

Exodus 3:1-22
The Great 'I AM'
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When Jesus cleansed the temple in Jerusalem, He made very clear that we should never turn God's house of prayer into a house of merchandise. In other words, we should be careful not to regard the church as primarily a business, as primarily a commercial enterprise. This is one of the real temptations in today's culture with all its emphasis on commercial success. We can easily turn numbers into an idol to be worshipped and into a possession to be coveted. We can easily start putting more emphasis on a church's financial health than on a church's spiritual health. We can easily become more concerning about growth and graphs than about God. A church can become so consumed with increasing its wealth that it loses its focus on God. A church can become so consumed with recruiting prestigious members that it forgets how to worship God. In our culture, true worship of the true God can easily become a lost art even for a church.

That would be tragic, wouldn't it? For worship to become a lost art for a church would be like healing's becoming a lost art for a hospital or like teaching's becoming a lost art for a school or like cooking's becoming a lost art for a restaurant. When a hospital forgets how to heal, when a school forgets how to teach, when a restaurant forgets how to cook, then they have lost the very basis for their existence. And the same is true for a church which has forgotten how to worship God.

What is worship? To worship is to focus on God, to recognize God's unique greatness, and to acknowledge this in His presence. If we as a church want to worship God, then we need to start with focussing on God. We need to take care not to forget God as God. We can focus so much on God as a source of salvation and help and blessings and happiness that we forget to focus on God as God and to focus on God as an object of worship and praise and adoration. We need to remember God's awesomeness, His very wonder, His exceeding greatness. We need to remember the honor and privilege of praising God, the honor and privilege of serving God, the honor and privilege of living for God.

We today want to focus on God by considering a passage where God reveals Himself to us. We will today be examining Exodus chapter three under three headings: the flame, the name and the claim. The flame: the bush was burning but not consumed; the name: My name is Jehovah; the claim: Israel is My first born son. The flame, the name and the claim.

Let us begin now by looking at the flame. We read in our passage that Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. In looking for green pasture for the sheep, Moses crossed a desert area and came to the slopes of Mount Horeb. Mount Horeb is also called Mount Sinai, and this is where Moses would later lead Israel, God's flock, to receive God's law and covenant. There upon Mount Horeb, Moses saw a bush - a common, insignificant bramble bush - which appeared to have caught fire. That was not an unusual sight there in the desert, except that Moses over time noticed that the bush was not consumed by the fire. Moses noticed the burning bush and probably at first thought nothing of it. Then, perhaps after considerable time, he noticed it again, and it was still burning. This phenomenon continued for a long enough

time that Moses' curiosity was aroused, and he decided to investigate.

As Moses neared the bush, he learned the reality behind this phenomenon. The Angel of the Lord, God Himself, was in the midst of the bush, and the appearance of fire was really the burning Shekinah glory of God Himself. God cried out to Moses, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." This is a precursor to the coming day when Moses will bring redeemed Israel from Egypt to this same mountain, and God will be there in fire and thunder, and the people will have to be warned not to draw near because this is holy ground, ground made holy by the special covenantal presence of the living and true God.

The burning presence of the Angel of the LORD in the midst of the bush was the reality, but there was also probably a symbolism to this scene. God tells Moses that He has seen the oppression of His people Israel in Egypt. Israel, a slave people in Egypt, were like a small bramble bush compared to Egypt, a nation with an empire, a nation which could be compared to a mighty tree which reached to the heavens and which could be seen from the ends of the earth. Israel, the small bramble bush, is burning with the fires of affliction. Israel as a people were in the iron furnace of Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaoh was purposely afflicting them with taskmasters to overwork them and with schemes to kill the Hebrew children at birth. Yet in spite of the affliction, the Hebrew people continued to multiply and to grow. As a people, the flames do not touch them any more than the flame at Mount Horeb was consuming the bramble bush. The flames burned but they did not consume. You seek, this fire of affliction proceeded from the Egyptian Pharaoh in an immediate sense, but ultimately it was the sovereign working of

Almighty God. God is a jealous God who is a consuming fire to idolaters but who is to His people a fire which purifies but does not destroy. God was preserving His people in the fires of affliction while burning away their love for the security of Egypt with its flesh pots and abundant fish together with cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. This was the symbolism of the bush which burned but was not consumed.

We have considered the flame. We have looked at both the reality and the symbolism of the burning bush. Our next point is the name. God tells Moses that He is sending him to deliver Israel out of their affliction in Egypt. Moses is first to make a modest request of the Pharaoh. He is to ask merely that the Pharaoh allow the men of Israel to go three days into the wilderness that they might there worship Jehovah God. God will harden Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh will deny this reasonable request and reveal to all the evil tyranny of his sin hardened heart. Then God will respond to Pharaoh's tyranny by striking Egypt with miraculous plagues and thus will completely deliver Israel from their slavery in Egypt. Moses responds to this assignment with a request:

Exodus 3:13

13 Then Moses said to God, "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel 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 say to them?"

Moses is not here asking for some phonetic syllables to associate with God's person. Some cults today totally misunderstand the significance of God's name and teach that what is all important is that one pronounce God's name phonetically correct. They claim that they know the correct pronunciation and that this is the key to

God's accepting them and blessing them. This is not at all the significance of God's names. God's names are primarily revelations of God's character, and that is what is important, not their correct phonetic pronunciation. Moses is asking God for a revelation about Himself to share with Israel in Egypt, a revelation which will bolster their faith and give them the confidence and courage they will need to follow Moses as God's prophet and leader.

In response to this request, God gives Moses a revelation about one of God's names. Now this is that special name of God which no one knows with certainty how to pronounce. As it is written in Hebrew, the name consists of four letters. The English equivalents are "Y," "H," "W," and "H." The vowels were not written as part of the spelling in the Hebrew. The Jews regarded this name as so especially holy that they never pronounced it. Whenever they read the Scriptures and came upon this name for God, they would not pronounce the name but instead would voice the Hebrew word "Adonai," which means Lord. Because of this practice, the actual vowels in the name were lost. Over the generations, the Jews forgot the pronunciation. Because the name is spelled with four letters, some refer to it as the Tetragrammaton, which means "the four letters." Some speculate that its original pronunciation was Yahweh. Others use the pronunciation Jehovah, and that is how I will be pronouncing it today. The King James Version translates this name LORD and spells it with all capital letters to signify that this is not the normal word for Lord. The King James Version's method may be inspired by the Jewish practice of reading this name as Adonai or Lord but writing it in a way to indicate its distinctiveness.

What is important is not the correct spelling or phonetic pronunciation of this name but its meaning as a revelation of

God's character. I think the opening verses in Exodus chapter six make this clear:

Exodus 6:1-8

- 1 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh. For with a strong hand he will let them go, and with a strong hand he will drive them out of his land."
- 2 And God spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am the LORD.
- 3 "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [Hebrew: El Shaddai], but by My name, LORD [Hebrew: Jehovah], I was not known to them.
- 4 "I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers.
- 5 "And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant.
- 6 "Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.
- 7 'I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.
- 8 'And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.'"

Now notice especially what God said in Exodus chapter six verse three: ""I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty [Hebrew: El Shaddai], but by My name, LORD

[Hebrew: Jehovah], I was not known to them." This statement seems strange at first because the name Jehovah is repeatedly used in the book of Genesis starting in the creation account found in Genesis chapter two. The name Jehovah is found repeatedly in the Genesis account of Abraham, and Abraham addresses God as Jehovah. What then does it mean that God appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai but was not known to them as Jehovah?

Here, I believe, is the answer to this puzzling question. God's name El Shaddai reveals God's power, and this name is associated in three verses in Genesis with God's multiplying the patriarchs and making them into a mighty nation. This is especially so in the case of the birth of Isaac who was born long after Sarah's womb was dead.

Genesis 17:1-2

- 1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God [Hebrew: El Shaddai]; walk before Me and be blameless.
- 2 "And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

Genesis 28:3

- 3 [Isaac speaking to Jacob]: "May God Almighty [Hebrew: El Shaddai] bless you, and make you fruitful and multiply you, that you may be an assembly of peoples;

Genesis 35:11

- 11 Also God said to [Jacob]: "I am God Almighty [Hebrew: El Shaddai]. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of

nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body.

God had made Himself known to the patriarchs as El Shaddai as God revealed His mighty power by multiplying Abraham and making Abraham into a mighty nation. In the time of Moses, God would reveal Himself as Jehovah as God revealed His covenant loyalty by fulfilling His covenant promise to Abraham through delivering Israel from Egypt and bringing them to the promised land. And this is exactly how God explains His making Himself known as Jehovah in Exodus chapter six verse four: "I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were strangers."

The name Jehovah reveals God's covenant loyalty and faithfulness, God's dependability. When God tells Moses that the name Jehovah means "I AM what I AM," God is saying that He is still the same God who made His covenant promise to Abraham, and thus He is going to fulfill that covenant promise. Because God doesn't change, we can today depend on the promises God made yesterday. Jehovah God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Jehovah hasn't changed. Jehovah was with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and now Jehovah is with Moses and with the children of Israel. Jehovah says to Moses in verse 12, "I will certainly be with you." And Jehovah in verse 15 tells Moses to say this to the children of Israel: "[Jehovah] God of your fathers, 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 My memorial to all generations."

In today's post-modern culture, some people put so much emphasis on change that they argue that they are today no longer the same person they were yesterday, and so what they promised yesterday is no longer binding upon them today. It is as if someone else and not they promised what they promised yesterday. This is not the case with God. We can today depend on what He said yesterday. He is faithful to His covenant with His people. Jehovah God is the unchanging Rock upon which we can firmly rely. As we read in Hebrews 13:8 regarding the divine Jesus, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

God is dependable as no one else is nor can be. Honorable people are true to their promises even though they change over time. God is absolutely true to His promises because He does not change over time. In this sense, only God can say "I AM what I AM." This is an essential difference between the Creator and His creatures. Every created thing is constantly in the process of becoming and changing. God, in contrast, never changes. I don't mean to say that God is totally static and inactive. It means that God never changes in the sense that God's character is constant, God's thinking is consistent, God's opinion is absolute, God's path is straight, and God's Word is dependable.

Also, if God does not change, then God never had a beginning. To begin is to change, to change from nothing into something. If God does not change, then God always has been. You know, this world in which we live is too wonderfully complex to have just happened. And yet this world in which we live is not wonderful enough to have caused itself. This is where God is different. God is so perfectly wonderful and so wonderfully perfect that His existence is a necessary existence. God is so perfectly wonderful and so wonderfully perfect that He is the cause and explanation of both

His existence and His continuance. God is because God is. Everything else is because God created it and it became. God is in a category all to Himself, and this category is high above us as the heavens are above the earth.

God is dependable, and His dependability is uniquely rooted in his immutability, His unchanging nature, His remaining the same from age to age.

We have looked at the flame and the name. Our third and last point is the claim. God claimed Israel as His very own people. Later in chapter four, God refers to Israel as His first born son. Because God made a covenant with Abraham, God is going to deliver Israel from their bondage in Egypt and bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. God will keep His covenant with God's covenant people.

We are God's covenant people today, and God is going to keep His covenant with us. Moses was the mediator of the covenant in its former form, and Jesus is the Mediator of substantially the same covenant in its current form. Jesus is both our Moses and our Passover Lamb. By the blood of His sacrifice, we are delivered from our bondage to sin. Jesus is our Redeemer, if we will only look to Him with the eyes of faith, if we will only rest upon Him alone for our salvation.

Jesus is the new Moses, the Moses of the New Covenant. At the burning bush, we see God the Son in the person of the Angel of the Lord, and thus Jesus can refer to Himself as the I AM. Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." At the burning bush, we also see Moses as a type, as a picture and pledge of Jesus as the new Moses. At the burning bush, we see in

the Angel of the Lord the pre-incarnate Son of God in His divinity, and we see in Moses a type of Jesus in His humanity. Matter of fact, in the glorified resurrected Jesus, we can see a combination of the humanity of Moses and the Shekinah glory of the burning bush:

Revelation 1:12-16

- 12 Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands,
- 13 and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.
- 14 His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and His eyes like a flame of fire;
- 15 His feet were like fine brass, as if refined in a furnace, and His voice as the sound of many waters;
- 16 He had in His right hand seven stars, out of His mouth went a sharp two-edged sword, and His countenance was like the sun shining in its strength.

Beloved, if we want our church to be a house of prayer and not a house of merchandise, if we want our church to be truly a place of worship, then we need to focus on Jesus with the eyes of faith. We will now be partaking of the Lord's Supper. Let us pray that God will use this Sacrament to focus the eyes of our hearts upon Jesus and to strengthen and confirm our faith in Him.