
Prayers

To God

Give thanks in silence. Set your thoughts towards God, and offer Him your heart, your mind, your strength, your soul, your spirit, and any other aspect of your being that seems appropriate.

For myself

Pray about your daily work

Lord God, You have appointed me my daily work, whether this is what I do for a living wage, or what I do to keep me occupied, perhaps at home or at church. It may be that you have something different for me to do in the future, and it may be that I need to make changes in how I work, but I am grateful for it. Lord God, may I always know Your presence close by, guiding and advising me, so that everything I do is done for Your glory. **AMEN**

For others

Pray for Christian communities in China, which are growing rapidly. Pray that God will bring them ever greater freedoms within their own country, as Christians become respected for who they are and as good citizens. Pray that the Gospel will be effective in China, for great good.

Meditation

Teach us, Lord God, what we do not know,
So that we may be more useful in Your Kingdom.

Teach us, Lord God, what we do not want to know,
So that we may learn Your spiritual disciplines.

Teach us, Lord God, what we really ought to know,
So that we are not caught out by the enemy.

Teach us, Lord God, to re-learn what we have learned before,
So that we do not become pretentious in our faith.

Teach us, Lord God, what we are afraid of knowing,
So that we may face Your truth and stand tall in You.

Teach us, Lord God, what we can never fully know,
So that our hearts embrace the mystery of Your grace.

Teach us, Lord God, to stay true to what we have been taught,
In the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Bible Passage

Exodus 3:13-15

¹³ Moses said to God,

'If I go to the Israelites and I say to them,

"The God of your fathers has sent me to you,"

they will say to me,

"What is His name?"

So what shall I tell them?'

¹⁴ God said to Moses,

'I AM THE ONE WHO IS.'

He added

'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."'

Review

People remember this passage today because it is the story about when the name of God was first revealed to Moses. Yet this awe-inspiring text is probably one of the most significant and well-studied theological texts in the whole Bible, because it contains probably the most powerful description of the character of God. The famous four lettered name of God revealed here is JHWH (in capital letters) and it was previously used by God about Himself when He spoke to Abraham (15:1f.). But from this point onwards, after being revealed to Moses in the special way described here (3:13-15), it became central to the life and worship of God's people and essential to their understanding of His character and nature.

In the context of our story, however, the revelation of this name of God indicated to Moses and to the people of Israel to whom Moses was sent that a new and powerful work of God was at hand. Later generations looked back and rejoiced in the God who had saved them from slavery in Egypt. So they used this sacred name as a reminder of His saving power and His control over the earth. It also reminded them of God presence with them as His people, and His active power to bless and sustain them.

The sacred name JHWH became regarded as too holy to pronounce. God was, according to them, unapproachable in His holiness! For this reason, most Jewish people when seeing this word written down did not try to pronounce it, they addressed God as 'the Lord' (in Hebrew 'Adonia'). There is more about this in the 'Going Deeper' section of this study, but it is worth being aware that because of this, wherever the holy name JHWH appears in the text of Scripture, it is usually translated as 'the Lord', often using a type face called 'small capitals',

like this 'the LORD'). Some Christians feel that we have the right to speak to God directly now we are 'in Christ', so they are unashamed to try to pronounce JHWH. The most common suggestion is 'Jahweh'.

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 he could give to the people, but the name itself is something of a riddle, and I have translated it as, 'I AM THE ONE WHO IS' (3:14). Then as if to clarify both the name and what He will do for His people, God immediately adds, 'I AM has sent me to you' (3:14) and he repeats this in the next verse, 'the LORD ... has sent me to you' (3:15). It is as if all these are important statements, because God is not just a name, He is by nature a God who acts as He pleases within His creation, and what pleases Him is to save His people.

It can be extremely difficult for the ordinary reader to make sense of what is going on here, and this is an important reminder to us that in order to understand God's Word, there are times when we need to pause and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we will find this by dwelling on the scripture text itself, and at others we will be blessed by reading what others say about these great texts, and seeing what the Lord has to say to us in this way.

Whatever Moses' personal state of mind and evident timidity at other points in the story of Exodus, his was a very bold request. Moreover, the 'name' of God revealed to him was an essential part of his response by faith to the God he met at the burning bush. And it was so much more. If Moses was to do what God wanted of him he had to deliver this name and do the work God required of him, and although the name given is mysterious to us, it had to be. It would hardly have seemed right for God to have a mundane name of mere earthly meaning. The name points to more than mere identity, for ancient peoples thought of names as a route to understanding something of the character of the person or the god who had that name, and when reading the Old Testament, we should think of them in the same way. Moses did not ask for a name to enable him to merely explain which 'god' he was talking about to the Israelites, but a name which revealed something of the character of God and what He intended to do to help and save His people!

Looking more closely at the name, 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, there was more.

More about the 'name' of God is revealed to us in verse 15, where God said to Moses that He is, 'the LORD, the God of your fathers ...'. So He adds this reference to the 'fathers' those people from whom He fashioned the people of Israel in the first place. But hidden in the Hebrew of this enigmatic phrase, the basic name 'JHWH', translated now as, 'the Lord', is written in the Hebrew present tense. God's very name JHWH means that He is present and active in His world, and for the people of Israel this meant that he was ready to bring them salvation from slavery! 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.

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 this is why Christians call him 'the Lord', using words that were first used by the people of Israel to address God!

Going Deeper

Further Comments

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'.

Discipleship

Application

The name of God now, and 'I AM'

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 'the 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. 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 in this way, Christians have often used 'I AM' as the 'name of God', though we do not need to feel that this name is so holy it must not be spoken. Jesus' presence with us as Saviour means that we have no need to be so distant from God. Jesus has won access for us to the presence of God Himself!

Getting to know Scripture

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 what to do

- When you pray, what do you call God? Have a think about this in the light of what you have read today.
- Write down a list of things you would like God to do, and offer this to Him in prayer. Then, after you have prayed, what proportion remains on your list? What does this say about your needs?

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.

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
