

Homiletics Analysis: Exodus 15

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Exodus 15 divides into two movements united by a single theological reality. The first and dominant movement (vv. 1–21) is the Song of the Sea — Israel’s corporate anthem of praise erupting immediately after the LORD’s destruction of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. The song rehearses the event (vv. 1–5), celebrates the LORD’s incomparable character (vv. 6–11), and projects that same power forward into the conquest of Canaan (vv. 12–18), concluding with Miriam’s antiphonal refrain (vv. 19–21). The second movement (vv. 22–27) is the immediately following episode at Marah — a jarring pivot from exaltation to complaint, where a three-day waterless desert march produces bitter water and bitter hearts, resolved only by divine provision at Elim.

The chapter thus presents two consecutive portraits of Israel: Israel singing with full-throated confidence that the LORD is their strength and salvation (v. 2), and Israel three days later grumbling that they cannot drink. The juxtaposition is not incidental — it is structurally deliberate, and the interpreter who separates the two movements loses the chapter’s own argument.

This Text — Intent

God is using this chapter to establish the definitive theological grammar of redemption for Israel — and through Israel, for all His people: the right response to deliverance is worship, and the ongoing test of redemption’s reality is whether that worship shapes how His people navigate suffering and shortage. The Song of the Sea is not merely liturgy — it is a theological deposit, a pattern of rightly-ordered memory and trust. The Marah episode is not an addendum — it is the first field test. God is calling His redeemed people to live out of the reality the song confesses, especially when they cannot yet see it.

Subject Sentence: The redeemed sing of the LORD’s incomparable power — and are immediately tested on whether they believe what they sang.

Primary Claim: God calls His redeemed people to worship that is grounded in who He has shown Himself to be, and to carry that worship as the governing reality when trial follows deliverance.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Song as Historical vs. Liturgical Composition

Critical scholarship has frequently argued that the Song of the Sea (vv. 1–18) is a later liturgical composition placed anachronistically in the Exodus narrative — that Israel could not have produced such sophisticated poetry at this moment. This reading must be refuted rather than merely qualified. The argument is methodologically circular: it assumes Israel’s literary and theological sophistication must develop gradually, then dates the text by that assumption. The song itself contains archaic Hebrew features (verbal forms, vocabulary, pronoun usage) widely recognized by linguists as among the oldest material in the Hebrew Bible, making an early date linguistically defensible. More decisively for the expositor, the song’s placement within the narrative is theologically essential — it is the *immediate* response to the crossing, not a later reflection on it, and the juxtaposition with Marah depends entirely on its position. The critical reconstruction loses the chapter’s own argument.

Pentecostal/Charismatic Readings — Miriam and Prophetic Worship

Some Charismatic expositors foreground Miriam’s role (vv. 20–21) as a paradigm for Spirit-led, spontaneous, embodied, prophetic worship — dance, tambourine, antiphonal response — and apply this directly to contemporary worship practice, sometimes as a corrective to restrained or liturgical forms. This reading contains a genuine insight worth acknowledging: the song is not merely cerebral; it is embodied, communal, and exuberant. Miriam’s role as prophetess leading the women in responsive singing is significant and should not be flattened. However, the reading overreaches when it treats the form (spontaneity, dance, tambourine) as the normative content of the passage’s teaching. The passage’s emphasis is the theological *substance* of what is sung — the LORD’s incomparable character and mighty acts — not the stylistic form of its delivery. Miriam’s contribution is the completion and confirmation of Moses’ song, not a freestanding worship paradigm.

Dispensational Readings — The Song’s Eschatological Projection

Dispensational interpreters rightly note that the Song of the Sea projects beyond the immediate crossing into the conquest (vv. 13–17) and has eschatological resonances picked up in Revelation 15:3, where the victorious sing “the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb.” This is worth acknowledging and retaining — the song is genuinely anticipatory, not merely retrospective, and its canonical afterlife in Revelation is significant. The Reformed reading does not resist this but frames it within the unified redemptive-historical arc: the Song of the Sea is a type of the final song of the redeemed, and the LORD’s victory over Pharaoh is a type of Christ’s victory over sin, death, and all powers. The dispensational instinct to read forward is correct; the Reformed framework simply insists this forward movement runs through Christ rather than through a separate Israel-track.

The Marah Episode — Discipline or Failure?

Some expositors read the Marah episode (vv. 22–27) as primarily a divine discipline narrative — Israel sins by grumbling, God disciplines, then restores. Others read it as primarily a provision narrative — God tests and provides, with the grumbling as incidental background. Neither is fully adequate. The text presents a genuine sequence: test → grumbling → divine resolution → covenant disclosure (v. 26). The grumbling is real and matters — it is Israel’s first post-redemption failure, and the “statute and rule” (v. 25b) language signals that God is beginning to form a covenant people who live by trust, not sight. But the episode’s resolution is provision and covenant promise, not judgment — the LORD heals rather than strikes. The Reformed reading holds both: grumbling is covenant infidelity, and God’s response is sovereign grace meeting the need while calling His people to a higher way of life.

Key Canonical Support

- **Revelation 15:2–4** — The redeemed in glory sing “the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb” — the Song of the Sea finds its ultimate fulfillment in the final victory of Christ over all enemies; the two songs are one song across redemptive history.
 - **Psalms 106:12–13** — “Then they believed his words; they sang his praise. But they soon forgot his works” — the Psalter’s own retrospective on this exact moment names the structural tragedy of Exodus 15: belief-to-worship-to-forgetting is the recurring pattern of human faithlessness that only grace can interrupt.
 - **Deuteronomy 32:1–4** — Moses’ second great song at the end of his life grounds Israel’s identity entirely in the LORD’s character — “The Rock, his work is perfect” — establishing that the Song of the Sea opens a pattern of theological song-keeping that runs through Israel’s entire covenant life.
 - **Isaiah 12:2** — “The LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” — Isaiah explicitly echoes Exodus 15:2 as the language of eschatological redemption, connecting the Exodus praise to the new exodus deliverance Isaiah announces.
 - **John 4:13–14 / Revelation 21:6** — The Marah-to-Elm movement of bitter water becoming life-giving water anticipates Christ as the living water who resolves the thirst no earthly water can satisfy; the wilderness water episodes form a typological thread culminating in Christ.
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Aim: To call God’s people to root their worship in the theological reality of what God has done, and to carry that rootedness as their governing posture when the desert immediately tests what they sang.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Introduction: Moses and Israel sing to the LORD; opening declaration — “horse and rider he has thrown into the sea”	The song’s thesis stated before the elaboration begins; first-person praise
2	“The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” — personal declaration of covenant identity	“My salvation” (yeshuah) — personal, not merely national; echoed in Isaiah 12:2
3	“The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name”	Divine warrior motif; name-theology — character on display through action
4–5	Pharaoh’s chariots and army drowned; “they sank like a stone”	Historical specificity — the song names what happened; praise grounded in event
6–7	“Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power” — the LORD’s right hand shatters the enemy; greatness overthrows adversaries	Parallelism of power and majesty; God’s strength as the sole operative agent
8	“At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up” — the sea’s movement attributed entirely to divine breath/command	Sovereignty over creation displayed; no natural explanation entertained
9	The enemy speaks — “I will pursue, I will overtake...” — five first-person verbs of human boasting	The arrogance of the enemy set up for its total reversal; human pride on display
10	“You blew with your wind, the sea covered them” — one divine action undoes all five enemy intentions	God’s word versus human intention; the reversal is total and effortless
11	“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” —	The rhetorical question is the theological climax of the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	incomparability declaration; holy, awesome, doing wonders	first section; no answer is possible
12–13	The LORD stretches out His hand; leads His redeemed people in His steadfast love (hesed) toward His holy abode	Redemption and guidance framed together; hesed as the motive for deliverance
14–16	Nations tremble — Philistia, Edom, Moab, Canaan — at the news of what the LORD has done	The song projects forward: what happened at the sea will precede Israel into Canaan
17	“You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain” — Zion/temple language; the goal of redemption is dwelling with God	Redemption’s telos is presence and worship, not merely escape from Egypt
18	“The LORD will reign forever and ever” — doxological conclusion; eternal kingship declared	The song ends not with Israel but with God; his reign is the final word
19	Narrative aside: because the LORD brought the sea back over Pharaoh’s army, Israel passed through on dry ground	Prose bridge connecting the song back to the event and forward to Miriam
20–21	Miriam the prophetess leads the women with tambourines and dancing; antiphonal refrain repeating v. 1b	Communal, embodied, gendered response; the whole people sing, not just Moses
22–23	Three days into the wilderness of Shur; no water; bitter water at Marah — “they could not drink the water”	Immediate structural pivot; the desert tests what the song confessed
24	The people grumble against Moses: “What shall we drink?”	First recorded post-redemption grumbling; the song’s confidence does not

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
25a	Moses cries to the LORD; the LORD shows him a log; he throws it in; the water becomes sweet	survive three days of thirst Divine provision through human instrument; no explanation of the mechanism
25b	“There the LORD made for them a statute and a rule, and there he tested them”	Marah is a formal covenant test; the testing was God’s intent from the beginning
26	“If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God...I will put none of the diseases on you...for I am the LORD, your healer”	Conditional covenant structure; the title “the LORD your healer” (Yahweh Rophe) introduced
27	Elim — twelve springs and seventy palm trees; Israel camps by the water	Provision is abundant; God’s grace exceeds the immediate need; rest follows the test

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–10	The LORD Sings His Own Victory — Israel rehearses the event in praise
2	11–18	The Incomparable King — the theological climax and forward projection
3	19–21	The Whole People Respond — Miriam and the women complete the chorus
4	22–27	Three Days Later — the desert tests what the song confessed

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The redeemed sing of the LORD’s incomparable power — and are immediately tested on whether they believe what they sang.

Primary Claim: God calls His redeemed people to worship that is grounded in who He has shown Himself to be, and to carry that worship as the governing reality when trial follows deliverance.

Applications

1. The Song of the Sea teaches you that right worship is not first an emotional experience but a theological act — you rehearse what God has done, name His character, and declare what that means for all who oppose Him. If your worship has no content, it has no staying power when the desert arrives. Spend this week reading one redemptive act of God in Scripture and converting it into first-person praise — not “God is good” in the abstract, but “You did *this*, therefore I trust You with *that*.” (*Mind/Belief*)
 2. Verse 11 — “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” — is a question with no answer, and that silence is the point. Your functional idols (security, approval, financial stability, health) are not defeated by trying harder to trust God instead — they are defeated by sustained exposure to the incomparability of the LORD. The reason Israel turned to grumbling three days later is the same reason you do: they had not yet let the song do its deep work. Let it do its deep work. (*Affections/Worship*)
 3. The Marah episode reveals that the grumbling of God’s redeemed people is not primarily a behavioral problem — it is a memory problem. They forgot, three days in, what they had just sung. Build into your week a deliberate practice of remembrance: a written record, a regular conversation, a repeated liturgical act that holds the LORD’s faithfulness before you when the water turns bitter. The antidote to grumbling is not willpower but rehearsed memory. (*Mind/Belief*)
 4. Notice that Moses does not shame the people at Marah — he cries to the LORD. When your people (your family, your congregation, your community) grumble in their desert, the first move is not correction but intercession. Moses models the posture of the mediator: he brings the people’s need to God rather than God’s judgment to the people. Where are you playing the role of critic rather than intercessor for those in their Marah moment? (*Will/Behavior*)
 5. The song ends in verse 17 not with Israel safely out of Egypt but with Israel brought to God’s “own mountain” — his holy dwelling. Redemption’s goal is not safety, not freedom from slavery alone, but presence with God. If you are treating salvation primarily as escape from consequences rather than as the beginning of a life lived in God’s presence, you have stopped the song two verses early. Let the telos of your salvation shape how you live today — not merely “I was saved *from*” but “I was saved *to*.” (*Affections/Worship*)
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Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Exodus 15 establishes the incomparability of the LORD as the irreducible foundation of Israel's covenant identity. The song does not merely praise God for what He did — it draws a theological conclusion: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” (v. 11). No one and nothing. This incomparability is demonstrated through sovereign power over creation (the sea), sovereign reversal of human arrogance (Pharaoh's five boasts undone by one divine breath), and sovereign guidance through hesed — steadfast covenant love (v. 13). The chapter also establishes that God's redemptive acts are not merely historical events but theological deposits: they generate a song, the song generates a pattern, and the pattern governs how God's people are to navigate everything that follows. The title “Yahweh Rophe” (the LORD your Healer, v. 26) expands the Exodus event into a comprehensive covenant promise — the One who delivered through water will heal, sustain, and keep.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Exodus 15 is a cornerstone of the Reformed theology of grace alone and the proper order of redemption and response. Israel does not sing in order to be delivered — they sing *because* they have been delivered. Worship is response, not cause. This structural reality guards against any reading of Israel's covenant life as merit-based: the song celebrates monergistic divine action — the LORD fights, throws, shatters, drowns, blows, leads — while Israel watches and then sings. The song's anticipation of the conquest (vv. 14–17) and its canonical echo in Revelation 15 place this chapter within the single unbroken arc of redemptive history: one God, one people, one deliverance accomplished through sovereign grace, one final song. The Marah episode further confirms the Reformed anthropology: even freshly redeemed people, three days removed from the greatest miracle in their history, default to faithlessness — which means the continuation of the covenant depends not on Israel's sustained faith but on the LORD's character as Healer and Provider. Covenant faithfulness is God's project, not merely Israel's obligation.

Main Takeaway

The LORD has shown you, in the Red Sea and supremely at the cross, that He fights for His people with a power no enemy can withstand and no suffering can undo. Sing that — not as a feeling but as a fact — and then carry the song into your Marah. The bitter water does not disprove the song; it tests whether you believed it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Separating the Song from Marah.** The most common structural error is to treat Exodus 15 as primarily a worship passage (vv. 1–21) and handle Marah (vv. 22–27) as a secondary or unrelated episode, or to assign it to the next study unit. The chapter’s own argument depends on their juxtaposition. Preach both movements as one claim: the song is tested immediately, and the test reveals how deeply the song has taken root. Separating them produces either triumphalist worship teaching or a disconnected provision story — neither captures what the text is doing.
- **Reducing the Song to an Emotional High.** Exposition that dwells on the exuberance, the spontaneity, or the communal joy of the song without grounding that response in its theological content produces a worship message with no staying power. The song is emotionally exuberant precisely *because* it is theologically specific — it names what God did, how He did it, and what it reveals about who He is. Preach the content, and the emotion will follow; preach the emotion alone, and you will leave people three days away from grumbling.
- **Moralizing the Marah Episode.** Preaching Marah as primarily “don’t be a grumbler like Israel” is a Clowney-violation — it reduces a gospel story to a behavioral lesson, and it is an application nobody can actually obey through willpower alone. The text’s resolution is not “try harder to trust” but “the LORD healed the water and showed them Elim.” Expose the grumbling as covenant infidelity, yes — but drive immediately to the provision and the Healer, and let the grace of God’s response be the ground of the application.
- **Ignoring the Divine Warrior Theme.** Verse 3 — “The LORD is a man of war” — is one of the most theologically dense statements in the Pentateuch, and many expositors pass over it quickly because the military metaphor is uncomfortable in contemporary settings. Do not. The divine warrior motif is load-bearing: Israel does not fight Pharaoh; the LORD does. The same motif runs from here through the conquest, the Psalms, the prophets, and into Revelation 19:11–16 where the Word of God rides out to make war. The passage cannot be fully preached without confronting the reality that God’s redemption involves the defeat of real enemies by overwhelming sovereign force — which is both terrifying for His enemies and utterly secure for His people.
- **Failing to Preach the Telos of Redemption.** Verse 17 states that the goal of the Exodus is not merely freedom from Egypt but dwelling on God’s “holy mountain” — being brought into His presence. If the sermon ends with “God saved Israel from slavery,” it has stopped too early. The Exodus is not primarily an escape story — it is a homecoming story. Preach the destination, not just the departure.
- **Overlooking the Canonical Echo in Revelation 15.** The Song of the Sea does not end in Exodus — it is sung again by the redeemed in glory (Revelation 15:3–4).

Expositors who treat this as a merely historical document miss its eschatological freight. The church today is not singing a different song than Moses and Miriam — it is singing the same song in light of its greater fulfillment in Christ. Where Moses sang of Pharaoh defeated, the church sings of sin, death, and the devil defeated. Preach the continuity.