

Moses Meets God

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in an eight-part series

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Exodus 3:4–14 (NIV)

⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

⁵“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” ⁶Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ⁹And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. ¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

¹¹But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

¹²And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.”

¹³Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

¹⁴God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

Romans 10:5–17 (NIV)

⁵Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: “The person who does these things will live by them.” ⁶But the righteousness that is by faith says: “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷“or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: ⁹If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. ¹¹As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

¹⁶ But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” ¹⁷ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

God has remembered the Israelites and the time has come to save God's people from slavery to Pharaoh and return them home.

After the lengthy family stories in Genesis, the book of Exodus opens differently than we might think it would. A couple of centuries have passed. 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.

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. Thus, at the beginning of the third chapter, God calls Moses to an unexpected vocation.

A burning bush?

Moses had grown up with mighty Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt (see Exodus chapter 2). But now he was tending a flock in the Sinai wilderness, after having fled Egypt. Moses knew that he was a Hebrew and when he had seen an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had lost control and struck the slave-master, killing him. So Moses had fled across the Red Sea, settled into a new life, and had married. But the flock he tended wasn't even his own; the animals belonged to his father-in-law. Nonetheless, Moses looked after them as they walked in the shadow of mighty Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai).

One day, Moses noticed a bush burning in the distance and went to check it out. As he approached the bush, he saw that even though flames licked upward, the bush wasn't being consumed by fire. Then he heard a voice calling out “Moses, Moses!” And so began Moses's education at the feet of God Almighty. Even from those first moments, it was clear that this god calling him was holy and that Moses was not. He was told to remove his sandals, for even the ground on which Moses stood was now holy ground. And as this god identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses hid his face in fear. Can a mortal, sinful man survive an encounter with the Holy One? Terence Fretheim, a very helpful Old Testament scholar, takes us a little deeper into Moses's encounter with the God he would come to know:

Moses hides his face, but certainly not for long. For the next few chapters, Moses and God engage in what can only be called a *face-to-face encounter* (cf. Num. 12:8), during which Moses is anything but deferential. God's word to Moses is of such a character that it draws the other into a genuine conversation. The exchange with God moves from worshipful deference to animated dialogue Divine holiness does not inhibit human response, even on the part of one who is “slow of speech” (4:10). Moreover, the word of the holy God now articulated (vv. 7–10) bespeaks,

not distance and judgment, but closeness and concern. The *holy* God enters into the suffering of the people and makes it his own (3:7). As in Hos. 11:9 and Isa. 12:6, God is “the Holy One *in your midst*.”

The emphasis throughout is on *the divine initiative*. It is God who confronts Moses and calls him to a task. Moses does not prepare for the encounter, nor does he seek it. He is surprised by what happens. . . . God’s creative work in Moses’ life to this point has shaped a human being with endowments suited for the tasks ahead. While the specific encounter with God brings new insights and a changed direction for life, an informed creation theology will affirm many continuities with Moses’ past.¹

God is patient with Moses, who offers up reason after reason why he is not the man for the job. This encounter may be about the divine initiative, but Moses wants a way out. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name.² What if the people don’t believe me? Moses asks. So, God gives Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don’t speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn’t want to do this, “O my Lord, please send someone else.” Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses’ vocation and there is just no getting out of it. These are God’s purposes and Moses is God’s choice.

God is patient, but, nonetheless, God gets angry with Moses’ endless excuses (4:17). In fact, even in this initial encounter at the burning bush, you wonder why God doesn’t just move on. But this episode reveals a deeper truth about God. God’s patience is born of God’s love; his relentless pursuit of his people over the centuries demonstrates God’s doggedly patient determination to rescue first the Israelites and then all the world from sin and darkness. Why such patience? Because God is love, plain and simple.

More on this patient God

God’s patience with his people, with all humanity, is displayed across the entirety of Holy Scripture. We could dip into almost page and find God’s Divine Patience on display. I chuckle to myself recalling Jesus’ seemingly limitless patience with his own disciples. Here is a bit on the virtue of patience from Karen Swallow Prior:

N. T. Wright says that patience is required in order to attain the other virtues. “Patience is one of the places where faith, hope, and love meet up,” he writes. Augustine describes patience as the virtue by which “we tolerate evil things with an even mind.” The patient person, he continues, chooses to bear evil rather than to commit further evil in response to it. Patience keeps us from yielding to evils that are “temporal and brief” and from losing “those good things which are great and eternal.” Patience is a high virtue, that’s certain. No wonder patience is traditionally understood to be a

¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 56–57.

²YHWH is the common English transliteration of the Hebrew name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush. This name was so sacred to the Jews that it came to be spoken only by the high priest, only in the temple, and only on one day each year, Yom Kippur. When Jews read their Scripture and came upon the name of God they would say *adonai* instead, the Hebrew word for “Lord.” In keeping with the Hebrew tradition, our English translations substitute LORD (all small caps) in the Old Testament at each place YHWH appears. Thus, “the LORD God” in our Old Testaments is actually “YHWH God” in the Hebrew.

subvirtue of courage. Indeed, all the virtues, Aquinas says, “are directed to the good of the soul.” He continues: “Now this seems to belong chiefly to patience; for it is written (Luke 21:19): ‘In your patience you shall possess your souls.’ Therefore patience is the greatest of the virtues.”³

Though patience may be a virtue with which many of us struggle, our efforts remind us of God’s relentless and endlessly patient love. The more we come to know the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation, the more we are humbled by this Divine Patience.

Further, 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, 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.⁴

Looking ahead to salvation for all

Almost anywhere you turn in Romans, you are going to find something a bit puzzling or confusing. When the writer of 2 Peter says that there some things in Paul’s letters that are “hard to understand” (3:15-16), he was right.

In part, this is because Paul is writing a letter to real people dealing with real issues and we have only one side of the conversation, a bit like listening in on one end of a telephone call. But Paul can also be confusing to us because we just don’t know our Old Testament very well. As Paul is stringing together one OT quotation or allusion after another, often weaving them together in bits and pieces, often interpreting them in the light of Christ, we simply have no context for the quote. We can’t hear the echoes that Paul’s Jewish readers would have heard, nor do we even have much appreciation for Paul’s larger themes. Here is a closer look at today’s passage.

Romans 10:5-17 is part of an extended reflection on Deuteronomy 30. (See what I mean. . . most of us have no clue what is in Deuteronomy 30, but every first-century Jew sure did).

³ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 150.

In Deut. 28 and 29, Moses tells the Israelites of the blessings that await them if they keep the law and the consequences if they fail. And he foresees the day when the Israelites' failures will result in their exile. But in Deut. 30, Moses also foresees the day of their return and urges them to choose life now and always. God's people don't have to go anywhere looking for God's word, neither to the heavens nor across the ocean, for "the word is very near to you" (Deut. 30:14).

Paul takes this passage from Deuteronomy and reshapes it around Jesus' incarnation (bringing Christ down, v. 6) and resurrection (bringing Christ up from the dead, v. 7). It isn't the righteousness of the law that saves, but the righteousness that comes from faith in God (v. 5 & 6). In other words, it is trusting that God has put things right through Jesus that marks us out as having been rescued. This is how our relationship with God has been put right—by our acknowledging and trusting that, yes, Jesus was truly resurrected by God and, yes, that means Jesus is Lord (v. 9 & 10). Further, this salvation is open to all, to the Jews, who had been given the law, and to the Gentiles, who had not been given the law . . . to everyone (v. 12). Paul then uses a quote from the prophet Joel to drive home his point (v. 13).

Earlier in the letter, Paul had made this point in even more stark terms: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (meaning, "non-Jew")" (Rom. 1:16). Quite an assertion: the message of the "Christ event" has saving power. Paul isn't saying that God has the power to save, nor even that the Gospel (the message) is *about* God's saving power. He asserts that the message itself has the capacity to save, but only for those who believe that Paul's assertion is true.⁵

Not surprisingly then, Paul goes on to state the obvious. How can people call on Jesus unless they trust him? How can they trust him unless they've been told? How can they be told unless there is someone to tell them? How can there be someone to tell them unless someone is sent? (v. 14-15).

Not only is Paul validating his own apostolic mission ("apostle" means "one who is sent"), he is urging us all to appreciate that the proclamation of the Good News is not just important, it is necessary. It is the means by which God calls people into the Church, the body of the saved. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (v. 17). Sadly, Paul knows that many of his fellow Jews are not responding the Good News that he proclaims. Nonetheless, Paul presses on, eager to share the gospel of Christ with any who would listen.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *2 Corinthians*

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

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *Acts*

⁵from Leander Keck's commentary on Romans, in the *Abingdon New Testament Commentary Series*, 2005.

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

About the weekday classes:

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

Current series: *Resurrection: The Claim, The Significance, and The Evidence*

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

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