

STUDY 7

Calling on the Name of the Lord

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At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD (Gen. 4:26, NIV).

This is an amazing statement, coming as it does almost immediately upon the revelation of the depth and consequences of sin into which the human race has so quickly fallen. If God had permitted grace to flow freely into the world immediately after the expulsion from Eden the true nature of the horror of sin, when left to itself, would not have been revealed. And consequently the great grace of God would not have stood out so starkly in the extraordinary and surprising statement of Genesis 4:26.

The murder of Abel by Cain illustrates a very rapid development of sin. The slaying was premeditated. Not even the warning by God (Gen. 4:6–7) could alter Cain's determination to kill his brother. The depth of his sin is noticed when after his judgement he was only concerned with the consequence of his deed and not with the sin itself. The act of disobedience in the Garden has in the second generation already revealed that a rapid progress in the corruption of the human heart had taken place. Cain then went away from the presence of the Lord. He is to be a wanderer and vagabond. As such he can find no rest. He is therefore condemned to an unending search for God's presence—the God with whom he wanted nothing to do and in whom he does not believe—and his very condition keeps him from ever finding him, a hopeless situation. So he builds a city to satisfy his desire for security by creating a place belonging to himself. The city is the direct consequence of Cain's murderous act and of his refusal to accept God's protection.¹

Then in the seventh generation an evil man called Lamech comes on the scene. His unbridled vengeance is revealed in his song (Gen. 4:23–24). It is a sword-song and an expression of immense arrogance. It makes its power its god, and carried its god—i.e. its sword—in its hand. What God had ordained as a measure of gracious protection for Cain is given over to utter mockery. Sole reliance is placed on human revenge through the sword. No trace of the sense of sin remains,² and the downward spiral of sin and violence continued until, 'the LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually' (Gen. 6:5, NRSV).

¹ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993, pp. 4–5.

² Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1996, p. 46.

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In contrast, what had caused sinful and rebellious men to call on the name of the Lord? What caused them to worship Yahweh? It is God himself who through his word caused his people to call on him. Jeremiah wrote to God's people in exile:

Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the LORD (Jer. 29:12–14a).

What an incredible promise by Yahweh himself, 'I will let you find me'! As for Israel, so for the human race exiled from Eden. It is obvious that God still loves fallen humanity and cannot bear his people to be away from him. God's purpose for mankind cannot be thwarted. His words of judgement and especially of promise spoken in the Garden followed them from one generation to another and did not let them alone. But we need to know one important thing. It was not a matter of Seth and Enosh and their families working out their own salvation by calling on the name of the Lord. They worshipped him because in his great grace God had caused them to find him. They called upon his name only because God had called them to himself. Like Israel much later it was the Lord who had established them as his holy people who would be known as those who are called by the name of the Lord (Deut. 28: 9–10). Their act of worship is really an expression of his own action. Such is the wonderful and endless grace of God.

THE LINEAGE OF WORSHIPPERS

Immediately after the Fall, both justice and grace are turned towards fallen man. The judgements are shown in the curses pronounced; the grace of God for mankind lies implicitly in the curse upon the Serpent. In the curse upon the primal couple, the key functions of the mandate of Genesis 1:26–28 of multiplying and filling the earth, the keeping and tilling, the ruling and subduing, are all accompanied by pain, suffering, hard labour, and ultimately physical death and decay. In the curse upon the Serpent lies the divine promise of ultimate victory over the Serpent and his seed. The promise is that one day, somehow, out of the human race a fatal blow will come which shall crush the head of the Serpent. Note the divine initiation in the work of deliverance. The emphasis rests on the pronoun: God says, '*I* will put enmity'. God's promise is to the effect that he will keep up the enmity in the line of human generations and will not allow it to die out. Fallen man would know that through God's divine power and grace he would bring out of the human race victory over Satan. Satan may seem to have stolen true worship, but his degree of success is defined by the promise of Genesis 3:15.

Upon expulsion from the Garden the primal couple were therefore not completely devoid of hope. In the first place they had experienced God's gracious provision of clothes despite their sin and they trusted in God's grace and power to bring deliverance from their enemies: sin and the evil one. This is borne out upon the birth of Adam and Eve's third son Seth. Eve exclaimed, 'For God has appointed another seed for me instead of Abel, whom Cain killed' (NKJV). There is a clever word play relating to Seth's name. 'Seth' (*šet*) connotes the word *šatli* in Eve's statement, 'God has

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appointed another seed [child, offspring] for me instead of Abel'. This suggests that this son was 'appointed' by God as a *replacement* for Abel. He is Eve's 'seed' which reminds immediately of Genesis 3:15 and the longing for the promised deliverer. Moreover, both his name and the verb come from the root *šat*, which can also mean 'foundation'. This suggests Seth's future role in establishing the line of the seed that will crush the serpent's head.³ Abel was called a man of faith, a righteous man, whose worship was acceptable to God (Heb. 11:4). From the very beginning God established a lineage of men and women who offered true worship to him. They were, like Abel, people of faith who firmly believed in the Word of God that promised to deliver them from the evil one, whose dastardly work had been revealed so quickly. Then in the time of Adam and Eve's son Seth and grandson Enosh, 'men began to call on the name of the LORD' (Gen. 4:26, NRSV). The NIV has the alternate reading, 'men began to proclaim the name of the LORD'. Seth named his son Enosh, which means 'man'. The Hebrew meaning suggests 'frailty'.⁴ Seth had come to realise men's inherent weakness and mortality, so he gave his son a name indicative of this truth. 'It is when we discover our real nature, our frailty—when we discover that we are creatures of need—that we finally discover who God really is.'⁵ In contrast to Cain who built a city for security, Seth and his family turned eagerly to their God in regular, public worship. So 'the face of the Church began distinctly to appear, and that worship of God was set up which might continue to posterity'.⁶ This is such a miracle of grace that God would raise up a single family in which the worship of God arose. Despite the downward spiral of human sin, a line of true worshippers was preserved from Seth through to Enoch, Noah and then Abraham.

When Abram pitched his tent east of Bethel, 'he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD' (Gen. 12:8, NIV). After his sojourn in Egypt Abram returned to Bethel, 'There Abram called on the name of the LORD' (Gen. 13:4, NIV). After Abraham had made a treaty with Abimelech, he 'planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God' (Gen. 21:33, NIV). Like father like son, in Beersheba, 'Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the LORD' (Gen. 26:25, NIV). In all of these references the expression 'to call on the name of the LORD' means to worship him. This was evidently done by sacrificing on the altar that had been built for that purpose and by prayer to God in connection with such worship.

Moses proclaims, 'What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?' (Deut. 4:7, NIV). Then there is the famous incident on Mount Carmel in Elijah's contest with the 450 Baal priests. Elijah called on the name of Lord:

O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel . . . Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God (1 Kings 18:36–37, NRSV).

³ Noel Due, *Created for Worship: From Genesis to Revelation to You*, Mentor, Fearn, 2005, pp. 51–3.

⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, WBC 1, Word Books, Waco, 1987, p. 115.

⁵ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 18.

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book Moses Called Genesis*, trs John King, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 1, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 224.

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Calling on the name of the Lord is clearly addressing a prayer to him.⁷

In the Psalms, calling on the name of the Lord is equivalent to worshipping him. Psalm 105 begins with, ‘O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples’. In Psalm 116 the expression is used three times:

Then I called on the name of the LORD:
‘O LORD, I pray, save my life!’ . . .
I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD . . .
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD (Ps 116:4, 13, 17).

In the Psalm passages,⁸ calling on the name of the Lord is a form of worship associated with prayer, giving thanks and praising the Lord. Similarly in Lamentations 3:55 Jeremiah prays, ‘I called on your name, O LORD, from the depths of the pit’.

Three times we find the expression in the Minor Prophets. Joel exclaims that ‘before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes . . . everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved’ (Joel 2:31–32). Zephaniah prophesies, ‘At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord’ (Zeph. 3:9). Zechariah says of the remnant of the scattered sheep (Zech. 13:7), ‘They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, “They are my people”; and they will say, “The LORD is our God”’ (13:9b).

THE NAME OF THE LORD⁹

The greatest gift which God gave to Israel was his holy name. In this one gift he included all the other gifts which he ever offered to his people. When God gave his name to the Israelites, he gave of himself to them, for by his name they had access to him personally . . . They could approach him and address him; they could gain his attention and communicate with him. In his name they could represent him and speak for him as he himself determined. In short, since they had been given his name, they had him as their God.

The name Yahweh (LORD) stands out by itself, recorded 46 times in the first eleven chapters of Genesis alone.¹⁰ This name is regarded so holy by the Jews that when it is read out aloud it is replaced by *Adonay*, which means ‘my Lord’. The importance of God’s name in Exodus 3:13–14 lies in its function as the proper name of Israel’s God. Like all proper names, it designates a unique personal being. ‘The name [Yahweh] does not then function metaphorically as a general designation for [God], but is to be used as his proper name by Israel in its dealing with him. It is powerful and holy and surrounded by taboo just because it is God’s proper name.’

⁷ Also 2 Kings 5:11.

⁸ Others are: Psalm 79:6; 80:18.

⁹ I have made extensive use of the essay, ‘What’s the Use of Naming God?’ by John W. Kleinig published in 1992 in the *Lutheran Theological Journal*, vol. 26, pp. 27–34. All quotations are his, unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁰ A total of 1567 times in the Pentateuch.

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It is not Israel who named God Yahweh to distinguish him from other gods; it was God himself. In Exodus 3 Moses receives his commission from God to deliver the Israelites from Egypt with the promise that they would worship him on Mount Horeb. In verses 3:13–15 Moses asks God for his name. God answers: ‘I AM’ in verse 14 and ‘The LORD’ in verse 15 and adds, ‘This is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation’ (NIV). The name Yahweh was then used by Moses to proclaim deliverance from oppression to the Israelites and to demand their release by Pharaoh for sacrificial worship (v. 18). The main concern in this story is not to explain the meaning of God’s holy name in some abstract way. Moses is sent to a suffering people crying out for deliverance (vv. 7–9). They needed to hear how and why the name was given to Moses. Since God had promised to heed their cry for deliverance, and since they were to meet with him after they had been set free from their concentration camps by presenting sacrifices to him at Horeb, they needed to know his name, so that they could call on him both in Egypt and later at Horeb. That name was described as his remembrance, it was his mode of address, the way that they were to remember him as they called on him for help and to proclaim his presence with them in their worship. With his name they then had access to him and his power. And that’s why it was given to them by God himself.

Then in Exodus 6:2–8 God introduced himself with the remarkable words: I am Yahweh (‘I am the LORD’). This is the first time that God introduces himself by name to Moses. He is then charged to be God’s mouthpiece to introduce him to the people by relaying his words to his people. In doing that Yahweh:

... makes himself known by name to his people and acts to fulfil his promises to them. The holy name is first given by God to Moses (Exod 6:2). Moses then passes it on to the people (Exod 6:6). It is therefore received to be handed down in history by the divinely instituted process of tradition.

The holy name YHWH is God’s proper name. God gave it to Moses for petition and proclamation. By introducing himself to Moses, God commissioned Moses to use the same formula to introduce him to the people and to announce their deliverance. After Moses, the priests used the same formula for divine self-introduction to proclaim him and his message to the people of Israel . . . So the name which was given by God through Moses was received by the Israelites in each successive generation as his gift to them.

Since God had given them his name, the Israelites could approach him in their worship: ‘For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him?’ (Deut. 4:7).

After that dreadful golden calf incident at Horeb, Yahweh promised Moses that his presence would go with him. God said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest’. Moses said, ‘For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth’ (Exod. 33:14, 16). The distinction is that Yahweh is with Israel and near to them, as against the nations whose gods are aloof and distant and cold. The distinction lies in the intimate relationship the covenant creates between God and his people.¹¹ God’s promise of his ongoing presence with them was not yet enough for Moses. He needed to know how the Lord would reveal (manifest) his presence in the tabernacle, and whether it would

¹¹ Deuteronomy 12:5, 11; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2.

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be in wrath or grace. So Moses asked, ‘Show me your glory, I pray’. God replied, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The LORD”; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy’ (Exod. 33:18–19). This then happened the next morning. In Exodus 34:5–9 we have the remarkable account of God’s appearance to Moses on Sinai. God did not reveal himself visually as that would be instant death, but audibly by the solemn proclamation of his name to Moses. ‘The uniqueness of this event is evident from the unparalleled use of the idiom “to call on the name of Yahweh” for God’s activity.’ Normally, this phrase was used to describe what God’s people did in their worship. They called on the holy name, Yahweh, in proclamation,¹² in petition,¹³ and in praise.¹⁴ Yet in Exodus 33:19 and 34:5–6 God ‘called on’ his own name. He invoked his own name and proclaimed himself to Moses. Not only did he proclaim his name, he also displayed his goodness before Moses for his appraisal by proclaiming his utter graciousness and sheer compassion to him. God’s glory then consisted of his goodness and grace and compassion, and these were all revealed to his people in his holy name:

This episode is a foundational event which sets a divine precedent for Israel’s worship. Since the Lord had ‘proclaimed’ his name to them as the means by which he reveals his glory and grants them access to his compassion and grace, they may ‘invoke’ that name for these purposes in their worship. The Lord had made his glorious presence available to his people in his name. They then could gain access to his presence and receive grace and help from him by proclaiming that name and using it to petition him, as encouraged by his own description of his character and characteristic mode of behaviour to them in Exodus 34:6, 7.

From these two instances the expression to proclaim the name, clearly means to proclaim the name of the Lord. Proclaiming God’s name is an essential part of public worship and is certainly included in the concept of calling on the name of the Lord.

In response to God’s divine proclamation of his holy name, Moses worshipped and immediately called on the name of the Lord. He interceded for sinful and rebellious Israel and prayed, ‘If now I have found favour in your sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance’ (Exod. 34:9).

Then later in Exodus 40 the tabernacle is erected and we read how Moses ‘took the covenant and put it into the ark . . . and set the mercy seat above the ark and brought the ark into the tabernacle’ (vv. 20–21). Immediately the cloud of the glory of Yahweh covers and fills the tabernacle. This is a definite sign that God is indeed with them, in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night, centred on the tabernacle. God’s glory descends as the ark of the covenant is installed. This indicates that Yahweh is the guardian of the Ten Words. Just as wonderful is the mercy seat above the ark. God’s glory and goodness are his mercy (Exod. 33:18–34:7). The mercy seat means that Yahweh can continue in fellowship with his people, even given their transgressions of the Ten Commandments. Yahweh deals with his people through the lens of his mercy. The Israelites firmly believed that Yahweh had chosen ‘to put his Name’

¹² Genesis 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25; Psalm 79:6; Zephaniah 3:9.

¹³ 1 Kings 18:24–36; 2 Kings 5:11; Psalm 116:4; Isaiah 64:7; 65:1; Zechariah 13:9.

¹⁴ Psalm 75:1; 80:18; 105:1–2; 116:13, 17; Isaiah 12:4.

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(NIV) first in the tabernacle and later in the temple,¹⁵ so that he could make his residence there. God dwelt there as his name dwelt there. The name was actually present at the temple in Jerusalem. By his name he was present with his ears to hear prayer, with his eyes to receive his people, and with his heart to respond to their needs (1 Kings 8:27–30). By his name his presence was given. The nations will see that Israel is close to Yahweh and that he is definitely and decisively with Israel (Deut. 4:7; 1 Kings 8:57–60):

God's name could not be divorced from the worship which he himself had instituted. It was given to them for their worship . . .

God, then, made himself and his grace available to his people by giving them his holy name. That name revealed his glorious presence. By that name they had access to his presence and grace in their performance of the public sacrificial ritual. Since they had been given the Lord's name, they could petition him according to his character and his many promises to them. Apart from the holy name, they could only revert to idolatry, and so incur his wrath.

When we read in Genesis 4:26, 'At that time men began to call on the name of the LORD' (NIV), we understand now that this refers to the public worship of God (Leupold—see below), since we know that private worship had been practised before the birth and naming of Seth's son Enosh. At that time that must have included various forms of worship, such as sacrifices like those which had been brought by Cain and Abel; prayers for help to fulfil the mandate of Genesis 1:26–28 despite the curses; praise and thanksgiving for blessings received and hope for a promised deliverer; and the public proclamation of God's name, particularly to those descendants of Cain who no longer worshipped the true God but had become idolatrous. Since the name 'Yahweh' is attached to 'name', this means that, from days of old, God was known in the capacity of Yahweh, or in the character of Yahweh—whether that word, as such, was known at this early date or not. The thing that the name stood for was known. Men do not first in the age of Abraham or Moses begin to comprehend God's faithfulness, goodness, mercy, incomparableness and unchangeableness:

The great importance of public worship, both as a matter of personal necessity as well as a matter of public confession, is beautifully set forth by this brief record. This act bears eloquent testimony to the courage of this group, who wanted to be known as such whose hope was placed only in Yahweh. It is not enough to say that 'Yahweh's religion began with Enoch.' It began with Adam and developed into regular public worship in three generations.¹⁶

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 12:5, 21; 14:24; 1 Kings 9:3; 11:36; 2 Kings 21:4, 7; 2 Chronicles 6:20.

¹⁶ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Evangelical Pr., London, 1942, p. 228.