

From Praising to Complaining (Exodus 15:13-27)

Let's open God's holy Word to Ex 15, the 2nd half of the song of Moses, 1st song lyrics in Bible. We left off in v. 12 where it says the enemy was swallowed up in victory and I quoted how Paul says our last enemy, death is swallowed up in victory, 'thanks be to God, who gives us the victory.'¹ We saw the Lord is a warrior. Maybe the best review of last week is by the poet Thomas More:

‘Sing—for the pride of the tyrant is broken, His chariots, his horsemen, all splendid and brave—
How vain was their boast, for the Lord hath but spoken, And chariots and horsemen are sunk in the wave.
Sound the loud timbrel over Egypt's dark sea; Jehovah [Yahweh] has triumphed—his people are free.’²

The loud timbrel or tambourine is a drum that's about to sound and a victory dance is about to break out as Israel sings to the Lord after the Red Sea. Ex 15:13: *"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. ¹⁴ The peoples have heard; they tremble; pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. ¹⁵ Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; trembling seizes the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. ¹⁶ Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased. ¹⁷ You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established. ¹⁸ The LORD will reign forever and ever."* ¹⁹ *For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them, but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. ²¹ And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."* ²² *Then Moses made Israel set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. ²³ When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah [marah=bitter] ²⁴ And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" ²⁵ And he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them, ²⁶ saying, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer." ²⁷ Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees, and they encamped there by the water.*

Imagine today you go home from worship encouraged, you've seen things you've never seen before in God's Word, the music was upbeat and even had you moving (maybe not as much as Miriam but still). You're still humming the songs as you drive home but you get home and the power is shut off and so is your water. And you're snowed in and can't get out and your phone is dead. You heard EID and PG&E will be out for days and it's now Wednesday, you haven't had water for 3 days, then you find some in the garage from family camp but it's bitter, it's bad. Would you turn to the Lord and pray about it? Or would your words start turning bad or bitter?

Now imagine 3 days in the desert sun with no water and you're about to die literally

Many of you are going to be tested as you go from worship, with far less than Israel was tested, 1st world problems. Will inconveniences reveal your ingratitude? Will you grumble? Israel is in a life and death situation, for us if life isn't best, we're in a temptation to be bitter. Some of you have physical challenges you haven't been healed from. Maybe you've vented about it already today, maybe on the way? Others will be tested as you go: will praising turn into complaining? How easy it is for God's people to go from glorifying Him to grumbling at others. We can go quickly from magnifying Christ to murmuring criticism. We go from worshippers to whiners.

Like Israel here, our spiritual life can often go from a high time to a dry time. The highest point of Christ's early ministry was His baptism where the Spirit came to Him like a dove and God's voice boomed from above '*this is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased.*' But right after that He went from the waters of Jordan to the wilderness of Judea to be tested by physical need and lack of food (much like Israel in the next chapter). We think we deserve better than Jesus?

We've seen before if we grumble, we're not humble, and we insult the Lord

We're no better than Israel here, but this passage can help us better respond to our next testing. Jesus passed His test in the wilderness that Israel failed, so that His people don't have to fail. He showed us how to respond with scripture (*It is written* 3x) and to rely on the Father's will and timing. God can change bitter to sweet and intends to change us from bitter grumbling to sweet gratitude. He is the Lord your healer, and He can heal from disease or discontentment, from a complaining heart to a praising heart. He can redeem your sinful past and renew sinful patterns.

He can heal any wound or help any worry, and part of His remedy is singing gratefully

1. Give thanks for God's steadfast love (v. 13)

"You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed; you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode." God's holy place is His holy presence in the pillar of fire and cloud. Later that would be in the tabernacle and temple (v. 17) but He's already leading them toward it

By His strength He'll guide them to Mt. Sinai and later Mt. Zion, to worship with thanks-giving

This whole context is giving thanks to God and in v. 13 the key word is steadfast love (*hesed*). It's covenant love to His redeemed people that can't be fully captured in any one English word. Other translations have 'unfailing love / loyal love / faithful love / lovingkindness / mercy,'³ etc. Ps 136: **Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever...** ¹⁰ *to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹¹ *and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹² *with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹³ *to him who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹⁴ *and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹⁵ *but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever;* ¹⁶ *to him who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever...* ²⁶ **Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.**

When you give thanks for God's attributes it changes your attitude. To cure complaining, start thanking God for His steadfast love. In the end of v. 13 God guides us with strength to be with Him, thank Him for that. In the start of v. 13 He leads us with steadfast love and He redeems. That's a word for paying to buy back and make free, we give thanks for redemption at the cross

B.B. Warfield wrote on this note: 'There is no one of the titles of Christ which is more precious to Christian hearts than "Redeemer"...[it expresses] appreciation of what it cost Him to procure this salvation for us. It is the name specifically of Christ of the cross. Whenever we pronounce [the word Redeemer] the cross is placarded before our eyes and our hearts are filled with loving remembrance not only that Christ has given us salvation, but that he paid a mighty price for it.'⁴

This is how Moses thanked God in Dt 9:26: *You have redeemed through Your greatness, whom You have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.*⁵ It wasn't about Israel's greatness, they're only great at complaining at the end of the chapter! God redeemed through His greatness and steadfast love.

Give thanks for His steadfast love is #1. #2 is See His supremacy and sovereignty (v. 14-19)

As other people groups see or hear what happened at the Red Sea, where Yahweh was seen to be supreme over Egypt's gods, v. 14 says they tremble. Some translations say they're gripped

with anguish or sorrow. v. 15 says leaders of Edom and Moab panic and all the Canaanites are melting in fear of Israel's God. ¹⁶ *Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone, till your people, O LORD, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.* ¹⁷ *You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O LORD, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established.* ¹⁸ *The LORD will reign forever and ever.* "

The nations see His supremacy, the superior greatness of His arm in v. 16, and they fear

v. 18 is His sovereignty, He's reigning always over all things you're complaining about. He's in control, so when you grumble, it's against God. But see His supreme and sovereign power, and know He keeps gracious promises like v. 17 (looking ahead 400+ years to Jerusalem temple). And v. 14-16 is still being fulfilled 40 years later as a Canaanite Rahab saw His supremacy and told the Jews in Joshua 2 *'I know that Yahweh has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you.* ¹⁰ *For we have heard how Yahweh dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt...* ¹¹ *Indeed we heard it, and our hearts melted, and a courageous spirit no longer rose up in any man because of you; for Yahweh your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath'* [LSB, note unrivaled supremacy and sovereignty that converts Rahab]

That's 40 years later that the supreme and sovereign God fulfills what He inspired in Ex 15

Rahab pleads for God's steadfast love, God saves her and makes her part of Israel. Now turn to Isa 19. Some people think it harsh that God utterly judged Egypt or Canaan but it's holy justice. And He's gracious to any who repent, including Canaanite harlots or Egyptians who fear in Ex 9 and are saved with Israel in Ex 12. A mixed multitude of Gentiles left Egypt with the Jews in the Exodus. Egypt had oppressed Israel till Israel cried out to the Lord and He sent their Savior.

But this isn't the end for Egypt in God's plans. He has sovereign supreme power to save

Isa 19 is a prophecy of future Egypt now oppressed but even the arch-enemy of Israel has future grace. Look at Isa 19:20: *It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt. When they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a savior [Yeshua] and defender, and deliver them.* ²¹ *And the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day [Ex 14:4] and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them.* ²² *And the LORD will strike Egypt, **striking and healing**, and they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and **heal them.*** ²³ *In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.* ²⁴ *In that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,* ²⁵ *whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "**Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.**"*

In the OT, Israel is God's blessed people, one day He'll say 'blessed be Egypt my people'!!

When Isaiah wrote, 'sacrifice and offering' was language of true worship, i.e. they'll truly worship God. This is a stunning prophecy: before the end, Egypt will turn to the Lord along with Israel. In the land of Egypt, God will send Yeshua/Jesus and save them and ultimately fulfill what He prophesied in Exodus: the Egyptians will know I am Yahweh. Egypt will turn to Him, plead for mercy, He'll heal them, and they'll worship with Assyria and Israel (former Muslims and Jews)

I think Calvin is right this means a great conversion of Egypt in Christ's kingdom⁶

I don't know exactly how, but I know if there's hope for Egypt there's hope for any. Go back to Ex 15 but see God is supreme and sovereign over salvation, even of former enemies, that's #2.

Now #3. Worship in song, all of you. v. 20 *Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing.* ²¹ *And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously..."* (so ladies echo v. 1)

This is for all God's people. Ancient writings didn't usually mention women but God's Word honors and involves them vitally in worship. All the women went out after Miriam, she spoke from God these inspired words as a prophetess (a role under shepherd-teaching role of Moses).

In the NT, God again speaks directly to a woman named Miriam (Mary is Greek/English form), and there's an elderly prophetess named Anna with special revelation of Jesus (84 years old?).

God spoke to and through Anna as she spoke to all looking for Jerusalem's redemption

Miriam is probably even older here because Moses is 80 and she was his older sister who God used to save him through the water with Pharaoh's daughter on the shore. It's fitting she does the call to worship with the daughters of Israel on the shore of the Red Sea after God saved all His people through water. This verse highlights not only women but elderly, the super seniors among us in worship and fellowship. Miriam is leading and teaching the women here and Titus 2 commands older women to teach the younger women in the church, that's a vital ministry.

Ladies, go after Miriam. We need your gifts in worship and service alongside other sisters

Listen to her in v. 21 as she calls all '*sing to the Lord,*' that's for all of you, and all that you are. The text says they were dancing, and we later read David danced before the Lord in worship. In the Hebrew dictionaries, a tambourine/timbrel was a drum beat by the hand, often with dancing. Some of you don't say the d word(s), or are nervous I'm saying them, but this elderly worship leader is calling for it in reverent rejoicing. It may not be your style, but it's in your scriptures:

- Ps 81 '*sing...make a loud shout...strike the timbrel... [to] God who brought up from the land of Egypt*'⁷
- You may prefer old songs a certain way, that's ok but Ps 149 also says: *Sing to the LORD a new song, And His praise in the congregation...with dancing; Let them sing praises to Him with timbrel*⁸
- Ps 150: *Praise God in his sanctuary...Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! [KJV 'organs']...with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!*
- The NT says teach and admonish with psalms as you sing, and those psalms admonish⁹
- Along with hymns, variety of songs, we should be moved as we sing, and it's ok to move
- If you don't lift a hand, at least lift a voice! If you don't shout, can you at least say amen?
- We have different cultures and comfort levels, but let's worship all of us with all we are

We're to glorify and enjoy Him, in our expression and emotion driven by truth. Amen?

#3. worship in song, all of you. 4^{thly} finally: Trust the Lord who transforms and heals (22-27)

There was dancing at the beach but 3 days later they're dragging in the desert, finding no water they can drink. In v. 23 there's only the bitter water of Marah and in v. 24 their bitter complaint. It wasn't wrong to ask '*what shall we drink?*' It's just the wrong attitude and the wrong person. Earlier when they cried out to the Lord, He transformed their situation, even transforming water to blood in Egypt and transforming it back, and He just transformed the Red Sea to a walkway.

They had just seen the Lord's power over water, why not ask Him for another water miracle? If He can kill the greatest army by water, can't He keep His people alive by water? They sang of God's rescuing and redeeming and reigning power in corporate worship, but how quick they go from seeing wonders to being whiners, from praising to complaining (like we can, remember?). But Moses, v. 25 says '*he cried to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet. There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them...*'

God is testing His people to grow and show [Torah]¹⁰ the way

So this was God's test, 1st question on the exam: will you ask me to provide? Israel starts 0 for 1 and the next question is will you trust and obey me? ²⁶ saying, "*If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer.*"

That's not an absolute promise for physical healing for all time, it's a promise for Israel not to experience the plagues God put on Egypt if they trust and obey. Plagues like undrinkable water in the first plague, or death to the firstborn like the last plague, or skin diseases like boils, etc.

You can turn on Christian TV and see ‘faith-healers’ who say today you won’t get diseases if you’re faithful to obey, or God will heal if you have enough faith, but that’s false bad theology.

Moses had an impediment, Job had boils, Paul a fleshly ailment, Timothy a bad stomach, etc.

But we trust the Lord who heals if it’s His will. He is the healer and He’s healed people in this room, and others who aren’t healed physically yet but He transforms spiritually so they endure. We’re praying for people in our church regularly to God who says ‘I am the Lord, your healer.’ This hits me close to home with my sister who grew up in my home. My older sister Laura who lives in Arizona just got diagnosed with cancer and starts chemo in just a few days, surgery or stage TBD. So next Sunday I won’t be with you because I’ll be with her. This is dominating my thinking as I’m reading about the Lord our healer, I pray and trust He can heal and/or transform.

Most of you don’t know her but I know she’d appreciate prayers as she trusts the Lord

He’s the Great Physician. He surprises doctors, heals through doctors, or finally heals by taking us to heaven. Some of you are on a health journey or have other worries or uncertainties if your situation or relations will heal. In the end of v. 26, *heal* isn’t just physical healing, it’s spiritual. This isn’t just about bitter water, this is about bitter words that can overflow from sinful hearts.

In the book of Ruth, Marah isn’t just a place, it’s a person: “*Don’t call me Naomi...Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.*” That’s the place in Ex 15:23 and she’s coming back from Moab, the place in v. 15. But God transforms and heals Naomi to see the truth of v. 13, His ‘*steadfast love*’ never ceases. The women tell her ‘*Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer...He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.*’¹¹ God transforms and heals her bitterness.

How sweet for her to hold the newborn baby who would be the grandpa of David. And Rahab is the mom of Boaz according to Mt 1, also redeemed in the family tree of Jesus our Redeemer! It included Canaanites and Moabites from Ex 15, former bitter enemies now in the family tree of the sweet Savior. In v. 25 God showed Moses a log, literally a *tree* was the remedy to bitterness. They’ll die after 3 days of thirst, but this *tree* transforms the water to give life instead of death.

Israel needed more than sweeter water so they’d survive that day, they needed a Savior

Moses earlier used this same word *tree* in Gen 2, a tree of life by the waters, but sin cut man off. Later in scripture God transforms creation with water and a tree of life for healing the nations.¹² God later shows the way there by another tree where Jesus drank a bitter cup of God’s wrath for us. 1 Pet 2:24 says ‘*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree...By his wounds you have been healed*’

‘Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus and His cleansing healing blood

John Newton wrote ‘amazing grace, how sweet the sound...’ He also wrote a song on this:

Bitter waters, he said ‘from this desert flow...they taste of sin and woe...

But, there’s a wonder-working wood, I’ve heard believers say,
can make these bitter waters good and take the curse away...

When they by faith behold the cross though many griefs they meet,
they draw again from every loss and find the bitter sweet...

The cross on which the Saviour died and conquered for His saints:
this is the tree, by faith applied, which sweetens all complaints’

That’s the power of the cross for every bitter thought and to transform complaining to praising. He can save and heal your bitter heart if you repent. In the gospels, He is the Lord your healer. Like v. 18, we can say ‘*the Lord Jesus will reign forever and ever.*’ Majestic sweetness sits enthroned. Like in v. 17 God prepared a place for them, Jesus said ‘*I go to prepare a place for you.*’ The sweet by and by is where we’ll rest on that beautiful shore. A sweet chariot will come forth to carry us home. And like v. 13, we’re redeemed by Jesus, sweetest name on earth, sweetest name I know.

May He keep us singing as we go. Let's pray and then praise the Lord who transforms and heals

Thank you O our Father for giving us your Son. Forgive us for our grumbling and give us grace to help us give thanks instead. I ask that you keep a root of bitterness from rising up among us and defile many. Help us even today when we're tempted to murmur or complain about our life, remind us you are supreme and sovereign over everything in our life you plan for our good. We praise your steadfast love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in so we didn't perish in our sin. Turn our complaining to praising that there is a Redeemer. Help us sing to Him in His name

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:54, 57.

² SOURCE?

³ Compare NIV/NLT, NET/LEB, HCSB, NASB/LSB, NKJV, etc.

⁴ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 325.

⁵ NKJV.

⁶ *Calvin's Commentary on Isaiah*: 'he comforts them, and promises the mercy of God. He declares that they will be in part restored, and will regain a prosperous and flourishing condition; for he says [in v. 18] that out of six *cities five* will be saved, and only one will perish... he contrasts the cities of Egypt which shall begin to acknowledge God with those which are destined to destruction... It is plain that the Prophet speaks of the kingdom of Christ... it will be for the good of Egypt that the Lord will punish her... the Lord will be gracious and reconciled to the Egyptians, he at the same time shews, that as soon as they have been converted, they will obtain forgiveness. It will therefore be a true conversion... When [v. 25] comes to *Israel*, he invests him with his prerogative, which is, that he is *the inheritance of God*, so that among the new brethren he still holds the rank and honour of the first-born... that covenant which the Lord first made with them, bestowed on them the privilege which cannot be made void by their ingratitude; for "the gifts and calling of God are without repentance," as Paul declares, (Rom. 11:29,) who shews that in the house of God they are the first-born. (Eph. 2:12.) Although therefore the grace of God is now more widely spread, yet they [Israel will] still hold the highest rank, not by their own merit, but by the firmness of the promises.'

⁷ v. 1-2, 10 LSB.

⁸ v. 1, 4 NASB95.

⁹ Colossians 3:16 (NASB95) '...teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.'

¹⁰ The verb for 'show' is the Hebrew root word for Torah, God's Law/teaching that shows us God's way and grace we need (ultimately Christ we need, as Paul argues in Galatians 5 in the context of redemption from slavery).

¹¹ Ruth 1:20, 2:20, 4:14-15 NIV84.

¹² Revelation 22:1-2.