

Genesis 50:19–21 (NIV)

¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰ You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. ²¹ So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Exodus 2:23–24 (NIV)

²³ During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob.

God heard, remembered, saw, and knew.

Robert Burns, the Scottish poet of the late eighteenth-century, got it about right when he wrote, “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men / Gang aft a’gley,” meaning “The best laid plans of mice and men oft’ go astray.” We plan and we forecast and we predict and we plan some more . . . and then we’re shocked when it all seems to go wrong. That’s how it is with us; but not with God.

Though God’s purposes move inexorably forward, how is often not clear to us. But God’s vision cannot be stopped. Out of our wreckage, God can bring good. Out of our pain, God can bring love. Out of our hope, God can bring assurance. This isn’t to say that all things in our lives work out well; there is much suffering and loss in this world. But it is to say that, as Paul wrote, “God works all things together for good for the ones who love God.” All things? Even when we harm others? The answer is an emphatic “yes.”

And so this week we begin a new series on the story of the Exodus, the great salvation event of the Old Testament, foreshadowing God’s rescue of humankind through the faithful sacrifice of Jesus the Christ. And we begin with the story of Joseph, which tells how it is that the family of Abraham, the Israelites, ended up in Egypt.

A special coat

Abraham was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons, from whom God would grow the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, the long-awaited child of Rachel, Jacob’s true love. If you’ve seen the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you know the basics of the story.

Joseph’s life begins with great hope. He has a gift for dreams that reveal much. He is his father’s favorite. Jacob gives him a beautiful coat to wear and frees him from the hard work assigned to his eleven brothers. But there is a darkness present as well. Jacob’s favoritism and Joseph’s dreams create an explosive family situation.

The brothers’ envy and anger eventually boil over. They consider killing the boy, who is perhaps seventeen or so. Instead, they sell him to some passing Ishmaelite traders, which is nonetheless tantamount to killing him. Indeed, the brothers make up a story about his violent death for their heart-stricken father, even using Joseph’s beautiful coat to embellish their account.

Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant to the captain of Pharaoh’s guard, Potiphar. Joseph has to reject the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife, who accuses Joseph of trying to rape her and has him tossed into prison. Joseph’s gift for interpreting dreams gets him

out of prison and, remarkably, he rises to become chief administrator of Pharaoh's empire.

Joseph's dreams reveal to him that there will soon be a lengthy famine in Egypt. Armed with this foresight, Joseph saves Egypt from starvation. When the famine threatens Canaan, Jacob's sons make their way to Egypt to buy food. There, they stand before Pharaoh's right-hand man . . . Joseph!

The brothers don't recognize him, but Joseph sure recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and says he will sell them grain, but they must bring the missing brother (for they have traveled without Benjamin¹) to show that they have told the truth about their predicament. Joseph hangs on to one brother, Simeon, to ensure their return. But, of course, the question is whether they will return. Or will they abandon Simeon as they abandoned Joseph?

Though it will become clear that Joseph wants to heal the breach with his brothers, it is understandable that he would set things up so that he can observe his brothers and see what comes of it all. The brothers claim to be "honest" but are they? Have they learned anything since their sale of the young Joseph? Also, by his questions, Joseph is able to learn about the family circumstances.

There are many twists and turns in the story, and Joseph has a lot of trouble keeping control of his emotions through it all. It is a well-told tale and I hope you'll grab a copy of Peterson's *The Message* and read the whole thing (Genesis 37-50). It might even be a little hard for you to remember that you are reading the Bible!

At last, the truth

Finally, the brothers do return to Egypt to buy more grain. And, in the end, too overcome with emotion to go on with the deception, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. Can you imagine the shock of the brothers when the "prime minister" reveals himself?! Their shock quickly gives way to fear. The brothers have every reason to expect that Joseph will exact revenge for their evil deed and that their family's cycle of treachery and hostility will roll on.

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,² Joseph said "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house³ . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune" (41:51-52, NRSV).

So Joseph forgives his brothers and embraces each. With everything out in the open, Jacob's whole family will move down to Egypt, where they will live under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph.

After some time, Jacob passes away. The brothers fear that Joseph will now turn on them but he reassures them, even going so far as to say that God had taken what the brothers had intended for harm and turned it into good, the salvation of Israel, for the family had not perished in the great Canaanite famine.

God's grace and a problem

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is God's amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. It is God

¹ Benjamin is the youngest of the brothers and is Joseph's only full brother, having been born to Rachel, Jacob's lifelong love. She died during Benjamin's birth.

² Joseph takes a Egyptian wife. Before his death, Jacob adopts the two sons as his own and Joseph's tribal allotment goes to his sons. Thus, in the lists of tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh are included. The books of the prophets can often be confusing because they frequently use the name of one the tribes to stand in for all Israel, Thus, the prophets will address Dan or Judah or Ephraim, for example, when they are bringing God's word to the people of God.

³ Joseph means that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised.

alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

And through all these stories of Jacob and his sons, through all the deceit and treachery, God was moving events and people forward toward the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

But there is a problem; the people of God are in Egypt and will soon be enslaved by an anxious Pharaoh and centuries will pass.

A life under control (Exodus 2)

Moses was born at exactly the wrong time. Fearing the growing number of Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies – including Moses. In order to save her baby, Moses' mother had placed the infant in a small waterproof basket and set him afloat on the Nile river, hoping that someone would save him. Someone did. And not just any someone, but the daughter of Pharaoh herself. Though she knew the baby was a Hebrew, she “took pity on him” and plucked him out of the water. Seeing all this, Pharaoh's sister (yes, it seems the like the whole family is ignoring Pharaoh's orders) sought out a woman who could nurse the newborn, finding Moses' mother -- of all people. When Moses was old enough to be weaned, his mother brought him to the palace where Pharaoh's daughter raised him as her own.

It's not hard to imagine what Moses' life was like. Being raised as a member of Pharaoh's household meant a life of privilege and luxury. It was a life beyond the imagining of Moses' fellow Hebrews who labored as slaves to their Egyptian masters. Moses' stepmother must have told him about the circumstances of his birth, though surely it was a secret held among the two of them and Pharaoh's sister. Still, I wonder how that knowledge affected Moses. Was he troubled by it? Did he simply accept his own “luck”? I'm actually a little inclined to the latter, for it seems that Moses lived just fine with the knowledge for forty years.

In our society, forty⁴ is only approaching middle age but in Moses' world, where the average life span was fifty years or so for the privileged, forty was well into the late stages of middle age. Bearing in mind that forty is often a symbolic number in the Bible, Moses was certainly well along in his life when it was turned upside down.

A life turned upside down

One day, Moses sees an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew. Moses takes it upon himself to rescue his fellow Hebrew and so he kills the Egyptian. Why, after so long a time, does Moses identify with his fellow Hebrews? Why does he care so much that he is willing to kill an Egyptian to save a Hebrew slave from a beating? Perhaps this is how it is with our mid-life crises. We reach a point in life when so much of what we have assumed about ourselves and our world is called into question. It would be foolish to speculate too long about Moses' motivations, but his aims are clear. He will stand up for the Hebrews, or at least for one.

When Moses kills the Egyptian, he knows exactly what he has done. He tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up the murder but word gets out and Moses has to flee. So he heads out into the land of Midian. You could hardly imagine a less hospitable place.

⁴The writer of Exodus tells us that Moses had his mid-life crisis when he was “grown up” (Exodus 11:1). In Acts 7:23, we learn that Moses was forty when he killed the Egyptian. Later in Acts 7, we learn that Moses was eighty when God came to him at the burning bush (Exodus 3). You may be wondering why all this is in the New Testament book of Acts. Most of Acts 7 is devoted to a long speech made by the disciple Stephen in his own defense before the Jewish leaders. Stephen relates the long history of Israel in the hopes that the leaders will see that Jesus is the fulfillment of Israel's story and hope. The leaders do not repent and Stephen is stoned to death, making him the first Christian martyr. The man who would become known as the apostle Paul was present at Stephen's stoning, fully approving and holding coats for those who wanted to throw stones.

One day Moses is sitting by a well, perhaps reflecting on how he possibly ended up in such a place, when he comes to the aid of seven sisters and marries one, Zipporah.

After all this, we are told that God heard the cries of the Hebrews and remembered his covenant with Abraham. “God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:25). And Moses would soon see a bush that burned without being consumed.

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* (ידע *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.⁵

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.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004

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*

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

Beginning this week, April 7 – *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."

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.