

“What’s in a Name? (Part 1)– Exodus 3:13-14

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Let’s meet in Exodus 3...

[Recap]

“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?’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.’” (Exodus 3:13-14)

Last week I reminded you that the most important question you should be asking when you study God’s Word is, “What does this text teach me about God?” We do this every week together, but sometimes I don’t come out and say that this is what we are doing. We just do it naturally in the course of our reflection on God’s Word. Today I want to be more explicit. I want to model it more overtly and in the process bring to the surface this important aspect of how I study God’s Word and how you should as well. More importantly my prayer is that we will learn more about our God or at the very least have our wonder of God restored, if it’s been waning.

So then, in this particular scene we have the beginnings of a back and forth conversation between God and Moses. God reveals Himself to Moses through a burning bush and Moses learns of God’s call on his life. Moses clearly doesn’t feel like he is the right guy for the job and this leads to a series of questions that Moses asks of God. The first one was the “who am I?” question, to which God replied, “I will be with you.” That wasn’t the answer Moses was expecting, but his next question is logical—“Then who are you?” In verse 14 we see God answer that question in a very profound way. *“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM...Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”* So that is the action of this part of the narrative. Now let’s meditate on it. First question.

What Does The Fact That God Reveals His Name Say About God?

It’s a bold move for Moses to ask for God’s name. But the more striking feature of the story is that God actually answers the question. That may not seem like a big deal to you, but the ancient reader would have been cringing when Moses asked for the name. That’s a bold move. The audacity of this shepherd! But God doesn’t rebuke him. He doesn’t say, “Who are you to ask Me something like that?” Instead, He actually answers Moses’ question without confrontation. That’s incredible.

What does that teach us about God? It reminds us that God does not shy away from relationship. He desires to have a relationship with His people. He desires for them to know Him even as they are fully known by Him. He is personal. He has a name. He reveals His name so that His people can relate to Him personally. And that, to me, is an incredible thought. The God who created and sustains everything in existence, from the grandest galaxy to the smallest electron, is not only intimately involved in our lives but desires to be intimately known by us. That’s a thought that should never cease to stir in our hearts immense wonder.

But let's be clear about something. God doesn't need us to fill some relational void in His being. No such void exists. He didn't create us because He was lonely and needed someone to talk to. God has existed in eternity past. There was never a time when He was not. He didn't pause one day and think, "I'm kind of lonely. Oh, I know. Let me create a world and fill it with people so I can have some friends." Nope. God is not needy. Therefore, He didn't create us because He needed relationship. That's a popular sentiment in our day, but it couldn't be further from the truth.

In fact, the nature of who He is as Trinity decisively ends all debate on the matter. Think about the triune relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One of my favorite modern theologians, Bruce Ware, offers this reflection:

"God is never 'alone.' He never experiences, whether with or without the world he has made, a sense of individual isolation and 'loneliness.' He never has been lonely or alone, in this sense, nor could he ever be, even in principle. The one God is three! He is by very nature both a unity of Being while also existing eternally as a society of Persons...He is a socially related being within himself. In this tri-Personal relationship the three Persons love one another, support one another, assist one another, team with one another, honor one another, communicate with one another, and in everything respect and enjoy one another. They are in need of nothing but each other throughout all eternity. Such is the richness and the fullness and the completion of the social relationship that exists in the Trinity."¹

In other words, God didn't create us to fill a relational need. Perfect relationship is enjoyed within His own triune nature. But having said that, we were created in His image. This helps us understand why we ourselves do in fact need relationships. We don't have His triune nature. We need others to experience relationship. It was not good for Adam to be alone.² So community is essential for us—with God and with other people—precisely because we were created in the image of a God who Himself is the perfect display of community. Thus, while He doesn't need relationship with us, we need relationship with Him. And the most amazing thing about it all is that God wants us to have relationship with Him. He's a personal God. The fact that God reveals His personal name for His people here in Exodus 3 is further confirmation of this attribute. And what a grace it is!

Next question...

What Does The Fact That God Reveals His Name *To Moses* Say About God?

Of all the people God could have revealed Himself to, He chose Moses. Moses is a has-been prince, a murdering fugitive, a failed deliverer, a great sinner, and little more than a lowly shepherd in the middle of nowhere. Forty years of obscurity in Midian had impressed upon Moses just how small and insignificant he was. And he wasn't wrong. Yet with everyone at God's disposal, in all the world of men, the voice of God calls out, "*Moses, Moses!*" (Exodus 3:4).

What does that teach us about God? It reminds us that God is no respecter of persons. He shows no partiality (Rom. 2:11). Which means He doesn't default to those the world would turn to in order to accomplish noble and important work. The résumés of his servants are usually unimpressive when He calls them out. Paul writes,

"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." (1 Cor. 1:26-29).

God is no respecter of persons. He doesn't need any of us, so He doesn't need to choose the best of us. And, furthermore, because this is the way God operates, Paul continues, "*you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'*" (1:30-31). God doesn't use only the best of us and God doesn't save only the best of us. He is not partial.

You have to wrap your mind around this because Satan will try to convince you otherwise when you fall into sin. When you have those dark nights of the soul, when you're face to face with your failure, when you did it again, when to your shame you've broken another promise or failed to follow through on yet another resolution, when you feel the slavery of your addiction, when you burned down another bridge or left another damaged person in the wake of your anger, when all you feel is consumed with disgust and guilt...there will come a temptation to hide yourself from God, to run from His presence, to believe that He's done with you and that this failure, this most recent debacle, this indulgence in sin for the thousandth time is the final straw and that God is done with you. That's it. It's over. He's sick of you. Done. You have exhausted the Gospel's grace and there is no more good news for someone like you.

But you have no right to tell God that He can no longer show you grace. You have no right to decide when He can and cannot give you good news. It's not your call to label yourself as beyond good news or grace. When you do that you are actually belittling the cross of Christ and trivializing His blood. While you wallow around in self-pity, you are exalting yourself above Christ and His choice.³ His forever-scarred hands were pierced with the full knowledge of every one of your sins. Nothing has changed when you are in the pit. He is still risen. His blood is still sufficient. He is still your hope. His grace remains for those whose faith will rest on Him. Nothing has changed.

In those dark moments we always seem to forget that grace never came to us because we deserved it. The fact that our salvation and the forgiveness that it entails is all of grace reminds us that it's completely undeserved. Where you were when you first believed and where you are in that wake of your most devastating sin are no different in terms of whether or not you deserve God's grace. Nothing's changed. You were just as undeserving on your best *and* worst day. You still need grace. And God's no respecter of persons. He shows no partiality. If you will trust in Christ and His work on the cross and the power of His resurrection for your forgiveness, it will be yours. God can restore you. God can have the sweet fellowship of relationship with you. In fact, He loves to do just that. And God can use you. Every time God uses a person to do His work, He is using an underserving sinner who doesn't have the strength to do it apart from Him. Every time. Without exception. So God can use you. Even if you are murdering has-been. Even if all your people have rejected you and every attempt to make a difference has failed. Even if for the last 40 years your closest companions have been sheep. Just ask Moses. He's a trophy of God's grace, just like every other believer in this place. So let us boast in the Lord!

Next question...

What Does The Fact That Moses Is Dependent On God's Revelation Say About God?

Moses has to ask God for His name. Why? Because God must reveal Himself. What do you know about God and how do you know it? How could you learn what God is like? We need God's self-revelation, which is what is found primarily in His Word, the Bible. Sure, you can look at God's creation and infer something of what God must be like. You can look at the vastness of the material world and reason that God must be powerful to have created all that exists. You can look at the coded language of DNA and determine that God must be intelligent. You can expand your scientific knowledge and come to the conclusion that God must exist. God can reveal these things through His creation. Theologians call this "general revelation."

But you can't determine who God is from looking at trees. You can't deduce His plan for your life by looking into nature. You will never understand the salvation He offers in Christ by looking down the lens of a telescope. No, for all of this, we need God to reveal Himself in a different way, in a special way. And that special revelation is preserved for us in His Word. In His Word, we find God revealing Himself through the story, through the covenants, through the recorded dreams and visions, through the prophets and apostles, and, most gloriously, through Jesus Christ.⁴ When we look at Jesus we see most clearly who God is. Jesus reveals to us God. And everything we need to know about Jesus can be found in this book. Without this, then, we would still be in the dark. We would not know who God is and the beauty of His plan in history. God must reveal Himself. God is self-revealing and, therefore, God is self-defining.

Saying that is probably not controversial in this room, but it is in the world. People today like to define God for themselves. They will say things like, "I am spiritual, but I'm not very religious and I don't like organized religion" or "I like to think God is like..." Have you ever heard statements like these? When a person makes these assertions, they are essentially saying, "I don't need anyone to tell me what God is like, because I get to define that for myself. I think he's like..."⁵ And Christians are not immune to these tendencies.

Mark Dever once taught a seminar on the attributes of God at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A young man in the seminar eventually raised his hand and said, "Mark, you know I like to think of God as omniscient, but not meddling. Just, but not nit picky. Sovereign, but not overbearing..." And when the student finished up with a few more such opinions, Mark said, "Thank you sir, but we are not here to talk about what you think, and we're not here to talk about you. We're here to talk about God. And so we're going to go back to the Bible now."⁶ He wasn't being rude. He was simply making an important point. In the end, it doesn't matter what you think. It matter who He is. What you think doesn't determine reality. I can stand up here this morning and tell you that I could beat Michael Phelps in a swimming contest, but we all know that is not true. I'm the reason there are lifeguards at Olympic swimming events. True story. But the point is that we don't get to define God. God gets to define Himself and He has done that in His Word. He's doing that for Moses in this text. So your conception of God is only as accurate as it is consistent with what the Bible teaches. That's why it's so amazing that some of the most biblically illiterate people have such strong and assured convictions of what God is like. That don't make no sense.

But we struggle with this. Like *we* in this room too. Maybe there is an aspect of God's character that we are uncomfortable with—maybe His sovereignty, or His wrath, or His designs for sexuality—and we think, "I don't like the sound of that." What ends up happening is we start to imagine God in our own image. Our view of God begins to evolve into one that suits us. Our god desires what we desire, thinks like we think. But, like I tell you all the time, if your "god" always agrees with you, always sides with you in ever matter, never challenges your way of life and way of thinking, then you are not worshiping the God of the Bible. You are worshiping a god that exists only in your imagination. You are worshiping an idol. And that idol you've created may make you comfortable at the moment, but it cannot help you in your time of need. "God is not a concept that we can shape as we choose. God *is*."

Some of you still don't realize I'm talking about you. Why? Because when you hear the word "idolatry" you think of it as worshiping the god of another religion or some statue made of wood or gold. You conceive of it as something that other people do, but not you... You know, you're in church. You're not an idolater. Oh really? It's easy to recognize when other cultures wrongly infiltrate and influence their thoughts about God and Christianity. But it's much harder to spot the ways your own culture does this to your view of God and Christianity.

For instance, I recently heard a pastor and former missionary to Burkina Faso, named Micah Fries, describe a church he visited in that West African country. It was touted as one of the most successful Christian churches, with its weekly attendance of over two thousand people. They sang Christian songs. They read

Christian Scripture. They had crosses displayed on their building and in their sanctuary. Their services were joyful and lasted as long as five hours each week. Any of these things would lead you to believe that it was a Christian church, just as they claimed. But if you happened to attend a service, you would discover that at some point they were sacrificing chickens on the altar. If you got to know the leadership, you might meet several of their girlfriends whom they provided for on the side and build houses for in the village. Each pastor fathered many children through various mistresses and these children could be spotted throughout the village.

How does that happen? It's called syncretism. It's where you syncretize, or fuse, various values into some new religious soup, some hybrid religion. It's what Oprah was famous for. It may have Christian language but that doesn't mean it's Christian. It may just be a corrupted version of Christianity. When this happens with Christianity, missiologists sometimes call this "folk Christianity." It's Christianity mixed with local values. So in the case of this church in Burkina Faso, all of those compromises occur because they were trying to make Christianity more palatable to the culture around them. The problem was they were changing core pieces of the Christian faith and not irrelevant non-core stuff (e.g., order of service, music styles). And as Christianity began to get fused with the leading values of that culture, it got distorted until in the end it ceased to be real Christianity. As outsiders we can see that. You can't sacrifice chickens on the altar. That's a misunderstanding of what Christ has done and the sufficiency of the sacrifice He offered on the cross. You can't have multiple girlfriends to satisfy your longings. That's not consistent with God's Word. That's obvious to us, but was harder for them to see because of the way those matters were so common and "normal" in the world around them.

But what happens in churches in America? We don't do that, right? Errrrrnt! Wrong. We do, we just do it with *our* cultural values. And we are just as blind to our tendencies toward syncretism as they are to theirs. So Micah Fries offers a couple of examples of American values that end up shaping our view of God and Christianity—materialism and independence. These are probably the pillars of American culture and we export those values across the world. And while we don't always see it happening, the American dream can get fused with Christianity until it so distorts the Christian faith that it is no longer Christian. Our Christianity becomes all about our independence and we start to view our faith as compatible with our rampant greed and materialism or, worse, a means of achieving it. We view God as our supplier. He's our cosmic vending machine who gives us our materialistic dreams, if we would just press the right buttons or put in enough coin.

Let me illustrate. There is no category for the independent Christian in the Bible. That guy doesn't exist. In the New Testament, the Christians are always inter-dependent. But what happens when our cultural value of independence creeps into the church? You get people who say things like, "I love Jesus, but I don't really like or need the church." Anyone in the early church would have recognized how ludicrous that kind of thinking is. Think about it. If you said to me, "Brandon, you're cool (don't laugh...it could happen), but I really don't like your wife. She's horrible. I don't want to be around her like ever." Then at best, we are not going to be friends. At worst there's going to be a scuffle. I guess it's your prerogative to decide who you are going to like and dislike, but don't expect us to get along very well if you are going to go around dissing my wife. We get that. That makes sense to you. And yet we somehow forget that the church is the bride of Christ. Do you really think God is pleased with, "I like Jesus, but not his bride"? Of course not! And I know His bride, the church, is flawed. We're messed up. We've got problems galore and glaring hypocrisies. But we are still the bride of Christ. He chose us. Be careful what you say about His bride. Don't ditch her.

Furthermore, our value of independence robs us of spiritual growth because it cuts us off from Christian community. If you take seriously what the Bible teaches, then you will come to the inescapable conclusion that Christian community is essential in your life. It's vital for your growth. It's not an option. It's not a preference. This idea that you can take or leave Christian community is not biblical. There are no lone ranger Christians in the Bible. Again, that guy doesn't exist in the New Testament. Theologically Christian growth

is achieved in the context of Christian community. We need each other. Your spiritual growth is my business and mine is yours. That may go against every fiber of your being, but that resistance is not coming from the Bible's influence in your life. That's the culture's influence on your life. Some of you have plateaued spiritually because you approach Christianity independently. That may be a good ol' American approach. But that's not the biblical way.

[Commercial: Next week is promotion Sunday and we are going to start talking about G.R.O.U.P.S...plug in...end of commercial]

What about materialism? There is nothing wrong with driving a nice car or having a nice home or enjoying nice things. We can do that with a thankful heart. We can honor God in our enjoyment of His stuff. But when those material things begin to determine your satisfaction or when the lack of those spiritual things robs you of that satisfaction, then there is a problem. When you begin to find your identity in things, there's a real problem. When your self-worth or self-image is tied to the car you drive or the kind of clothing you wear on Sunday or Monday to Saturday, then there is a problem. It's an idolatry problem. And it's rampant, which is why there are so many television shows that allow us to tour the homes of celebrities. We eat that stuff up. Why? Because it matters too much to us. Because, as one author put it, "products are not simply valued for their usefulness but rather play a central role in the cultivation and maintenance of our identity... They define us, send social signals to others, and construct our identities."⁷

What does that have to do with Christianity? Lots. It's the reason some of us are so stingy with our money and fail at every opportunity for generosity. It's why we don't give in church joyfully and give enthusiastically when needs present themselves. We simply cannot do it because our identity is so tied to our money and stuff that to part with it could jeopardize the very things we tie our worth to. It's more important that we can drive the best car than it is for us to seek first the kingdom. It's more important that we have a huge house or own the latest technology, than it is that we have freed up resources to care for the needy in our community. We are among richest people who have ever walked the earth in all of human history and yet it doesn't seem to register with us that all those many things that Jesus says about money and stuff could have something to do with us. If He wasn't talking about us, who could He possibly have been talking about? Meanwhile the rest of the global church looks at us with tilted heads as if to say, "Why are you concluding church by sacrificing all those chickens on the altar?"

And that materialism affects the way we look at God. We assume that if we can just be good people then God will make sure that our kids get saved, and our car always has gas in it, and the promotion comes at work. We develop this *quid pro quo* theology, where God is nice to us because we are nice to Him. We scratch His back and He will scratch ours. It's the prosperity gospel. Health and wealth theology, which we are the primary global exporter of. And it is no gospel. It's worldly values distorting the Christian Gospel and the net result is garbage masquerading as Gospel that will only leave us broken, or shaking our fist at God, or both, sooner or later. That's not the way the Christian economy works.⁸ Where is our theology of suffering? Where is there room for Jesus to say to us, like He said to the rich young ruler, sell it all and give it away to the poor and follow Me?

But in all of these instances we are not allowing the self-defining God to define our understanding of Him and our understanding of His ways. We have taken upon ourselves the divine duty of defining and that, friends, is why the human heart is such an idol factor as Calvin famously said. We make our own gods. But that has to stop. We, like Moses, are utterly dependent on God to reveal Himself to us. The only thing we can know of Him, He must reveal to us. Our opinions don't matter and our opinions are shaped by other influences that we may be blind to. Again, we need the Word to spell things out, just like Moses was dependent on God to reveal His purposes for Moses life, to reveal Himself, and to define Himself. So then...about that...

What Does *God's Name Itself* Say About God?

“Who are you?”, Moses asked. And God says, “*I AM WHO I AM...I AM has sent*” you. With that answer, God is blowing up all the boxes we like to put Him in. He’s destroying all the categories Moses is comfortable with. And the self-revealing, self-defining God is doing just that. So we need to listen carefully. And this, friends, is where we will pick up next week...I know, another cliffhanger. But trust me, you won’t regret it. Join us next week...Bring a friend...

Let’s pray...

¹ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 20-21.

² Genesis 2:18.

³ Based on a video clip I stumbled on this week. In the clip John Piper was addressing a gathering of Gospel Coalition participants. As of the date of this sermon, the clip could be found online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_sn2eJ7xE4.

⁴ Anthony T. Selvaggio, *From Bondage to Liberty: The Gospel According to Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 43-44.

⁵ Tim Chester, *Exodus for You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 28.

⁶ The story was told by J. Ligon Duncan in a sermon titled, “I AM Who I AM,” which was preached on November 26, 2000, and as of the date of the sermon you are reading could be found online at the following web address: <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/i-am-who-i-am>.

⁷ Mark Driscoll, *Who Do You Think You Are?: Finding Your True Identity in Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), 8.

⁸ This section was influenced by the aforementioned sermon by Micah Fries, which, as of August 13, 2016, could be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/brainerdbaptist/videos/vb.185754277198/10153920282462199/?type=2&theater>.