

Sermon 10, I AM Yahweh, Exodus 3:10-15

Proposition: God's presence with His chosen deliverer, and hence His people, is guaranteed by His underived self-existent personal (and thus named) being.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this evening to one of the high points of Biblical revelation. This text is a highly disputed text; the commentators have run roughshod over it since Classical Antiquity. There are many books on what the name of God is and what it means; indeed, my own brother-in-law, Jared McKinney, wrote his bachelor's thesis on the name of God during our time together at Patrick Henry College. So just know, going into this sermon, that the critics, philosophers, theologians, and others have all aired their views on what the name of God is and what it means. The classical interpretation, and the one that I believe to be correct, is that God's personal name is Yahweh and that it means "He is," and that this name and its meaning refer in the final analysis to God's ultimate, underived, and self-existent being. In other words, the truth that Moses saw in the self-feeding fire in the beginning of the chapter is the same truth that God revealed by sharing His name with Moses in our text this evening. Well, that is the short version of it. What I hope to show you tonight is that God's presence with His chosen deliverer, and thus with His people, is underwritten by His underived self-existent personal (and thus named) being.

I. Moses' Correct Statement of Inadequacy, v. 11

It is vital, for the understanding of God's name, that we look at it in the context in which it's presented here in Exodus 3. Already, we've seen that God appeared as a flame of fire, a fire which needed no fuel because it was self-sustaining. Now that God has set the terms of access to His holiness and commissioned Moses to deliver His people, Moses responds with a question that, he hopes, just might stop God in His demands. That question is "Who am I to do this mighty task?"

As we have seen, it's a good question. Moses is not at all the right man for the job, humanly speaking. The guy doesn't even own his own flock. On the wealth-and-power scale, he is way too close to the bottom to have a chance with people like Pharaoh who are at the top.

II. God's Presence that Makes up for Moses' Inadequacy, v. 12

But as we saw last week, God's presence makes up for Moses' inadequacy. The context in which God gives His name is a context in which He promises to be with Moses. "Who am I?"

"I will be with you." God doesn't lie. He doesn't say "You've got this, Moses. You can do it." No. He effectively admits "Moses, you can't do it, but it won't matter because I'll be there the whole time."

III. Moses' Request for God's Name, v. 13

So it is in this context, where God has promised to be with Moses, that Moses then says "Let's say I go and announce that 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.'" Hypothetically, then, he adds, "Let's say that they say 'What is His name?'"

In short, rather than saying "I want to know your name," Moses says "I may need to know your name in order to do this mission." As we've noted, his reason seems a bit thin, given that the name of God is never an issue during the entire rest of the book of Exodus. But anyway, Moses hears "I will be with you," and responds by saying "What is your name?"

IV. God's Names, vv. 14-15

And we get those names. God doesn't play coy at all; He doesn't suggest that He lacks a name, or that His name is hidden. Much mystical speculation from the first century B.C. and onward argued that God has no name, or that His name is hidden. One of the commentators I read (Houtman), writing as recently as 1983, claims that "I am who I am" means "What does it matter what my name is?" In the face of such absurdity, it is imperative that we cut through the clutter and recover the true significance of God's name — a significance that He made clear to Moses in this encounter, a significance recorded in this text, and repeated frequently throughout the Bible. Let's talk about that significance.

First, I want you to notice that there is not one singular name of God given in this passage; there are five.

A. I AM WHO I AM

The first, and perhaps most memorable of them, is this declaration "I am who I am." It is the first-person imperfect Hebrew verb of being repeated twice with the relative particle *asher*, meaning "that, what, which, who" in between. Thus, you can render it I am, I will be, I was, etc. And you can translate "I am who I am" or "I am that I am" or "I am what I am." Contra Prof. Houtman, this does not mean "What does it matter who I am?" It means something roughly expressed by the first translators of the Bible, the Jewish scholars (according to legend there were seventy of them) who rendered the Hebrew Bible into Greek sometime between 300 and 150 B.C. They rendered this phrase, "I am He who is." And that is indeed what it means. It is God's way of affirming in the strongest possible terms that He exists and that His being is infinite, absolute, and unlimited by anything beyond itself. He is, and what He is cannot be limited by saying "He is a this" or "He is a that." He is greater than any this or that; He is not a god, the god of the Hebrews. No. He IS — in other words, His being is underived. As the bush showed Him to be a self-feeding fire, so His name announces that He is self-existent God, not one of the gods but The God, the High God who alone is worthy of the name "deity."

B. I AM

Immediately, though, God shortens this name to just one of its components, “I am.” Clearly, “I am” means in essence what the longer version means — and “I am” cannot mean “what does it matter who I am.” It means “I exist. Being is mine.” Of course, this name does not appear only here in Scripture. There are a couple of places where God refers to Himself as “I am,” such as in Psalm 50: “You thought that the I AM was altogether like you.” But most notably for our purposes is its recurrence in Rev. 1, where God describes Himself as He who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty. The phrase there in Greek is identical with how the LXX translators rendered the phrase “I am who I am” here. The name of God is “He who is,” and you can put that verb of being into any tense you want. He is. He was. He is to come. Jesus memorably used this same phrase to refer to Himself, with statements like “Before Abraham was, I am.” The present/imperfect tense of the verb of being makes it clear that this God who revealed Himself to Moses exists in a state outside and beyond all control of time. He is, was, and will be. We have to use all three tenses to sum up the duration of His being. But He uses just the one, the present imperfect, to indicate that He is.

What is He? He is with Moses, as He said in v. 12. But the reason He can be with Moses is that He is. A nonexistent God could not be with Moses. A god whose being was derived from elsewhere, contingent on something outside himself, could not be certain of being able to be with Moses, any more than you or I can be certain of being here next Sunday. We can assign a relatively high probability to our chances of being here then. But we cannot absolutely promise; that’s why we say “Lord-willing,” because we know that we are dependent on Him. But God is not what some greater God made Him to be. He is not what He was made to be. He is what He is, and nothing else, because He is self-existent.

C. Yahweh

That self-existence, that being, finds expression in the name “He is,” i.e., the Hebrew word “Yahweh.” Most people aren’t named with a verb. One of the chaplains in our prayer guide is named “Bee,” like the insect. But I’ve never met someone named “Read” or “Walk” or “Swim” or “Feel.” And I’ve certainly never met a human being named “He is.” But just as “I am” is the first person of the verb of being, so “He is” is the third person of that same verb. Yahweh is His name. That’s the name that God gives in v. 15. Call Him “I am,” in direct discourse, or “He is,” in indirect discourse. Either way, the meaning of the name is clear as fire. His name refers to self-existence, underived, uncreated, raw Being. The name “Yahweh” occurs over 6000 times in the 39 books of the Hebrew bible, yet not once in the New Testament. That is the ultimate explanation for why Christians today so rarely call God Yahweh. It is His name, and since it is a name, we know that He is not being in the abstract, but that He is what we would call personal. We do not, as a rule, give individual names to inanimate objects, except to those select few that represent a living thing (e.g., a stuffed animal). But by and large, if something has a name it’s a someone. “God” is a title of essence, the exact counterpart of “man.” But “Yahweh” is a name, and even though He is the only God, the counterpart of Yahweh is another person — say, Adam or Moshe.

Should we call God “Yahweh”? We certainly should. The greatest saints of the old covenant prayed to Him under that name. We can also address Him as “He who is.” But a name is built to be transliterated rather than translated. God’s having a name at all tells us that He is personal, that He is not a Force or a Thing but rather a Someone. But His having the name “Yahweh” tells us that He is. All of His promises, all of His actions, are founded on that truth. He is not a non-existent god like the gods of the nations, the gods of Egypt or Canaan. He is the God who is, and who will never stop being. That’s why He could promise to go with Moses. That’s why He could promise to bring His people out of Egypt. And that’s why He is still our God today.

D. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob

So Yahweh, this God who exists in contrast to the non-existent, and who is named in contrast to the elemental forces or philosophical categories (“number” or “beauty”) which do not have personal names, goes on to identify Himself in yet another way. This is as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. What does it mean to say this about God? It means that He is the God who belongs to them, even as they belong to Him. He is in covenant with them — not was, but is. And that covenant is unbreakable. Ordinary covenants are terminated by death, because human beings cannot be tracked down by others and forced to keep their covenants on the far side of the grave. All of our terrestrial covenants are about things that are only of value here under the sun, anyway. But Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is still their God. That’s how we know that the resurrection is coming. God is not merely God of their souls; He’s God of their bodies. He’s not merely their God up until the moment of death; He remains their God after they’ve passed on to glory. And thus, anyone who would come up with a narrative that tries to make the resurrection look ridiculous is a person who does not understand the Bible. God is the God of these patriarchs, meaning that we can trust Him to raise us from the dead, reunite with our bodies, and break the cycle of death and rebirth that we see in nature.

God is not just “He who is.” He is the God your fathers knew. He is the God who has a history with your family — a history in which He has always been faithful, always been perfect, always been exactly what you needed Him to be.

E. Yahweh Is His Memorial Name Forever

This name Yahweh is how He is to be remembered for all generations. He will never change His name. He will reveal additional names, such as Jesus, and additional titles, such as Lord. But Yahweh is His name and it is very appropriate that we address Him by name.

So why doesn’t the New Testament contain this name? One can argue that it does, in a sense. The name was replaced by pious Jews with the title “Adonai,” “My Lord,” when they read the Hebrew text aloud. That title was translated into the Septuagint as “Kyrios,” “Lord,” and thus into English as “Lord” as well. The New Testament, of course, calls Jesus “Lord” over and over, thus highlighting the connection: Yahweh is Jesus, or to use the Hebrew pronunciation, Yahweh is Yeshua. And thus, it is appropriate to call Jesus Lord, and LORD. It is appropriate to call on Yahweh as Yahweh, and on Jesus as Yahweh. But at the same time, based on the example of the

New Testament, we can say that it is not necessary. Maybe the best way to explain this is by saying that sometimes titles are more intimate than names. You all are thinking, “What?”

But go back with me to the earliest relational context, when you were a little baby with your mommy and daddy. To this day, you think of them by those titles, rather than as Helen and Joe or whatever your parents’ names were. Would you feel that you had made a major breakthrough in intimacy if you were able to call your parents and say, “Well, Helen and Joe, how are you today? Are you interested in a few more pictures of the grandkids?”

Yes, “Mom” and “Dad” are titles. But they are intimate titles. They are titles you wouldn’t trade in for anything. To the day you die, your parents will be Mom and Dad to you, and you wouldn’t want it any other way. To go from “Dad” to “Joe” is not a gain in intimacy, but a loss.

Well, in the same way, the name of God revealed in the New Testament is what? Father. Are we getting somewhere deeper by calling on Him as Yahweh instead of as Father? I think not. Yahweh says “He is.” But Father says “He’s mine.” Anyway, the name “Yahweh” is in “Yahshua.” Every time we say “Jesus,” we are saying a shortened version of “Yahweh saves.” Is a shortened name less intimate? Well, you can ask my wife (Alexa) whether she feels that “Alexandria” is more intimate than “Lex,” which is what her mom calls her. You can ask our friend Beth, who only goes by “Elizabeth” when talking to bureaucrats and people who don’t know her. You can ask most Dougs, Jons, and Joes whether those with whom they are most intimate are the ones most likely to call them Douglas, Jonathan, and Joseph. And on and on it goes.

So yes, don’t be afraid to say “In you, oh Yahweh, I put my trust.” But don’t stop saying “Our Father, thank you for your Son Jesus,” either. Both are appropriate. But I think it is quite true to say that most of you are going to call your father “dad” thousands of times for every time you call Him by name. As I write this, my middle daughter is saying “Daddy, is your name ‘Caleb’?”

“Yes it is,” I tell her. But I want to add that I’m her daddy and would rather be daddy to her. I’m Caleb to the rest of the world, but I’m her daddy and I wouldn’t trade that in for anything. And that, brothers and sisters, is how the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob feels about you.

He is who He is. He is Yahweh. He is the self-feeding fire who voluntarily bound Himself to the patriarchs. He is the great I AM, and it is that identity which guarantees and underwrites His deliverance from Egypt, His salvation, and His fatherhood. Do you know His name? He’s Yahweh. He’s Father. He’s Jesus. Amen.