

Special Series

the Call of God – Moses (3)

Prayer

We praise You, Living Lord; for You have a plan for the whole of Your Creation from beginning to end. You have given us the privilege of living in Your world; help us therefore not just to enjoy the benefits of what we have been given, but also to look after our world, to maintain it and manage it; and so find fulfilment in living to Your praise and glory. Thanks be to God, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Find some moment in the course of the day to stop what you are doing and pray for those closest to you

On-going prayers

- **Pray about the world of sport** *Pray for the many people who do not 'make the grade' in sport and have to learn to live with that rejection*
- *Give thanks to God for the blessing of sleep and rest*
- *Pray for those who have suffered in a train collision in Belgium*

Meditation

The Lord has always guided people through troubles to greater glory:

- He told Abraham to listen to the voice of his wife when he doubted;
- He told Moses to face His temper, control it and become a leader;
- He told Joshua He would only succeed by being bold and faithful;
- He told Ruth not to let go of her faith because of her family troubles;
- He told Eli to trust Samuel with the things of God, not his own sons;
- He told Solomon to be wise, and worship God alone, in Jerusalem;
- He told Elijah to leave mount Sinai and get on with job of a prophet;
- He told King Manasseh to repent after he had committed awful sins;
- He told the prophet Isaiah to announce the mystery of God's salvation;

And what He has told you is part of the same eternal plan; so go for it!

Bible passage – Exodus 3:13-15

¹³ Moses said to God, 'If I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they say to me, "What is His name?" what shall I tell them?' ¹⁴ God said to Moses, 'I AM THE ONE WHO IS.' He then said 'This is what you will tell the Israelites: "I AM has sent me to you."' ¹⁵ God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "The LORD, the God of your ancestors, 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 how I am to be known for all time.'

Bible Study

Review

This awe-inspiring text is probably one of the most significant and well-studied theological texts in the whole Bible, because it contains a most powerful description of the character of God. People remember this passage today because it is the story about when the name of God was first revealed to Moses. The famous four lettered name of God JHWH (normally written as 'the LORD' in most Bibles – see later Bible Study) was previously used by God about Himself when He spoke to Abraham (15:1f.), but after it was revealed to Moses in the special way described in this passage (3:13-15), it became central to the life and worship of God's people. The revelation of this name of God indicated to the people of Israel that a new and powerful work of God was at hand, and later generations looked back and rejoiced in the God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt. They used this sacred name as a reminder not just of God's nature and character, but of His presence and His active work amongst them for their liberation.

As we read this passage, however, we cannot fail to notice that it is not at all straightforward, and much of it appears to be mysterious. Moses asked God for a name to give the people, but God responded with what appears to be a riddle; 'I Am the one who Is' (3:14). He then gave what appears to be two versions of His name; 'I Am has sent me to you' (3:14) and then 'the LORD, the God of your fathers ... has sent me to you' (3:15). It is therefore extremely difficult for the ordinary reader to make sense of what is going on, and this is an important reminder to us that in order to understand God's Word, there are times when we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit found in the wisdom of others who have studied the Scriptures in detail.

The rest of the Bible study will explain more, but in summary, what happens is this. Moses asked for a 'name' of God, but his request was for more than mere identity, for ancient peoples regarded names as a route to understanding something of the character of the person or the god who had that name. Moses was therefore not asking for a name that would enable him to explain which 'god' he was talking about to the Israelites, but a true name which revealed something of the character of God and also something about what He intended to do to help and save His people! Whatever Moses' personal state of mind and evident timidity at other points in the story of Exodus, this was a very bold request.

God's answer was essentially twofold. Firstly, He used a simple but enigmatic Hebrew word to describe Himself, which is most simply translated 'I AM', and He said it twice. The effect in Hebrew is extraordinary. Because of the nature of the language, 'I AM' is not a statement about abstract 'existence' as we might think today; but it conveys the idea of God's presence and His action. This is rather like the phrase, 'Here I am' in English, because when someone says this, it implies that they have come, are present, and waiting to do something. This is exactly the message that God was giving Moses in verse 14; however, this was not God's 'name'.

The 'name' of God is revealed to us in verse 15, where God said to Moses 'the LORD, the God of your fathers ...' Here, the Hebrew letters for the word 'LORD' are 'JHWH', which is a different form of the same word God used to say 'I AM', but the tense of the verb has been changed to mean 'HE IS'; the on-going present tense! There is much more to discover about this amazing name, and some considerable dispute, but we must not lose sight of the overall nature of this word, now changed into a name for God, and what it meant for Moses. The famous word/name JHWH meant that God was present and active in His world, ready to do His will and bring salvation to His people in slavery!

In Old Testament times, the people of Israel came to realise that God's name was a clear statement of His presence and His love. Now, through Jesus Christ, a real person and the Son of God, we have the tangible evidence of both the presence of God and His love, within our world. The name of God has been fulfilled in everything Jesus came to do on earth for our salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit makes this real for us now!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Moses' question (3:13)
- God's identity (3:14)
- The Holy Name (3:15)

Going Deeper

In order to study this short but important passage in more detail, we will look at it verse by verse. The intense nature of the conversation is extraordinary in itself, but the more we look at each part of it, the clearer picture we will have of the power and majesty of God in this revelation to Moses.

Moses' question (verse 13)

Verse 13 comes as the climax to a series of quite extraordinary statements and questions in Exodus 3, which build up to the great revelations of God in verses 14 and 15. In order to understand this, we will briefly look

back. When Moses first heard God speaking to him from the burning bush, he replied 'Here I am' (3:4). This was the response that God was looking for, and He revealed Himself to Moses as the 'God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (3:6). This was an important revelation, because it enabled Moses to have confidence that he was being addressed by the One who had worked through these ancestors to create 'the Israelites', his own people, but it was not sufficient. After Moses heard that the Lord was asking him to go to Pharaoh and obtain the release of the Israelites (3:7-10), he was clearly unsettled, and asked the question 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh ...' (3:11). He obtained the personal assurance from God; 'I will be with you ...' (3:12). Moses may have been satisfied that the Lord was indeed guiding him, because his next question (verse 13) asked the Lord not about himself or his own personal needs, but about how he would explain what was happening to the Israelites. His question nevertheless seems a little strange to us; why would Moses feel the need to ask God for His name, after having heard that He was the God of his ancestors?

Generally, people of those times had a keen sense of religion and of various deities, and the names of the different gods in whom they believed reflected what they were believed to do. From Moses' point of view, if God was about to do a new work amongst His people (3:7-10), it was logical for him to ask God to identify a name that would reflect that task. It is fascinating however that the identity and name revealed by God to Moses (in the next two verses) did not do this, but instead, it summarised everything about Him. It was truly unique to Him ask God, the Creator of the World. This is why the name revealed is so important for us today. God stands above human history and He is involved in everything, working to achieve His purposes. This is what was revealed, and it is no surprise that Moses subsequently found it hard to understand and accept what God was doing, as we see later in Exodus 4:1f, where Moses prevaricates about the whole mission to save the Israelites.

God's identity (verse 14)

God did not answer Moses simply by telling him His name. Those who have read a little of the Hebrew Bible know from elsewhere that the name of God used in Scripture is 'JHWH', and this is not what is found in verse 14. God said three words in Hebrew which when translated literally mean 'I am that I am' (in Hebrew, "ehyeh asher 'ehyeh"); however, the English language does not do justice to what the Hebrew means. Over the years, scholars have performed endless research on these words. Some regard the phrase as vague and elusive, and others have even argued that it is a 'pun'! There is no reason, however, not to read this exactly as it is written. In Hebrew, strictly, the present tense, 'I am' could also be the future 'I will be', and it could also be what is called the 'continuous present', that is, 'I am being'.

Now, if we put all this together, there are a wide range of possible translation, and if you look in some Bibles, you will find that alternative translations are often offered for this phrase, most commonly 'I will be what I will be'. The reason why I have translated it 'I AM THE ONE WHO IS' is because God was addressing Moses about Himself, and I do not believe He was prevaricating or intending to talk in some kind of mystery code. He was telling Moses that He was alive, He was active, He was present and real, and He was not going to change, for the nature and character of God was fixed and eternal. You could also say that when speaking about being the 'God of the forefathers', God was speaking about the past, but His words in verse 14 told Moses that He was present with him in a new and powerful way.

It then appears that God used the single Hebrew word 'I AM' (Hebrew, "ehyeh") rather like a name, telling Moses to say to the Israelites 'I AM has sent me to you' (3:14). The message was obvious. God said He was present with His people, was with them in their suffering and was in the process of doing something about it.

The Holy Name (verse 15)

The problem, however, was that these were God's own words, and Moses had to report this to the people. So God went further by instructing Moses to use a new name which is translated 'the LORD' in verse 15. The reason for this change is not obvious to us, because in English this looks quite different from 'I AM'. However, it is obvious in Hebrew, because the word we read as 'the LORD' is 'JHWH'. As I pointed out in the introduction, these letters in Hebrew mean 'HE IS', as they are from the same word as 'I AM', but a different tense. Moses could therefore say to the people of Israel that he was sent by the God of their forefathers, whose name was 'HE IS', and the meaning of this name was everything we saw in verse 14. God was not only a God of their past, but a God of the present and of the future.

When you read this, you might well ask how it can be that the Hebrew word for 'HE IS' has come to be written in the Bible as 'the LORD'. The history of the word JHWH is complicated, but over the centuries, the Israelite people came to regard this word as so holy, it should not be spoken or pronounced when reading Scripture. For this reason, wherever the letters JHWH cropped up in the Hebrew text, they were not spoken; they were replaced by another word, meaning 'Lord' (in Hebrew, 'ADONAY')! This is why you will often find in your Bibles that the word 'Lord' is written with some form of capital letters (often what is called 'small capitals'), and this tells us that the original Hebrew at this point is the holy name of God JHWH.

We do not know how the ancient Israelites would have pronounced the word JHWH, and over the centuries, some people have tried to work this out, the best guess being the term 'Jahweh'. You may be familiar with this name for God which is used in some Bibles and translations (in particular, the New Jerusalem Bible).

All this intrigue about the name of God is important for us to understand, as it is only when you peel away the layers of language that you discover what God was really trying to say to the Israelite people. In truth, the LORD was their God, and had been since the beginning; since the time of their forefathers. However, He was not a God of the past, He was alive and active, and this meant that He was about to do something in their lives. His activity was not to be confined to the past. As is clear from the last part of verse 15, God wanted it made clear that He was God of the past, the present and the future, 'and this is how I am to be known for all time'.

Application

If you have managed to read this far and understand the study, you will realise the complex nature of language and how God used it to tell the Israelites about Himself. It is perhaps unfortunate that the Israelites became concerned about the holiness of God's name and replaced JHWH ('HE IS') with 'LORD', for although the term 'the Lord' is important in its own right, we have perhaps lost sight of the name of God by which He told His people He wanted to be known. This is either 'I AM' (from verse 14) as when God speaks about Himself, or 'HE IS' (from verse 15) when we speak about God. It is helpful, however, that the Gospel of John records Jesus as saying in seven distinct ways 'I AM ...' about Himself, as, for example, in 'I am the Shepherd' (John 10:11). Because Jesus did this and identified Himself with God, we do not need to feel that God's name is so holy it must not be spoken, for Jesus' presence with us as Saviour means that we have no need to be so distant about God. Jesus has won access for us to the presence of God Himself!

Christian people, therefore, have every reason to be grateful for this powerful Old Testament text. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He revealed Himself as alive and active and present within His world, willing to work with His people for salvation and liberation. We now know that God continued to work in His world through History, that He worked His salvation through Jesus Christ, and He is now present in His world through us. 'I AM' or 'HE IS' may not be a 'name' in the way that we think of a name, but the words certainly tell us a great deal about God.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what the presence of God means to you. How is God's presence made known to you?
2. Make sure you understand everything written in the Bible study, and check it out against what is written in any other Bible or study Bible you have.
3. Discuss how you think Moses would have responded to this revelation from God.

Topics covered by this text

- *The nature of God*
- *The self revelation of God in His name*
- *Salvation and the purposes of God*

Personal comments by author

It can be hard to work your way through texts like this if you are not used to dealing with the complexities of language. However, we have to realise that translation from one language to another, particularly from an ancient one to the present day as is true in using the Bible, often creates the potential for great misunderstanding. Also, it is only when you have to translate or change from one language to another that you realise the importance of things such as verb tenses! We must not rely on our own understanding of God's Word, but on the Holy Spirit, who will guide us into all truth; sometimes through careful study!

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Write down a list of things you believe about God, and compare this with what you have read about His name here in this passage. What can you learn, and what ought you to learn from God's Word?*
 - *Pray that all God's people will seek to learn from the meaning of His name, and the revelation of His saving grace through His eternal name.*
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Final Prayer

Dear Jesus. You came to earth and lived amongst Your people and saw their pain and heartache, and You worked to set people free from illness, pain, bondage, suffering, prison and every other form of captivity. Come amongst us now, and do the same, we pray. AMEN
