

The Name of the Lord

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God's names tell us about Him.

Part 1

This week we are going to talk about the names of God, what these names tell us about Him, and why God's names are so important. But first, let's talk about names in general.

In our modern culture, many names are nothing more than unique identifiers. Many parents pick names for their children simply on the basis of how they sound, and often spell the names in an unusual manner to make them distinctive. It wasn't so long ago that children were often named in honor of friends or relatives.

In Biblical times, names expressed the aspirations that parents had for their children. For example, a child named "Honesty" might think twice before telling a lie. You don't have to look any farther than Genesis to see examples of this.

Adam named his wife Eve, because she would become the mother of all the living. (Genesis 3:20)

Even without knowing whatever language was spoken in the Garden of Eden, it is clear that the name "Eve" has something to do with motherhood.

Often times, Bible translations will include footnotes in which the translators tell the meanings of names. For example, in Chapter 25 of Genesis in the New International Version it says,

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob (Genesis 25:24-26)

The footnotes tell us, "*Esau* may mean *hairy*; he was also called Edom, which means *red*. *Jacob* means *he grasps the heel*."

It isn't hard to find many other examples of people given names for various reasons. The same is true of place names. For example,

That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi ... (Genesis 16: 14)

The footnote tells us, "*Beer Lahai Roi* means *well of the Living One who sees me*."

Our modern culture does that, too. One should not be surprised to find hot springs in Hot Springs, Arkansas, or anyplace named *Agua Caliente* if one knows any Spanish at all.

You may have noticed a principle of ownership or authority when it comes to naming things. You can't name someone else's child or property. This, too, goes back to Genesis.

Adam lay with his wife again, and she gave birth to a son and named him Seth, saying, “God has granted me another child in place of Abel, since Cain killed him.” (Genesis 4:25)

It was Eve’s son, so Eve named him. Sometimes the naming authority was delegated to someone else.

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (Genesis 2:19)

God created all the living creatures, so it was His right to name them; but he gave that right to Adam as part of the responsibility of subduing the Earth.

God has, on several occasions, renamed people to assert His authority over them. For example,

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.”

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. ...

God also said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” ...

Then God said, “... your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. (Genesis 17:1-5, 15-18)

The footnotes explain that *Abram* means *exalted father*, *Abraham* means *father of many*, and *Isaac* means *he laughs*.

Later, God gave Jacob (whose name had come to be associated with deception) the new name, Israel, as an indication of his reformation.

There are several more Biblical examples of God or a civil authority asserting authority over someone else by changing his or her name. Shadrach, Meschack, Abednigo, Daniel, Peter and Paul come immediately to mind, so we probably don’t need to mention them.

So let’s leave the Bible for a moment and go to the schoolyard. They say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me!” But name-calling does hurt because when someone else calls you a name, it implies that that person has the authority to rename you and define your character.

We have spent so much time on this because it is important to understand that, Biblically, at least, names are important and mean something. That’s why it is worth investigating God’s name—or, more accurately, God’s many names. God has many names, each of which is an expression of a divine attribute. God’s names reflect His character.

God's personality is so rich that He has enough names to fill a good size book. One such book is All the Divine Names and Titles in the Bible by Herbert Lockyer, but it is by no means the only good book on the subject.

This week we are going to sing about, and talk about, some of the many names of God. So, as Susie gives me a little background music, let's begin.

[music – Dave Pogge, “El Shaddai”]

Part 2

Several of the names in that song contain the syllable, *El*, which means, *god*. *El Shaddai* means, *God Almighty*. *El Elyon* means *God of gods* or *God Most High*. These names reflect the power and authority of God.

The God Who Really Sees is the English translation of *El Roi*. It goes back to the story about the well *Beer Lahai Roi* in Genesis 16 we mentioned earlier. Hagar had gotten her son and herself kicked out of Abraham's house for mistreating Sarah, and they were about to die in the desert. But God saw them and saved them by giving them water. *El Roi* sees everything we do, which is either very comforting or very frightening, depending upon our behavior.

Adonai means *lord* or *master*. The word *lord* doesn't seem to mean much to us Americans. Britain's parliament consists of the House of Lords and the House of Commons based on the historic notion that lords are superior to common people. We don't confer the title, “lord,” on anyone; and, since the Civil War, we haven't been keen on the notion of a master, either. So, unfortunately, when we call Jesus, “Lord,” it is more of a title of respect than an acknowledgement that Jesus is our master and we are His slaves.

The historic abuse of slaves might make one hesitant to view God as a slave master because it makes God guilty by association. There were so many bad slave masters that we tend to think of all masters as bad. But the apostles were not ashamed to call Jesus, “master,” and mean it.

Given our view of slavery, the model of “boss” and “employee” might be better in our society; but even that falls short because there are bad bosses; and employees aren't always as obedient to their bosses as we should be to God.

The most common name of God, which appears over 7,000 times in the Old Testament, is the name orthodox Jews reverence so much that they won't even say it. It is translated as Yahweh or Jehovah in English Bibles, and means, “I Am.”

All the Egyptian gods had names. So, Moses needed to tell the Israelites enslaved in Egypt which god had sent him. God told Moses to say that, “I Am,” had sent him. This name is based on the characteristic that distinguishes God from all of the Egyptian gods. God is. The Egyptian gods are not. The Egyptian gods are fictitious. They don't exist. The God of Abraham does exist. That's what makes Him different from all other gods.

In the previous paragraph I called Him, “The God of Abraham.” Sometimes He is called, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” These phrases identify God on the basis of who His followers are. He is not ashamed to be known as the God of Abraham. Hopefully He is not ashamed to be called the God of You.

Now, here's another song that tells us who He is.

[music - I Am]

Part 3

God has so many attributes that the list of His names is nearly endless. Ancient of Days, Prince of Peace, Desire of All Nations, Lord God of Heaven, Root of Jesse, there are just too many to list. But a few of them, especially those applied to Jesus (which, by the way, means, "savior") need some explanation.

Jesus is called "The Alpha and Omega." These are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. This name is applied to Jesus because He is the first and the last in everything. He is the "Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world because He sacrificed Himself as our Passover Lamb. He is "Immanuel", that is, "God With Us." And, of course, He is "The Word," which is why we call this program "The Word With Us."

Let's listen to another song about many of the names of Jesus.

[music - Jesus Christ, Forever, Amen]

Part 4

Now that we've established the fact that there are many names and titles for God, let's move on to the topic of why God's name is important to Him. In 2 Chronicles 6, Solomon dedicated the first permanent temple to God. Please notice how many times God's name was mentioned.

While the whole assembly of Israel was standing there, [King Solomon] turned around and blessed them. Then he said:

"Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who with his hands has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David. For he said, 'Since the day I brought my people out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city in any tribe of Israel to have a temple built for my Name to be there, nor have I chosen anyone to be the leader over my people Israel. But now I have chosen Jerusalem for my Name to be there, and I have chosen David to rule my people Israel.'

"My father David had it in his heart to build a temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel. But the LORD said to my father David, 'Because it was in your heart to build a temple for my Name, you did well to have this in your heart. Nevertheless, you are not the one to build the temple, but your son, who is your own flesh and blood—he is the one who will build the temple for my Name.'

"The LORD has kept the promise he made. I have succeeded David my father and now I sit on the throne of Israel, just as the LORD promised, and I have built the temple for the Name of the LORD, the God of Israel. There I have placed the ark, in which is the covenant of the LORD that he made with the people of Israel." (2 Chronicles 6:3-11)

The temple, the church building, is a visible representation of God. A temple is associated with a particular god. The god's name tells you whose temple it is.

Missionaries have told me that it is very important to have a building. Natives say, “If your God is so great, why do you have to worship under this tree? Can’t He give you a nice building?” Or, “Don’t you care enough about your god to give him a building?”

Certainly how worshippers treat their building is a visible indication of how sincere and dedicated they are to their god. The great cathedrals of Europe witness to the sacrifice of the people who built them.

Beautiful, modern churches also testify to the faith of the congregation. Even a modest church building makes a positive statement if it is well maintained. A church building that is in disrepair, surrounded by grounds filled with weeds and trash, tells anyone passing by that the church members don’t really care about their church building, and by extension, about their God.

God told Ezekiel that his name is profaned not only by the appearance of the church building, but also by the people who assemble in that building.

I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel profaned among the nations where they had gone.

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, the name you have profaned among them. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Sovereign LORD, when I show myself holy through you before their eyes. (Ezekiel 36:21-23)

How do we profane God’s name? Here’s how God explained it to Malachi:

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.

“But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’

“You place defiled food on my altar.

“But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’

“By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible. When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 1:6-8)

God says we defile Him and His name when we give Him less than our best. Are you giving your best to God?

The Jews went into captivity in Daniel’s day because they disobeyed, and disrespected God, defiling His name among all the heathen nations. Daniel prayed for their deliverance; but he could not beg for freedom on the basis of how good they had been because they certainly had not been good. Like us, they

did not deserve to be saved. So, Daniel took the approach of appealing to the name of God in the long prayer recorded in Daniel chapter 9. Here is a very short portion of that prayer.

“Now, our God, hear the prayers and petitions of your servant. For your sake, O Lord, look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.” (Daniel 9:17-19)

He prayed for mercy not on the basis of their goodness, but on the basis of God’s goodness. He prayed for relief because their situation reflected upon God’s reputation. If God did not save the Jews from the Babylonians, heathens might think that God wasn’t able to save them.

Daniel knew that God had told the prophet Jeremiah that the captivity would last 70 years. So, near the end of the 70 years Daniel reminded God of that promise. In reality, this was not done to remind God of His promise. It was recorded in the Bible to remind US that God made the promise, and He kept His promise. In this way both God’s justice and reputation were maintained.

Sometimes we forget that God blesses us, not because we deserve it, but because it reflects well on God’s name. We hear it so often, that it can easily be overlooked. How many times have you heard Psalm 23? Countless times, I imagine. But have you ever stopped to think about what it says in verse 3?

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3)

He gives us rest in green pastures, beside still waters, restoring our souls, leading us in the paths of righteousness, FOR HIS NAME’S SAKE, not because we deserve it.

The least we can do is to try to bring honor to His name.

You’ve hear the Lord’s prayer countless times, too. Remember how it begins?

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. (Matthew 6:9)

The very first thing Jesus says you should pray for is that God’s name should be respected and honored. How is this supposed to happen? Is everyone supposed to honor God’s name just because you prayed The Lord’s Prayer? No. God’s name is to be honored by your behavior. You are praying that God will show you what you must do to hallow His name, and give you the strength and willingness to do it.

God doesn’t need us to pray to tell Him what He should do. God knows what to do better than we do. God wants us to ask for things in prayer so that we will recognize our need and recognize how He fulfills that need. When we pray, “Hallowed be thy name,” it should prompt us to look for how God will answer that prayer. How will God hallow His name through us? The answer is in Jeremiah 15.

When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. (Jeremiah 15:16)

We Christians bear the name of Christ. If we have taken His words to heart our actions will hallow His name. If we don’t live according to the words He has given us, we dishonor His name. This sheds new light on the Third Commandment.

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold *him* guiltless who takes His name in vain. (Exodus 20:7)

Many people think taking God’s name in vain has to do with using bad language, and it certainly does. But there is much more to it than that. When we call ourselves Christians, we are taking Christ’s name. If we call ourselves Christians, but don’t live as Christians, we have taken the name of Christ vainly. It is vanity to call ourselves Christians, and try to get respect by association, if we aren’t Christ-like. But if we take the name of Christ, and live as Christ lived, there is great power in the name of the Lord.

[music – In The Name of the Lord]