

Names of God, Part 1: Yahweh. Ex 3:11-15, John 8:54-59. Mike Starkey, 26 May 2024.

Names are interesting. Because a name's an intimate thing, it's how people know you. Sometimes people change their name, because they don't want to be known by their original name.

Sometimes musicians and actors choose a name that gives a certain image. So here's a little quiz for you. I'll give you a few real names of famous people. And I want you to shout out what name they became better known by!

- Harry Roger Webb (Cliff Richard).
- Reginald Kenneth Dwight (Elton John).
- Marion Robert Morrison (John Wayne).
- Maurice Joseph Micklewhite (Michael Caine).
- Farrokh Bulsara (Freddie Mercury).
- Steveland Hardaway Judkins (Stevie Wonder).

And it's not just actors and musicians who choose new names with a special meaning. Mother Theresa wasn't an actual mother, and she wasn't called Theresa!

Names can say a lot about a person, who that person is, or at least how they see themselves and how others see them. And that's also true for God. In the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament, there are a number of names for God. And they're important, because they reveal a lot about God's character.

Today we start a mini-series of three sermons, on names of God in the Bible. Today and over the next two weeks we're going to look at three of the names by which God reveals himself in the Scriptures.

In the culture of the Bible, names are important. They don't only distinguish one person from another, they're seen as expressing the nature and character of a person. And there's a sense that if you know God's name, you have privileged access to God: if you know God's name, you know who to cry out to and ask for help and protection.

In the Bible, we're told God has more than a job description on a CV, 'Ruler of the Universe'! God has a name, and that name is **Yahweh**. At least, we're fairly sure it's

pronounced Yahweh. The Hebrew language doesn't have vowels. And the name is spelt YHWH. The most likely way of pronouncing it is Yahweh. In English it used to be pronounced Jehovah, which comes from the Latin version of the same letters.

The personal name of God is Yahweh, and it's used more than 6,800 times in the Bible (in English Bibles it's usually written as 'LORD' in capitals). You get the impression God's trying to make a point: he has a name, and this name is significant. The root of the name Yahweh is 'to be', to be real and to be present. Moses asks God what his name is, and God replies 'I AM' (Exodus 3:14), that's the same root as the name Yahweh. And after God's told Moses his name, God says 'That's my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation'.

So the name Yahweh says: 'I'm real, I'm personal, and I'm present with my people to help and save them'. God's not anonymous. He's revealed in history who he is. We have access to him, and we can know and trust him. We can't know God *fully*, of course we can't, because our human brains are limited. But we can know him *truly*. God's name is Yahweh: 'I'm real and present with my people'.

In OT times, the name Yahweh was considered so holy, it was only spoken aloud by the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. And after the Romans destroyed the Temple in the year 70 AD, it was never spoken aloud at all. So when Jewish believers read the Bible and came to the name Yahweh, they'd say the word 'Adonai', which is Hebrew for Lord and Master, a sort of respectful title. Which is why we don't really know how to pronounce Yahweh. The pronunciation was lost with the destruction of the Temple.

But this gives us a bit of background to the words Jesus taught his disciples in the Lord's Prayer: 'Hallowed be your name'. Hallowed means to give it special respect. So Jesus says we need to pray God's name will be hallowed, or honoured and respected. Why? Because the way we use the name of God says a lot about our view of God himself. To talk about God's 'name' is a way of talking about God.

So when we pray: 'Hallowed be your name', we're praying God's name will be honoured and respected in our day, in our culture. And we're committing ourselves to honour and respect the name of God. We're committing ourselves not to misuse the name of God, by using it casually or as a swear-word.

Sometimes the name *Yahweh* is used in the Bible alongside other names or titles of God, to draw attention to characteristics of God. So when the people of Israel escape from slavery in Egypt, God reveals to the people that he's *Yahweh Rophe*, the God who brings healing and restoration. Abraham calls God *Yahweh Yireh*, God who provides for my needs. There's a worship song called *Jehovah Jireh*, which is just a different pronunciation of the same name.

One person who likes these combined names for God is King David, who's described as a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22, 1 Sam 13:13-14). David often likes to refer to God as *Yahweh... something*:

When David faces Goliath he says he comes in the name of *Yahweh Tsebaoth*, which means Lord of hosts. (That's the old English use of the word 'host' to mean a large number of people or things, as in: 'There's a whole host of reasons'). So David calls God Lord of hosts. The idea is that God is sovereign over all created beings, over the whole host of angelic beings, the whole host of human beings and animals and plants in the natural world. In other words, David says he approaches Goliath in the name of the God who's supreme over every power in the material and spiritual universe.

In the Psalms, David writes of God as *Yahweh Roi* (the Lord my shepherd, Ps 23:1), and *Yahweh Tsur* (the Lord my rock, Ps 144:1). So you get these combined names, based on God's personal name of *Yahweh*.

But what matters most is this. God has a name he reveals to his people. It's used nearly 7,000 times in the Bible: *Yahweh*. And that tells us something important. God isn't remote or impersonal. God is up close and personal. God enters into relationship with his people, and is present to help and save them. That's who God was in the time of Moses. That's who God was in the time of Jesus. That's who God is today.

And the implications of that will depend on who you are. If you're somebody who's exploring faith, maybe dipping your toe in the water, there's an invitation to know who God is for yourself. There's an invitation this morning to find faith.

If you're somebody who's drifted away from faith, there's an invitation to turn around and be embraced by the personal God, who never stopped loving you.

If you've been a Christian for years, there's an invitation to fresh confidence in sharing your faith with friends. We sometimes avoid faith conversations, but here's what

I've found to be true. Our friends are far more interested in our faith than we think. It's part of who we are, so we can chat about it naturally, as we'd chat about anything.

In a few minutes, I'll be inviting everybody forward to receive the bread and wine of Communion. Feel free to see that step forward as taking a literal step of going deeper in faith with *Yahweh*, the God who loves you more than you can imagine.