



Exodus 3:1-14
 What's In A Name?
 Yahweh: The God Who Is

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Today we continue our series on the names of God, titled, “What’s In A Name?” And the name today – Yahweh – is probably the most important and foundational name for God in Scripture, along with Jesus. We learn the core foundational truths of who God is in this name, and really every other name ascribed to God is an outgrowth of this name. This is not the first place we see the name Yahweh in Scripture, but it is arguably the most famous place where we see it, because of the circumstances surrounding it. Let me try and bring some things out of the passage we just read to fully understand what’s going on before we get to this name of God and what it means for us today.

So, Moses is tending the flocks of his father-in-law in the region of Midian, which is not in Egypt, when his life takes a sudden turn. **God comes to Moses in this bush, lets him know that he's on holy ground, and that he's in the presence of the Lord.** Then he reveals to Moses who this is he's conversing with: The God of his ancestors. The God of the Hebrew people. And immediately, Moses' level of reverence goes up through the roof, as he turns his face away from the bush, afraid to even gaze on God's presence in the symbol of the burning bush.

Things continue with God telling Moses that he's seen the suffering, he's heard the cries of the Hebrew people, and so he's going to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, and take them into a new land that will be their own. As Moses listened to this, he would have certainly begun to feel a sense of joy that God had come to liberate his own people. Although Moses grew up in Pharaoh's home, and not in a Hebrew household, he knew who his people really were...he knew who were his ancestors, his spiritual heritage, and spiritual family.

So, **God tells Moses that He is going to bring the Hebrews out of slavery and into a land of plenty and a land of freedom.** And Moses must certainly have been excited to hear this. We don't know what Moses was thinking at this point, but it must have been something like, “This is such Good News! I can't wait to see you do this. It will be great to be reunited with my real

family after you lead them out of Egypt. Where should I wait for them and meet up with them?”

But God isn't done speaking. And as Moses is trying to decide how to greet everyone when they show up – handshake, fist-bump, hugs, high-fives, chest-bumps, kiss on the cheek, or the always trendy “social distancing elbow bumps” or “foot high fives”? – as Moses is pondering, here's what God says to Moses in the next verse: **“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10)**. Now Moses is thinking, “Crud!! I fell for the old 'burning bush' trick. I knew I should have just walked away!”

So immediately, he starts trying to hide behind objections, something we're all familiar with, when he then responds: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). Moses wants to know what it is about himself that qualifies him for this job. In fact, he doesn't feel qualified. “Who am I?” he says. God answers Moses' question, sort of. He responds, **“I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (Exodus 3:12)**.

You see, Moses wants to put up objections based on who he is; he doesn't think he's qualified for the job. But who Moses is isn't as important as who God is. God sees something in Moses that Moses himself doesn't see, and God knows that this really isn't about what Moses will do, but what God will do through him. So “I will be with you” is God's answer to Moses' question. Moses, however, isn't done with the questioning. Verse 13 says: **But Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” what shall I say to them?’ (Genesis 3:13)**.

Given the fact that Moses grew up in an Egyptian home, this makes sense that he would ask this. They had a multiplicity of gods: the god of sun, the god of rain, the god of land, the god of disease, god of football, god of pandemics that interrupt football, and so forth. Now, even though his father-in-law was a Jewish priest, Moses still had 17 years of Egyptian religious

experience when he grew up in Pharaoh's home (and Egyptian Pharaohs were considered gods!), so asking which god this is makes sense. So Moses' first question was, "Who am I?" as he doesn't think he's worthy or capable of doing what God is asking him to do. And God responds by saying, "Doesn't matter; I'll be with you." Then Moses basically asks, "Well, if who *I* am doesn't matter so much, then...who are *you*?...What do I say to the Hebrews when they ask who sent me?"

And here's what the next verse tells us, **God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me [Moses] to you'" (Exodus 3:14).** In answering Moses' question about who He is, God responds with a name that is also a claim to his being. The Hebrew words here are a play on the verb "to be" though there is no such verb in Hebrew. We'll talk about that more in a moment. It says, "Yahweh asher Yahweh." Which basically means, "I am what I am" or "I will always be what I will always be." This name of God occurs well over 6,000 times in the Old Testament, and most of our English Bibles represent it with the word "LORD" in all capital letters.

Some of you may be aware that this name of God was considered to be so sacred that a Jewish person wouldn't say it when using it in conversation or when reading it. This practice did not come into being until the last three or four centuries before Christ. **Instead of Yahweh, a Jewish person would substitute in the word Adonai, which means Lord.**

We will look at Adonai as one of God's names in a few weeks. The name "Jehovah" is another work-around of sorts, that combines the vowels of Adonai with the four consonants of Yahweh. This is how they would write Yahweh when they needed to: It would be with the vowels from Adonai. It's confusing, I know. This is why, as I mentioned last week, the more proper way to pronounce Jehovah is really "Yehovah" and is usually pronounced that way in scholarly circles, because it really is Yahweh, but with these other vowels from Adonai. In the end, Jehovah is essentially a "latinized" pronunciation of Yahweh that uses the vowels of Adonai. So, when you hear a name for God like the one we looked at last week – "Jehovah Jireh" – it is really is taking the name of Yahweh and putting it in a format that over time

was considered ok to actually say out loud (Jehovah)...and then adding the “Jireh” which means provide. Or there’s also Jehovah Raphe – the Lord who heals – and a few others.

But the original name is Yahweh. **The first time we see the name Yahweh is in Genesis 2:4.** This is the slowed down creation account, where the man is created first and then a bit later the woman is created out of him. In Genesis 1, the name for God is Elohim – which makes things even more confusing, and it’s a name we will look at in a couple weeks; but at least that name is not some re-working of a name considered too holy to say and combined with vowels from another word, and then mis-pronounced in English. ☺

And this name that God gives is also a description of who he is: **He is a constant state of being. He always is. He’s uncreated. He’s before, beyond, and above any other deity.** Yahweh, whether repeated the way that God first puts it here when he says to Moses “Yahweh asher Yahweh,” or on its own, such as when he says, “Tell them Yahweh sent you”...either way, Yahweh is a name that sort of translates to our verb “to be,” but Hebrew actually doesn’t have the verb “to be” or any of its variations. It’s communicated through a change to words, similarly to how we change a noun from singular to plural by adding an “s” or changing a verb to past-tense by adding “ed”.

But some form of “to be” is what seems to be getting communicated here. **Hebrew Bible dictionaries define “Yahweh” as “self-existent” or something like that; or more specifically, since it’s a name for God, “the self-existing one.”** The verb is clearly not given in the past tense. So when God answers Moses’ question with “Yahweh asher Yahweh,” it’s not, “I was who I was” and it’s not future tense, “I will be who I will be.” It’s also not fully present tense. It’s sort of a combination of present and future. It’s like God is saying “I am the God who always is.” “I am eternally ‘ising’,” “I exist as the existing one.” Something along those lines.

So, it’s quite a response really. To put it in context in an illustration I’ve used before: Can you imagine if you asked someone, “who are you” or perhaps

more commonly, we ask “how are you” and they said, “I am...” and that’s it? Or even more confusingly, “I am I am.” Not “I am Brian” or “I am a dad” or “I am fine” or “I am happy” or “I am hungry” or “I am bored”...just “I am...” or “I am that I am.” That would just be a little weird. But that’s God’s answer to this question of, “Who are you?": “I am that I am”...tell them that “I am, who is always I ‘am-ing’” (Yahweh) sent you.

Quite frankly, the old cartoon “Popeye” had it pretty close: **(Video clip)**

There are a few things we can learn about God from this name, “Yahweh.” **First, God has no need of us.**¹ I know that comes as a shock to some of you. We humans have a way of overinflating our importance to the world, as if we are the saviors and not Jesus. The simple fact that God doesn’t need us can be a little offensive to our human nature – that part of us that wants to be significant; to be needed; to be important. But it’s true – God does not need us. He doesn’t need anyone. He is completely whole within himself, and he is eternal – he has always existed, and he always will. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega.

And he is the only one in existence who can be described this way. The rest of us need quite a lot to go right in order to keep existing! The most powerful person on earth is still at the mercy of his health and fortune, and the grace of God. If nothing else, Coronavirus has taught us this in 2020. Yahweh stands alone in needing nothing, in being wholly self-sufficient.

Second, Yahweh is a relational God. Yahweh is only used in the Bible when the author is talking about God’s personal relationship with his people. A great example of this is Psalm 19. David talks in the first 6 verses about Elohim (one of the other names of God I mentioned earlier) and Elohim’s relationship with the material world. Then, in verse 7, he shifts and starts to write about Yahweh and his relationship with those who know him and who are in covenant with him.

The fact that God introduces himself to us as “Yahweh” tells us that his first priority in relating to us is making sure we know that he is the intensely personal God, seeking to have a relationship with his people.

So God doesn't need us, but he wants us. This is a God who was so love-motivated to know us and to be in relationship with us that he came to earth as a human and took the punishment we deserved. Yahweh is relational.

Third, Yahweh is with us. God is here, existing, right now, interacting with our world, and among us. And he does that out of love. God is under no obligation to remain close to us, working in our lives and writing a love story between himself and the world. And yet, he chooses to do so. In fact, he chooses to build his very kingdom among believers, something that Jesus affirmed in his own teaching such as in Luke 17: "One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, 'When will the Kingdom of God come?' Jesus replied, 'The Kingdom of God can't be detected by visible signs. You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you'" (Luke 17:20-21). Yahweh is with us.

Fourth, Yahweh Is wholly other than us. When was the last time we took a step back and acknowledged the holiness of God? The most common and popular theologies are ones that make God into our own personal servant – the ones that will get us our best life now; perfect peace and prosperity and no problems. Yahweh is not our servant. He is infinitely and entirely wholly other than you and me. In Psalm 50:21, God says through Asaph, the author, "You thought I was one like yourself." He isn't like us. He relates to us more deeply than we can ever imagine, but he is not like us. His ways are higher than our own, and he is set apart from everything and everyone else in existence in holiness, strength, and power. Yahweh is completely "other."

Fifth, Yahweh keeps his covenant with us. God calls himself "Yahweh" when he first enters into the covenant with Abraham, a subtle promise that he will forever be faithful in keeping his word. When he reveals himself again as "Yahweh" to Moses, it is our reminder that he is unchanging, and we can trust him not to back out or change his mind.

God will never stop wanting us, and he will never cease in his pursuit of us. He is the ultimate covenant-keeper, the one who keeps his promises and does

what he said he will do. We can trust God as much as we want and it will never be too much. He will always measure up. Yahweh keeps his covenant.

And all of that makes Yahweh worth seeking after. **This God who doesn't need us but wants us, is with us but wholly other than us, and who keeps his covenant with us, is worth pursuing.** He finds *you* worth pursuing. Maybe you doubt that, and you're like, "Dude, no way!" but God's response is, "Yahweh!" We see it in this passage, as he pursues after Moses and reveals who he is in this name. Similarly, God has created you in His image and he keeps after you. He has come to us, even. Not in a perplexing bush that's burning but not consumed by the flames. He's come to us in Jesus Christ, the one who even takes this phrase "I am" and applies it to himself. So, let's pursue him back, and be in relationship with the existing one, the great I am, the God of the universe who loves you, is with you and desires to be in relationship with you, now and right into eternity. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ The wording for these six points comes from Biblestudytools.com. The way they put this was more succinct than anything else I read or that I could come up with on my own.