

Exodus 2:23–25 (NRSV)

<sup>23</sup> After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. <sup>24</sup> God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

<sup>25</sup> God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Exodus 13:17–22 (NRSV)

<sup>17</sup> When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.” <sup>18</sup> So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. <sup>19</sup> And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.” <sup>20</sup> They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>21</sup> The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. <sup>22</sup> Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Exodus 14:19–29 (NRSV)

<sup>19</sup> The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. <sup>20</sup> It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup> The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Exodus 15:11–13 (NRSV)

<sup>11</sup> “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?

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

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

*Who is this God that rescues slaves from their chains?*

The title of this series is *Knowing God*, not knowing Moses or even knowing ourselves. We are seeking to know better the One we worship, by reflecting on God’s actions revealed in the book of Exodus.

Exodus tells the story of God’s delivering his people from slavery under Pharaoh to freedom and a new life in the promised land. It also recounts how God taught his people to live in God’s presence, i.e., to live as they were created to live.

Even those who have never read the book of Exodus know at least the outline of the story told in *The Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*. But, just in case, here are the basics.

### *The book of Exodus in a nutshell*

When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, is raised in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks.

One day, Moses sees, in the distance, a bush that is burning, yet is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that he is to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means "I am" or "I am who I am." Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn't the right guy, but God presses on. Thus, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you'd expect, the Pharaoh resists, and relents only when God sends death to all the first-born of Egypt. Death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb. After the final plague, the Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the sea.

God then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments and the rest of the covenant. Moses leads them to the edge of the land God has promised them. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the Hebrews turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until all of that generation die. Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses' final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses' death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

### *God remembers*

The book of Exodus opens differently than we might think it would. The Israelites are enslaved and God is largely absent, staying so until the closing verses of chapter 2, when God "remembers" the Israelites and acts. It seems odd to us that God would need to remember anything, so that is a clue that something else is going on. For the Hebrews, speaking of God "remembering" was a way to say that God is now taking action. It is fruitless to wonder why not earlier or later; all the text tells us is that God is now ready to act at the end of chapter two (v. 23–25 above). Thus, at the beginning of the third chapter, God calls Moses to an unexpected vocation. Walter Brueggemann, one of the most noted OT scholars of our time, elaborates for us:

The startling moment of this narrative is when the silence is broken. Israel cries out. We are not told why. No theological reason is given; the cry is neither God-induced nor God-directed. The beginning point of the exodus is rooted not in any explicitly theological claim, but in this elemental fact that human bodies can absorb so much, and then will rebel and assert and initiate. The crying, groaning bodies of the slaves found enough voice to say that their circumstance is not right, acceptable, or sustainable. In a quite distinct rhetorical maneuver, the narrator reports that God heard their cry (v. 24). The one who hears was not explicitly addressed. Perhaps there is something about this God that makes hearing possible. Perhaps this God is especially attentive to cries of oppression. In any case, now and only now, God takes a critical role in the narrative. Until now God has been mentioned only briefly in chapter 1 and not at all in chapter 2.

Only now, after the cries, is there a sustained statement about God. God is now the subject of four crucial verbs: God *heard* (שמע *šāma* ), God *remembered* (זכר *zākar*), God *saw* (ראה *rā'ā*), and God *knew* (יָדָה *yāda* ). God heard their groaning.

These were not groans addressed to God, but the hearing caused the remembering. The voicing of pain drives God back into the book of Genesis, to the ones to whom God is already committed. The memory is powered by those unambiguous carriers of the promise who are now named: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. God connects present slaves and old promises. God has one eye on the old covenant oaths in Genesis. The other eye, however, is on the present circumstance of Israel in bondage. The text does not say, as the NRSV has it, “God took notice *of them*” (emphasis added). It is only, “God knew,” without an object. We are left to imagine what God knew. God knew that these slaves were connected to the people of Genesis. God knew that promises were yet to be kept, requiring powerful intervention. God knew, because of old memories, abiding promises, present pain, and audible groans. God knew and so had to act. All of chapters 1–2 have built toward these powerful verbs that witness to God’s powerful, sovereign purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrews might have felt that God had forever abandoned them, but no, God would rescue them, break their chains of bondage. For God is faithful and God had made a covenant with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob. God had made promises to them and, through them, to all the world. Now, at the end of chapter 2, it is time to get on with it.

### *God leads*

So, the story moves on to the contest between the Lord God and the pharaoh-god, for that is just how Pharaoh sees himself. And it is a contest Pharaoh will lose, culminating in the death of the first-born, the Passover, and the flight to the Red Sea. At each step of the way, the Lord God, YHWH, demonstrates his superiority to Pharaoh. But after the final plague, God must begin to lead his people out of Egypt to freedom. What can we learn about God’s leadership as the Exodus proper begins? Brueggemann again provides some valuable insights:

At the beginning, God “leads” by a circuitous route in order to avoid conflict with the Philistines (vv. 17–18*a*). That decision about an alternative route, however, is not made because of the threat of the Philistines. The reason for this decision is given us by the rhetoric of a divine soliloquy. The expression “God thought” is, in Hebrew, “God said.” God said out loud, perhaps only to God’s own self. God is mindful that the Israelites, in the face of danger, may have a “change of mind.” The verb “change their mind” is *nāham* (נָחַם), which in many other places means “repent” (Gen 6:6–7; Exod 32:14; Amos 7:2, 5). Israel may repent of its resolve for freedom, may abandon its liberated destiny, and may accept the bonded fate of Egypt.

At the end of the unit, *lead* is related to a very different set of images (vv. 21–22). Now God is much more transcendent and impersonal, being present neither personally nor through reflective speech, but only through the cultic devices of “cloud” and “fire.” This part of the tradition has devised a sign of God’s full presence that is stable and visible. God is not directly available, but only through mediation. (Clearly this is a very different leadership from that in vv. 17–18*a*.) Two facets of this leadership are important. First, it is for “day and night,” all of the time. Both the day and the night are filled with enormous danger, and this people is completely vulnerable (cf. Ps 91:5–6). The cloud shields from the sun; the fire protects from darkness. . . .

The primary affirmation of this passage is that God’s leadership is thoughtful, prudent, and utterly reliable. The form of that leadership in vv. 17–18*a* is not described, but in vv. 21–22 it is given a more concrete, substantive identity. Compare Ps 23:2–3, perhaps the best-known use of the image of God’s leadership. The metaphor in the psalm is of a shepherd who leads sheep safely to good

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004

pastures and well-supplied water, even though the terrain to be traveled is dangerous and threatening. The notion of God's leadership is a primary datum in Israel's creedal recital, in Deuteronomy 8:2-4. Both texts affirm that God supplies every needed thing<sup>2</sup>

We will see next week, just how far God will go to meet every need of his people, as they struggle with hunger in the Sinai Wilderness.

### *Faithfulness and possibilities*

God is utterly faithful, to the point of taking on human flesh to keep promises made. And somehow, God must exercise this faithfulness in the face of uncertainty and human weakness. For we are not robots; we are free to love and not love. God's people are free to go on and to turn back. Somehow, God's purposes must work forward through all these freely made decisions. Terence Fretheim, my favorite OT scholar, helps us to see this even in the story of the Exodus.

This divine concern for Israel is important in that it shows that God must take into account prevailing sociopolitical forces as well as people's emotional makeup in charting a way into the future [13:17 ff above]. One might expect that God, with all the power at the divine disposal, would not back off from leading the people into any situation. God would just mow the enemies down! No, *the human situation makes a difference regarding God's possibilities* and hence affects the divine decisions. The exercise of divine power in providential activity is thus shown to be of such a nature that it could not ignore or override whatever obstacles might come along. Divine planning in view of such human circumstances is necessary, and so God's guiding hand leads Israel on a route that has less potential for difficulty. In fact, this divine concern suggests the possibility of failure; the people could decide to return to Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

### *A hymn of celebration*

Finally, we turn briefly to the celebration hymn of chapter 15. Even here, we find the truth of God's nature: "Who is like you, O Lord . . . in your steadfast love (*hesed*) you led the people whom you redeemed" (from 15:11-15). That Hebrew word, *hesed*, is one we've examined before in these studies. More than any other, it sums up the essential character of God. Katharine Sakenfeld has shown that *hesed* refers to sustained covenantal solidarity, i.e., God's faithfulness to God's promises. This formula affirms that Yahweh has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in covenantal commitment to Israel.

God is faithful. It is as simple as that.

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### **Monday Evening Class**

A study of Matthew's Gospel

#### **No class on 9/21**

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

A study of Genesis

#### **No class on 9/22**

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 150.

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like, wear your pj's.-- we're on-line now so who'd even know. Have a Bible handy.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle".

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Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

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Beginning 9/27: *Seven Books that Rocked the Church*

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