

Prayer

Powerful and generous Lord, come into our lives to deal with the problems that beset us. Expose the Devil's grip wherever it has taken hold, break the bondages that have held us back from doing what is right, and liberate us into the light and blessing of the Holy Spirit You have given us. We praise You, Lord God, we praise You: ALLELUIA!

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

If you have access to an old hymn book, look up some hymns you do not know, and use the words to inspire you in praise of God, your Maker.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the farming community** *Pray about land rights, which differs from country to country. Pray about the management of these rights within your own land.*
- *Give thanks to God for your family and their life and health*
- *Pray about the legal protection of the seas, and fish stock*

Meditation

The Word of God is a mystery,
But we all may read or hear it;

The Word of God is a 'means of grace',
By which we may all be saved;

The Word of God is a brilliant light,
Which is focussed on God's pathway;

The Word of God is a unique signpost,
Showing only one way to heaven;

The Word of God is a river of life,
Flowing out into the sea of eternity;

The Word of God is a place of safety,
Where all can find true peace;

The Word of God is a stirring challenge,
Which demands a response from us;

The Word of God is always with us,
Written in the Bible and our hearts.

Bible passage - Exodus 15:13-21

¹³ In Your faithful love
You led the people You redeemed;
You guided them by Your strength
to where You dwell in holiness.

¹⁴ The nations heard and were troubled;
the people of Philistia were seized with
anguish,

¹⁵ whereupon the chiefs of Edom were
terrified,

the leaders of Moab were gripped with
trembling,
and all who dwelt in Canaan melted
away.

¹⁶ Terror and dread fell on them;
Because of the strength of your arm,
they were as still as stone
until Your people passed by, O LORD,
until the people who You obtained passed
by.

¹⁷ You have brought them in,
You have planted them,
on the mountain which You own,
the fixed place, O LORD,
Where You have made Your dwelling,
the holy Place O LORD,
established by Your hands.

¹⁸ The LORD will reign forever and ever.'

¹⁹ When Pharaoh's horses with his chariots and
his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD
made the waters of the sea flow back on them;

but the Israelites walked on dry ground
through the middle of the sea.

²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took
up 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 risen up in triumph;
He has thrown both horse and rider
Into the sea.

Bible Study

Review

This reading is the second half of the great song of thanksgiving and deliverance sung by Moses and Miriam after the Israelites were saved from the Egyptians (15:1-21). The first half of the song (15:1-12) celebrates the Lord's victory over Pharaoh at the Red Sea, but the second half (15:13-18) describes not the past but the future; the whole song is therefore about more than celebration, it is about moving on in God's power to achieve His future. Lastly, the remaining verses of our reading tell us how Miriam, Moses' sister, led the people of Israel in their praises to God (15:20,21), for the victory over Egypt was indeed the beginning of their journey with the Lord.

Our passage begins by recounting God's love for His people in enigmatic and powerful language; God's '*faithful love*' will guide His people to their destiny, which is to dwell with the Lord '*in holiness*' (15:13). It then continues by describing the nations standing in the way of Israel's progress. They are gripped with fear because of the Lord's victory over Egypt; what chance did they have against such a powerful God! The song comes to a conclusion with a remarkable description of Israel's future (15:17), containing the first hint in Scripture that God intended to dwell in the midst of His people, in a 'holy place', which is another word for a 'Temple'. The song concludes with a triumphant affirmation that the Lord God 'reigns' over Israel (15:18), and anticipates the idea of God reigning like a King over His sovereign people.

Clearly, this passage is significant not just for the rest of Exodus but for the whole Old Testament, and it seems that God's victory over the Egyptians is the trigger for Him to speak to His people about what lies ahead. This is typical of the Lord's work amongst His people, because God always has in mind the future destiny of His people. After the Israelites had come through the Red Sea, they were clearly elated, but they needed inspiration to go forward in the right direction, and the picture of what lay ahead was designed to do just this. With the sight of Pharaoh's army covered by the sea behind them (15:19), Israel had to take hold of their future in God's will.

The last part of the passage is also remarkable, but in a different way. Verses 20 and 21 tell us that Miriam took up the refrain of this great song (15:1,2,21) to lead the women of Israel in celebrating with tambourines and dance. This is not merely a beautiful touch to the whole story of the Exodus, showing that the women of Israel were now free from danger and able to celebrate and dance without fear of oppression. More than this, the text describes Miriam, Moses' sister, as a prophet and therefore someone who communicates God's will to His people. Some people doubt whether her deeds and words here can be described as prophetic because they cannot see where the prophecy is in this text. However, what she did was to take the words of her brother Moses ('*I will sing to the Lord ...*' 15:1), and repeat it as a command to God's people, by adding the instruction '*sing to the Lord ...*'. This is one of only a few places in Scripture where a woman takes the lead in a celebratory act of worship to the Lord.

The 'Song of Moses and Miriam' in Exodus 15 is often left to one side and unread, perhaps because of people's inability to see how God's victory in war can be regarded as a relevant part of His saving will (see the study on Exodus 15:1-12). One advantage of separating the study into two halves is the fact that when we look at the second half, the theology of God's providential care stands out. It may only describe an event in the past, but prophetically, it also points to the future reign of God amongst His people. For us today, this points us towards Jesus' return in glory.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The importance of God's faithful 'covenant love'
- God's chosen people and the fear of the nations (15:13-16)
- The destination of God's people
- Miriam, the prophet (15:20,21)

Going Deeper

The importance of God's faithful 'covenant love'

Much of the interest in the passage lies in a close study of the words used, such as the great Hebrew word for God's covenant love 'cheseth' which appears in verse 13 (translated 'faithful love'), and the extraordinary descriptions of the Israelites as 'the people You redeemed' (15:13). Such powerful words indicate the importance of the text and also its prophetic nature, justifying the description of Miriam as a prophet.

Verse 13 contains a wonderful series of brief sentences, typical of this song, which describe God's covenant chosen people. From the beginning of the story of Abraham in Genesis 12, God had promised His people two essential things, firstly growth in numbers (Gen 12:2 etc.), and secondly, a land where they could dwell (Gen 13:14-17 etc.). Once the people had grown into a nation, they needed to be separated out from the Egyptians with whom they were living, so the fulfilment of the first promise made the Exodus necessary. However, the Exodus also looked forward to the fulfilment of the second promise, that of a Promised Land within which to dwell. All of this is brought to our minds by the reference to God's covenant 'faithful love' at the beginning of today's reading (15:13).

In addition, the rest of the verse confirms God's covenant love, for 'You led the people You redeemed' is now powerfully true. On the night of the Passover, the sacrifice of the 'Passover lamb' in each household ensured that the people were redeemed, saved from the angel of death which killed the Egyptian firstborn through obedience to the Lord's instructions and the 'blood of the lamb'. In addition, the strength of God which had previously saved them from the might of the Egyptian army was now poised to 'lead' them 'to where You dwell in holiness' (15:13); that is, the Promised Land.

God's chosen people and the fear of the nations (15:13-16)

Firstly, however, the people had to travel from where they were to Canaan, and although we know that the journey took far longer than was originally intended, the guidance of the Lord was still required to take them past other nations and other potential foes before they could reach their goal. In verse 14,15 and 16, the song describes the fear which engulfed the entire region when it became known that the Lord had defeated the army of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. In ancient times as today, a victorious army was to be feared, and as a general rule, the ancient peoples believed that the gods of those who had succeeded in battle were clearly protecting their own people and inflicting defeat on their foes. Four lands are pictured as gripped with this fear; Philistia, Edom (the descendants of Esau), Moab, and the Canaanites (those who already lived in the Promised Land). 'Because of the strength of Your arm, they were still as stone ...' says our song; these people were not willing to suffer the same fate as the king of Egypt who stood in the way of the God of Israel! (Some scholars argue that Philistine tribes were not yet living on the coastal regions of Canaan as in the time of David, and use this to claim that this part of the poem is a later addition. However, we have already seen that Scripture has called 'Philistine' whichever people lived in that region during the entire time of Genesis and Exodus – see Genesis 21:32; 26:1f. – so the reference to them in this song is not surprising).

All the nations mentioned were ones with which the nation of Israel would one day struggle for independence, but the song of Moses would remind the people of Israel of the strength of the Lord God, providing they stayed within His will. What happened in reality was that the people did reach the Promised Land quite quickly, and with the nations generally allowing them to pass, but their own unbelief then prevented them from taking possession for at least forty years (Numbers 13 and 14, Deuteronomy 1:19-45).

The destination of God's people

Up to this point in scripture, all we know about the Promised Land is that it consisted of all Abraham surveyed when God brought him up to the heights between Bethel and Ai (Gen 13:14-18). Certainly, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob settled in the deep south of this region and had little contact with the central and northern regions of Canaan apart from passing through on journeys (as did Jacob in Genesis 28). Now, in a remarkable passage of the song, God speaks to the people prophetically, giving them new information about the Promised Land, and telling them what He wanted them to do once they arrived there. This passage as much as any in the song justifies its description as prophecy, telling of the Lord's intent and purposes for the future at a time when it would benefit the people from knowing His plans for them.

Verse 17 is an astonishing departure from the normal rhythm of Hebrew poetry, being a series of seven brief and succinct statements which all link together; 'You have brought them in, You planted them, on the mountain which You own, the fixed place O Lord, where You have made Your dwelling, The Holy Place O

Lord, established by Your hands.' (15:17). The first two phrases are a promise of God's guidance to bring His people to the Promised Land and enable them to start a new life. Interestingly, the image used is agricultural, for the Israelites are described as being 'planted' in the land; and this describes the change that would be required of them. Once in Canaan the Israelites would need to change from a nomadic culture of herding animals to the agricultural skills of a settled community and the cultivation of the land.

In the middle of verse 17 comes the first mention of God's 'mountain', a place which the Lord makes 'His own'. Some have thought that this should refer to Mount Sinai where the people of Israel were heading to worship and where they would soon receive the Ten Commandments; however, the passage is almost wholly about Canaan and therefore the mountain must be a prophetic reference to Zion. This is confirmed by the rest of the verse which uses language which usually refers to the Temple in Jerusalem; that is, 'Your dwelling', and 'the Holy Place'. It would be many years before Jerusalem would be won over by David and made the capital city of a united Israel (2 Samuel 5:6f.), and even longer before his son Solomon would finally build a permanent temple on the mount of Jerusalem (1 Kings 6). Here in this song of Moses and Miriam we have the beginnings of hope for a truly settled community centred upon the worship of Almighty God in Jerusalem. This is an important text, and it concludes with a specific sentence which talks of God's 'reign', His kingly authority expressed through His permanent presence with the people symbolised by the Temple.

Miriam, the prophet.

Verse 19 is a prose sentence that comes at the end of the song, bringing it formally to a close and stating again the facts of the Israelite's liberation from the Egyptians through the Red Sea.

Much has been made of the description of Miriam as a prophet. She is the third person in the Bible to be called a prophet; Abraham (Gen 20:7), Aaron (Ex 7:1) and now Miriam (15:21), although it is clear from the words and deeds of Moses that he also spoke and acted as a prophet both before this time and later (Deut 34:10). Some Christians of the present day feel that this is an important designation because it gives Biblical backing to the principle of women taking leading roles in the life of God's new people, the Church.

The role of both men and women in the Church and the contentious issue of Paul's comments about women in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 14:34, Ephesians 5:22f.) is a far bigger subject than this text, however. No-one who reads through the Old Testament can escape the fact that men and women are created equal in the sight of God (Gen 1:27 etc) and that the pages of Scripture have more stories about the critically important role of women in the covenant plans of God than we might expect. Although Israelite society was clearly male dominated, its sacred writings were far more liberal minded. It does no-one any good, therefore, to undermine or belittle the role of women in God's Kingdom in any time or place, whatever view you take of the cultural appropriateness of certain roles for either men or women within society (an issue that Paul dealt with in surprising ways in his letters).

Application

This wonderful text contains promises of God (15:13) for His people, and an amazing verse which anticipates the presence of God dwelling amongst His people (15:17). As with many Old Testament Scriptures, these promises and prophecies are fulfilled firstly in Jesus Christ. He has redeemed His people and brought them into a place of holiness, and He has fought His way through all evil to win the victory by which we can place our trust in Him. We can also say that God has also made His dwelling (15:17) with those who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and received the Holy Spirit as a gift. Even this is in some way a fulfilment of the prophetic words of this very ancient song sung by Moses and Miriam.

However, there is more to most prophecy given by God than fulfilment in just one event in history. This song can be read as a prophecy of the Lord's coming again, when our redemption will be complete and we will finally live in the true holiness of God, surrounded by His presence, and living without fear or distress. When this happens, the Lord will truly reign '*for ever and ever*' (15:18), and we will know that the journey of faith has been fulfilled because Jesus has taken away all earthly fears.

From time to time, Scripture affords us this great vision of God's future, and we should be grateful for such texts. They all reflect the Christian hope for God's completion of His creation at the end of time. We should read the second half of the song of Moses and Miriam in this way, and be reminded that from the beginning of time, our Lord has shown a passionate love for His people and a deep desire to draw them back to Himself. The Church must always appeal for people to accept this love.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss verse 13 of our passage and see how many promises of God you can find within it.
2. Discuss verse 17 of our passage and see how many promises of God you can find within it.
3. In what ways does this song of Moses and Miriam reflect prophecy? What is prophecy and how do we know when it is given to us?

Topics covered by this text

- *The guidance of God*
- *The fear of the nations at the work of God*
- *The prophetess Miriam*

Personal comments by author

Sometimes we must each take hold of the promises of God and not debate them, question them, reject them, ignore them or leave them to one side for consideration another day. We need to accept them wholeheartedly and believe that they are our passport into the future with the Lord. You may not have expected to find inspiration within a passage such as this, but Scripture throws up surprises to remind us that there is always much more for us to discover about Him. Within the text we have read today there are a number of promises of God, about His love, His presence, His redemption, His authority and rule, for example. All of them can be an inspiration to us if we will allow Scripture to speak to our hearts.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *As an exercise of discipleship, make a list of the promises you find in the text and keep them with you to read from time to time. Refer to them daily and see what they lead you to do or not to do.*
- *Pray and ask the Lord to challenge His people, the people you know in your own church fellowship, with a greater vision of where He wants to lead them, and a greater heart to respond to such a call.*

Final Prayer

Merciful Lord, when life rushes past so quickly, keep us alert to the possibilities of love, of hope, of faith and of joy. Be present with us by Your Spirit so that we do not forget the blessings and the privileges we enjoy. Thank you Lord, AMEN
