



Six Themes
Everyone Should Know

Exodus

V. Steven Parrish

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Press

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Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

Six Themes Everyone Should Know consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

Introduction to *Exodus*

Exodus is one of the books of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. The opening verses describe a continuation of creational and covenantal themes in Genesis. Long years after their arrival in Egypt and the death of Joseph, the Israelites have grown “exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7), just as God had promised (Genesis 1:28; 35:1).

The tone turns ominous when the story introduces “a new king [who] arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Pharaoh perceives a threat to his state economy, so he enslaves the Israelites. Thus, an oppressive power, bolstered by the gods of Egypt, threatens the promises God made to the ancestors and the whole of creation. And so the dramatic conflict is set. What follows is a tale that has emboldened oppressed people for centuries, a story in which God empowers human striving for freedom.

In this insightful study, Steven Parrish introduces us to six themes that focus on revealing the character of God. God listens to the captives’ suffering and responds with a name (YHWH) and several emissaries. From the Passover meal through the wilderness, God sustains the people with food, water, and law. God promises to be present to the people in the gifts of the tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Finally, God is merciful and gracious, as demonstrated in the golden calf episode.

May this study fill your heart with confidence in the promises and purposes of the God of the Exodus.

Biblical Backgrounds to Exodus

Author and Date

“My own point of view is that Exodus is a patchwork quilt of traditions from various periods in Israel’s life. Yet it is also a finished product. In its earliest form, it was probably a relatively brief narrative with the basic thread of the story, dating before the monarchy. . . . Existing versions of the story were reworked and supplemented in a major way during the exile by a redactor.”

—Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 5–6.

Major Concerns

“God does not remain unchanged by all that happens. . . . God is not only the one who is; God is also one who in some sense becomes. Hence the identity of Yahweh, not very clear at the beginning of the narrative, achieves a depth and clarity as the narrative progresses through divine speech and action as well as human alertness and boldness.”

—Fretheim, *Exodus*, 15.

“The exodus is seen to be a sign of hope that poverty and oppression are not the last word, for God is at work on behalf of a different future.”

—Fretheim, *Exodus*, 18.

Importance

“The book of Exodus moves from slavery to worship, from Israel’s bondage to Pharaoh to its bonding to Yahweh.”

—Fretheim, *Exodus*, 1.

“As a constitutive event, the exodus . . . so captured the imagination of Israel that it not only served to illuminate Israel’s most basic identity but also functioned as a prism for interpreting all of Israel’s subsequent history.”

—Fretheim, *Exodus*, 10.

God not only speaks and acts but also listens.

Chapter 1

God Listens

Scripture

Exodus 1–2 God listens to captive people.

Exodus 15:22–25; 16:1–17:7 God listens to hungry and thirsty people.

Exodus 32:1–14; 33:7–11 God listens to intercessory prayers.

Prayer

God, there are so many words—too many. Everyone is talking, and no one listens. Sometimes it feels like what we have to say—yearn to say, need to say—is squeezed out because of so many words. But you have shown yourself, again and again, to be a listening God who hears our outcries, even welcomes them. And more, we have found healing in your listening, and we thank you. Help us to become engaged listeners too, and perhaps as we listen to others, we may become agents of healing. Amen.

Introduction

The opening of the book of Exodus is tightly linked to the preceding book of Genesis. Exodus 1:1–5 reminds us that Jacob and his family, to whom we are introduced in Genesis, have made their way to Egypt. We quickly discover that by the time of the Exodus narrative the first generation of Israelite sojourners has died, but not before being faithful to the creational mandate to “be fruitful

and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Clearly, God has been faithful to the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (12:2; 15:5; 17:6; 26:4; 28:14). They indeed have many descendants, as Exodus 1:7 makes clear. Unfortunately, the descendants reside not in the land of the promise but in Egypt. The story of Exodus will set into motion the events that will eventually bring together the twin pillars of God’s commitment to the ancestors: land and descendants.

The Israelites’ abundant growth does not go unnoticed. A new, unnamed Pharaoh sees and, alarmed by Israel’s creative potential, sets in place policies designed to thwart the reproductive capabilities of the people. First comes the policy of severe and oppressive labor. When that fails, Pharaoh commands that all newborn male children be executed. Then, the people “cried out” (Exodus 2:23).

The narrative does not say that the people cried out to God. We know only that they “cried out,” and that God heard. Perhaps “overheard” would be more precise. God’s hearing leads to divine remembering and reminds God of the pledge to the ancestors of descendants and land—a guarantee now threatened by the reckless and deadly policies of Pharaoh. God’s hearing or listening sets the exodus into motion.

The outcry of the people will have a joyful counterpart in Exodus 15. After the people are beyond the sea safely out of reach of Pharaoh, Moses and Miriam will sing songs of thanksgiving. Thus, the first significant section of Exodus has an almost lament-like structure: outcry, petitions along the way, and finally affirmation with thanksgiving. All are predicated on a God who listens.

A Basic Theme: God Listens

For faith communities the actions and speech of God have held central focus when reading Exodus. After all, the Hebrew word *dabar* translates as both word and act. For a period in the twentieth century, it was customary for both the church and the academy to view the bulk of the Old Testament as a witness to the mighty acts of God in history. Although that view has fallen out of favor, it is beyond question that the Bible portrays a God who acts and speaks. That it also presents a God who listens has been less noticed.

The theme of divine listening is painted against the backdrop of human outcry, complaint, petition, and inquiry. In each case, God’s attentive capacity is on bold display.

Outcry. As noted above, Israel's initial outcry is a tormented outpouring of anguish to whomever might hear. Perhaps the reader is supposed to infer that the cry was explicitly directed to God, but the text itself is not quite that bold. It will be later, at the crossing of the sea, when the narrator tells us that the Israelites "cried out to the LORD" (Exodus 14:10). But here it is the unfocused outcry of people in misery that God hears.

Complaint. In Exodus 16 the people are between the sea and Sinai when they begin to "complain" or "grumble" because they are hungry. This complaint was explicitly directed against Moses and Aaron (16:2). The people reason that it would have been better to have stayed in Egypt where food and water were readily available. Although Moses deftly deflects their complaint and counters that the people were, in fact, complaining against God, the Lord hears and provides the gift of manna (16:12). While the people's complaining will be treated differently in Numbers, here the Lord realizes that food and water are crucial for their survival and responds accordingly.

Petition. One of the more visible ways in which God's listening is crucial is in petition. It was Moses' speaking to God ("crying out") that resulted in fresh water (15:22–25). More pointedly, following the golden calf episode (32:1–6), God is said to be genuinely angry: ". . . that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (32:10). In a shrewdly crafted intercession, Moses argues that God's honor will be tarnished should God give full vent to divine wrath. As a result of divine listening, the destruction of the "calf builders" was graciously averted.

Inquiry. In Exodus 33:7–11 readers are suddenly and unexpectedly introduced to the tent of meeting. People who sought the Lord would go there, presumably to inquire about some matter. Moses would enter the tent, where he and God would have a conversation, much as friends talk to one another (v. 11). To be sure, the text talks about God speaking, but the notions of inquiry and conversation suggest very strongly that the God of the tent and the God of Exodus is a listening God.

The Life of Faith: God Listens to Us

While the Exodus affirmation that God listens may be a theme in a biblical book, it is much more than that. It is also a mark of the fundamental character of God. To put it another way, when God listens, God is acting in character. More importantly, the God we encounter in Exodus is the same Holy One who journeys with us by day and watches over us at night. The God who heard the outcry of oppressed slaves in the past is the same God who hears us and stands bound to us in covenant fidelity today. That is good news!

That the Lord listens means that God is accessible. There are no lines in which to wait, no passports, visas, voter I.D.'s, P.I.N.'s, or passwords. All that's necessary is a cry, a complaint, a petition, or an inquiry. Accessibility to God flows from the Holy One's character as a listening God.

The dependability of a listening God stands in stark contrast to the world that many of us experience day in and day out. The polarization that exists between political parties, factions within parties, the various "culture wars," radical disagreements over immigration, and so on are often driven by loud and angry voices shouting at and past one another. Genuine dialogue and conversation rarely take place. Unlike the exchanges between Moses and God in the tent of meeting, we've become accustomed to gall and bitterness. For many people of faith, it has become an alien and disorienting world. Surely the world from which the Israelites cried out also seemed strange and disorienting. After all, Egypt was a land that once offered food and life, but new leaders transformed it into a land of oppression and death. From that context, God heard, and the events that led to liberation were set into motion. So there is a reason for us to have hope.

Finally, events and crises in life overtake us, and it seems that there is no one to whom to turn. A child lies dying in a hospital bed. A young teenager is bullied at school and on social media. A husband of fifty years is slowly slipping away into the darkness of dementia. A young mother is sinking into the depths of depression. A young husband is ensnared by the deadly grip of opioid addiction. The list seems endless, and in so many of these cases, it can seem that there is no one to whom to turn—or at least no one who is up to the task at hand.

The only petition in the desperate Psalm 88 is “Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry” (v. 2). This is a prayer that pleads to be heard from the depths of utter despair. The good news from the Exodus story is that God hears us and listens to us.

The Church: A Listening Community

In many ways, the church is a community of prayer. That is as it should be. As a community organized around the presence of God, prayer should be a central part of its life. So, no less than individuals, the church cries out, complains, petitions, and inquires. And just as God listens to individuals, God listens to the church at prayer. In fact, prayer is predicated on the theological conviction that God listens and has the freedom and wisdom to choose if and how to respond. If that were not the case, then prayer would make little sense. And so we pray, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

If the conviction of a listening God beckons us to pray, might there be another side to this “theological coin”? If the church is to sense anything instructive for its nature and being from the biblical portrayal of God, should we not be about this business of listening as well?

The church has not always been keen on listening. We have been far more focused on speaking. We have often attended to rules and regulations: what to do or not to do; who’s right or wrong. We’ve made pronouncements about orthodoxy or heresy, producing creeds and confessions. Not that these are necessarily inappropriate for the church, but what if we flipped the coin? What would it be like to become a genuine, listening community? What might the church look like if it decided, instead of speaking first and listening later, to listen along with God?

One of the many things that the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have shown us is that there are people all around us whose voices have not been heard. One can only suspect that these are the tip of the iceberg. Tragic incidents of harassment and overt racism created contexts in which hurting people found a voice and are finally being heard. But must it take a tragedy to create a space for oppressed people to be heard? Are there not ways that the church can offer safe places for anguished and hurt people to cry out, without being judgmental or patronizing? Sometimes merely being heard is enough to provide at least a toehold on life.

With a little imagination, a lot of patience, and a lot of effort, surely the church can learn the art of listening.

If the church is to be a genuine healing agent in a broken world, then those of us who are the church are enjoined to develop our capacity to listen along with God. We are beckoned to identify the people whose voices have been stifled for one reason or the other. The challenge, then, is to create the space and opportunity for the hurting people among us to shout out and be heard instead of being dismissed. That is the path that leads from brokenness to wholeness and well-being. That is the Exodus path.

For Reflection and Action

1. Have you ever experienced a sense of relief—even healing—when someone has sincerely listened to share your concerns?
2. Identify specific people or groups in your community who cry out to be heard. What are their interests?
3. Name ways that your congregation can be a better listener. What are some specific ways that you can make your church a safe and caring community where people feel comfortable voicing their most profound concerns?
4. Create a puzzle in which children fill in key words or phrases pertaining to themes of “God listens.” Share the puzzle with the children in your church.



Group Gatherings

Eva Stimson

God Listens

Main Idea

Not only does God speak and act, but God also listens. Because being heard can be liberating and healing, the church is called to follow the example of God in Exodus and become a listening community.

Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “God Listens.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select questions and activities that you will use.
- Gather newsprint and markers, if needed, and prepare to post newsprint sheets on a wall or bulletin board.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask volunteers to bring refreshments for the next five gatherings.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.
- Have available paper and pens or pencils.
- Review the gathering format: Gathering, Opening Worship, Conversation, and Conclusion.

Opening Worship

Prayer (unison)

Sometimes, God, it seems as if there are so many words—too many. Everyone is talking, and no one really bothers to listen.

Sometimes it feels like what we have to say, yearn to speak, or need to say gets squeezed out because of so many words. But you have shown yourself, again and again, to be a listening God who hears our outcries—even welcomes them. And more, we have found healing in your listening, and we thank you. Help us to become engaged listeners too, and perhaps as we listen to others, we may become agents of healing. Amen.

Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Exodus 33:7–11 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is reread and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

(spoken prayers may be offered)

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

Conversation

- Introduce chapter 1, “God Listens.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review the Introduction (pp. 1–2). Share these key points:
 - a. The opening of Exodus reminds us of God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis.
 - b. The story of Exodus sets into motion events that will eventually bring together the twin pillars of God’s promise to the ancestors: land and descendants.
 - c. The first major section of Exodus has an almost lament-like structure: outcry, petitions along the way, and finally affirmation with thanksgiving.
- Review “A Basic Theme: God Listens” (pp. 2–4). Distribute paper and pens or pencils. Have participants write in a few

sentences what they would say if someone asked, “What do you believe about God?” Have them review what they have written and circle references to God’s actions. Then have them underline references to God’s words. Ask:

Did anyone mention God’s listening?

Divide a sheet of newsprint into three columns with the headings “God acts,” “God speaks,” and “God listens.” Invite participants to give any examples they can think of from the Old Testament, especially Exodus, of God acting, speaking, and listening. List these in the appropriate column, noting which list is the longest. Ask:

Which of the three do you tend to emphasize in your own view of God?

Why do you think God’s words and actions often tend to be noticed more than God’s listening?

Form two groups to look more closely at examples of God’s listening. Have one group read Exodus 15:22–25; 16:1–17:7; the other group reads Exodus 32:1–14, noting what gets God’s attention (complaints, petition, intercession) and how God listens and responds. Have someone from each group report on the discussion.

- Review “The Life of Faith: God Listens to Us” (pp. 4–5). Share these key points:
 - a. Listening is a mark of the fundamental character of God.
 - b. The God who heard the outcry of oppressed slaves in the past is the same God who hears us today and responds in our times of need.
 - c. God is accessible and dependable in a world where genuine dialogue and conversation are all too rare.

Read aloud Psalm 13. Ask:

Where does the tone shift in this lament (i.e., between verses 4 and 5)?

What might account for the radical change? Could it be the result of having been heard by God?

- Review “The Church: A Listening Community” (pp. 5–6). Have participants reflect silently on the first question in For Reflection and Action (p. 6). Suggest that they reread Exodus 33:7–11 and imagine themselves bringing a need or petition into the tent of meeting. Ask: How does it feel to be heard by God? By other members of your community of faith? What happens when people are not heard and keep issues bottled up inside of them?

Form several groups, and discuss the second and third questions in For Reflection and Action (p. 6). Have someone in each group record ideas about how the church can become a listening, healing community for people in need. Have each group share its thoughts.

Conclusion

Invite participants to lift up prayers for people or groups in your community who cry out to be heard. Thank God for listening.

Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

Amen.