

SING LIBERATION

EXODUS 15:1-21



Hymns are a vital part of how we learn, remember, and practice what we believe about God's saving story. Songs from Sunday school introduce us to the basic vocabulary and grammar of Christian faith. Hymns in worship flesh out theological teachings and fill in the biblical story. And these songs and hymns remain with us throughout a life of discipleship, as music reinforces memory. They carry us through times of joy and sorrow. They return to us in hours of uncertainty and need. They may transport us to other times and places in our lives or keep us rooted and grounded through seasons of transition. Hymns are something we often hold on to, even as other memories fade.

The earliest songs of our faith in the Bible are songs of liberation. Music has a powerful way of expressing raw emotion, both inspiring people fighting for liberation and celebrating it when it comes. After the ancient Israelites safely crossed the Red Sea, Exodus 15:1-21 recounts Moses' and Miriam's songs of liberation. At this moment, the people stand on the threshold between slavery and freedom, marking the end of captivity and the beginning of their pilgrimage to the promised land. This singular event must be sung.

Moses strikes up the song. Perhaps he uses the same staff that parted the sea as a conductor's baton. The Israelites join right in, praising God's majesty and might. This is not a sentimental ballad, not a love song or a lullaby. It is a battle hymn, the song of those who have come out of a great ordeal. It reflects real struggle, raw emotion, and great thanksgiving for their liberation. And the song spills over into dancing, as Miriam picks up the refrain and grabs a tambourine, with all the women joining her.

The great hymns of the church are like the grandchildren of this song. Many of them were composed in similar situations of struggle, whether in the history of the church (such as "A Mighty Fortress" and "The Church's One Foundation"), movements for liberation (such as "Oh Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome"), or the lives of the hymnists (such as "Come, Thou Fount" and "Precious Lord"). They connect us with the people of God in other times and places. They reflect the trials and triumphs of our forebearers in the faith, singing on their own days of deliverance. At such times, speaking is not enough. The story of salvation must be sung.

IS IT PSALMS, HYMNS, OR SPIRITUAL SONGS?

It is all of them! People of faith have created a variety of types of singing to worship God, including spirituals, traditional or new hymns, gospel music, praise music, chorales, and Gregorian chants.

Many, if not all, the psalms were originally sung. The Greek word *ode* ("song") appears fourteen times in the New Testament. The epistles (the letters in the New Testament) commend the singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5, Colossians 3) in the early church. Another Greek word, *hymneo* ("to sing a hymn"), is used after the disciples' Passover meal (Matthew 26, Mark 14), when Paul and Silas sing in prison (Acts 16), and in a reference to Jesus praying the psalms (Hebrews 2). Yet another, *psallo* ("to play a harp" or "to sing a psalm"), occurs in the writings of the apostles (Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 14, James 5).

Future generations of many cultures will continue to create types of music to give glory to God. Thank God!

➤ What are some hymns you know that are songs of liberation? A few are listed on page 15.

➤ What is a song of liberation for your own life (doesn't have to be a hymn), a song that lifted you up when you were in the midst of or coming out of a time of struggle?

- Do you know the story behind the song or hymn?
- What were the historical events from which it arose?

SING A NEW SONG

The following hymn was written by the foundational-essay author of this practice, David Gambrell. A new verse will be added each session. It is written to the tune many know as “Morning Has Broken.” Consider singing or reading it as you begin each session.

SING A NEW SONG

Tune: BUNESSAN (“Morning Has Broken”)

1. Sing liberation! God is our savior.
To our redeemer we all belong.
Blessing and honor, glory and power.
God is our savior! Sing a new song.

—lyrics © 2022 David Gambrell



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

THE SONG OF MOSES

The song of Moses (Exodus 15:1–18), sung after the Israelites escaped the Egyptian army through the parting of the Red Sea, is often referred to as “the Song of the Sea.” Through generations of oral and written history, the song has been passed down to us. Scholars have studied its archaic Hebrew, thought to be some of the oldest in the Old Testament. Jews still sing it on the seventh day of Passover. Christians may chant it at the Easter Vigil. It has inspired prayerful poetry, classical compositions, and folk songs, such as the spiritual “Mary Don’t You Weep.”

If you have a Bible, read Exodus 15:1–19 in its entirety. Or read the following excerpts from the song. Read it as though you had just lived through this miraculous event as someone escaping slavery to freedom.



Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;

horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my might,

and he has become my salvation;

this is my God, and I will praise him,

my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

The LORD is a warrior;

the LORD is his name.

“Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.
The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.

.....
“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.’
You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.

“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?
You stretched out your right hand,
the earth swallowed them.

“In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

.....
You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have established.
The LORD will reign forever and ever.”

When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.

—Exodus 15:1–5, 9–13, 17–19

➤ What are some of the specific saving acts the song cites that God has done?

➤ How does this song make you feel about God?

➤ What imagery and expressions of God do you really like in the song?

➤ Are there any that make you uncomfortable? Why?

THE SONG OF MIRIAM

Immediately following this song of Moses in Exodus 15:1–19 is Miriam’s song in verses 20–21.



The Song of Miriam (1880), by William Blake Richmond.

Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

➤ What thoughts or feelings does the picture evoke for you?

➤ How do you see liberation conveyed in the picture?

➤ Where/how do you see God conveyed in the picture?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

A CLASSIC HYMN OF LIBERATION

One of the most famous hymns of all time, “Amazing Grace,” was written by John Newton in 1772. Newton was an Anglican cleric, a slave-ship captain in his younger years who later became an abolitionist. He wrote “Amazing Grace” several years after he ceased working on slave ships as a way of capturing how God had saved him personally from both a harrowing night on the sea and from a life of depravity. While the hymn is about personal salvation, his story illustrates how his own liberation became tied up with the liberation of others as he became a fierce advocate for the abolition of the slave trade. He was a mentor to William Wilberforce, a young member of Parliament, who led the movement to outlaw slave trade in England. A movie, *Amazing Grace*, tells the story of William Wilberforce’s endeavors along with Newton’s role in it.

The YouTube video “Amazing Grace: The Story behind the Song” ([bit.ly /FMAmazingGraceHistory](https://bit.ly/FMAmazingGraceHistory), 14:29) tells the story of the hymn’s creation.



- How does learning the backstory to “Amazing Grace” change your feelings about or understanding of the song?
- Have you ever had an experience where you felt the saving power of God in your life?
- In what ways is your personal liberation tied up with the liberation of other people?

AMERICAN SONGS OF LIBERATION

When we think of songs of liberation in our country, what comes to mind is likely protest songs, many of which are adapted African American spirituals. The song “We Shall Overcome” became the hallmark of the civil rights protests in the 1950s and 1960s, but it, too, was an adaptation from an earlier African American spiritual. “The Inspiring Force of ‘We Shall Overcome’” is the title of a news segment on *All Things Considered* (August 28, 2013) that tells about how the song became tied to the civil rights movement (bit.ly/FMWeShallOvercomeHistory, 8:15).



In twenty-first-century America, protests in defense of Black lives continue in the wake of police violence against unarmed Black people. With the rise in protests has come a resurgence of songs of liberation, some new and some old. The song “Glory” by Common and John Legend was written for the movie *Selma*, which was about the civil rights era, but the lyrics spoken by Common in the song include references to both the 1960s as well as to Ferguson, Missouri, and the contemporary fight for freedom and justice for Black people in this country. Watch the YouTube video “Common, John Legend—Glory” (bit.ly/FMCommon, 3:08).

➤ Why do you think songs of liberation are such an important part of protest movements?

➤ How do modern protest songs make you feel?

➤ What is a hymn or song of liberation that holds meaning for you? Why?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Each session of this unit offers the opportunity to reacquaint yourself with a familiar hymn and one you may not be familiar with, that connect to the theme of the session (*liberation, tribulation, transformation, new creation*). A list of suggested hymns will be given, but you can identify others. One familiar hymn will be explained, and you can follow the link supplied or research another hymn you choose. Hymns originating in another language that have become popular in English are marked with asterisks, to help us learn more about the global church.

A great tool for researching hymns is www.hymnary.org. It is a free website that searches most all known hymnals, including most US denominations' hymnals. See the text box for more information. In addition, use your denomination's hymnal and its indexes, usually found in the back of the book. Most offer a topical index where themes can be searched. If the session theme is not mentioned, there is usually a related theme. For example, if *liberation* is not found, *freedom* may be. Some hymnals' tables of contents are arranged thematically as well.

Hymnary.org

Spend a little time and explore this extensive online hymnal library, provided free of charge. If you spend a minute and create an account, you can choose your denominational hymnal and others to always search first. But that is not necessary to use the site. Search for a hymn by name and a wealth of information appears, including the full text, hymnals that contain the hymn, and author information. Some hymnals also have an index search option.



The second activity is to find and acquaint yourself with a song you may or may not have heard and wish to learn more about. Perhaps you have heard the song in worship, but it is new to you. This can be a chance to read the text and reflect on its meaning and how it connects to the theme of the session.

As you work on this section in each session, be thinking about a song mentioned or studied and commit to singing or reading or listening to it during the time before beginning the next session.

DENOMINATIONAL HYMNALS

Most denominations have hymnals that are revised every generation or so to include new hymns sung by congregations. All US denominations share an ecumenical core of songs that occupies about two-thirds of the content of any hymnal. *Glory to God (GtG)* is the most recent Presbyterian hymnal, and the page numbers of hymns mentioned in this unit are listed on page 15. However, most, if not all, hymns are found in other denominational hymnals as well.

There is no one way to order the collection of songs found in any given hymnal. The content of the *Glory to God* hymnal happens to have songs grouped according to

some of the themes of this study and will be mentioned when this happens. Again, these songs may be ordered differently in other hymnals; a topical index or list of hymns should make them easy to find in any hymnal.

HYMNS OF LIBERATION

- “Lift Every Voice and Sing” (*GtG*, #339)
- “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” (*GtG*, #66)
- “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine” (*GtG*, #839)
- “Live into Hope” (*GtG*, #772)
- “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table” (*GtG*, #770)
- “Arise, Your Light Has Come” (*GtG*, #744)
- “Hear the Good News of Salvation”* (*GtG*, #441)
- “Freedom Is Coming”* (*GtG*, #359)
- “We Are Marching in the Light of God (*Siyahamba*)”* (*GtG*, #853)

* Hymns originated in a language other than English.



A FAMILIAR HYMN

At first glance, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine” (*GtG*, #839) may seem a stretch to put in this first session’s theme of liberation. Yet, from the day the song was first published in 1873, author Fanny Crosby’s words have provided comfort for many who face fear, persecution, sorrow, and doubt. In spite of all the trials that may come, we know that we belong to God. The baptismal imagery of the first verse—“Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of his Spirit, washed in his blood”—connects with the crossing of the sea in the Exodus passage read. “This is my story; this is my song” is about claiming the practice of singing the story of one’s life, including the experience of liberation.

A NEWER HYMN

Each week, choose a hymn you are unfamiliar with from the list above or one you have been curious to know more about. Perhaps you sang it in worship recently. It may be a new or old hymn but one you don’t know well.

Once you decide on one, search for it on hymnary.org or do an internet search or find more information from your denominational hymnal resources. Read the words to the entire song and consider what it meant to those first singing it and those who sing it now. How is liberation seen in this song? Listen to it sung by searching for it on YouTube and listen to a couple of different clips of the song.

➤ Which hymn will you reflect on this week?

FOLLOWING JESUS



Hymns of liberation are songs that call upon God to bring freedom from oppression or that lift up the saving acts of God in a person or a community's life. From the ancient Israelites during the exodus, to a British slave-ship captain turned Anglican priest, to Americans participating in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century and today, songs of liberation lift one's heart to God in thanksgiving and remind people that they are not alone in their struggle for freedom.

For a closing reflection time, watch the YouTube video "Lift Every Voice" (bit.ly/FMLift, 4:30).



Sing liberation! God is our savior.
To our redeemer we all belong.
Blessing and honor, glory and power.
God is our savior! Sing a new song.