen before, the church has an integral role to play in all of this. Christians do not simply sit by—me, my Bible, and Jesus—while God does his mighty deeds. As Israel before, the Church is part of those mighty deeds. We experience the wickedness of the world—from the neighbour who robs us in the dark of night, the shady workman who rips us off, the acquaintances who mock our faith, the central bank with its unjust weights and measures that debases our currency, to the government that rules the proclamation of the gospel to be "hate speech". God's people are in the thick of the world's injustices. We are meant to know by our own mournful experiences that this is not how the world was meant to be. And so, like those saints before the throne, we can declare to the nations the mighty acts of God—the acts that have brought both judgement and deliverance, both wrath and hope—from the Red Sea to the Cross and the empty tomb to the fall of wicked Jerusalem and the conversion of an empire and the nations. Brothers and Sisters, we know the fallenness of the world and we know ourselves the Lord's saving hand. We are his people and he has filled us with his Spirit. We are now the tabernacle in which he dwells. May the smoke of his holy presence now arise from us as we proclaim the good news of his justice and mercy, his wrath and his grace, to this world so desperately in need of the hope of the good news. We do so in sure and certain faith, knowing that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

Let's pray: O God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*