



Prayers of the Old Testament

Session 1 – A Prayer of Moses: “Praising God for Doing Wonders”

(Exodus 15:1-18)

Thursday, September 8

Opening Prayer

Who is like you, O Lord, majestic in holiness
and awesome in splendor?

We will sing to the Lord,
for God has triumphed gloriously.
God is our strength, our might,
and our salvation!

This is my God, whom I will praise,
the God of my mothers and fathers,
the God whom I exalt.

The Lord is mighty
and holy is God’s name!

Amen

Introduction

When we think of poetry and prayers in the Old Testament, our minds usually take us immediately to the Book of Psalms. This collection of 150 “prayers” in the Bible provide beautiful models for a variety of moods and aspects of prayer. For centuries, Christians have memorized these Psalms for communal and personal worship, pouring out their worship to God.

However, the Book of Psalms is not the only place prayers are found in the Old Testament. Some of these prayers are brief. Some of these prayers are long. Some are exuberant and joyful, while others come from a place of pain and need. We will examine these prayers over the next 8 weeks.

Each of the prayers in the Bible provide a model for our own prayers. They will help pull us out of the “routine” of praying into a more intimate conversation with God. These prayers will help us pray in new ways, bringing freshness to our faith. These prayers show diversity in mood and expression. They demonstrate that a variety of emotions can play a role in calling us into God’s presence, while providing answers to some common questions: Can I be honest with God? Does God truly care about everything in my life?

How do we know when we encounter a prayer in Scripture? Some passages are very clear, “From inside the fish, Jonah prayed...” In some cases we have to discern, like in Jeremiah, “You are always righteous, O Lord, when I bring a case before you.” The eight prayers we will look at all approach God directly for at least part of the prayer. These prayers will help us deepen our prayer life. As we study, consider using them as part of your prayer walk with God when the mood and timing is appropriate.

The prayers in this guide present God as powerful and majestic, the Creator of all and the Lord of all. They also help us see God as the One who saves his people from disaster, and the One who listens and cares when his people are in need. What a privilege to know this God, both mighty and gentle, and to be invited into prayer.

Opening Questions...

Have you ever experienced great joy after a tumult of painful and powerful emotions? What was it like? What did it feel like in your body? In what ways did God’s presence seem real?

The Setting for Tonight’s Prayer

The Israelite people/nation (Israelites) has been in slavery in Egypt for many generations, working long days at backbreaking labor with no Sabbath day for rest. Their despair seemed absolute until Moses came on the scene. Raised up by God to confront the Pharaoh, Moses helped bring a little bit of hope to the Israelites. When the plagues unfolded, this likely brought both confusion and cautious optimism among the people of Israel. Was God finally going to save them? After the plagues, Pharaoh let the Israelites go! They were finally on their way to freedom.

However, this freedom did not last long. Pharaoh – realizing in grief what he had done – wanted redemption from the Israelites and pursued the fleeing nation. Their optimism no doubt flew away in the face of terror. However, God was with the Israelites. He parted the Red Sea for them to cross through, and then closed the water again after them, killing their enemies. After all the ups and downs of emotions, the deliverance must have been intoxicating! I bet most were in great joy!

After crossing the Red Sea, Moses leads the people of Israel in prayer of great praise – Exodus 15:1-18.

The Prayer – Exodus 15:1-18

Often referred to as the “Song of Moses”, this passage of scripture is commonly recognized as one of the oldest, most radical, and most important poems in the Old Testament. This prayer not only echoes elements of the Israelites’ fundamental faith, it forms it in a way that becomes the foundational pieces for their entire belief (canon). This prayer is a “story of liberation”, moving from Pharaoh’s oppression to the safe land of promise.

The prayer/song begins in verses 1 and 2 with Moses and people preparing to lift the prayer/song to God. This is a standard element in Israelite hymnody. In this act, the singer is participating in an act of self-abandonment – yielding oneself to the subject of praise. With this change, the “I” comes to stand for the community and not just “Moses”. The subject of this act of self-abandonment is Yahweh, named three times in the opening verses. This Yahweh has been the subject of the entire exodus narrative, in whom Israel has come to believe, and whom Pharaoh finally comes to know. The naming of Yahweh is not only an act of praise, but also a polemical act – whereby Israel dismisses and nullifies any rival to Yahweh.

Many scholars believe that Miriam’s song that begins in 15:20 precedes Moses’ hymn, but we will not venture down this path for now since our focus is on the “Prayer” itself.

Verse 1 – Moses makes two proclamations that we need to make note of. First, the reference to the defeat of the “horse and its rider” becomes the elemental claim from which all else in Israel’s doxological tradition derives. God is greater than man. Second, the reference to “the sea” could specifically point to

the Egyptian waters of death, but more largely refers to the waters of chaos, which Yahweh has utilized for the purpose of liberation.

From this event, now celebrated in all its wonder, the song/prayer uses a series of first person pronouns to draw close to Yahweh in adoration and allegiance.

Verse 2 – Yahweh is – my strength, my song, my deliverance, my God, God of my father. The singer knows that all of life is owed to this one who will be lifted up and enthroned in an act of praise.

Verse 3 – Israel’s faith depends in important ways on a military metaphor. While to modern readers, our minds might not track this way, for the Israelites it would. Rescue, deliverance, and salvation depends on the reality that God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Just by uttering Yahweh’s name is a battle cry against those who stand against us. The speaker (Moses/Israel/Us) is buoyant and delighted at the new possibilities the reality of this God makes possible. The remainder of the poem explicates this passionate faith and such confidence.

Verses 4 – 10 – The body of the Song/Prayer in its first half focuses on the rescue, understood as a victory for Yahweh. The victory song, characteristic of Israel, celebrates by retelling the dangerous, hard-fought conflict and its happy resolve. The whole drama of Exodus is summarized in one single verse – verse 4. In verse 5, we have a dramatic picture of the soldiers and horses of the empire slowly sinking into the waters. That graphic picture is voiced in the hardest terms – flooded, depths, being cast.

After the pivotal act of defeat, the song/prayer breaks into a fresh doxology in verses 6 through 8, as it expresses Yahweh’s incomparable power. Their safety and rescue was by the “right hand” of Yahweh. In comparison to the “right hand” of God, is anyone who rises up against you (in this case, Pharaoh).

In verse 7b and 8, we are given two contrasting images for Yahweh’s power. On the one hand, Yahweh’s “fury” is like a consuming fire, for which chaff is most flammable. On the other hand, Yahweh is like a great sea monster. The “wind” out of the Yahweh’s nostrils blows the waters of the sea (what an image!). the images of warrior, fire, and monster appeal to the language of God at creation, and attempt to voice the extravagant power of Yahweh.

The enemy did not give up without a fight! The enemy – a surging, calculated power of chaos – issues a resolve against Yahweh in verse 9. “I will

pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil...I will draw out my sword, my hand will destroy them.” The enemy has not yet been defeated nor convinced of Yahweh’s power.

The shift from verse 9 to 10 is abrupt and complete. However, a divide is present. The change goes from the “I” of the enemy to the “You” of the doxology. “You blew the wind.” That was all, but it was enough. The wind of God moves over the mighty waters, and the enemy is destroyed. The voice of the poem/prayer is positioned as a witness who sees and attests to the contest between Yahweh and Egypt, between creation and chaos, and between life and death. There is no contest. In two lines of poetry, the battle is over and the enemy is not heard from again.

Follow Up Question...

1. In verse 2, Moses calls the Lord “my strength”, “my song”, and “my salvation. What do you think Moses meant by each name individually?

Verses 11 – 12 – At the center of this song/prayer stands a reflective, doxological reprise that looks back on the victory described in verses 4 through 10 and speaks an adamant affirmation about the aftermath. These two verses stand between the two major elements of this song/prayer (4-10 and 13-17). We must not forget that the writing was penned in a polytheistic context. The author knew what he was doing when he spoke these words. It does not say that there are no other gods, just that there are no parallels to Yahweh. On the other hand, Yahweh is named – the only one named, and in truth has no rivals among the other gods. Preaching while not preaching! Impressive.

In the drama of the world, the world is made safe for the adherents of Yahweh. Slavery is banished, and chaos is eliminated. The final words of verse 12, “The earth swallowed them...” leads up back to precious language that we experienced before. In this case, the earth swallows up the sea, the surging power of chaos. This is what Israel saw: dry land swallowed up the water, creation swallowed up chaos, and order swallowed up disorder. Yahweh has won. Israel is safe!

Verses 13 – 17 – In the second half of the main body of the song/prayer, the setting and tone change. We are not at the water’s edge, but now moving through occupied territory. For Israel, this is a victory parade in which the

winning God moves in processional splendor to take up his throne. Those who stand to watch are in silent awe, filled with both respect and dread. These verses portray Yahweh and Israel moving triumphantly on to the land of promise, moving without resistance, because all the potential resisters have seen Yahweh's great victory and are duly intimidated.

The dominant image here is not power (as in verses 4-10) but steadfast love. He journeys now in protective leadership. This foreshadows the journey of Israel towards the Promised Land. This outline of the journey is the one that will be followed in Numbers. Here, however, is not to recall all the encounters, but to instead witness the power and fidelity of Yahweh. The journey is dangerous. This hostility that they will face are countered by the fidelity of Yahweh, which is committed to these people whom he has "redeemed" and "acquired". Yahweh has purchased these slaves and set them free.

Yahweh, who embodies cosmic law, protects Israel. The watching people hear about this "invasion" and tremble. They are driven to do something to avoid the loss of territory. The "peoples", while generic, could easily point towards the long list of enemies and oppressors of Israel. To each of them, a verb of anxiety is listed with them – seized, dismayed, trembling, melted. Then in verse 16, there common condition – "terror and dread".

Their source of fear is not Israel. It is Yahweh. Each of these people groups had their "own" gods protecting its own territories. Each of these groups now know that Yahweh is supreme. It is the might of Yahweh's arm that leads them to submission. They now know the story of Pharaoh of Egypt. If he could not compete with Yahweh, how could they?

How long will these witnesses persist in silent awe? As long as Yahweh wants them to! For as long as it takes to get every individual Israelite safely placed. Now, even after these words about Yahweh, it is not completely clear what this poems intends as a destination. While we expect the goal to be the Promised Land, the language of the song/prayer suggests rather a sanctuary or a Temple established in Jerusalem. Taken either way, the goal is a safe place marked by the majestic presence of God.

Verse 18 – Verse 18 concludes the song/prayer/poem, paralleling the opening in verses 1-3. At the beginning the prayer, the military power of Yahweh is celebrated. Now in verse 18, Israel sounds an affirmation of Yahweh's enthronement. However, this does not leave Yahweh in isolation. Instead, this

requires both the safe establishment of Israel and the proper deference of the nations. One thing we must not forget is that Israel's story could not happen unless we first have Yahweh's story. Both stories are deeply intertwined. One cannot be spoken without the other!

Follow Up Questions...

1. In verse 11, Moses focuses on God's holiness, glory, and wonders. Why do you think Moses zeroes in on these three characteristics of God in this prayer?
2. In what ways does God's tender care for the people of Israel, described in verses 13 and 17, complement the picture of God as a warrior from verse 3?
3. How have you experience God fighting for you (as a warrior) when you have been in deep need? How have you experienced His tender care?

Applying Moses's Prayer/Poem/Song to our Prayer Life...

- When you pray, do you have the same "picture" of God in your mind? If so, change to some of the images shared in this Prayer in Exodus. (Warrior, Mighty Right Hand, Consuming Fire, Water from Nostrils(!), Sitting on the Throne, Showing Mercy)
- We all have moments in our lives when we feel like Praising God (remember the range of emotions in the opening questions.). When in these moments, celebrate in prayer as Moses and Israel did after passing through the Red Sea. Talk about a High and Holy Moment!
- All believers are called to Praise God in the Expected Times (Sunday morning, 11 AM, etc.) But what about in the Unexpected...Moses did not expect to be leading a Prayer Service by the Red Sea that day, but that is where the day lead. Allow the Spirit to guide you to intimate moments with God.

Closing Prayer

Father,

May we go with You, the God who can part
the troubled waters of our lives
and lead us through to dry ground.

May we go with the You, the God who can scatter and subdue
all that hinders us on our journey.

May we go forth in God's might and in God's peace.

Amen.

Next Week...

Prayers of the Old Testament

Session 2 - "A Prayer of Hannah: Turning Things Upside Down"

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Thursday, September 15 6:30 PM
