

Moses and Miriam Lead in Praise

Devotional Reading: Psalm 104:1-9

Background Scripture: Exodus 14:21-31; 15:1-21

Exodus 15:1-3, 11-13, 17-18, 20-21

¹ Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

“I will sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.

² “The LORD is my strength and my defense;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

³ The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.”

¹¹ “Who among the gods
is like you, LORD?
Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?

¹² “You stretch out your right hand,
and the earth swallows your enemies.

¹³ In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them
to your holy dwelling.”

¹⁷ “You will bring them in and plant them
on the mountain of your inheritance—
the place, LORD, you made for your dwelling,
the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.

¹⁸ “The LORD reigns
for ever and ever.”

²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. ²¹ Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

Key Text

Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing.—Exodus 15:20

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 1: Leaders Set Worship Example

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List God’s attributes as sung by Moses and Miriam.
2. Trace the historical elements within Moses’ and Miriam’s celebratory songs of praise.
3. Write and sing a song of praise to God for his character and deliverance of his people.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Power of Song
- B. Lesson Context

I. The Song Introduced (Exodus 15:1–3)

- A. Recipient (v. 1)
- B. Reason (vv. 2–3)

II. The Song Continued (Exodus 15:11–13, 17–18, 20–21)

- A. The Lord’s Guidance (vv. 11–13)
- B. The People’s Inheritance (vv. 17–18)

Six Seedlings

C. The Women's Response (vv. 20–21)

Joyful Dance

Conclusion

A. Sing to the Lord

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Amalekites *Am-uh-leh-kites* or *Uh-mal-ih-kites*.

Korah *Ko-rah*.

Miriam *Meer-ee-um*.

Moriah *Mo-rye-uh*.

Pentateuch *Pen-ta-teuk*.

Pharaoh *Fair-o* or *Fay-roe*.

Zion *Zi-un*.

Introduction

A. The Power of Song

The power of song can transcend ethnic and national boundaries. In every country and every people group, songs are significant. According to many experts, music and singing can improve a person's sleep, mood, and cognitive performance while decreasing the effects of stress. Not only is it fun to sing along to your favorite song, but it might also contribute to a healthy lifestyle!

Songs can also improve a person's *spiritual* health. Through songs of worship, we learn the truths about God and strengthen our faith in him. Further, such praises have the power to unite the people. Today's lesson consists of an ancient song that united the Old Testament people of God by remembering his work.

B. Lesson Context

The song in today's lesson comes from the book of Exodus, which is part of the Pentateuch, another name for the first five books of the Old Testament. These books have been traditionally attributed to Moses because he was well-educated ([Acts 7:22](#)) and skilled at detailed record-keeping (examples: [Exodus 17:14](#); [24:4](#); [Numbers 33:2](#)).

The events of the exodus are traditionally dated to 1447 BC. Long before then, God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ([Genesis 13:14–15](#); [26:3](#); [28:13](#)). The fulfillment of the promise seemed to be in jeopardy when Jacob and his family moved to Egypt because of a famine. Still, God worked through Joseph, a son of Jacob, so that the family could have all it needed during the

years of famine (41:53–54).

Over the centuries, the Israelites witnessed significant leadership changes in Egypt. Eventually, there came a new king to whom Joseph’s reputation meant nothing (Exodus 1:8). The original favor Jacob (Israel) and his sons experienced changed into servitude and oppression. After the Israelites spent 430 years in Egypt (12:40–41), God was ready to act to fulfill the promises (2:23–25).

It was during this time that Moses was born. It is well-known that a princess of Egypt adopted him, but he had to flee Egypt at age 40 after killing an Egyptian (Exodus 2; see Acts 7:23). Forty years later, Moses encountered the Lord at Sinai. God repeated the promise given to Moses’ ancestors and called him to lead the enslaved Israelites away from Egypt (Exodus 3:8). God worked through Moses and Aaron (Moses’ brother) to bring about ten plagues that devastated Egypt.

At that point, Pharaoh expelled the Israelites from Egypt (Exodus 12:31–33). It had been 430 years to the day since Jacob and his family entered Egypt (12:40–41). As God’s people left Egypt, they were reminded again that their destination was Canaan (13:5, 11).

Pharaoh, however, changed his mind and decided to bring his labor force back (Exodus 14:5–8). The Egyptians pursued Israel to the edge of the Red Sea. It seemed that the Israelites were blocked by the sea, and victory for the Egyptians was assured, but God had other plans.

The Israelites crossed the Red Sea safely after the waters parted, but the Egyptians drowned when they tried to follow. The God of Israel was superior to any of the fictitious gods of Pharaoh! The crossing of the Red Sea was pivotal in the history of ancient Israel. The enslaved Israelites were free, beyond the reach of Pharaoh. Moses and the people responded with joyous singing (Exodus 15:1–21).

The first song in the history of this new nation is a song of rejoicing because of the victory that the Lord has obtained for the people. We note a minor difficulty in finding an appropriate designation for this song. Some students of the song have created designations for this song. These designations include “A Song of the Sea” (compare Exodus 15:1, 4–5, 8, 10), “A Song of Moses and Miriam” (compare 15:20–21), or “A Song of Moses and Israel” (compare 15:1). Another song designated as “A Song of Moses” can be found in Deuteronomy 32 (see the introduction in Deuteronomy 31:30).

I. The Song Introduced

(Exodus 15:1–3)

A. Recipient (v. 1)

1. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD: “I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.

The use of the English word *Lord* with small caps indicates that the underlying Hebrew term reflects God’s self-designation as revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14). Its use in this verse highlights that the song is directed to none other than the only true and great God who had previously revealed himself to Moses.

The song praises the Lord for the ways he triumphed over Pharaoh and his army and thereby received glory (see Exodus 14:17–18). The *horse* and *driver* refer to parts of Pharaoh’s army. Although

his forces were considered all-powerful in their day, they paled in comparison to the power of the Lord ([Isaiah 43:16–17](#)).

The Lord’s power was on display by casting the Egyptian armies *into* the waters of *the sea*. Through this powerful act, the Lord eliminated the most powerful military force of that era and showcased his unparalleled greatness (see [Exodus 18:9–11](#)). As a result, the enemy was incapable of a return attack on the Israelites.

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to the claim that this verse reveals God’s lack of care for the suffering of animals?

Digging Deeper

How might [Nehemiah 9:6](#); [Psalm 36:6](#); [Isaiah 11:6–9](#); and [Matthew 6:25–26](#); [10:29](#) inform your response?

B. Reason (vv. 2–3)

2a. “The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation.

This half-verse reflects the Israelites’ response to the powerful work of *the Lord*. The people were pursued by the armies of Pharaoh ([Exodus 14:23](#)); the strength of the Israelites was inadequate to save themselves. Liberation came not through their own power but by the *strength* of the Lord (compare [Psalm 28:8](#)). Before crossing the Red Sea, Moses commanded the people to “stand firm” and “see the deliverance the Lord will bring” ([Exodus 14:13–14](#)). [Psalm 118:14](#) and [Isaiah 12:2](#) quote this half-verse as the writers look back to the miraculous strength of the Lord in bringing salvation to the people.

2b. “He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

The song removed any possibility of misidentifying the *God* of Moses’ ancestors; he is the single objective of the Israelites’ worship. For centuries, the people would *exalt* God for what he had done for them in the exodus (see [Psalm 22:3–5](#), [lesson 7](#)).

3. “The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.”

The Israelites lived in a hostile world. They had been pursued by the nation that had enslaved them. Then, just weeks after the events of this song, the Israelites faced their first actual military conflict, against the Amalekites ([Exodus 17:8–16](#)).

The Old Testament describes the Lord as a divine *warrior* who would fight for his people (example: [Isaiah 42:13](#); compare: [Deuteronomy 3:22](#); [Nehemiah 4:20](#); [Zechariah 14:3](#)). On some occasions, the Lord joined in battle with the Israelites (example: [Deuteronomy 20:1–4](#)). But at other times, the Lord went to war alone (example: [Exodus 14:14](#)). The imagery of the Lord as a warrior is expressed later by the phrase the “Lord Almighty” (particularly in the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah). It would have been easy for the Israelites to depend on their power or the power of other nations. Instead, the people of Israel were to trust that just as the Lord protected them and brought them out of Egypt, the Lord would continue to do so.

The New Testament contains similar imagery regarding conflict and the power of the Lord. God has not called his people to fight battles against flesh and blood, but against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heav-

only realms” ([Ephesians 6:12](#)). Ultimately, God’s people have been promised that the enemies of God, and even death itself, will someday be destroyed ([1 Corinthians 15:23–28](#); [Revelation 20:6–10, 14–15](#); [21:4](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what situations is it comforting for you to think of God as a “warrior” ([Exodus 15:3](#))?

Digging Deeper

In what situations is it a comfort to think of the Messiah as the “Prince of Peace” ([Isaiah 9:6](#))? Are these two designations contradictory? Why or why not?

II. The Song Continued ([Exodus 15:11–13, 17–18, 20–21](#))

A. The Lord’s Guidance (vv. 11–13)

11. “Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?”

This verse contains two rhetorical questions that highlight the uniqueness of God. The Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods and goddesses. However, those “gods” were fictitious and could not provide protection. By asking *who among the gods is like you, Lord?* Moses emphasized the Lord’s superiority over these pagan gods. This was a question for which Moses knew the answer: there is none like the Lord God (compare [1 Samuel 2:2](#); [Isaiah 45:5](#); [Jeremiah 10:6](#)).

The second question builds on the first by distinguishing the ways that the Lord is incomparable to all other “gods.” The *holiness* of the Lord describes his moral purity. The Lord God is *awesome in glory* and perfect in every way ([Deuteronomy 32:4](#); [2 Samuel 22:31](#); [Matthew 5:48](#)). The Lord is unique regarding his holiness ([1 Samuel 2:2](#); [Psalm 77:13](#)).

Because the Lord is holy, his people are commanded to have lives of holiness ([Leviticus 11:44–45](#); [1 Peter 1:15–16](#)). As a result, people should honor the Lord and have a willingness to follow his commands (example: [Deuteronomy 10:12, 20–21](#)).

The *wonders* of the Lord’s work were displayed in his power to lead the Israelites safely across the sea on dry ground (compare [Psalm 66:5–6](#)). Even in Heaven is the Lord worshipped for his holy and mighty acts (see [Revelation 15:4–5](#)).

What Do You Think?

What are some “gods” worshipped by our culture, and in what ways is God more wondrous than those “gods”?

Digging Deeper

How will you celebrate the wonderful and wondrous ways God has worked?

12. “You stretch out your right hand, and the earth swallows your enemies.”

In biblical times, the right hand or being located at a person's right hand conveyed blessing (example: [Genesis 48:17–20](#)), demonstrated prestige (examples: [1 Kings 2:19](#); [Matthew 22:44](#) [quoting [Psalm 110:1](#)]), or revealed power (example: [Psalms 20:6](#); [98:1](#)).

This verse uses a literary device called *anthropomorphism*, the practice of assigning human attributes to God (examples: [Leviticus 20:6](#); [Numbers 6:25–26](#); [Deuteronomy 11:12](#)). God does not have a physical body ([John 4:24](#)). The song uses this literary device to describe how the Lord conveys his power through his outstretched *right hand* (compare: [Psalms 17:7](#); [138:7](#)). The expression is used twice in this song, once here and in [Exodus 15:6](#) (not in this week's lesson text). In this case, it celebrates God's victory over the Egyptians on Israel's behalf ([Exodus 14:21–30](#)).

Given that the song celebrates that *the earth swallows the enemies*, this verse also seems to point to future events. The Egyptian army was swallowed up by the sea, after all. Not long after the events of this song, Israel would see Korah and 250 rebels swallowed up when “the earth opened its mouth” ([Numbers 16:32](#)). In that instance, as when the sea swallowed the Egyptians, it was a sign of God's judgment on wickedness and delivering his people.

13. “In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.”

When we think about provision, we might consider material things like food and shelter. While it is true that God provided these things for the Israelites, their greatest need was by no means material. The Israelites had experienced enslavement, and their greatest need was redemption. The Lord demonstrated *unfailing love* by noticing their suffering and promising deliverance ([Exodus 3:7–8](#)). The concept of redemption consists of God's taking back or buying back what is rightfully his. God redeemed the people and took them back as people of his own ([6:6–7](#)). No longer were the people the possession of Pharaoh; instead, they would be the unique people of God.

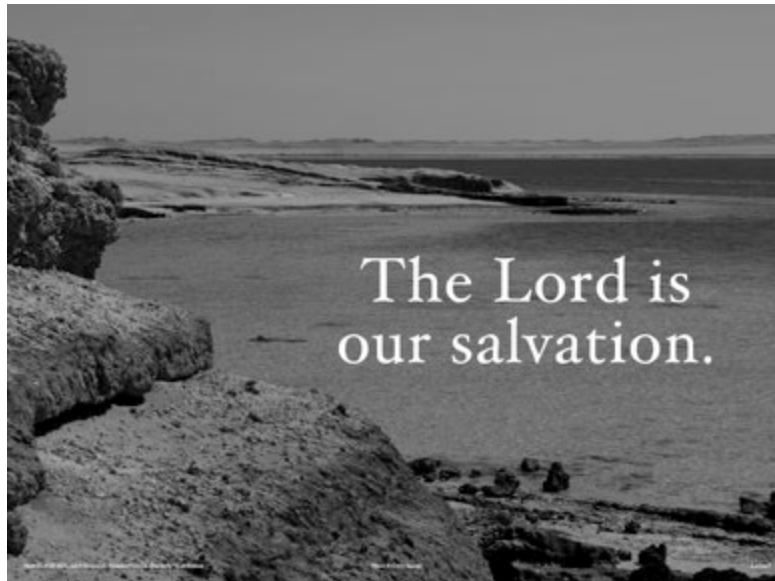
After redeeming the people, the Lord led them to a *holy dwelling*. The underlying Hebrew word translated *dwelling* elsewhere refers to the tabernacle ([2 Samuel 15:25](#)), the city of Jerusalem (example: [Isaiah 33:20](#)), or a more general descriptor for the place of the Lord (example: [Jeremiah 25:30](#)). God was leading the people to the promised land of Canaan, the land where he would dwell with them ([Genesis 17:8](#)). The New Testament presents Christ as our redeemer, paying the price to purchase us from the slavery of sin ([1 Corinthians 6:20](#); [Galatians 3:13](#); [1 Timothy 2:5–6](#)). God continues to lead his people to the ultimate holy dwelling beyond the physical realm ([John 14:1–3](#); [Hebrews 11:10](#)). Thus, the saints in Heaven “sang the song of God's servant Moses and of the Lamb” at their final destination ([Revelation 15:3](#)).

What Do You Think?

In what ways would (or should) your life change if you spent more time reflecting on and emulating God's holiness?

Digging Deeper

Which of these three texts spurs you most to start doing so today: [Ephesians 1:4](#); [Hebrews 12:14](#); [1 Peter 1:15–16](#)?



Visual for [Lesson 5](#). Point to this visual and ask for examples of other ways that the Lord has been the source of salvation for his people.

B. The People's Inheritance (vv. 17–18)

17. “You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, LORD, your hands established.

The Lord's leading to *bring* the Israelites into the promised land demonstrates his provision and the permanence of his care. The song acknowledges that the people's establishment in the land would come from the Lord's work to *plant them* and not because they made a name for themselves (compare [1 Chronicles 17:9–10](#); [Psalms 44:2](#); [78:54–55](#); [80:8–11](#); contrast [Isaiah 37:24–25](#)). The land was an *inheritance* given to them by the Lord. It had been promised to Abram ([Genesis 12:6–7](#)) and confirmed to Moses ([Exodus 6:2–4, 8](#)). It would be the place of God's blessing to the people ([Leviticus 20:24](#); [Deuteronomy 8:7–8](#)).

The land of Canaan is mountainous, unlike the flat, coastal region of Egypt where the Israelites had likely been enslaved. There are many mountains in Canaan, but the song probably refers to *the mountain Zion* ([Psalm 2:6](#); etc.). Centuries after Moses, Solomon would build *the sanctuary* that is the temple on this mountain, also called Mount Moriah ([2 Chronicles 3](#)).

Six Seedlings

Two cottonwood trees grew in the backyard of my childhood home. The trees released thousands of cotton-like seeds that floated through the air like little white puffs each spring. Some seeds would take root when they came to rest in the yard. The seedlings did not remain in the ground for long because my dad usually mowed them down as they sprouted. My sister and I always pleaded with him to let the seedlings grow. He eventually succumbed to our request, guiding us to plant six seedlings in evenly spaced rows in the front yard.

The seedlings eventually took root and matured. My sister and I were photographed standing next

to the trees each year. By the time we moved out, the trees were taller than the house. When I drive past that old house, I marvel at the size of those trees, deeply rooted and mature.

After leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the Lord planted them in a new land. He wanted them to take root in that land and flourish as his people. Are you following the Lord, becoming deeply rooted in God's plan for you? Are you "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season" (Psalm 1:3)?

—L. M. W.

18. "The LORD reigns for ever and ever."

This verse repeats the song's central theme: *the Lord* is all-powerful and eternal in his reign. Unlike earthly rulers, the Lord's reign over his people will be forever (Psalms 45:6; 146:10; Revelation 11:15).

D. The Women's Response (vv. 20–21)

20–21. Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea."

This is the first explicit reference to *Miriam* in the Old Testament. It is possible that she was the sister who watched the "papyrus basket" that contained the baby Moses (Exodus 2:3–4). Miriam is also one of several women in Scripture who are designated as a *prophet* or prophetess (Judges 4:4; 2 Kings 22:14; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; Luke 2:36; compare Micah 6:4). The book of Numbers records an event that shows how her service in this role was somewhat of a mixed experience. In a misdirected way, she believed (accurately) that God had spoken through her (Numbers 12:2). This statement, however, came in a bout of rebellion against her brothers. As a result of her rebellion, she experienced leprosy as a punishment from God (12:10). However, she was restored following her brother's petition (12:11–15).

Timbrels are the equivalent of modern-day tambourines or hand drums. It was customary in the ancient world for women to celebrate various occasions *with timbrels and dancing* (example: Judges 11:34; compare Psalms 149:3; 150:4; Jeremiah 31:4).

The refrain of the women's song celebrated how the Lord cast Israel's foes *into the sea*. It is very similar to the beginning of Moses' song, which also focused on the mighty acts of the Lord to save the Israelites (see Exodus 15:1, above).

The implication may be that Miriam is the one who leads the other women in a type of antiphonal rendition. (That's when one group answers another.) In any case, their words are a final reminder of how the most powerful nation in the world at that time was no match for the God of Israel.

What Do You Think?

What are some occasions that would be appropriate to label as "a time to dance" (Ecclesiastes 3:4)?

Digging Deeper

Why did you, or did you not, include "a church worship service" as one of your responses?

Joyful Dance

As a religion professor, my husband often took his students on field trips to observe various congregations and their worship services. Our young daughter and I often accompanied them to these services. One enthusiastic service stands out: the worship music was energetic, and the congregation moved and swayed to the music more than I had ever seen. During the service, a group of women with tambourines gathered in a semicircle before the sanctuary and began dancing to the music. As they did so, I saw my two-year-old daughter joyfully dancing. I smiled at how she could confidently dance as an act of worship, just as the women at the front of the room did.

My mind flashed back to the story of Miriam and the Israelite women as I watched a modern-day version of that example play out. How will you honor and worship God for his great blessings? Can you incorporate worship practices that you typically have not utilized?

—L. M. W.

Conclusion

A. Sing to the Lord

Singing helps diminish feelings of stress and anxiety by releasing “feel good” brain chemicals that alleviate pain. Singing also activates the portion of the brain associated with memorization—you can probably still sing the alphabet song!

Our songs of worship do these things and so much more. We sing in worship to the Lord because he is the source of our strength and salvation. Our worship also celebrates and remembers the Lord’s goodness and faithfulness. The apostle Paul sang to the Lord in worship, even in imprisonment ([Acts 16:25](#)). “Psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit” along with singing and “making music from your heart to the Lord” are marks of a life filled with God’s Spirit ([Ephesians 5:19](#); see [Colossians 3:16](#)). While there are specific situations when singing is not always appropriate (examples: [Proverbs 25:20](#); [Amos 5:23](#); [8:10](#); [Ezekiel 26:13](#)), the righteous people of God are called to sing praises to him ([Psalm 33:1–3](#)). Sing to the Lord without hesitation!

B. Prayer

Lord God, we thank you for the example of worship and song presented in Scripture. Help us be further attentive to your Spirit so that we might sing to you in all situations—good or bad. In the name of your Son, Jesus, we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The Lord has given us a reason to sing!

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Divide the class into three groups, no more than four per group (large classes can create duplicate groups). Distribute a pen and a handout (you create) to each group with one of the following three song titles at the top: *Just As I Am*, *It Is Well with My Soul*, *Blessed Assurance*. Have groups write down the lyrics of the assigned song from memory as possible. After three minutes, have each group share what they wrote and compare their results to the lyrics.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “Songs can be a powerful tool for teaching because they can help reinforce important messages. Today’s lesson will study a song that taught the Israelites of God’s power and provision.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Exodus 15:1–3, 11–13, 17–18, 20–21](#). Divide the class into three equal groups. Distribute handouts (you create) with the following questions for in-group discussion based on the lesson’s Scripture text.

Actions of God Group. 1—What are some examples from the song of God’s powerful actions? 2—What were the results of these displays of power? 3—How has God’s power been on display in our congregation? 4—What are some results of his displays of power?

Provision of God Group. 1—What are some examples from the song of God’s provision for the people? 2—What were the results of these displays of provision? 3—What instances of provision from God can you celebrate? 4—How has God’s provision been on display in our congregation?

Attributes of God Group. 1—What are some examples from the song that highlight God’s attributes? 2—How were these attributes on display to the Israelites? 3—What other attributes of God can you name? 4—How have you seen these on display in our congregation?

After five minutes, ask a volunteer from each group to share responses and ask them what the song reveals about God’s character. Write responses on the board. (Keep responses on the board until class concludes.)

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Song of Moses and Miriam” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

Option. Divide learners into triads and ask a volunteer to read aloud [Revelation 15:1–4](#). Say, “This song taught by Moses and Miriam will also be sung by the victorious saints in Heaven. What significant themes in the song can also be celebrated by these saints?” Allow three minutes for triads to discuss before asking for responses. (Possible responses: the exodus led by Moses formed a pattern for

the deliverance brought by the Lamb; the enemies of the people of God will ultimately be destroyed; the people of God can celebrate their inheritance).

Into Life

Point to the responses from the Into the Word activity written on the board, and say, “The song celebrated God’s character and deliverance. Today, we have the opportunity to celebrate the same.”

Form learners into groups of three. Give each group a large poster board along with markers and colored pencils. Instruct groups to write on their poster board some reasons for praising God for his character and deliverance. Then, ask groups to flip over the poster board and write a song of praise based on the reasons listed on the other side. (*Option.* Have groups use a sheet of printer paper instead of poster board.) After 10 minutes, have each group read or sing their song of praise.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “My Song of Praise” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete the activity as a take-home. Tell learners that you will give volunteers time at the start of the next class to share their work.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(September 29—Moses and Miriam Lead in Praise\)](#)
