

## It's all in the name. (Exodus 3 & John 8:48-59)

### Introduction

Moses has had God's hand on him since his earliest days. Famed for being the baby in the 'bull rushes' he was saved from infant death by the quick thinking of his mother and sister. Raised as a prince in the royal house of Egypt with a privileged upbringing, and then managing to escape the Pharaoh despite murdering an Egyptian, he finds himself exiled to Midian, where he lands on his feet again and marries a Midianite woman called Zipporah.

Moses's story is interwoven with that of his own Hebrew people who are suffering at the hands of the Egyptians. Joseph is long dead and now the Hebrew people are seen as a threat rather than a blessing. The Egyptians have kept them oppressed for many years out of fear.

Just listen for a minute to the last couple of verses of chapter 2.....

Many years later the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. The cries of relief from their hard labour ascended to God. God listened to their groaning. God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw what was going on with Israel. God understood.

And then the next we hear is that Moses was looking after Jethro's flocks when he saw the burning bush.

### Call, objectives, clarification

God called to Moses, and Moses responded, 'yes. I'm right here'. And God went on to outline the plan he had for Moses to rescue the people of Israel from slavery and to bring them into possession of a land they could call their own.

Understandably, Moses balked at the suggestion that he would be the one who would convince Pharaoh to run with the idea. But interestingly we see that each time he objects (and this runs through into chapter 4 as well if you want to read that later) Moses learns more about God. Each time he says that he couldn't possibly be the right person for the job, he gains some sort of clarification as to who God is. And in this chapter it all hinges on God's name.

### Names are so personal

There's something really annoying isn't there when people can't remember your name, or call you by the wrong name. We might laugh and say it doesn't matter, but deep down it does. Because names are very personal things. They take on far more meaning than just a label by which we're known. They become bound up with our personality. Ask any retired teacher the top three names they remember out of the hundreds of children they taught and as they recite them they'll either smile in fond recollection or shudder with horror at the memory of certain children.

It was so much more the case for Hebrew names, where the name given described the character of the person. Take the twins Jacob and Esau as an example. Esau, says genesis 25 came out of the womb reddish, as if wrapped in a hairy blanket, hence his name 'hairy'. Jacob came out grasping Esau's heel and so his name reflects that grasping action.

So to learn God's name is deeply significant for Moses because it isn't just God's name, but his character that he's discovering. Think of a child being named. Often we choose a name and start to use it before the baby is even born. A sort of trying it out. The name becomes associated in our minds with the bump. Then once the child is born the name comes to mean all the little things that we discover about the baby. How it sleeps, how it moves. And as the child grows and develops and a personality becomes more apparent, the name takes on richer meaning, until it becomes impossible to imagine the child ever being called anything else.

### Discovering God

For Moses, and ultimately for the people that he will lead, God's name is continually taking on richer meaning as Moses discovers more about him.

1. The first thing Moses discovers about God is that (v6) I am the God of your father. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.

Wow! This God who is speaking to him from out of a bush (of all things) is the God he has heard about from his ancestors. Not something new or unknown, but a fuller picture of the God his people already worship. We mustn't underestimate this revelation because we know the rest of the story and how it all fits together. This is a big moment for Moses.

I've taken a good long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. Says God. I've heard their cries for deliverance. I know all about their pain, and now I've come down to help them.

This God who has revealed himself to Moses is actually going to intervene in the suffering of the Israelite people, and it turns out that Moses will be the agent by which this happens.

But why me? says Moses. What makes you think I could ever go to Pharaoh and lead the children of Israel out of Egypt?

2. And here Moses learns something more of God. (v12) 'I will be with you' says God.

Sounds straight forward enough doesn't it, but there's a bit of a play on words going on here, and unfortunately we need to be able to read Hebrew to get it. 'I will be' is a play – pun almost- on the name of God which we'll find out later in verse 15 is 'Yahweh' or I am who I am. I suppose an equivalent sort of play on a name for us would be the joke 'what do you call a man with a spade on his head – Doug' The name and the action are the same thing. If none of that makes sense to you, the easiest way to think of what God says here is

'I, God (that's who I am) will be with you. And Moses learns that God is a personal God, who has not only appeared to him in an exceptional way, but now is promising his presence and offering proof that he is with him.

That's all very well says Moses. (No doubt he's delighted if not a bit bemused that God is getting personal and offering his presence along with something to prove what he's saying is true) But suppose I go to the people of Israel and tell them 'The God of your fathers sent me to you' and they ask me 'what is his name?' What do I tell them?

3. And at this point Moses learns something else about God. His name. There's no doubt that Moses ancestors had a name for God – he wasn't some nameless thing to them. They called God El-shaddai – God Almighty. But new revelations of God (and that's what was happening to Moses) were accompanied by a new title.

My name, says God, is 'I am who I am' or just 'I am' for short.

Well that's rather enigmatic isn't it? What does it mean? I am who I am could also be translated I will be what I will be. Its all about God 'being'. He will be what he's already promised to Moses' ancestors.

I will be what I will be is a short hand way of describing his attributes – self existent, external and unchangeable, incomprehensible.

I am who I am, or I will be what I will be is a bit of a mouthful and so over time the phrase became condensed into YHWH which is a sort of running together of all the Hebrew into one word.

### Excuses, excuses

'Now be on your way' says God to Moses. He's told Moses who he is. He's given him the task, now its time to get on with it. What else does Moses need to know before he goes to Pharaoh? Nothing as far as God's concerned. He's just revealed himself to Moses and that should really be the end of the argument.

But this is Moses he's dealing with, and if you read on later you'll find that he still doesn't think he can do it because the people won't believe him, so God gives him miraculous signs – a staff that turns into a snake, a hand that turns leprous inside his cloak.

Then Moses says, but I can't speak well, so God appoints Aaron as his spokesperson. And then as a last ditch attempt to get out of it Moses says 'Can't you send someone else?' and God at this point is understandably very angry! Moses knows more of God than anyone has ever known, and yet he still thinks the project is a non- starter.

It would be tempting here to get rather critical of poor old Moses. But before we do, let's just pause for a moment. You see there are times when God calls us to take on tasks or roles for him and we develop a similar line of argument to Moses. No I couldn't do that, I don't

know what to say about you Lord. No I couldn't do that because no one will believe me Lord. No I couldn't do that because I'm not very good at it Lord. No, I couldn't do that because I think you should send someone else Lord! And maybe God is getting angry with us. Because we know more of God than Moses ever knew. We know God revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. We know God as flesh and blood- God with skin on as the message says. We know God as one who comes and lives in us when we accept him as our Lord and saviour.

Before Abraham was born 'I am' says Jesus in John chapter 8.

As I was reading for this morning I came across a quote in one of the commentaries that really got me thinking, and it was this: 'A knowledge of God's name is a shorthand for all his dealings of grace'.

If I say the name 'Jeremy Clarkson' to you, what comes to mind? Well probably an image of his appearance, tall with curly hair, wearing jeans and a jacket. His voice probably, his laugh. But as well as just the person I reckon you'll think of fast cars, Top Gear, his fellow presenters May and Hammond, an image of some madcap thing you've seen him do on the programme. The name Clarkson is shorthand for all those images we hold in our minds.

And the same is true with God.

Jesus who shockingly takes on the title 'I am', declaring himself in that very moment to be God, is so much more than a name to us.

When we think of the name 'Jesus' it might be that we picture a baby in a manger, or a boy in the temple, or a man travelling round the countryside teaching and healing. But the name Jesus has also come to mean the cross, salvation, new life, all those images in our minds. It is as the commentator says 'a shorthand for all his dealings of grace'.

Moses discovered in his dealings with God:

A God who was consistent with the past (the same God as that of his ancestors)

A God who was personal (and would be with him)

A God who had name and therefore being

We are invited to discover God revealed to us in Jesus, consistent with the past, present and active at the creation of the world

We are invited to discover God who cannot get more personal than promising to dwell in us

We are invited to discover God in the name and actions and being of Jesus Christ.

God revealed himself to Moses so that he could perform the task of leading the people out of slavery and into a new relationship with their God, Yahweh, a new relationship both physically and spiritually.

God has revealed himself to us in Jesus, and our task is to lead people into a new relationship with him. One that frees them from darkness and moves them into the light.

God called to Moses from the burning bush, outlining His plan of salvation for the people of Israel. This plan was to significantly involve Moses, who understandably balked at the suggestion. But each time he objected (and this runs through into chapter 4 as well) Moses learnt more about God and in particular His name.

Names are very personal things. They become bound up with our personality. It was so much more the case for Hebrew names, where the name given described the character of the person. Jacob and Esau are a good example. (Genesis 25)

To learn God's name was deeply significant for Moses because it wasn't just God's name, but his character that he was discovering.

Moses discovered that God:

1. Was consistent with the past (v6) 'I am the God of your father. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.' This was not some new or unknown God, but a fuller picture of the God his people already worshipped.
2. Was personal (v12) 'I will be with you' says God. 'I will be' is a play on the name of God.
3. had a name and therefore being (v15). There's no doubt that Moses ancestors had a name for God – he wasn't some nameless thing to them. They called God El-Shaddai – God Almighty. But new revelations of God were accompanied by a new title. 'I am who I am' or 'I will be what I will be' . YHWH is a running together of the Hebrew phrase into one word.

'A knowledge of God's name is a shorthand for all his dealings of grace.'

We know God revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. But the name Jesus has also come to mean the cross, salvation, new life etc. Our role is to lead people (as Moses did) from darkness to light, into a new relationship with Him.

### **For Discussion.**

Moses learnt more of the nature of God as he wrestled his call. When have you learnt more of the nature of God? Is it possible to learn more of God in good times?

God's name 'I am who I am' or 'I will be what I will be' is shortened to YHWH (known as the tetragrammaton). What difference do you think this revelation made to Moses? What difference does it make to us?

'Before Abraham was born, I am' (Jn 8:58) What did Jesus mean by that? What did it mean for the Jews? What does it mean for us?

'A knowledge of God's name is a shorthand for all his dealings of grace'. How would you describe God's *dealings of grace*?

