

Exodus: What We Mean When We Say God

Part Two – The Name in the Flames

By Pastor Ricky Stephen

The Name in the Flames

Exodus 3 is the prototypical theophany. It is the prime example of a ‘God-sighting’. As such, we can expect to learn somethings about what it means for God to show up in this passage.

The three things we can expect are revelation, confrontation, and vocation.

Revelation: Playing with Fire

It’s a biblical fundamental that we are incapable of knowledge of God without revelation. However, as Blaise Pascal once wrote “God made [humanity] in His image, and [humanity] returned the favor.”¹

The word ‘god’ is not a name, it is a category. As such, it has become an empty container for us to fill with our own ideas about ‘God’.

God reveals Himself in a burning bush because if you play with ideas about God you play with fire.

What makes Israel special is not their thinking, philosophy, or theology. It is that in their history, God chose to reveal Himself. He gave them a name from the flames.

Moses’ request for God’s name is not from humility about needing revelation.

Names in ancient cultures meant power to invoke. They were seen as something to control or call on.

Names put gods in their place in the cosmic pecking order. Moses, as a polytheist, was probably asking what this god was responsible for.

Names also give authority. Moses is being asked to confront the leading superpower of his day, he wants to know if this ‘god’ has the authority to back that call up.

If names mean power to invoke, place in the pecking order and authority, what ‘name’ do you call ‘God’? What do you mean when you say God?

¹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

Revelation: The Name in the Flames

God answers Moses' request in Exodus 3:14:

"I AM WHO I AM" This is what you are to say to the Israelites 'I AM has sent me to you.'

The first response is not a name, but a sentence:

Ehyeh = first person imperfect of 'to be' = I am/will be

Asher = relative pronoun = Who/what

Ehyeh = first person imperfect of 'to be' = I am/will be

It means "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE". The imperfect tense has both a present and future connotation.

Christ Wright in his comments on Exodus writes:

"In asking, 'what is His name?' they may have been effectively asking, 'What can *he* do?' To which [God] effectively answers, "Watch and see. Trust me."²

When God says, "I AM has sent you", it is four letters in Hebrew: YHWH. Hebrew is written in only consonants with vowels implied, and the most common vocalization of this word is 'Yahweh'—which means 'He is/will be.'

There are long explanations as to why many of us do not know that name, you can find a video and a paper below.³ Jewish people began to think it was too holy to speak, so they would substitute the word 'Yahweh' with the word 'Adonai', which means 'lord, sir, or master.'

English translations follow this convention. They use 'Lord' for Adonai and 'LORD' for Yahweh.

Again, this is not technically a name either. It means "He will be".

What will He be?

That's what the rest of Exodus is all about.

But in the rest of the Bible, other titles are used for Yahweh to demonstrate his characteristics. God for his power. Lord for his sovereignty. Provider, refuge, father, etc. Yahweh is used to refer to the Exodus and four other things:

1. The God Who Sees and Hears the Suffering: "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." (Exod 3:7-8)

² Chris J.H. Wright, *The Story of God Commentary: Exodus*, 115.

³ <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/yhwh-lord/>; http://areopage.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Gertoux_UseNameEarlyChristians.pdf

2. The God Who Delivers People from Evil: "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land..." (Exod 3:8)
3. The God Who Keeps His Covenant Promises: "And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites... (Exod. 3:17)
4. The God Who is With His People: "Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' And God said, 'I will be with you.'" (Exodus 3:12)

Revelation: Say His Name Say His Name

"I think the gradual shift from calling God "Yahweh" to using the title "the LORD" says something about the human condition. For all our talk about a 'personal relationship with Jesus,' there's a part of us that's scared of intimacy with God. We see the fire and smoke up the mountain and we shrink back in fear."⁴

A good practice to adopt is to say the name Yahweh in prayer.

Because when we do, we go back to this moment and like Moses we are saying: show me who you really are. I don't know on my own. Show me.

On the topic of names, Jesus' spoken name was 'Yeshua' which is more commonly translated into English elsewhere as 'Joshua'.

It means 'yah saves' or 'Yahweh saves'. Jesus' name also calls back on the Exodus, and Jesus is the one who sees the oppressed, sets us free, keeps the promises of God and is with us by His Spirit.

Confrontation: Take Off Your Sandals, Get Up, and Go Face Pharaoh

A summarization of the story so far: Moses is a Hebrew baby who is adopted as Egyptian royalty. He is overzealous for justice and has murdered an Egyptian guard, making him lose credibility with the Hebrews. So, he runs away to the desert, meets a girl, has a kid and raises some sheep (see Exod 3:1).

Many of us have had similar experiences of giving up on dreams and passions.

Yahweh confronts Moses: "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:5)

⁴ John Mark Comer, *God has a Name*, 53.

In Genesis 2 and 3, humans are initially seen to be naked and unashamed, meaning they are defenseless and unashamed of it. When they sin, however, the first thing they do is cover up. They hide their vulnerability.

Shoes represent how we move in the world. The way we make it from place to place and day to day. Yahweh needs Moses to be vulnerable again, to change his ways.

Poet and Philosopher John O' Donohue once wrote a blessing for exhausted people that says:

“You have traveled too fast over false ground;
Now your soul has come to take you back.”⁵

Often Yahweh meets us when we accept our weakness. Moses' story parallels the story of Jacob Wrestling with God (Genesis 32:22-33). In that match, Jacob's hip is torn out of socket, so he has to limp away. Jacob is humbled.

Moses is also humbled. He is a failed revolutionary now standing barefoot—defenseless—before Yahweh. Yahweh tells him:

“So now, go, I am sending you to Pharaoh...” (Exodus 3:10)

Moses doesn't get to be the hero. Yahweh is the warrior who saves Israel. The burning bush becomes the thunder and lightning of the plagues (Exodus 9:13f), it becomes the smoke and fire of the mountain where the Law—how to really walk in the world—is revealed (Exodus 19:18), and the pillar of fire that stands between the Israelites and Egypt's army (Exodus 13:17-14:29).

Moses' main action in the Exodus is just *listening to what Yahweh says*.

If we want to see God show up, we must accept our weakness. It's then he can remove the false kings and false gods and lead us into freedom.

Vocation: Becoming a Burning Bush

John Calvin once wrote: “Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”⁶

Knowledge of God will lead to knowledge of self. Revelation and confrontation will lead to vocation, to our calling.

Yahweh is on mission; Yahweh is at work for the good of the world. And every day is a *bring your kid to work day for Him*.

⁵ From John O' Donohue's, *To Bless the Space Between Us*. You can find the blessing [here](#).

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 1 Chapter 1.

One other place in scripture we are given a vision of fire that burns but does not consume. One of the other places there is a 'God-sighting' is in the book of Acts chapter 2:

When the day of Pentecost came, they [that is, Jesus' disciples] were all together in one place. ²Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues [or languages] as the Spirit enabled them.
(Acts 2:2-4)

We are called to become burning bushes, filled with the Holy Spirit. We are called to reveal God's true name, confront the Pharaoh's and false gods, and invite other people to embrace their call to be the light of the world.

Discussion Notes:

Open Up:

What do you think the most popular 'names' for God are in our culture? What do most people mean when they say 'God'?

What 'name'—as in what power, position, and authority—do you use for God?

Dig In:

1. Read Exodus 3. What else do you notice; how might God be speaking to you in the text?
2. How have you had the name Yahweh explained to you before, if ever? What might change if you start to use it?
3. Many are speaking of a current revival at Asbury college. What would be the test for proving this is a true place God is showing up?⁷
4. What might God confront in you if He shows up in your life? What are your 'sandals'—ways of protecting yourself and moving—that you might need to take off?
5. How does knowing that God shows up to reveal, challenge and call change the way you seek Him in your personal practice? In church?

Pray:

Pray for Yahweh to show Himself among us. Ask Him to reveal Himself, challenge us, and give us a clear calling to confront those places where He is not honored as is His due.

⁷ See the article from Christianity Today [here](#).