

EXODUS 15:1-21
THE LORD IS A WARRIOR

When is a photograph, not really a photograph?

A photograph is an attempt to capture an image of reality: A beautiful sunset. A smiling child. A bloody battlefield. You may not always like what you see, but you make a photograph so you can see what is really there.

I am still about a decade behind on technology, but I have observed that picture and graphic technology is getting better and better, to the point that I wonder when a “photograph” is not a photograph at all.

We can add some orange to the sunset. We can cover up the unsightly dimple on the child. We can either clean up or make worse, the battlefield picture.

Whatever we want. Whatever appeals to us. We make it look exactly as we would like it to look.

But then, is it really a photograph? I wonder.

I wonder about this, too.

Have we done with God, what we do with photographs? In a culture where we so value the visual, and where we can manipulate technology so that we see only what we want to see, have we created “photographs” of God, that picture him not as he really is, but merely in a way that appeals to us?

You may think this is just a question for the theologians and philosophers. But it is not.

If we do not see God as he is, then we will not see ourselves as we are, and not only will our image of him be distorted, we will become distorted. As Christian author Maurice Roberts writes, “All men become like the objects of their worship. Our inward character is being silently moulded by our view of God and our conception of him.”

If we do not see God as he is, then we will not see others as we ought, and our message to them, about him, will then be distorted. We will offer them a false picture of the God before whom they must answer, eternally.

The foundation of our faith, is that we do not decide who God is. He has told us about himself. The “photograph” is before us, in the Scriptures.

Dare we see God, as he is?

This week, as we read through the Old Testament, we have read the story of the Exodus.

God’s chosen people, the sons of Abraham, the people of Israel, are now living in Egypt. Joseph passes from the scene, and a ruler, called a Pharaoh, who does not know about Joseph, forces the Israelites into slavery.

God raises up Moses to lead the people. He commands Pharaoh to let the people go. Pharaoh refuses. God brings plagues, ten in all, and the last one is the worst one, for all the firstborn of the Egyptians die.

Moses and the people leave. Pharaoh follows. The Red Sea is ahead. All looks lost. But God stops the waters of the Red Sea, lets the Israelites pass through, then brings the waters back down upon the Egyptians.

Moses and the Israelites rejoice,

“I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.”

This story and this song provide a true picture of God.

Dare we see God, as he is?

We must do this. Even if it does not appeal to us.

As we enter the story, let’s start with this question: WHAT HAS HE DONE? What has God done here?

To start with, *HE HAS PROCLAIMED AN ENEMY.*

All through the Exodus story, we see God's opposition to Pharaoh. Then we read in verses 9-10:

"The enemy boasted, 'I will pursue, I will overtake them.

'I will divide the spoils; I will gorge myself on them.

'I will draw my sword and my hand will destroy them.'

"But you blew with your breath, and the sea covered them. They sank like lead in the mighty waters."

The enemy boasted. This is the enemy of God, who opposed God and his purposes for his people, by preventing them from worshipping him.

God has claimed an enemy.

One of our nation's more forgettable political campaigns was the 1996 presidential race. Bob Dole never had a chance against Bill Clinton.

But Mr. Dole tried, and he sought to develop a "softer" image for himself. So he started saying, "Our opponents - not our enemies - our opponents..."

They are not our enemies. We do not have enemies. They are just on the opposite side of this civilized discussion.

You can decide whether that appeals to you in politicians, but does God appeal to you, when you read that he proclaims people as his enemy?

You may say, "But doesn't God love everybody?"

Yes - if you define love in a certain way. The Bible certainly reveals God as the One who provides all we have, and he does not just provide for some.

Yet God does not love everyone in the same way.

We understand this. If I say, "I love you," to my wife, I am saying something very different than if I say, "I love you", to someone else. I genuinely love you both, but I have chosen to love my wife in ways that I should not, and do not, love others.

But even if we say, "The Bible says God loves everybody," we still have to say that the same Bible declares that God has enemies. He acts with a form of love toward his enemies, in providing them with life, health, and even great blessings in this life. Yet they are still his enemies.

You may say, "That's not nice. That's not kind. I don't like that."

But you have no right to create an image of God that appeals to you. You cannot make him into what you want him to be. He is who he is, and here and elsewhere, he proclaims that he has enemies.

God has proclaimed an enemy, and *GOD HAS DESTROYED THIS ENEMY.*

Listen again to some of the words of this song:

"Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea.

"The deep waters have covered them; they sank to the depths like a stone...

"Your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy...

"You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble...

"You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them."

Sometimes in the summertime, maybe you will have a gathering at a pool, and some strong man will decide to grab young, giggling children and hurl them into the swimming pool. Scream...splash...laugh...do that again!

That is not what is happening here! This is real, and this is graphic. This is a countless number of men and horses, suffocated by the raging water, and lying in the relentless desert sun, dead and then decaying.

How often do we hear this story, in the churches of our culture? Or if we do know the story, how easily do we rush over the unappealing details?

This is the destruction of God, brought upon his enemies, whose hard hearts have opposed him and his people. This is not pretty.

What has he done? He has proclaimed an enemy, and he has destroyed this enemy.

Dare we see God, as he is?

So a second question: WHY HAS HE DONE THIS?

Why would God do this? Why must we see this photograph? Why can't God just give us stories that appeal to us?

He has done this, first, *BECAUSE OF HOW HE HATES*.

See in your mind's eye, not what you want to see, but what is here:

"The Lord is a warrior." A warrior fights his enemies.

"Who is like you - majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"

He is a fighter, and he will fight like no other. But why?

"In the greatness of your majesty you threw down those who opposed you. You unleashed your burning anger; it consumed them like stubble."

Hear those words again: "burning anger."

Today is Taylor's 14th birthday. I am reminded of his 9th birthday.

I knew there was a problem, when I drove home from church, and I saw the microwave sitting on the front sidewalk. When you pull into the driveway and see that, you know something is not right!

It was an unusually warm day for January, so Beth Ann decided to grill out hamburgers for Taylor's birthday. So she pulled some ground beef from the freezer, and she put it in the microwave to thaw it. But she forgot the little "twisty" on the ground beef...the little "twisty" with a metal spine.

She turned it on, the fire started, and the microwave ended up on the front sidewalk.

I tell a fairly funny story, to make a deadly serious point. The flame of that microwave, is like the flame of God's anger.

God is a God of holy hatred. We hardly know how that can be, because we are very good at unholy hatred.

In his purity, he despises impurity. In his righteousness, he abhors unrighteousness. In his goodness, he blazes against evil.

In this culture, we do not believe this. Even with Christians, many do not believe this. We have created a God who appeals to us. We do not like hate, so we do not like that God hates, so we do not think about, or speak about, or even entertain the possibility that God hates someone or something.

God is love. Indeed, he is. But that is all we hear.

The "god" we have created, is either ignorant to wrong, or indifferent about wrong, or indulgent of wrong.

Ignorant: like the fool described in the Psalms, some speak and act as if God does not know.

Indifferent: if he does know, he does not really care.

Indulgent: if he does know, and he does care, he understands. It will be okay. Don't worry. Be happy.

No, no, no! “The Lord is a warrior”! He is not ignorant or indifferent or indulgent. He is incensed. Holy anger flames from him, against his enemies.

Let me say it again: we do not get this, because we do not see this. We see unholy hatred, so it is hard for us to imagine holy hatred. In our culture, we have defined hatred as something is absolutely, always, wrong, so we have a hard time seeing God could possess holy hatred, that is unleashed in burning anger.

But it is so. It is what God reveals about himself here.

Dare we see God, as he is?

Yet there is more to God than that. God has not just done this because of how he hates. God has done this, *BECAUSE OF HOW HE LOVES*.

Verse 13: “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed...”

What a sentence! In these few words, this song shouts of two of the great covenant truths of the Old Testament, and indeed the whole Bible!

* “Unfailing love.” This is “hesed.” This is God’s faithfulness to the covenant relationship he has established with his people. Yes, they are sinners. Yes, they rebel against him.

But he loves them anyway, and he keeps on loving them anyway. He will remain faithful to his promises to them, and his purposes for them.

* “Redeemed.” How will he continue in this unfailing love, when these people are indeed sinners and rebels? What of his holy hatred for their unrighteousness, their impurity, their rebellion, their sin?

The answer is redemption.

When you redeem someone, you pay a price, for their restoration to a safe place.

In God’s hatred, he will judge the sin of his people. But in his mercy, he will allow that sin to be paid for by someone else.

This is represented in the Passover event that is central to the Exodus. When the final plague is promised, God tells his people to slay a lamb, and to put some of the blood of that lamb on their doorpost, so when God’s angel of death arrives to bring judgment, that angel will “pass over” God’s people.

This is God’s great Old Testament act of redemption. It prepares us for God’s great New Testament act of redemption: the giving of Jesus Christ, the true, final Passover lamb, for the sins of God’s people.

As John writes, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”

“In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.”

A pastor writes of the dangers of being a sheep. Plenty of animals want to kill and consume sheep. So the shepherd must carefully guard the sheep. As they enter their enclosure called the sheepfold, they go through a small opening. Then the shepherd lies down in front of the opening, so that when potential attackers come, they will have to get through him, to get to the sheep.

This is God, with his people. In his holy love for his people, he has holy hatred for his and their enemies. So he defends against those enemies and even destroys those enemies, for the sake of the sheep he has redeemed.

Why has he done this? Because of how he hates, and because of how he loves.

“In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.

“In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. The nations will hear and tremble...”

This is the photograph. This is the true picture of the true God of all. Hating and loving. Bringing judgment and showing mercy.

Dare we see God, as he is?

So a third question: WHAT MUST WE DO? If this is God as he is, how do we respond to this “photograph”?

To start with, we must do as Moses, Miriam, and the people did. *WE MUST SING TO HIM.*

“I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.”

This is a call to worship. Moses and the Israelites will offer their praise to the Lord who has loved them, and who has hated their enemies.

But what kind of worship is this? Is this the kind of worship we offer? Is this the kind of worship offered in most churches today?

Again, I wonder. Do you worship God, because he is a warrior, who fights for his people, even to the point of hurling other people to eternal destruction? Or do you worship God, only for the qualities that appeal to you?

We say we worship the one, true, living God. But then we might use our spiritual technology to tone down or even blot out some of what he has revealed himself to be.

I think of a story I have told you before, of once meeting two women in the airport in Dayton. We were delayed for a while, so we had time to talk, and they found out I was a pastor, which meant they had to tell me all about their great church, which was so neat, because when you went to that church, you never heard about judgment or hell or any of that depressing stuff.

If that is your image of God, and if that is your picture of God, and if that is how you present the “photograph” of God to yourself, you are really not worshipping the true God at all.

It is pleasant and comforting, to worship God for his qualities of love and mercy. But we must also worship him for his qualities of holiness and justice.

This is important, for this will shape the singing of our worship, but also the “singing” of our lives. Listen again to those words of Maurice Roberts:

“All men become like the objects of their worship. Our inward character is being silently moulded by our view of God and our conception of him.”

What happens to our lives when we worship God only for his “appealing” qualities?

We take our sin lightly. We do not see it for the obnoxious offense it is, before a holy God.

We take God’s grace lightly. Instead of seeing the wondrous love of God in his astounding mercy for enemies like us, we see ourselves as okay, and we think that when we got the grace of God, we just got what we were owed.

We become spiritually dull. Everything becomes shrouded in shades of gray, like the atmosphere on a dank winter day.

We care less and less about good and evil in our hearts, and in the hearts of the people we care for, and in the lives of the people around us.

“A little pornography? What’s the big deal?”

“My daughter speaks that way? Oh, she’s just high-spirited.”

“Their marriage is falling apart because he did what? Too bad.”

But if we worship God for all he is, we will live with a passion for what is true, right and good. We will love what God loves, and we will hate what God hates. Yes, we will need to remember that God is the judge, not us, and we will always need to guard against our unrighteous expressions of anger.

Yet if we worship God for all he is, we cannot dwell in the dull gray of a culture that surrounds and suffocates us with moral carelessness. We must reflect his care, for good and evil, within us and around us.

I will take radical measures to defeat that serious sin, and I will get every bit of prayer, help, and counsel I need.

I will be open and honest about how I have hurt others with my sin, and my habit will be to plead for forgiveness.

I will offer my children the truth about right and wrong, and I will urge them to stand against their culture's dull and gray attitude about what God loves, and what God hates.

The wondrous love of Jesus will be theme of my heart, my song, my lips, and my life, for I know how unspeakably great is his redeeming mercy to me.

What must we do? We must sing of him, and *WE MUST SPEAK OF HIM*.

“The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him.”

We exalt him in the song of our worship and our lives, but we also exalt him as we speak of him, both as individuals, and as a church.

What about our speaking of him, as individuals?

God is love. For God so loved the world. But if God is only love, if his only attitude toward people is love, then why tell people about Jesus?

I wonder again. I wonder if we lack a passion for sharing our faith, because we think so little of the judgment of God.

You say you believe in heaven. But do you believe in hell?

You say you believe in God's promise of eternal forgiveness through Jesus. But do you believe in God's promise of eternal punishment, apart from Jesus?

Until you do, you will never speak of Jesus to other people. Why should you? If hell and judgment are not real, what is there to save people from?

Yet maybe you believe in these things. But you are still afraid, because you live in a culture where we snicker at the prospect of hell and judgment.

Yet you know you should speak. And maybe you do. Yet all you describe is the love of God. You invite people to “come to Jesus.” He is great. Wait ‘til you get him into your life.

That is not the way the gospel is presented in the Bible. Here is how the gospel is presented: “Repent and believe.”

Repent of your sins, for if you do not, you will suffer - eternally.

Believe in Jesus. Not just so he can make your life better now, but so that you will have life forever.

We must speak. We must speak because we believe in the warrior God who hurls the horse and rider into the sea, and who will hurl hard-hearted sinners into the eternal judgment of hell.

Yet “we” includes the church.

We live in a day when we are surrounded by “popular” churches. How do they become popular? I am not sure. I am busy on Sundays!

But those ladies in that airport went to a “popular” church, and if I am hearing right and reading right, I can say this with confidence: most “popular” churches in our culture, rarely or never speak of God's judgment or God's hell.

How can they do that? How can they neglect that?

I know. I know what it is like to want people to like you, and to like your church, and to keep coming back. So I know what it is like to cringe at saying a word like “hell”, and I know what it is like to try to find another word, so I can “sort of” say it, but not really say it.

It is much more appealing to speak only of God’s love. But we are not here to please people. We are here to please God.

Will we as leaders be found faithful in presenting the whole “photograph” of God? And will you as members, be faithful in supporting us in this?

Dare we see God, as he is? Dare we sing of God, as he is? Dare we speak of God, as he is?

Maurice Roberts also wrote,

“The prophet declares God to be what he is.

“Over against the hundred-and-one false views of God which prevail in this world, the prophet affirms God as God in truth. The genuine prophet is in this respect radically different from the false prophet.

“The false prophet conforms his view of God to that of popular opinion.

“His view of God does not offend anyone because the presentation which he makes of God is conventional and acceptable.

“The false prophet always presents a god who is tame and quiet. His god fits comfortably into the existing scheme of things.

“His god excites no wholesome fears, stirs no unwelcome qualms in the mind, disturbs no sleeping consciences, arouses no holy indignation, inspires no religious revolution.”

He is majestic in holiness. He is awesome in glory. He inspires revolution in our hearts, our lives, and our world, for he is perfect in justice and mercy.

We meet him as he is. We sing to him. We speak of him.

“I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.”