

Exodus 19:4–9 (NRSV)

⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

⁷So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. ⁸The people all answered as one: "Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do." Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD. ⁹Then the LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after."

When Moses had told the words of the people to the LORD,

Exodus 20:1–2 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words: ²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

Exodus 32:7–8 (NRSV)

⁷The LORD said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" "

Exodus 34:5–9 (NRSV)

⁵The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD." ⁶The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,

"The LORD, the LORD,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

⁷ keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children
and the children's children,
to the third and the fourth generation."

⁸And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped. ⁹He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O Lord, I pray, let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."

Exodus 40:34–38 (NRSV)

³⁴Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. ³⁶Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; ³⁷but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. ³⁸For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was

in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

The true story

After leading his people out of Egypt, God takes them to Mt. Sinai, where God and the Israelites enter into a covenant. God tells them how to align their society and their lives with God's moral will (the Law) and also tells them how to build a suitable dwelling place for God to be near his people. Sadly, even in the midst of this covenant-making, the people rebel against God, making a golden idol and worshipping it. You might think God would abandon this project, but no, that would not be God, who is relentless and undeterred in his love. God reveals himself to be merciful and gracious, boundless in steadfast love. So God occupies the tabernacle constructed by the people and they press on to the Promised Land.

God creates. I'm sure that when we hear those two words, our minds turn to Genesis 1 and 2; I know mine does. But even the creation of this world was a means to an end. As Simon Chan once put it, "God made the world to make the church." Rocks and trees and mountains are a means to create a people whom God loves and who love God. This creation of a people is the story of the book of Exodus.

Yes, God had come to Abraham and made big promises to him and Sarah about all the families of the earth being blessed through them. But God had asked little of them and, by the time of the Exodus, the Israelites had forgotten much and were not a people through whom God could rescue humanity. So God took them to Mt. Sinai, promising them that if they obeyed God and kept covenant with God, they would be God's treasured possession, a holy nation (19:5-6). Terence Fretheim helps us get deeper into these central phrases of obedience and covenant:

"Obey my voice and keep my covenant." [19:5] First to be noted is that the matter is presented in personalistic terms: I did; I bore you; brought you to myself, giving heed to my voice, keeping my covenant, being my own possession, being to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That which is called for on Israel's part is couched in language that speaks more of personal commitment to God himself than to particular commandments. There is as yet no specified content to the voice to be obeyed.

Second, obeying the voice of God is a concern already expressed in Exodus (see at 15:26). We have seen that issues of obedience are not simply associated with the law revealed at Sinai but also emerge in connection with various situations in Israel's life. Hence, when combined with the lack of specificity, there is an openness here regarding the shape of Israel's obedience, a recognition that *to obey the voice of God entails more than obeying the laws given at Sinai*.

Third, much the same point can be made regarding the phrase "keeping my covenant." . . . Israel as a *community* for the first time responds as Abraham did. Keeping covenant has as broad a reference as obeying the voice of God. In the widest sense, it is doing justice to, being faithful to, the relationship with God in which the people stand, *a responsibility that is more extensive than obedience to Sinai law*.¹

Thus, though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mount Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." Nonetheless, it is very important

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 210–211.

to realize that the Israelites agree to the covenant; they sign on for the project. They will obey God, not just in law-keeping but in all that God asks of them. Yes, they will love God and love others! After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, neither will their failure to keep it.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. An excellent example today is a marriage covenant.

Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor.

When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

Instruction in the covenant

In God's address to the people, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are several keys to understanding why this is so.

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mount Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract "to love" is made concrete by the commandments.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people. But just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of the rebellious and disobedient

Adam?² So, beginning in Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle³, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. The Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them*! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Third, God sets up a system of rituals, priests, sacrifices, and festivals so that the people can begin to learn that some things are holy and some are not. They must learn that the two do not mix. The priestly system teaches the people that God cannot be approached by a sinful and unholy people. Thus, the priests and sacrifices accomplish, after a fashion, the reconciliation of God and his people. But still, all the rituals, priests, and sacrifices are only signposts to the real thing; they could never be the "real thing" itself. That will await the arrival of God's own son (Act 4).

Finally, the Law was not given to the world, but to the Israelites, the family of Abraham. They were the ones who worshipped YHWH and he gave these teachings to his people. God would dwell with them in a way that he did not dwell with others. Thus, in a way, the Law can be seen as a manual on what it means to live with God. None of us would be surprised to be handed a list of house rules if God moved in upstairs. All of this is to say it is foolish to try to separate the two tablets, to strive to live by the ethic of the second tablet while ignoring first.

What does God want from his people above all else?

Jesus summed up all of the Law, God's Instruction, in two teachings: love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18). The first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on. All of it seeking to answer the question, "What would love do?"

If you took all of God's teachings set forth in the Law of Moses, mixed them up in a pot, and boiled them down to their essence, love of God and others would be what is left. Think again of the two tablets – the first one focused on what it means to love God, the second on what it means to love others. If you will let this sink deep into your mind and heart, your understanding of Scripture will be revolutionized. You will come to know Jesus as you have not before.

Indeed, God created a people to live in love and fellowship and through whom God would rescue humanity. And when the community failed to love as they promised, God provided one faithful Jew who would and did -- Jesus.

Many people mistakenly believe that Jesus came to abolish the Old Testament. On the contrary, Jesus came to fulfill the law. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples what God's Law is really all about. When tested by the young lawyer, Jesus said that all the Law can be summed in the commandments to love God (the first tablet) and to love neighbor (the second tablet). All of the do's and don'ts one finds in the Old Testament are simply concrete expressions of those two commandments for an ancient people.

A slender volume on my shelves is entitled, *Smart Choices*. It is an excellent introduction to decision analysis (which is a fancy way of saying deciding among

²We are all children of Adam in the sense that we are all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed.

³The tabernacle was a moveable tent, suitable for a nomadic people. Inside was a place set apart from the rest that was called the Holy of Holies. In it was kept the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets brought down the mountain by Moses. Centuries later, when the people were settled in the Promised Land, they would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem. It was patterned on the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

choices). The authors take the reader through a straightforward presentation of how to state the problem, define objectives, create alternatives, evaluate tradeoffs and so on. They are business school types who want to help managers make better choices.

But for Christians, any talk of the good life or making better choices or living ethically must *first* begin with God. This isn't to say that sound analysis is unimportant, but that the analysis must start with God. It is God who is good. It is God who made this world. It is God who made us in his image (*the imago Dei*). Thus, it must be God who points us toward the better choices. It is God who establishes what a really smart choice is. It is God who takes away our blindness and enables us to see the life that we seek and the life that God desires for us.

This is what the Law of Moses does for us. When we learn in Exodus 22:21-22 that "you shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien . . . you shall not abuse any widow or orphan," it speaks volumes to us about how to live and what God values, i.e., it tells us about the character of God.

Moses dares

However . . . while Moses was on the mountaintop receiving the very word of God, a terrible thing happened. Pretty much the worst thing ever. So chilling in its execution that the consequences could only be disastrous.

When Moses had been gone longer than the people expected,⁴ they panicked and turned to Aaron, Moses's brother, and pleaded for gods that could lead them as they thought they ought to be led. That's bad enough. But it got worse, much worse. Aaron led the people in constructing a golden calf out of their melted down jewelry. And they worshipped this pagan idol, this abomination. They worshipped it and thanked the statue for bringing them out of Egypt. Was this any way to love God? The people had promised to do just that . . . but, gee, that was weeks ago!

God hurried Moses down the mountain to see for himself the depth of Israel's sin. And then God tells Moses that he is done with these people. God is ready to let his fury devour them and start over with Moses alone. But Moses pleads with God on behalf of the people and God relents . . . the people will live.

But that isn't the end of it. The people will live, but God tells Moses to go ahead without him. The people are so rebellious they will never complete the trip. At some point, they will be consumed by God's holy anger, much as you and I would be consumed were we to fly too close to the sun.

And so Moses again comes before God, ready to plead for the Israelites, to persuade God that he must go on with the Israelites to the Promised Land. What courage it must have taken for Moses to again appeal to God, not deferentially, but firmly and directly. A foremost Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, reflects on this in his commentary:

Moses' performance in vv. 12–18 is a model for daring, insistent prayer. He prays with enormous *hutzpah*, and is prepared to crowd God in insistent ways. First, he asks to know *God's ways*. Then he insists on the *face as accompaniment*. Finally, he asks to see the *glory*. Moses refuses to let God determine the limits of asking. This model of Jewish prayer offers much to learn for Christians, whose piety is characteristically too deferential.⁵

Perhaps Moses' courage in confronting God was born in his understanding of God's nature. Like Moses, prayer should sustain our commitment to God and his purposes. But that prayer must be genuine and grounded in the deeply faithful relationship God

⁴ This story begins at 32:1 and continues the narrative 24:14. The truth is that it is very difficult to be confident of the chronological ordering of the events at the mountain.

⁵ Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 942). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

desires to have with each of us, a relationship to which we can bring all our hopes and all our fears. Moses has come to know something of God and is relentless in his daring appeals. As Fretheim notes, Moses appeals to God's reasonableness, God's reputation, and God's own promises. *Hutzpah* is about right.⁶

So, God does not smite all the Israelites, abandoning the project begun with Abraham. Instead, remarkably, God will reveal himself to Moses, to the Israelites, to the whole world. If you want to know God, there is no better place to start than with God's self-description in Exodus 34, remembering that it follows on the heels of the Israelite's terrible sin with the golden calf.

Knowing God

Moses has persuaded God to go forward with his rebellious and ungrateful people and has even asked to see God's "glorious presence" (Exodus 33:18). Since even Moses is unholy and cannot stand before God and live, God tells Moses, in beautiful figurative language, that he will pass by Moses and protect Moses so he only sees God's back. God also writes on new stone tablets, as Moses broke the others in his anger over the golden calf. As God then passes by Moses, God reveals himself in seven Hebrew words (Exodus 34:6-7, above). Walter Brueggemann sketches the meaning of each term. Together, they are a staggering portrait of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is the God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son (John 3:16).

Merciful (רחום *rahûm*). Phyllis Tribble has effectively made the case that this term is related to the noun *womb* (רֶחֶם *rehem*), and thus speaks of the kind of positive inclination a mother has toward her child, a "womb-like mother-love."

Gracious (חַנּוּן *hannûn*). This term refers to completely gratuitous positive inclination, given without cause or warrant, unmerited favor.

Slow to Anger (אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם *'erek 'apayim*). The phrase literally is "long-nosed." It apparently suggests that whatever "heat of rage" there was in Yahweh's anger has a chance to cool off, as it must be breathed out the long nostril.

Abounding in Steadfast Love (רַב־חֶסֶד *rabhesed*). Katharine Sakenfeld has shown that *hesed* refers to sustained covenantal solidarity. This formula affirms that Yahweh has a great capacity and resolve to remain loyal in covenantal commitment to Israel. In this context, the phrase suggests that Yahweh will "put up with" a great deal because of Yahweh's own powerful resolve to sustain covenant, even when the partner reneges.

Faithfulness (אֱמֶת *'emet*). This term is frequently used in a pair with *hesed* and is a close synonym. It witnesses to Yahweh's complete reliability.

Keeping Steadfast Love (*hesed*), for the thousandth generation. This formula reiterates the term *hesed* and assures that God's *hesed* continues to operate for a long time, and for a host of subjects.

Forgiving (נָשָׂא *nāsā*). The verb literally means "lift," which here means to relieve covenant violators of the burden of their violation.⁷

Before we leave Exodus 34, I need to speak about verse 7. The Hebrew word translated "visiting" or "to visit," *padaq*, is often, and regrettably, rendered as "punish." But it is literally "visit," thereby helping us to see that, generally in the Old Testament, the consequences of an evil deed grow out of the deed itself, rather than being imposed from the outside, as in God.⁸ A good example is Ezekiel 22:31, "I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads" (NRSV).

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 285–286.

⁷ Brueggemann, W. (1994–2004). The Book of Exodus. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 1, pp. 946–947). Nashville: Abingdon Press. I've abridged the comments a bit.

⁸ See Fretheim, Terence. *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters*. Baker Academic. 2010. P. 50-51

There is a loosely-woven moral fabric in God's creation. Love begets love (usually!). Violence begets violence (usually!).

Finally . . . a dwelling place for God

The Israelites have camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai for months. They have committed themselves to the keeping of God's Law. They have followed God's blueprints in every detail and constructed the Tabernacle, the tent where God will be present with his people in a way that he is not present elsewhere. They have furnished the Tabernacle with a table for God's bread, a lamp to provide light, and a curtain behind which they placed the Ark of the Covenant with the stone tablets. When they were all done, it was time for God to occupy the residence and so "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle." The presence of God so filled the space that Moses could not even enter the tent. I suppose it is what Paul had in mind when he wrote of Jesus, "for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Of course.

We'll close with a few words from Walter Brueggemann:

We are at the finish of Exodus. The workmen finished (39:32). Then Moses finished (40:33). And now God has finished (40:34–38). The seer of Revelation also anticipates a "finish" (Rev 21:3). In our candid self-knowledge, we pray hungrily that God should "finish" for our good. Our prayer for this presence, however, is not a desperate prayer. It is urgent, but it is also confident and bold. Such confidence is grounded in, and informed by, the sacramental enactment by Moses in this text before our very eyes. We dare also say, "It is finished." That lyrical affirmation is part celebration and part anticipation, all grateful, joyous, and confident.⁹

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Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

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

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

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

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Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

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

This week: We just began the nine-month journey through the Bible, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 1994–2004, 1, 981.