

Knowing the LORD by Name

Exodus 5:22–6:9

When you go to school growing up, you know your teachers not so much by name, but by title. It's Mrs. Hatfield, or Mrs. Garcia—as opposed to Joan or Andrea. I know my daughter's 1st and 2nd grade teacher as Colleen, but she's Mrs. Wolf to her—and will probably always be Mrs. Wolf. Which doesn't mean that Moriah doesn't know her; but she only knows her in a certain context—the classroom. And there's more to Colleen than the classroom. You don't really know a person *by name* until you know them as more than a teacher. Until you know them personally, not just professionally, by title.

In our passage this morning, God is going to show Moses (and us) the difference between knowing him by title, and knowing him by name. Israel, for all their relationship with God so far, has really up to this point only known him by title. He is their covenant God. But there's more to God than his covenant promises; there is the *redemption* that makes them possible. And it's when we *experience his redemption* that we come to know him *by name*.

The problem of not knowing the LORD by name was revealed to us in the previous passage, chapter 5. The kings of Egypt have enslaved God's people Israel for the last four hundred years, and God has now sent Moses to lead his people out of slavery and into the land he promised to their ancestors. In ch. 5 we saw Moses' first attempt to tell Pharaoh to let God's people go. But it didn't go so well. Instead of releasing Israel, Pharaoh increased the harshness of their slavery. But the reason he didn't release Israel was telling; in fact it revealed the central problem that God will now address throughout the rest of the book: *He didn't know the LORD*. “Who is the LORD that I should obey his voice? . . . I do not know the LORD” (5:2).

But not only was Pharaoh ignorant of the LORD, we also saw that Israel and even Moses were ignorant of the LORD. Faced with harsher slavery, Israel failed to see God's worthiness—“who is the LORD that we should suffer for him?” And Moses, being rejected once again by both Egypt and Israel, failed to see the LORD's faithfulness—“who is the LORD that I should keep serving him?”

I want to pick up where we left off, with Moses' reaction in 5:22-23, because it brings into focus just what's at stake in this whole mess, and triggers God's response in ch. 6.

The Situation: Your Name is Broken (5:22-23)

Chapter 5:22: “Then Moses turned to the LORD and said, ‘O Lord, why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all’” (5:22-23).

Moses is disillusioned with the LORD. He trusted God, followed his orders; he took the risk of coming back to Egypt where he had previously been rejected by both the Egyptians he grew up with and the Hebrew people to whom he belonged. He went to Pharaoh just like God told him to, and said just what God wanted him to say. And it only made things worse. God doesn't seem to be keeping up his end of the bargain—"you haven't delivered your people at all."

But notice the nature of Moses' critique in v. 23: "For since I came to Pharaoh to speak *in your name*, he has done evil to this people, and you have not delivered your people at all." I didn't just go to Pharaoh of my own accord, I went in your name—the name you revealed to me at the burning bush. "Thus says *the LORD, Yahweh . . .*" And guess what—your name didn't work. According to Moses, God has failed to live up to his name.

Of course as we talked about last week, it's not really that God's plan failed. The purpose of this first meeting wasn't to convince Pharaoh to let Israel go, but to expose the central problem: ignorance of the LORD. They don't know him by name; they're all missing the key ingredient. And now that that's on the table, God says in 6:1, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand he will send them out, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land." Now that Pharaoh has acknowledged with his own lips that he doesn't know who he's dealing with, and now that both you and Israel have also revealed your ignorance of who I really am, we're ready to get to work. By the time I'm done Pharaoh, he's not just going to *let* you go, he will *make* you go, so that he no longer has to deal with me. And through that, all of you will come to know that I am the LORD.

But before God sends Moses back into the devil's den, he takes the time to address Moses' accusation—that God is not living up to his name, the name he revealed earlier to Moses at the burning bush in ch. 3—*Yahweh*, as it was most likely pronounced in Hebrew, or "the LORD" as we translate it in English (using all caps). The name that means "I AM who I AM," and tells us that *God IS who he IS*, particularly who *he is* in this story of salvation and glory—a God who sees his people and knows their suffering, who hears their cries and remembers his covenant, and who comes down to be with them and deliver them from slavery and bring them to the land he promised (cf. 3:7-15). That's who God is, and who he will always be, and all of that is folded into the meaning of his name.

A name that Moses still doesn't quite get. And so God returns to the subject in 6:2-8. Not so much to put Moses in his place, but to reveal himself more deeply, and restore hope to the situation.

The Revelation: Knowing Yahweh by Name (6:2-8)

That God is interested in addressing his name is evident in the very structure of the passage. Notice how this section begins and ends—with an announcement: "I am the LORD." That's the first thing out of God's mouth in v. 2, and the last thing he says in v. 8. Then zoom in a little bit and look at vv. 6-8: again, he frames his speech with this announcement: "I am the LORD" (beginning of v. 6 and end of v. 8). And in the middle, in v. 7, he says it again: "I am the LORD."

So what is Moses missing? What does it mean to know God by name? To answer that question, God draws a contrast between knowing him by title in vv. 2-5, and knowing him by name in vv. 6-8.

Knowing God by Title: El Shaddai (6:2-5)

It's not entirely surprising that Moses is thrown off, because God is in fact doing something new in his relationship with his people. He is making himself known to them in a new way through the exodus. Israel, for all their relationship with God so far, has really up to this point only known God by title. He is "Mr. President" to them; as opposed to Barack. "Mrs. Vaclavik," as opposed to Jessica (a lot of teachers in our congregation). This is what God explains in vv. 2-5. Verse 3: "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them."

That doesn't mean that Israel didn't really know God. My children have a real relationship with their teachers, even if they don't really know them by name. It doesn't even mean that Israel didn't know what God's name was. Moriah knows that Mrs. Wolf's first name is Colleen, even though she's still Mrs. Wolf to her. Sometimes people have read this verse and assumed that up to this point that Israel didn't actually know what God's name was, which creates a problem when you go back to Genesis and you see his people addressing him by name, the LORD (e.g. Gen. 12:8; 15:2). And all sorts of theories have been proposed, based on this, about the different sources behind the books of Moses. But Israel knew God, and they knew what his name was. But they knew him in a certain context, and there is more to God than that context.

What context is that? When God appeared to Israel as "God Almighty" (Hebrew, *El Shaddai*), he did so in the context of making a covenant with them. In Genesis 17:1-2, it says, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I am *God Almighty*; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.'" A covenant in which God promised to give them the land of Canaan, and to be their God and that they would be his people. He reiterates this covenant with Jacob in Genesis 35:11, again appearing to him as *El Shaddai*, God Almighty—a title that seems to signify God's power and might to make a covenant with his people and to accomplish his promised blessing of a nation and a land. That's the kind of God he revealed himself to be to Abraham, and that's what he reminds Moses of here—he is their faithful covenant God. "I also established my *covenant* with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my *covenant*" (Exod. 6:4-5).

But there's more to God than what he revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They knew him by title; he is their covenant God. Now the time has come to make himself known by name. That's something he's going to accomplish through the exodus, and something he explains in vv. 6-8, in verses that have been described as "the gospel of the Exodus."¹

Knowing God by Name: Yahweh (6:6-8)

Look at vv. 6-8 with me. Notice again how he frames them with his announcement, "I am the LORD"—the beginning and the end. And again, right in the center, he declares "I am the LORD your God" (v. 7). What he is saying here deals specifically with the name he is making known.

¹ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 91.

And we see three specific promises as he makes his name known: the promise of redemption, of relationship, and residence. In v. 6 he asserts his promise of *redemption*: “I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.” Notice the repetition there—three different ways of describing his salvation: I will *bring you out*, I will *deliver* you, I will *redeem* you. God makes himself known by name through the experience of his redemption.

Verse 7 expresses his desire for *relationship*: “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and [listen to this] you shall *know* [before they did not know him by name, now they are going to *know*] that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burden of the Egyptians.” God makes himself known by name through the experience of his redemption.

Finally, in v. 8 he describes his plan for *residence*—for dwelling with them: “I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.”

Redemption, relationship, and residence. But of those three commitments, there is one that makes the real difference between knowing God by title and knowing him by name. One that is new to Israel’s experience here: the promise of redemption. The promises of relationship and residence were already part of God’s covenant promises in Genesis. They’re close to the heart of God and his love and commitment to his children, but there’s more to his love and power than that. There is his *redemption*. And the reason Israel doesn’t yet know God by name is because they haven’t yet experienced that redemption—the redemption of the exodus.²

We come to know God *by name*—not just title, but name—when we experience his redemption.

Knowing the LORD by Name through Jesus

For ancient Israel that mean experiencing the exodus—being delivered from slavery in Egypt and brought into the land of promise. For us, it means experiencing salvation in Christ.

As we’ve talked about before, the exodus of Israel was not just a historical event; it was a pattern and promise of a later, greater salvation to come—a salvation taken up and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Just as God promised to bring Israel out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver them from slavery, so he sets us free from the penalty and power of the sin which enslaves us. Just as God promised to redeem Israel—to buy them back—with an outstretched arm, so he redeems us today “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). It is through Jesus, and only through Jesus, that we can experience the redemption of God. His perfect life for our rebellious life; his death in our place. We come to know God by name when we experience his redemption.

So what does it look like to know God by name today? What does it mean to experience his redemption?

² See 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), 243.

First, it means *appreciating what we've been redeemed from*. If someone in your office offers to take a call for you from a particularly difficult client, you're going to be thankful that they rescued you from that call. But not nearly as thankful as you'd be if that person found you slumped over your desk, grabbed the defibrillator and performed CPR on you until the ambulance arrived. You only understand the magnitude of your salvation when you see the utter terror of what you were saved from.

For Israel, they were about to be rescued from four hundred years of harsh slavery and oppression. Systematic campaigns of murder, dehumanizing exploitation. And they're about to find out that their God is *the God who saves people from that*. And so for us, the problem God saves us from is not a minor inconvenience or setback. He saves us from our sin, and the sure and certain death we deserve because of it. Sin is not a careless mistake or a moment of weakness that's really no big deal. Sin is treason against heaven. It's our attempted insurrection against God's throne, at the expense of his glory and to the harm of his children. And so when God saves us, he saves us from the brutal dictatorship of sin, from our own willing allegiance to that sin, and from the full weight of his holy anger against that sin.

Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," has become a caricature for how hellfire-and-brimstone the Puritans could be. But if you read the actual sermon, you see that the reason he goes to such exhaustive lengths to convince the sinner of their terrible predicament before a holy God—how "God . . . holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire"³—is to impress on them both the urgency of salvation, but also the beauty and glory and love of the God *who saves us from that*. This is what we have been saved *from*—our rebellious sin and its righteous and horrible consequences. We come to know God by name in the experience of that redemption.

The second way we experience God's redemption is by *appreciating what that redemption actually cost*. If you owe someone \$10 and they say, "forget about it," you're thankful, but you'll probably forget that experience. If you owe someone \$100,000 and they say, "forget about it," you'll name your child after them, and establish a foundation in their name.

For ancient Israel, the price of their redemption will be the Passover lamb; a spotless lamb will be slain in place of Israel the firstborn. And the same is true for us—"Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed," as the apostle Paul put it (1 Cor. 5:7). Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, by dying on the cross and rising again (cf. Jn. 1:29).

The price of our redemption is not something we come up with. It's not like I made a mistake and now I have to make it up, or a stole something and now I have to pay it back. You can't pay that debt on your own, not apart from an eternity of punishment in hell. The only way we can be saved from our sins and have relationship with God is by trusting in Jesus Christ, because *he* willingly paid the debt we owed.

When he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was arrested and crucified, do you remember his request? "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will." (Matt. 26:39). The cup he was talking about is a common metaphor in the Old Testament for the wrath of God against sin (e.g. Isa. 51:17; Jer. 25:17). Jesus knew what

³ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, vol. 6 (1817; New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 458.

was about to happen, what it would cost him—the full weight of God’s holy anger against all human sin throughout all history—the full terror of hell—was brewing and foaming in that cup. And Jesus took it, and drained it to the dregs. That’s what your salvation cost the Son of God. We know God by name when we recognized the price of our redemption.

Third, we know by God name in the experience of his redemption, when we embrace what we were redeemed for. God said to Pharaoh, “Let my son go that he may *serve* me.” In the same way, the joy of our redemption is not just in the relief of avoiding punishment, but in the privilege of doing what we were made to do—serving God for the glory of God. Listen to Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We are not redeemed simply because of what we get out of it. As children of God and servants of God, we have work to do. We are ambassadors of Christ to a hurting and dying world. A world that is running in circles of constant dissatisfaction and disenchantment. A world that preys upon each other in order to get ahead or stay on top. A world filled with fear and anger and selfishness and hatred. A world in desperate need of the hope and wholeness that only Jesus can offer. And so we know God by name when we live in step with the purpose of our redemption, as embodiments and messengers of the sacrificial love of Christ.

And when we experience God’s redemption—personally, in salvation from our sin, and corporately, as we are adopted into God’s family together—when we recognize what we have been saved from, what our redemption actually cost God, and what we have been saved for, our relationship with God is no longer distant or professional; *it’s real and personal*. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we come to know Yahweh by name.