

I AM who I AM

Exodus 3:1-15

When a couple discovers that they're pregnant, among the numerous rituals you go through to get ready for the baby, the most contentious one for many is agreeing on a name. Carissa has said that it's probably good that we only have one boy because we've never agreed on any other boy's name besides Joshua.

It's a big deal. Do we go with a family name? That's common, honorable, easy. Do we pick a biblical name, which usually safe: David, Micah, Sarah, Deborah. Though you have to be a little careful; you don't want to end up with Maher-shalah-hash-baz or something. I once had a friend ask me what Beth-Aven meant (from Hosea 4:15). It sounds pretty—Beth as a first name, Aven as a middle name. When I told her it meant “house of iniquity,” she wisely moved on.

And then there's the more creative trend in names. If you don't want your kid to be one of four other children with the same name in their class, you've got to mix it up. Maybe a unique spelling on an older name, or just make up new one: Hashtag, Billion, Rocket. Or take cue from a celebrity baby name—Ocean, Apple, Sage Moonblood.¹ Perhaps the coolest name I've ever heard is what Carissa's cousin named his son: Chase Danger Jones. That's right: Danger is literally his middle name. That's awesome.

But as much pressure as we might put on ourselves, a name today is still little more than an *identifying tag* for someone. It's the way we know we're talking about this person and not that one. Which is very different than the way that names function in the Bible. When someone is given a name in the Bible, it is rarely a simple identifying tag. It often communicates something of the person's character or reputation, or even role they will play in life.

For instance, think of Abraham—born Abram (which means “exalted father”), but renamed Abraham, which means “father of a multitude” (Gen. 17:4-5). That tells us something about what role Abraham will play in life. Or Jacob, which means “cheater”—and so he was (Gen. 25:26). Or in the book of Exodus so far, we have Moses, which sounds like the Hebrew from “draw out”, because Pharaoh's daughter said, “I drew him out of the water” (Exod. 2:10), which not only describes his experience of salvation, but foreshadows Israel's coming salvation. Or the name Moses gave to his firstborn, Gershom, which sounds like the Hebrew for sojourner, stranger, alien, because that's what Moses felt like after having been rejected by both his people Israel and the Egyptians he grew up with (Exod. 2:22).

¹ See “Celebrity baby names top 20 – the crazy list,” <http://www.kidspot.com.au/birth/baby-names/naming-your-baby/celebrity-baby-names-top-20-the-crazy-list>.

So in the Bible, names are often significant. They tell us something about the person. And more important than any other name we encounter in Scripture is the name revealed to us in our passage this morning: the name of the LORD—*Yahweh*. I AM who I AM.

We often hear people talk about the ‘names of God’—*El Shaddai, Adonai, Elohim*. But technically those are titles, not names. God only has one self-chosen, proper name—the one revealed in this passage. We’re not 100% sure how to pronounce it, since for centuries it was considered too holy to even utter. Sometimes you hear “Jehovah,” but “Yahweh” is far more likely.² You can recognize the name in your English Bibles whenever you see the word “LORD” in all capital letters. If you’ve ever wondered why sometimes in the Old Testament the word Lord is in all caps, that’s why. When it’s translating the name *yhwh*, it’s in all caps; if it’s translating the Hebrew word *adonai*, which is a title meaning ‘lord’ or ‘master,’ it’s not.

But more important than recognizing the name when we see it is knowing what it tells us about the God who bears it. As one author puts it, “The identity of God, the mission of God, the action of God, were all bound up in that one name.”³

But this name is revealed to us not in a phone book or on a kiosk or a label, but in a story. A story we’ve been walking through for a couple of weeks—the story of the exodus.

Last week we met one of the main characters of the story of Exodus—Moses. Who, despite becoming a pillar of ancient Israel, had a questionable start to his career. After spending the first 40 years of his life in luxury, being raised by the daughter of Pharaoh, he spent his next forty years in relative obscurity, settling down in Midian after a failed attempt to defend the Hebrews and being rejected by both Israel and Egypt. And we wondered whether this is really the guy God was going to use to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt.

We find the answer to that question in Exodus 2:23–4:17, which is one long section that we’ll be looking at this morning and when we return to Exodus after the missions conference. And as we’ll see today, the real answer to that question has nothing to do with Moses, and everything to do with the God who makes his name known.

We pick up the story in Exodus 2:23.

The Groaning of Israel and the Compassion of God (2:23-25)

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew. (2:23-25)

² The pronunciation of the name fell out of use several centuries before Christ, most likely out reverence for God or a fear of breaking the third commandment (i.e., not taking the LORD’s name in vain, which in reality has nothing to do with whether we say the word or some substitute for it). The tradition throughout history up to today has been to substitute *adonai* for *yhwh* when reading aloud (*adonai* means “lord” or “master”). This is how both the Greek translation of the OT (LXX) and the NT translate the divine name: *kyrios* (“Lord”). This is also where the pronunciation “Jehovah” comes from. In order to protect the pronunciation of the name, the scribes took the vowels for the word *adonai* and put them in the letters for *yhwh*. Filter that through Latin and into English, you have “Jehovah,” which, despite its popularity, is not an historically accurate pronunciation.

³ C. H. J. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (CDGP; Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 51.

So far we've seen how despite multiplying and growing into a great nation while in Egypt, the people of Israel were viewed as a threat. So the king of Egypt first enslaved the whole nation, and then attempted to systematically murder the baby boys. And though we've seen evidence of God's work behind the scenes, he's been rather absent from the page. His people are suffering. Notice the repetition of the words "cry" and "groan" in these verses—*four times* we're told that they are crying and groaning; their suffering is severe. And God's promises are being attacked; by opposing the people of Israel and trying to stop them from flourishing, Pharaoh is setting himself up against God.

But God has not been absent. And here we see how he is compassionately attentive to his children. For each mention of groaning or crying, there is a description of God's actions on behalf of his people: he *hears* their groaning, he *remembers* his covenant, he *sees* his people, and he *knows*—he knows their suffering. He is intimately acquainted with it.

Nor was he not taken off guard by Pharaoh. We were told back in Genesis 15 that this whole series of events was part of his plan: "Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions" (Gen. 15:13-14). So when it says God "remembered" his covenant, it's not as though he forgot about his promises, the way you or I might forget to stop at the store on the way home like we said we would. It means he is giving attention to his covenant, calling it to mind and acting on it—a covenant that he told Abraham would be fulfilled *through* slavery in Egypt, not by going around it.

So we see God's compassion for his people's suffering at the end of ch. 2. Chapter 3 begins to show us what he's going to do about it, and how he'll do it through this obscure servant named Moses.

The Revelation of God and the Call of Moses (3:1-15)

Here we have one of the most iconic scenes in all of Scripture—the burning bush. Moses, having settled in the land of Midian with a wife and family and taken up his father-in-law's shepherding trade, is going about business as usual. Which is why God uses something rather unusual to get his attention—a bush that is on fire but not consumed. He doesn't know yet that this mountain is special—"the mountain of God," the narrator tells us (here called Horeb, usually called Sinai). He doesn't know that what he is seeing is an angel of the LORD. Nor, as we're about to find out, does he really know who the LORD is. But all of that's about to change.

Moses turns aside to take a closer look at this spectacle, and God calls him by name from the bush. "'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground'" (3:4-5). What is an otherwise normal mountain and an otherwise normal bush becomes sacred, not because there's something magical about the place, but because of the presence of the LORD. God is there. Removing one's shoes is an act of reverence for God's presence, of humility before God.

But who is this God and why is he there? He tells Moses who he is in v. 6: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,": to which Moses responds

with a holy fear. And if he wasn't terrified enough, he then tells him what he is going to do in vv. 7-10. And notice in these verses an echo of ch. 2:23-25:

Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." (3:7-8)

God has heard and seen his people, and knows their suffering, and he is going to rescue them from slavery and fulfill his promise to Abraham by bringing them into the land of promise. He reiterates this plan in vv. 9-10, but now watch for the difference:

"And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. [Sounds just like v. 7] Come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt." (3:9-10)

God is going to act on behalf of his people to save them—he's going to come down. And he's going to do it *by sending Moses*.

Talk about the most overwhelming job interview in the history of mankind. Moses reacts how anybody should have reacted in that situation—v. 11: "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?'" Moses clearly recognizes he is not cut out for this. And we'll talk more about this part of the story (Moses' call) when we come back to this passage in a few weeks. But notice what God does *not* to Moses: "You can do this. You have to believe in yourself. You're smart enough and brave enough. I believe in you." All the things we might expect him to say today. Instead he responded by promising to be *with* him. He responded by promising his presence. Verse 12: "He said, 'But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.'" Again, we'll look more at this in a couple of weeks, but what equips Moses for his call is not his wisdom or intelligence or can-do attitude or mad leadership skills; what equips him is the presence of God.

But then Moses anticipates a situation. And here is where the divine name comes into focus. Verse 13: "Then Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?'"

Moses is picturing what this conversation with the people of Israel will be like when he shows up out of the blue, not having been seen for 40 years, and claims that *God* has sent him to lead them out of Egypt. That's just crazy talk. How are they going to know whether to believe him? What if they ask me for your name as verification that you really sent me? Do you have a business card or something I can show them?

And what we realize here is just how disconnected from God and the people of God Moses has become. Notice first how he says, "the God of your fathers," not "the God of our fathers." Moreover, he doesn't even know the name of the God of his father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Which, when you think about it, isn't entirely surprising. He was raised in an Egyptian household, and as soon as he tried to associate with his people, he was run out of town.

And so Moses is asking an honest question. If they want some verification that you sent me and ask for your name, what do I say? God takes his question, and uses it as an opportunity to reveal not only the name itself, but the *significance* of the name. What it means. What it tells us about the God who bears it.

Look at v. 14:

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (3:14-15)

Now you understand why God told Moses to take off his shoes. This is holy ground—God is revealing to his people his self-chosen, proper name. The name he is to be known by for all eternity. Not just the word, but the significance of it. So what does it mean?

The clue comes in the declaration he makes before he actually answers the question. Moses asks him, “what do I say?” and before God says, “say this to the people of Israel,” he makes a declaration: I AM who I AM. Why would he do that?

Some have accused him here of being snarky and dismissive. “Don’t you question me, Moses!” But I don’t think so. As one author suggests, “‘I am [who] I am’ is not a rebuttal . . . *but a clue to the meaning of the proper name YHWH. God’s name involves something that he will be or become.*”⁴

This makes sense when you consider that the name itself, *yhwh*, comes from the Hebrew verb, “to be.” God’s name, the LORD (Yahweh) means “I AM.” God himself makes this connection when he actually answers Moses’ question. Notice the parallel here:

14	God	said to Moses,		"I AM WHO I AM."
	And he	said,	"Say this to the people of Israel,	'I AM has sent me to you.'"
15	God also	said to Moses,	"Say this to the people of Israel,	'The LORD . . . has sent me to you.'

The LORD means I AM. God’s name deals with *who God is*.

And so the question becomes, ‘Well, who is he?’ *He is!* But what does that mean? Does that mean he’s the self-existing one or something like that? How do we understand this? Here’s where we have to remember that God reveals his name to us not on a business card or a placard on his desk, or in a philosophical or theological text book, but in a *story*. God *is* who he is *in this story*. He is who is revealing himself to be to Moses right here.⁵

So who is God in this story? Think back through what we’ve seen. He is the God who cares deeply about his people. Remember the connections we saw between the end of ch. 2 and ch. 3:6-10: He is the God who hears their groaning, sees their affliction, knows their suffering, and

⁴ C. R. Seitz, “The Call of Moses and the ‘Revelation’ of the Divine Name” in *Word Without End: The Old Testament as Abiding Theological Witness*, C. R. Seitz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 239.

⁵ I owe this observation to Vern Steiner.

remembers his covenant with their forefathers. God is personally and compassionately involved with his people.

Remember what he promises to do: “I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . .” (3:8). He is the God who will save his people from their bondage. He will deliver them and rescue them and bring them to the place he wants them to be.

And he will do this by being *with them*. He is the God who is present. In fact, this is the closest contextual link to what God means when he says “I AM” in this passage. When Moses asks, “Who am I that I should go?” in v. 11, God answers in v. 12, “I will be with you.” But note that the words “I will be” are translating the exact same Hebrew word and form as the word for “I AM” in vv. 14-15. They’re identical. Who is God? He is the God who is present *with* his people. “I AM *with* you.”⁶ And he is with his people because he cares deeply about them and is committed to saving them.

This is who God is. He is the God who sees, hears, and knows his people, who will be faithful to his covenant, who comes down to be present with them in order to save them and bring them to where he wants them to be. That is his name. And according to v. 15, it will be his name to *all* generations.

This is our God. When we call upon the name of the Lord, when we pray in the name of the Lord, when we run to or cling to or trust in the name of the Lord—this is the God whom we are calling upon, praying to, trusting in. That is who he is, and who he will always be—a *compassionate God who comes down to be with us because he is committed to the salvation of his people.* And he will always live up to that name. Once again, “The identity of God, the mission of God, the action of God, [are] all bound up in that one name.”⁷

And when you come to the New Testament and you realize what the name Jesus means, this takes on a whole new level of significance.

In Matthew 1, when the angel appears to Joseph and tells him about the boy Mary is going to have, he says, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, Joshua, Yehoshua. It means “YHWH saves.” Think about that for a minute. Everything that we have learned about who the LORD is and what his name means—all of that is wrapped up in the name of Jesus. The LORD, the compassionate God who comes down to be with us because he is committed to our salvation—the God who sees and hears and knows us, who is present with us to save us from where we are and bring us to where he wants us to be—that God—*HE saves*. That is Jesus’ name. God manifests his name supremely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

It’s no wonder that we see Jesus taking on the identity of Yahweh in the New Testament. In John 8:58-59, Jesus says to the Jews, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ So they picked up stones to throw at him . . .” because they knew what he was claiming—to be equal with God. Seven other times in the book of John, Jesus echoes the divine name: *I am* the bread of

⁶ Note that God will use this identical phrase two more times before the end of their conversation (4:12, 15).

⁷ Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God*, 51.

life (6:35); *I am* the light of the world (8:12); *I am* the door (10:7, 9); *I am* the good shepherd (10:11); *I am* the resurrection and the life (11:25); *I am* the way, the truth and the life (14:6); *I am* the true vine (15:1).⁸

But perhaps the clearest declaration of Jesus sharing the unique identity of Yahweh is in Philippians 2, where Paul declares that after Jesus became incarnate and humbled himself to the point of death, “God . . . highly exalted him and bestowed on him *the name that is above every name*, so that *at the name of Jesus* every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that *Jesus Christ is Lord*, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11). And “Lord” here comes from a quotation of Isaiah 45:23-24, where “Lord” is Yahweh.

The LORD saves. That is who he is. When we think of our need for salvation— not just from any suffering we might experience in this broken world, but ultimately from our sin and rebellion against God, and the rightful wrath we deserve because of it—when we think of our need for salvation, do you turn to the LORD, whose *very name* expresses his compassion for us and his commitment to rescue us, whose *very name* tells us he has come down to be with us in the midst of our suffering so that he can bring us out from our bondage to sin and into the place he wants us to be—the good and broad land—the place of his presence and provision—ultimately the new heavens and the new earth? Do you know this God by name?

He is the LORD. Besides him there is no savior. (Isa. 43:11). “Everyone who calls upon the name of the LORD will be saved” (Joel 2:32; cf. Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. When you think of God, what comes foremost to your mind? What is dominant about his reputation for you personally?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. How is the problem of Israel described in 2:23-25?
3. How is God’s character described in this story? (hint: look for repeated actions, descriptions)
4. What is God’s plan according to 3:8? How will accomplish that plan according to v. 10?
5. How does Moses react to God’s plan? Why do you think he asks for God’s name?
6. What do we learn about God’s name here?
7. What does this story tell us about who God is?

⁸ The context of John 8:58 suggests the Greek *ego eimi* (“I am”) is meant to echo the Hebrew *’hyh* (“I am”). Seeing *ego eimi* in so many other key statements in the book suggests a similar connection is intended with each, not least because the pronoun *ego* is optional in Greek (it is implied by the first person singular verb).

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. Think about other places in Scripture that talk about God's name (e.g. Exod. 20:7; Ps. 20:7; Ps. 113:1; Rom. 10:13). How does this story inform those passages?
9. How does the revelation of God's name impact you personally?
10. How does it shape our understanding or affection for Jesus (remember: "Jesus" means "Yahweh saves")?