

# The Name of God

Text: Exodus 3:1-17

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

Do you know what your name means? Most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. This just happens to be what my parents called me when I was born. But many names have significance. It might be that you were named after a special family member: a grandfather or grandmother, a favorite aunt or uncle. Or maybe a famous person inspired your name: a professional athlete or movie star or a historic figure. Or maybe your parents liked the meaning behind the name they gave you. There are books that list the most popular baby names for boys and girls, with background information including where the name comes from, what it means. Here are a couple of examples...

- The name Annabelle is of Latin origin and it means: loving.
- Barrett comes from a German background and means: brave.
- Candace is a Latin name and means: sincere
- Matthew is of Hebrew origin and according to one website it is among the list of top 20 most popular names of all time it means: gift of God.
- Sophia is an English name that means: wisdom
- Steven is derived from the Greek word that means: garland or crown.
- Joyce comes from a Latin background and means: joyous
- The name Trent is of English origin and means: super-cool, handsome, all-around great guy... At least that's what I was told, and who am I to argue?

It's kind of fun looking up this information and learning something new about ourselves. Our culture doesn't necessarily place as much emphasis on the meaning of names as other cultures. When we come to the Bible there is often great significance that is attached to the meaning of names. This is certainly true for the names of God. We can learn a great deal about his nature and attributes by studying the names by which he has revealed himself.

Throughout the Bible, the Lord makes himself known to his people in a number of ways. He is called Elohim more than 2,000 times in the OT. Many believe it is related to the word that means mighty or strong. Another title in the Bible is Adonai, found more than 700 times throughout the OT. It means master or lord, pointing to his sovereignty over all creation. Both of these are somewhat general terms, but God also reveals himself in a more personal way to his people. We see that in our passage this morning.

In Exodus 3, Moses was tending sheep in the wilderness, when the Lord unexpectedly appeared to him in the burning bush. The sight was incredible, but the message was even more amazing. God called Moses to return to the land of Egypt, confront the Pharaoh and deliver his people from slavery. Needless to say, this was a lot to process, and Moses did not feel adequate for the job. "Who me?" he wondered. "Yes you," God assured him. This seemed like a daunting task for a man who was now close to eighty year old, and he must have wondered if the Lord had confused him with someone else. He raised all kinds of objections, begging God to find another person, but the Lord was confident in his choice, and promised to go with Moses.

Moses still wasn't convinced and said, "What if the Israelites want to know who sent me? What if they ask your name? What shall I say?"

This was an important question. The people of Israel must have heard about God, from their ancestors, but they had yet not experienced him the same way as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. After spending 400 years in slavery, they wanted to know if they could trust him. Who is this God? What is he like? How has he proven himself?

God responded in verse 14, "*I AM WHO I AM;*" and He said, *'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'*" The Lord was not being dismissive here. He wasn't dodging the question. This is his name: He is the great I AM. It may sound like a strange title to us, but it is the perfect title for him, demonstrating that he is the living, personal God who stands with his people. This is where we get the name: Jehovah or Yahweh, which in Hebrew means "He is." It is by far the most frequently used name for God in the Bible, appearing more than 5,300 times in the OT. The Lord goes on to explain in verse 15: "This is my name forever, and this is my memorial name."

The names of God are just as meaningful for God's people us today. Even though our situation may be very different the children of Israel, in the book of Exodus, we still have the same basic questions about the Lord. We want to know: What kind of God is he? What is his nature? What is it about him that inspires confidence through the struggles and struggles we face? The Bible addresses our concerns by introducing us to the great I Am.

## **The name of God tells us "I AM" the awesome God.**

Look at verses 1-3.

<sup>1</sup> Now Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup> The angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup> So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up."

The Bible tells us that Moses was about eighty years old when these events took place. He spent the first part of his life living in luxury, in the palace of Egypt, as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter. But things changed dramatically, one day, when he stepped in to defend one of the Hebrew slaves from an Egyptian taskmaster. He couldn't stand to see his own kinsman treated with such cruelty so he rose up to do something about it. In the heat of the moment, Moses ended up killing the Egyptian, and when word got out, he was forced to flee for his life to the desert of Midian, where he spent the next forty years as a shepherd. I'm sure he never expected to return to Egypt. Those days were gone. The condition of his people was tragic, but it seemed as if there was nothing he could do. That's where the Lord appeared to him.

On the slopes of the mountain, where the sheep were grazing, he caught a glimpse of a bush

that was on fire. This, in and of itself, would not seem strange in the dry desert heat. What was usual is that blaze kept raging and the bush was not consumed. If you've ever spent any time around a campfire you know how it's supposed to work. When the wood catches on fire it is intense and radiant and hot. But it doesn't last. Give it a few minutes, and as the fuel is consumed, the flames being to fade. After a while all that is left is a little smoke and a few warm coals. That wasn't the case with this fire. The bush kept burning, and burning, and burning without fading. It was remarkable.

He turned to get a closer look, and that's when he heard the voice of God speaking to him. "Moses! Moses!" the voice called out. "Here I am," he replied. God answered, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." That's when Moses started to realize that it was the Lord calling out to him. This would be enough to startle anyone, and the passage tells us that Moses was more than startled. He covered his face, afraid to look at God.

If we were searching for a word to describe that experience, "awesome" comes to mind. It is a word that is frequently used to describe the encounter between God and his people.

Turn over a few pages to **Exodus 15:11**. Moses and the people had just witnessed a miracle, when the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea, allowing them to cross to the other side on dry land. Moses responded with a song, singing in Exodus 15:11 (NASB95), "*Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?*" Of course, the implication is that there is no one like God; there is no one who compares. He is the awesome God, whose glory, and power, and majesty is beyond our comprehension.

They would see God's glory displayed again and again in the days ahead. As the Lord guided his people through the desert he appeared as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Imagine what it must been like to open the door of your tent and see an enormous flame hovering above, lighting up the sky. When people encounter God in the Bible it was never a ho-hum experience. They witnessed his glory.

It's too bad the word awesome has become overused in our culture. We receive coupons in the mail for McDonalds, and respond, "Hey, this is awesome, save \$1.00 on a Big Mac." I'm sorry to say that is nowhere near awesome. It's not like you've won the lottery, it's just a dollar. And the sandwich might look good in the picture, but it doesn't live up to the hype in reality.

The true meaning of the word is to be gripped with an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder, to marvel and be astonished, to be filled with reverence and admiration. It is when you open your mouth to say something but you're unable to speak because there are no words that will do.

In that sense of the word, we worship an awesome God. **Psalm 47:1–2** (NIV84) says, "*Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the Lord Most High, the great King over all the earth!*" And **Psalm 99:3** (NIV84) declares, "*Let them praise your great and awesome name— he is holy.*"

Chances are, you haven't stumbled upon a burning bush like the one Moses saw that day, but we encounter God in different way every day of our lives. There are moments when we experience his goodness and his mercy. We see his hand at work when we don't expect it. It may be as you're listening to words of a worship song, a word or phrase might impress upon you some aspect of his character, and it moves your heart. You want to lift your hands and declare, Lord, you good, you are mighty, you are glorious! It may be the beauty of his creation that takes your breath away as you consider how great and powerful he must be to bring all of these things into being. At that moment all you can do is cry out in praise, "How awesome is the Lord Most High!"

When we approach God in our worship and prayers, may we never lose sight of how marvelous it is to enter his presence. Moses trembled when he heard God's voice. May our hearts tremble with wonder and awe, as we humble ourselves before him giving glory and praise to his name.

## **The name of the Lord also tells us, "I AM" the God who is present.**

Turn back to our passage in Exodus 3. Moses heard the voice of the God from the burning bush, and in verse 7 we read...

*The Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings.*

Generations had gone by since the Lord first appeared to Abraham, promising to bless him and to make his name great, to multiply his descendants making them as numerous as the stars of the heavens. Part of the promise was fulfilled. God certainly did multiply Abraham's descendants, but their current situation was far from ideal. The children of Israel spent the past 400 years as slaves in the land of Egypt. They endured harsh conditions, forced to do back breaking labor in the fields or quarries of Pharaoh. Their slave drivers were cruel, cracking the whip to keep them in line. Every day was a struggle just to survive. I'm sure it wasn't easy holding on to God's promises. In the midst of their affliction they cried out to the Lord to save them. At times they must have wondered if God could hear them. Why was taking so long for their prayers to be answered? Had the Lord forgotten them? No, that wasn't the case. The Lord was there, through it all, even in the moments when they could not see him.

As God spoke to Moses in the burning bush he said "I have seen the affliction of my people." He wanted them to know that he isn't the kind of God who is far away in some distant place unaware or unconcerned about our struggles. He was with them, through everything they faced, even in the moments when they could not see him. He was the one who gave them the strength they needed each day to continue on. He was the one who offered comfort through all the sorrows. He was the one holding onto them when they were ready to let go. And he was the one who would rise up to deliver them.

I have seen your afflictions. I have heard your cries. I am aware of your suffering. I am with you. The same is true in our lives today. Even though, at times, it might seem as if the whole world has abandoned you, you are never alone. Even in the moments when you do not feel God's presence, he is always near. Even when you think that your prayers have gone unanswered, He hears you, so do not despair.

The other day the kids wanted to play outside in the snow. School was cancelled two days in a row, and they had all of this energy stored up inside that needed to be released, so we bundled them up in their coats and boots and let them help shovel the sidewalks. It wasn't really the kind of snow that was easy to shovel, it was more like chipping away at the ice, but they tried. After a while, they were bored of that, and started playing with the sled. There was a moment when I was working around the corner, and I heard one of the girls crying. Apparently, she had slipped and was a little shaken up a little. She may not have seen me, in that moment, but I was there listening to her cry, and responded to make sure she was okay. And I wasn't the only one, we looked up and saw Charity's face in the window watching them to make sure they were okay.

We don't leave our children all alone. We watch over them. How much more is God present in our lives through all that we go through?

**Isaiah 63:9** (NIV84) looks back on God's relationship with his people during through their afflictions. It says, *"In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."*

And so when you're struggling to hold on, remember that in all of our distress he is distressed, but his presence is with us. He lifts us up and carries us through all our days. This is what his name means: I am there, I am present in the midst of your sorrows, I am with you." We don't know why our path leads through the different peaks and valleys, but we do know that we never have to travel it alone, and that gives us a great deal of comfort.

One author says,

Suffering is not evidence of God's absence, but of God's presence, and it is in our experience of being broken that God does his surest and most characteristic work. There is a way to embrace and to deal with suffering that results in a better life, not a worse one, and [that results in] more of the experience of God, not less. God is working out his salvation in our lives the way he has always worked it out—at the place of brokenness, at the cross of Jesus...<sup>i</sup>

## **The name of the Lord tells us, "I AM" the everlasting God**

Look at Exodus 3:14.

<sup>14</sup> *God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' "* <sup>15</sup> *God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons 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 this is My memorial-name to all generations.*

Moses anticipated the kinds of questions the people of Israel might have when he showed up claiming to bring a message from God. They would naturally want to know more about who this God is, what is his name? It wasn't so much an interest in titles, but more of a concern about his character. Is it the true God who has sent you? If so, what information can you tell us about him that would speak to our situation?

God responds by revealing his name, I AM. This is a statement about his eternal being, and self-existence. The Lord is constant, enduring, through all generations. He is the very same God who appeared to Abraham calling him to step out in faith to an unknown land. He is the same God who took care of Isaac while he lived as a stranger and exile on the earth. He is the same God who wrestled with Jacob, changing his name to Israel. Those men had lived and died, half a millennium ago. But the Lord remains. From the beginning of time, before the first stars began shining in the heavens, God was there. And in the distant future, when this present universe passes away, and all things are made new, God will continue to be there. He is eternally present, the one who is, who was and is to come.

This was similar to the flames that Moses saw in the burning bush. They were constant, never fading, just as intense and radiant from one moment to the next. God's glory is just intense and radiant today as it ever was. His strength and wisdom and goodness will never fade.

We recently replaced the lighting in the sanctuary. Isn't it so much brighter and more pleasant than it used to be? We installed the new LED bulbs which are more energy efficient, and they say last much longer than traditional bulbs. I was reading that many LEDs are rated to last up to 50,000 hours. If you left the lights on for 12 hours every day that would calculate out to more than 11 years. And unlike traditional bulbs, that diminish over time, LEDs are supposed to burn just as brightly for their entire lifespan as they day they were installed.

That's impressive, but it's not nearly as impressive as the Lord. He will never grow weary or tired. That's why Moses and the people could place their confidence in him. He is the rock we can count on through every season of our lives.

**Psalm 90:2** (NASB95) tells us, *"Before the mountains were born Or You gave birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."*

And **Isaiah 26:4** (NASB95) *"Trust in the Lord forever, For in God the Lord, we have an everlasting Rock."*

We can look back at how the Lord has proven himself faithful in the lives of those who came before us, and know that he will continue to remain just as faithful in our lives today. He is the one constant in this world that will never change. We don't know what tomorrow might bring, but we know that no matter what comes, the Lord will be with us. Even though our time on this earth will not last forever, our relationship with God will endure without end, because we have found eternal life in our Savior.

John Piper writes,

Here is what it means that God is who he is. God's absolute being means he never had a beginning. This staggers the mind. Every child asks, "Who made God?" And every wise parent says, "Nobody made God. God simply is. And always was." God's absolute being means God will never end. If he did not come into being he cannot go out of being... God's absolute being means that God is utterly independent. He depends on nothing to support him or counsel him or make him what he is. God's absolute being means that everything depends totally on him. The entire universe came into being by God and stays in being moment by moment on God's decision... God's absolute being means that God is constant. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is not becoming anything. He is who he is. Absolute perfection cannot be improved... God's absolute being means that he is the most important and most valuable person in the universe. He is more worthy of interest and attention and admiration and enjoyment than all others...<sup>ii</sup>

## What's In a Name?

"What is your name," Moses asks. "I AM WHO I AM," the Lord answers. He is Jehovah God, and his name points to his character: the awesome God, the God who is near, the everlasting God. And he is so much more. If we were to continue reading, in the passage, we would see that he is also the God who saves. Because he is the great I AM, he is able to deliver his people out of slavery, bringing them to the land of promise, and he does exactly that.

It is no surprise then, that the NT explains the same God is able to deliver us from slavery to sin and death. Jesus repeats these words throughout the Gospel of John, making several statements that begins "I AM." He applies this name to himself, show us that He is Lord. This is the name we can hold onto. This is the name that is above all names. This is the name that has the power to save. May we place our trust in him.

Like Moses, we should be moved to awe and reverence as we experience God in our lives. We can face frightening situations with confidence knowing that God is with us. And we can face the future with certainty because the God who was who is and who is to come will always stand with his people.

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<sup>i</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, adapted from Foreword of Alan E. Nelson, *Embracing Brokenness: How God Refines Us Through Life's Disappointments* (NavPress, 2002)

<sup>ii</sup> Piper, J. (2014). *Sermons from John Piper (2000–2014)*. Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God.