

## **“The Song of the Lamb” (Revelation 15)**

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What’s your problem? What is the biggest problem that you have in life right now? For some of us, this would be a health issue. We have aches and pains, injuries, diseases or conditions, ones that we wish would go away. If only these issues could be fixed, our lives would be more active, less painful; more free, less restricted.

For some of us, the problem is money, specifically a lack thereof. If only we had more money, or a better job with more income, or if we only invested in shares of Netflix stock fifteen years ago, then a number of our problems would be resolved. We would be out of debt, able to repair our houses, buy a new car, go on that trip we always wanted—or hire a personal chef and a personal trainer to fix some of those health issues.

Others would like something that money can’t buy: better relationships. Our problem is that we have don’t have ideal relationships with children, grandchildren, or our spouse. We lack other relationships, like good friendships. Or perhaps we have strained relationships at work. Now, if we had more money, we wouldn’t have to work, but that brings us back to that second problem. But if we had all the money in the world, we would still have relationship problems. If only we could have loving, peaceful, meaningful relationships, then life would be so much better.

There are other kinds of problems, of course. There are political problems: if only our politicians would uphold the law, or create more just laws, then life would be better. There are the many problems of evil: if only natural disasters would end, if only people would stop murdering and abusing each other, then life would be better.

Regardless of what your problems are this morning, what would you do if those problems were solved? How would you react if all the problems simply went away, in a miraculous fashion? You would celebrate! You would be full of joy! If you believe in God, you would likely praise God. You would tell your friends, sharing your joy on social media. If that condition or disease or injury vanished overnight, if you were given millions of dollars, if that relationship drastically improved, then you couldn’t help but feel happy. You wouldn’t just feel joy, you would be overjoyed. You would be elated, ecstatic, over the moon, jubilant, exultant.

But what if those problems weren't over yet, and all you had right now was the promise that those problems would go away in a year, or ten years, or twenty-five years? What if you were told, "Yes, you don't have a lot of money now, but in twenty years, you'll have all the money you ever need?" Imagine someone who is absolutely trustworthy, someone who could give you that money, made such a promise to you. How would you respond now? Would you be excited or skeptical, waiting to see if the promise were true?

I ask us to think about such things because this morning, as we continue to study the book of Revelation, we're going to see a song of praise sung by people who have received a solution to the greatest problems of life. They praise God because God has done wonderful things. He has saved them from a great enemy. He has executed his justice. And he has also saved them from a very bad fate, which is condemnation. I talked about that quite a bit last week, and that topic will come up again. If we are truly united to Christ by faith, if we truly belong to Jesus, we will celebrate on that great day when Jesus puts an end to all evil, when we receive indestructible and immortal bodies, when justice is delivered in a final and irrevocable way. We will sing! But the question for us is, do we celebrate this future victory now? Are we praising God for that future salvation that God has promised will be ours if we trust in Jesus?

This morning, we're looking at Revelation 15. It's a rather short chapter, so I'll read it in its entirety, and then explain what it means.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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!  
<sup>4</sup> 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.”

<sup>5</sup> After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, <sup>6</sup> and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. <sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Revelation contains things that a man named John heard and, for the most part, saw. He saw images, visions, signs—truths cast in symbols. Here, we’re told that he sees a sign in heaven: seven angels with seven plagues, which will be sent upon those who reject Jesus. God’s wrath is his righteous anger against sin, his just punishment against sin. These angels will execute God’s final, ultimate condemnation of sin and sinners. John has already seen seven seals opened, each one unleashing an aspect of God’s judgment on the world. He has seen images of seven angels blowing seven trumpets, each trumpet blast leading to judgment. These seven plagues seem to parallel the seven seals and seven trumpets. When the seventh plague is sent upon the earth, God’s judgment will be done. We’ll see more of this next week, when we look at chapter 16.

In verse 2, John says that he saw something else: a sea. But this is not just any sea. It is a sea of glass. We saw this sea of glass earlier in Revelation, in chapter 4, where it seems to be the floor of the throne room of God in heaven (Rev. 4:6). We’re told that this sea is mingled with fire, which might mean that God’s wrath is imminent or is already being unleashed. Or perhaps it represents the fire that guided Israel by night when they left Egypt. I’ll explain why that might be the case in a moment.

We’re also told that John saw people, “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 beast is an agent of Satan, the devil. We talked about the beast when we looked at chapter 13. The beast may represent evil governments, such as Egypt led by Pharaoh, or Babylon led by Nebuchadnezzar, or Rome led by Nero. Those who conquered the beast and its unholy number of 666 stand beside the sea with harps. These are harps of God, harps made by God, given to them by God. And they praise God by singing “the song of Moses” and “the song of the Lamb.”

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

What is going on here? When we hear about plagues, a sea, and a song of Moses, and if we know the Old Testament, we will likely think about when Israel crossed the Red Sea. Israel had been enslaved in Egypt, where their lives were miserable. Egypt was led by Pharaoh, a king who was threatened by Israel's number of people. Pharaoh even tried to kill Israel's male babies to prevent them from becoming too powerful. God rescued Israel by sending Moses, an Israelite raised in the royal family of Egypt, to Israel. Moses told Pharaoh to let the people go, or plagues would start occurring. Pharaoh refused to let the people go, so one by one, ten plagues occurred. The last one—the death of all the firstborn in the land—finally made Pharaoh let the people go.

But Pharaoh was stubborn, and when he realized that he let his slave labor go, he sent his army to chase after Israel. Now, Israel had come to the Red Sea. They had water on one side of them and a ferocious army closing in on them on the other side. Though God had told the Israelites that he would rescue them, though God had told Moses that Moses would bring the people to Mount Sinai and eventually to the Promised Land of Canaan, the people panicked. They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exod. 14:11). But Moses responded with these words: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent” (Exod. 14:13–14).

The story is famous: God parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites could cross it. Then, after they had crossed, God let the waters of the Red Sea come back together, swallowing Pharaoh's army. And, according to the book of Exodus, this was the result:

<sup>30</sup> Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup> Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

One of the major themes in Exodus, and in fact, the whole Bible, is that God gets glory, or praise, by saving some people and judging others. One could make a good argument that the main theme of the Bible is that God gets glory in salvation through judgment.<sup>2</sup> God led the Israelites into Egypt. God caused them to grow and multiply. God hardened Pharaoh's heart

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<sup>2</sup> That's the argument made in James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

against the Israelites. God raised him up for the very purpose of demonstrating his power in judging him, so that God's name would be proclaimed (Exod. 9:16). God said he would get glory when he destroyed Pharaoh's army (Exod. 14:17–18). God would be glorified by those whom he saved from Pharaoh. But there is no salvation without judging. There is no salvation without destroying the very thing we're saved from.

In the case of Israel, the Israelites did praise God when they got on the far side of the Red Sea. This song is sung in Exodus 15. I'll read most of it. Here is Exodus 15:1–13:

<sup>1</sup> Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

<sup>3</sup> The LORD is a man of war;  
the LORD is his name.

<sup>4</sup> “Pharaoh's chariots and his host he cast into the sea,  
and his chosen officers were sunk in the Red Sea.

<sup>5</sup> The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.

<sup>6</sup> Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,  
your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy.

<sup>7</sup> In the greatness of your majesty you overthrow your adversaries;  
you send out your fury; it consumes them like stubble.

<sup>8</sup> At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.

<sup>9</sup> The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,  
I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.  
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.’

<sup>10</sup> You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

<sup>11</sup> “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders?

<sup>12</sup> You stretched out your right hand;  
the earth swallowed them.

<sup>13</sup> “You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed;  
you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

We see in that song that Moses and the Israelites declare two important things. They praise God for salvation. If God had not intervened, the Egyptians would have likely killed some of them and rounded up the rest. They would be brought back to captivity, back to slavery. God rescued them from that. They also praise God for judging their enemy. They don't hesitate to praise God for destroying Pharaoh's army. They aren't squeamish about the violence. You can't have salvation without judgment. They are two sides of the same coin. God is praised for both. God demonstrates his mercy and grace by saving people who are in a predicament they cannot rescue themselves from. He is glorified by rescuing those who don't even deserve rescue, as in our case, since we got ourselves into the mess that is known as sin. And he is glorified in punishing and destroying evil, demonstrating his justice and power.

Israel praised God after this salvation. But they first doubted that salvation was possible, because they lacked faith. That was brought to my attention years ago by someone. I haven't met many famous people, or many great athletes, but I have a retired athlete who won a world championship. In 2005, I was involved in a ministry that mentored teenagers who were in juvenile detention. I heard about it my church in Austin, Texas, and it sounded like something I could do, since I was already mentoring a teenager through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Each Wednesday, I would drive about thirty miles to San Marcos to go the Hays County Juvenile Detention Center, where I would meet for an hour with a 17-year-old who was doing his second stint in "juvie." After I was doing this for a month or two, the leader of that ministry said that they were holding a special event on a Saturday. They were bringing in a guest speaker, and they were trying to reach out to all the teenagers in that facility, telling them about Jesus and encouraging them to sign up to be mentored. We were told that the guest speaker was a former athlete. We were also told that this athlete was flying into Austin and staying at a hotel at the airport. He needed a ride from that airport hotel to the juvenile detention center.

I volunteered to give him a ride since I was driving from Austin. So, early on a Saturday morning, I picked up a man named McCoy McLemore. Now, I know that name won't likely ring a bell. But he was an NBA player in the 1960s and early 1970s. He was never a star and he bounced around from team to team, but he did win an NBA championship with the Milwaukee Bucks in 1971. When I picked him up, he fit his large, 6'7" frame into my 1995 Toyota Camry, and we made the roughly thirty-minute drive to San Marcos.

During that time, he showed me his championship ring, of course, I asked him some questions about his career, and he talked to me about what he was going to talk to the kids about. He had been reflecting on that great act of salvation in Exodus, when God parted the Red Sea. And he said something like this: “The Israelites should have praised God on the other side of the Sea.” Remember what happened: Before crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites doubted God’s power to save. They panicked. They thought they were going to die. It was only after they were safe on the far side of the Red Sea that they praised God. McLemore’s point was that if they had faith in God’s power to save, they should have been praising God before that great day of salvation.

That’s something to think about. The fact is that we all were made to glorify God, to worship him, to love him, to praise him, to honor him through our serving him, obeying him, and treasuring him. We were made to glorify God in times of triumph and times of weakness. Are we glorifying God with our lives? If we claim to be Christians, are we trusting God’s power to save now, even before that great day of salvation and judgment, when Jesus returns to earth to make all things new? Or we praising God on this side of the sea, so to speak, or are we panicking and doubting?

The people who sing the song of Moses in Revelation 15 praised God. Perhaps they are praising God after he has judged, or while he is judging. Perhaps they are praising God right before he judges. The timeline in Revelation is not always very clear. But what they do is praise God. After all, salvation from sin and condemnation is far greater than salvation from slavery and a wicked ruler. Those of us who know Jesus should praise God for the greatest salvation.

The redeemed praise God for his great and amazing deeds. We can, too. We can praise God for creating a vast universe out of nothing. We can praise God for creating stars and planets. We can praise God for creating all the species of plants and animals, and for creating human beings. We can praise God for creating us. The Bible says that not only did God create human beings from the ordinary chemical elements, from “dust” such as carbon, but that he creates each one of us. Now, the Bible also discusses how babies are made. We can say that our parents made us through the usual means of procreation. But the Bible says that God works through those usual means to produce what he wants. So David, in Psalm 139, says that God formed him, knitting him together in his mother’s womb (Ps. 139:13). Now, if you were to ask David, “Do you really think God takes giant knitting needles and knits us together like scarves or socks?” I

am sure David would think you are crazy. He would say that's just a metaphor. He would say the point is that though, yes, David's parents made him in the usual way, it was God who produced him, working through the very means that he created to make David. My point is that we can praise God for creation, for all of life, for all biological processes, for astronomical features of our universe, for sunrises and sunsets and mountains and canyons and flowers and pets and everything else we see. We can praise God for creating us.

We can also praise God for sustaining our lives at every moment, and for providing for us. Every good thing we have is a gift from God. He has even given us all our talents and abilities.

And we can certainly praise God for salvation. I believe the reason why this song is called "the song of the Lamb" is not that it is sung by the Lamb, Jesus Christ, but it is about the Lamb. Salvation comes only through the work of Jesus. Our problem is that we have sinned against God. We were made to love and glorify him, but we don't. That's a problem. God would be right to condemn all rebels, blotting them from the face of the earth. But he doesn't do that to everyone. He saves some. He sent his Son into the world, and his Son came willingly into the world, to rescue sinners (Matt. 1:21; 20:28; Luke 19:10). Jesus came to live the perfect life that we don't live and to die the death that we deserve. Everyone who trusts in him is credited with his perfect life, and their punishment for sin has already been received—by Jesus. We can and should praise God for salvation. If we realize how great and holy God is, if we realize the purpose for which we were made, if realize how great our problem of sin is, and if we realize how horrific eternal condemnation is, we should be ecstatic.

Think of all those times you see professional athletes winning championships. Think of every World Series victory, every Super Bowl win, every NBA championship. Those players celebrate! They act as if they have secured the greatest triumph there is. But that glory does not last. Players are soon forgotten. Paychecks are spent. Even the glory of championship rings fades over time. Christians, we have a salvation that lasts forever. We have something far greater than a ring, or money, or fame. We have peace with God, an eternal, perfect relationship with the greatest being imaginable. No money can buy that. No amount of human effort can win that. Such salvation can only be given by God, and if you realize you have received that gift, you should praise God. The nations will come to God because Jesus will have redeemed people from

every nation, and from people group. Are you part of that company of the redeemed who will sing God's praises?

God will also be praised for judgment. This will come up again in Revelation, so I won't spend much time on it now. But God should be praised for condemning evil and evildoers. We want someone like Hitler to be condemned. We want a Stalin, a Mao, an Idi Amin to be punished. We should want all evil to be punished and crushed, even our own. God's punishment of evil is "just and true." It is part of his "righteous acts."

That is why this passage ends with a vision of seven angels carrying the seven plagues in "golden bowls full of the wrath of God." The whole scene is captured in the language of priestly service at the tabernacle, where God dwelled and met with his people. Priests used "golden bowls" (1 Chron. 28:17) to carry ashes and parts of animal sacrifices. Here, these priestly angels dish out God's wrath. We'll talk about that next week. But the idea is these judgments come from God's temple, from God himself. God is going to make the world his temple, his holy place, but he can only do that by removing all evil. When evil is removed, the temple will be prepared, it will be consecrated. And just as when Moses built the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35) and when Solomon built the temple (1 Kgs. 8:10–11), the presence of God's glory will fill it entirely. No one will be able to live in God's temple forever until God's wrath has been executed, until evil is removed. That's another reason to praise God for judgment. When God executes judgment, the world will be purified of sin, so that God can dwell directly with all his people forever.

I want to start to bring this message to a close by pointing out something important: there is another song that Moses sang (Deut. 31:30). This song is delivered by Moses to the Israelites before he dies, and before they enter into the Promised Land. He delivers these words as a song that praises God and castigates Israel. He says things like this:

The Rock, his work is perfect,  
for all his ways are justice.  
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,  
just and upright is he (Deut. 32:4).

That sounds familiar. But then Moses said this, in the very next verse:

They have dealt corruptly with him;  
they are no longer his children because they are blemished;  
they are a crooked and twisted generation (Deut. 32:5).

Moses says that God is Israel's Father and Creator (Deut. 32:6), but they have treated him poorly. God chose them out of all the peoples of the earth, but they rejected him and worshiped idols. Moses said:

- <sup>17</sup> They sacrificed to demons that were no gods,  
to gods they had never known,  
to new gods that had come recently,  
whom your fathers had never dreaded.  
<sup>18</sup> You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you,  
and you forgot the God who gave you birth (Deut. 32:17–18).

If you read all of Deuteronomy 32, you see that God promises to punish, or at least discipline, his people, but he also promises to vindicate his people and avenge their blood. But God does warn Israel that if they refuse him, reject him, turn away from, they will be punished. In Leviticus 26:21, God says to Israel, "Then if you walk contrary to me and will not listen to me, I will continue striking you, sevenfold for your sins." Sevenfold, just like these seven plagues.

God gives us many chances to turn to him, but if we don't trust him and his word, if we walk contrary to him, he will judge us.

Christians, if we truly trust in Jesus, we can celebrate now. We should be thankful and praise God. And, as I have said over these last two weeks, we should listen to his word and respond. If we're not doing this, perhaps we're not truly Christians. We are told that not all Israel was the true Israel of God (Rom. 9:6). They thought they were God's people, but many lacked faith. Today, there are many who think they are on Jesus' side, but they are not. If we want to praise God on the far shore of that glassy sea, we need to praise him and follow Jesus on this shore.

If you are not a Christian, I invite you to learn about Jesus, to trust in Jesus, and to become part of this group of people who praise God. What Jesus offers is better than a championship ring, or all the money in the world. The celebration that God's people will far outweigh any Super Bowl victory or Oscars afterparty that we can imagine. Christians aren't going to Disney World, like those Super Bowl MVPs of years past, but to a perfect world with God. Join this company of the redeemed by turning to Jesus today.