

Jason Upchurch - Systematic Theology - Theology Proper - Names of God

This morning we return to our look at systematic theology, or as the Bible calls it, "Doctrine." We need to know doctrine, the Bible commands it. In Sunday school we've been going over the great creeds of the faith and how they have progressed over time and really what we see is that doctrine found in the Bible is becoming more and more precise and clear over time.

That should be happening in our lives, too. As we mature in the faith our understanding of what the Bible teaches about any given subject should be maturing and growing. I hope this series is just a taste of that for you.

And, just as a personal note, when I was in high school my pastor didn't teach anything like this. I think I had read a couple simple books on theology, but nothing in depth. When I got to college I took my first systematic theology course and it really changed me because it seemed like almost every day I'd walk out of class in awe of God because my professor would walk us through the greatness and majesty of God in a systematic way. Theology for me is what fueled my worship of God.

If you remember there are 6 or 7 major sections of systematic theology. There's bibliology, ecclesiology, Soteriology, so on. The big umbrella section in systematic theology we're tackling is theology proper - what does the Bible say about God himself.

We've seen that God is one. There is only one God and even as we think of God as Trinity, he is Trinity in unity. Not 3 gods, but one eternal God. We also talked about divine simplicity. That is, God is not a jigsaw puzzle made up of a bunch of attributes. God just is, and when we talk about his attributes we're just talking about one aspect of the one God.

This morning I want to focus our time talking about the names and titles of God.

That might sound a little odd at first. But think about when you first meet someone. What's the first thing you usually say about you, or ask about the other person? You either give them your name or you ask them for their name. Why? Because our name encompasses the whole of who we are. It represents the fullness of us.

And then usually depending on the situation you also ask about what they do. What's their job?

Well, God is no different. God has a name; 2 names depending on how you count it. And he has title.

So his name is Yahweh. In the NT the name of the incarnate Son is Jesus (that's why I say depending on how you count it). And his titles are God, Lord, Father. So let's unpack that a little bit.

Let's start with God's name. Now, a couple of things. In our culture we don't give much thought to the meaning of names. Maybe sometimes, but not always. When naming a child most people will go with a name they like, and if it happens to have a fun meaning that's great but it's an afterthought.

In the Bible, and particularly in the OT, it was just the opposite. People were usually named for the meaning no matter how unusual the name itself was. The name was intentional. It was purposeful.

Adam is **the man**. Eve - meaning life - is the mother of all humanity. Abram, ironically for most of his life, meant father. Jacob meant heal-catcher. Remember when he was coming out of the womb he was grabbing Esau's heel like "I'm gonna get you!" "Jacob" is someone who takes what is not theirs - and his name was really the story of his whole life. The meaning of names in the OT is very important.

It's no different with God. And his name is Yahweh. This is the self designated name of God. We didn't give God this name, he revealed this name to us to know and to use.

Now, let me get just a little technical with for a few minutes and then we'll talk about the name Yahweh. In ancient Hebrew there are actually no vowels. It's all consonants. So actually the name is YHWH. And there was

some confusion for a long time about how to even pronounce the name. Modern Hebrew and ancient Hebrew is not quite identical so there was some guessing.

In the Old King James this translated as Jehovah a couple times. This is where the Jehovah's Witnesses - which is a cult - get their name. They are using the divine name of God in their name.

So why don't we call him Jehovah? Well, because over the centuries as we grew in our understanding of ancient Hebrew linguistics, we realized that there are no "J" sounds in Hebrew and there are no hard "V" sounds in Hebrew either. So it's actually a "Y" sound and a "W" sound - Yahweh. But to credit the KJV, the translators at least used the actual name of God a handful of times in their translation.

Exo 6:3: And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty, but by my name Jehovah was I not known to them.

So God only revealed his actual name to Moses. That was the first time it was known to God's people.

Psalms 83:18: That men may know that thou, whose name alone is Jehovah, art the most high over all the earth.

Again this word in the Hebrew, is YHWH.

These 4 letters are often called the Tetragrammaton. Tetra meaning 4. Like the game Tetris was all these shapes made out of 4 blocks. And Grammaton meaning letters. This is God's 4 letter name. Yahweh.

Now, most modern translations, sadly, don't actually translate the Tetragrammaton - Yahweh - as Yahweh. Instead, they opt for changing the word entirely and replacing it with capital LORD. Lord is a title, not a name. It's a job description that is true of God, but it is not his name.

Why do they do this?

Well, sadly I think most of them follow the Jewish superstition of not saying God's name. The Jews supposedly said "Lord" (Adonai) every time they saw the word Yahweh because they said God's name is so holy and reverent they didn't want to take Yahweh's name in vain. And that sounds okay, except that nowhere are we commanded to avoid using God's name. And many times Yahweh commands us to call him by name not his title.

Think about **Prov. 18:10:** The name of the Lord is a strong tower, the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

That verse actually makes no sense because in most modern translations because the translators have hidden the very name that saves.

It's the name of Yahweh - his very name that saves.

Rom. 10:9-10: That's why if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is what? Lord. And believe in your heart God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

Now that's the NT where Lord is actually kurios, but but our confession as Christians about Jesus is that he is Lord - he is Yahweh. Not just a master in charge, but God over all the universe.

Psalms 29:2: Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.

Again, we ascribe to Yahweh the glory due his actual name. This is important because God's people have entered a covenant relationship with God and we now know him personally. This is why we often talk of a personal relationship with God through faith in Christ. If you have a personal relationship with someone it would be really odd to not use their name.

Imagine every time you go to talk to a close friend you refer to them by their job title. “Good morning, Mechanic.” “Good morning, Stay At Home Mom.” “Talk to you later, Office Manager.” It’s weird and impersonal. There is a time to use titles, but it’s odd to force it.

Why do translations do this?

Many of them don’t actually give a reason, I think they just follow the old Jewish superstition which is the worst possible reason you could ever give.

If you look at the beginning of your Bibles (not now) you can read the preface. And the preface is important. It’s really just a letter from the translators to you, the reader. It’s an explanation to you, the reader, about how and why the translators did some of the things they did.

Interestingly, the ESV and the NASB preface mentions translating Yahweh as LORD but they give no defense for why they do this. NKJV and NIV don’t even mention the issue, they just do it.

The only 2 translations I’m aware of that translate it as Yahweh are sort of fringe translations. One is the Lexham English Bible which was put out by the Bible Software company Logos. The other is the Legacy Standard Bible which was put out a couple years ago by the staff at the Master’s College and Seminary.

The Legacy Standard is an awkward translation, in my opinion, but I highly respect their decision and here’s their explanation:

“The meaning and implication of [Yahweh] this name is God’s self-deriving, ongoing, and never-ending existence. *Exodus 3:14–15* shows that God Himself considered it important for His people to know His name. The effect of revealing God’s name is His distinction from other gods and His expression of intimacy with the nation of Israel. Such a dynamic is a prevalent characteristic of the Scriptures as Yahweh appears in the OT over 6,800 times. (<https://lsbible.org/faq/why-does-the-lsb-use-yahweh-instead-of-lord/>; accessed 1/31/2024)

I love that. Yahweh gives us his name because in the OT it’s not just some generic god versus all the other gods. It’s Yahweh versus all the nothings. And God put his name in the OT 6,800 times. If you’re going to willingly scramble up God’s name you better have a good reason to do so and give that explanation to the tens of millions of people reading the Bible. I don’t think there is a good reason but I think they should at least make the case.

So, Yahweh is God’s name. What does Yahweh mean and why is it important? Remember this is the whole burning bush situation. Moses has run away from Egypt and is a shepherd in the wilderness when he God meets him and charges him to deliver his people, Israel. **Read Exodus 3:13-22**

So Moses says people are going to ask who sent him to deliver the Israelites. Who should he say? And the answer is not a generic god or lord. The answer is a very specific name: I am that I am. And he is commanded to say that very name. **Read 14**

So Moses is required to give God’s actual name - not just a generic title. There were dozens of gods in Egypt at the time. So which god is telling Moses to take 2 million people out of slavery? “I am” is sending Moses. Yahweh. And his name means “I am that I am.”

Why this name? Because it encompasses who God is. He is the self-existent one. He relies on no one for his existence. He has always existed. In fact, all life derives from him. He is the creator and sustainer of all living things.

Jesus says that just as the Father has life in himself, so too he has granted the Son to have life in himself. **John 5:26**

God has life in himself. He exudes life. He eternally granted the Son to exude life. The Holy Spirit is the same: he exudes life because he proceeds from the Father and Son.

The Triune God is Yahweh who has life in himself and gives life to all flesh. There's a lot of names God could have given himself, but this is the one by which he chose to name himself for our basic understanding of who he is. He is the eternally living one who gives life to all things.

I mean, think about it you could name yourself. If you could change your name and label yourself however you wanted. What would you do? What meaning would you give yourself? How would you want everyone to think of you for the rest of your life?

God says he wants people to understand that who he is, fundamentally as God, is as self-existent, eternal, the source of all life.

And we see that in the reference to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is the God who promised to them. We just saw this last week in **Mark 13** Jesus use this verse to prove that Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are still alive in heaven waiting the resurrection. **God is** the God of them even after their bodies died.

Back then it seems as though they didn't know his covenant name, but now Moses does. And so later on when Moses writes down Genesis, Exodus and so on he will refer to God as Yahweh because now he knows God's name. But back then they didn't know it.

And the name has implication beyond the name itself. Of course God has always existed and will always exist. But if you look at what he says, **as Yahweh** it speaks to his omniscience: He sees all that is going on with the Hebrews. **Read 16-17**

Yahweh has been watching and knows what will happen. He's not some Johnny-come-lately god who they just conjured up. He also knows the future: he knows Pharaoh won't let them go unless he compels him and he knows that eventually the Egyptians will gladly give the Hebrews gold and silver and jewelry and clothing.

This is who has been watching over the Hebrews the whole time. And interestingly, it seems as though the people of God had forgotten their God.

Just a little devotional point: Yahweh is our God. He is the self-existent one. He doesn't need us to survive; he is the definition of life. And just like the Hebrews who were afflicted for 400 years in brutal slavery, he sees and knows and cares what we go through. He's not a God far off. He's a God who has compassion and will deliver the very people he has revealed himself to. That's all wrapped up in his actual name.

Look over at Chap 5:1-9. Read

Pharaoh knows about a lot of gods. He knows about a lot of idols. Egypt was rampant with idolatry at this time. But he doesn't know this Yahweh. He's never heard of him which means the Israelites probably had never mentioned him. Again, the name is not generic. It's his personal name.

Turn to Exo. 34:5-7. This is where Moses asks to see the glory of God. But God says no because that would be too intense for a mere human. But he does let him see the afterglow of his glory. And in all of that he not only reveals his name as Yahweh, but he sketches out what that means. **Read**

This is God describing who he is as God. He's not the god of Mark Twain that's evil and mischievous. He's not like the idols who are hard taskmasters.

He's merciful and gracious. Amazingly, God does not treat people how they actually deserve to be treated. His default position is mercy. To not give people what they deserve. And his default position is grace: to give what people don't deserve.

And it takes God a long, long, long, long time to get mad. He is very slow to anger. Whenever we see God in the OT get angry and bring judgment it's usually after hundreds of years of patience and second and third and 500th chances.

That's because he abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness. Yahweh is not fickle. He keeps his promises and that's expressed in the forgiveness he offers to thousands of generations.

But at the same time he will judge. The sin of fathers does affect the children. God doesn't punish kids for the sins of their parents, but what parents - and fathers specifically - do often affects their children.

This is Yahweh. This is who he is. And we say that Yahweh is God's covenant name because it a personal name that he chooses to reveal to his covenant people. It's shows that he is personal and close and intimate.

If I were to go up to the President it would be odd for me to call him by his first name. I don't know him, he's not close to me. He's my president but we have no affection or relation.

The God of the universe has revealed himself to his covenant people and we can call him by name.

One other note on Yahweh. The name is often lengthen to include other attributes. You've probably heard "Jehovah Jorah" or Yahweh Yirah - Yahweh provides. There's several modifiers that are used of his name.

But one modifier that God often refers to himself as is Yahweh Sabaoth - which means something like Yahweh of armies, or Yahweh of angels.

And what Yahweh seems to be doing when he refers to himself in this way is to remind us that God commands all the hosts of heaven. He's almighty God, but he's almighty God and he has an innumerable army of ten thousands times ten thousands angels. Why does that matter? Because our God is not weak and his hand is not slack that he cannot save. You remember just one angel slaughtered 185,000 soldiers of Assyria in one night. God has tens or hundreds of millions of angels at his disposal.

When Jesus says he could call down 12 legion of angels and destroy everyone he wasn't joking. And it's because as Yahweh he commands them.

As personal and tender as God is, he's also a mighty and sovereign king and can bring all the hosts of heaven in a moment to destroy. And one day he will bring the whole host when Jesus returns again.

2. What else do we call Yahweh? The next 3 are titles from the OT.

Two are similar: In the OT the Hebrew words El and Elohim often refer to God.

El (spell) is the simplest form just referring to a deity in general. El is the singular use of the word. Elohim is the plural use of the word. Most anything in Hebrew that ends in 'im is plural. Cherubim or Seraphim are types of spiritual beings, but that's the plural form.

Yahweh is God and so El is an appropriate way to refer to him. Now, the word is also used of idols as well, it's just a category for any being that is referred to as divine or authoritative in any way, whether true or false.

In the OT Yahweh often creates contests between him and other gods. There are no other gods in actuality. But for the sake of the argument Yahweh does this. This is the contest between Elijah and Yahweh and the the prophets of Baal. These kinds of contests prove that there are no other gods. Yahweh is the only one.

Yahweh is also referred to as Elohim. That's the plural. Why plural? For Christians, we like that because God is triune. Three in one and Elohim seems to get at that. And that could be the case. Although, more likely it is used in a majestic sense. Sometimes even human rulers are called Elohim in the Bible because they have authority. They're not divine, but they have control.

Why use the plural? In the British empire when the king gives a formal decree or declaration he will usually say "We decree...whatever." And you're asking "who's we?" It's just the King. But it's a way royalty often refer to themselves. It's called the plural of majesty. Or the divine "we." God is the king above all kings and so he seems to take full advantage of his status.

Another word that is often used in Hebrew referring to God is Adonai. Adonai means lord. Master, sovereign, ruler or judge. This is usually translated as “Lord” and speaks of God’s power and authority over people and creation.

Adonai, or Lord, is usually the word that the Jews would use instead of Yahweh when they came across his name in the OT. **Turn to Matthew 1:20-25.** We come to the Christmas story, the incarnation of God the Son coming into the world and we find out that the name, or names, of Jesus is important to understand what is going on. **Read**

So in the NT the generic word for God is Theos. This is where we get the term theology - the study of God. Theos is very similar to El or Elohim in Hebrew. It’s a catch all for any sort of deity, whether the true and living God or false gods.

But here we see specific names of Jesus.

Jesus’s name, then is important because it is very specific about what is happening. He is to be called 2 names here. Immanuel which means “God with us.” And you see that even in the name a little bit. There’s “El” at the end. That references God.

Daniel, Nathaniel, Joel - those are all names that include “God” in their designation. Jesus is Immanu-el: God with us.

And his name is Jesus. What does that mean? Jesus is the NT working of Joshua. In Hebrew Joshua is Yeshua - Meaning Yahweh (or Ya) saves.

So what Jesus means is Yahweh saves. Any of the names that have a Ya in them reference Yahweh.

So Jeremi-Yah, Isai-Yah, Jonathan (Yah-nathan), Yah-shua. All these names are given on purpose to reflect the divine name of God, Yahweh.

So Jesus means Yahweh saves. That’s who he is. Every time people would call to him or refer to him they are actually referencing not only who he is but his mission on earth which isn to save his people from their sins.

Read 21

He’s also Immanuel, God with us.

Two other names. Kurios. Kurios is Lord in Greek. You must confess that Jesus is Lord in order to be saved. If you do not acknowledge or submit to his lordship you cannot be saved. It’s fundamental to the gospel message and actually refers to his deity as well.

1 Cor. 1:3: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

That’s a common greeting in Paul’s letters. It doesn’t make Jesus less God. It can’t because he is fully God. But the writers tend to associate Jesus with Lord, the Father as God, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit that indwells us.

Turn to Gal 4:1-7

One more. One thing we need to understand is that names are personal and titles are personal and they convey something very important. And as Christians this is something we need to remember. One of the most glorious names that we are privileged to call God is Father. **Read 1-7**

In the OC, the OT, people were under the Law and in some way were like little kids who had a nanny. But when Jesus came we’re no longer under the nanny of the OT Law. But we’ve been set free from it. It can guide us and inform us, but we’re not enslaved to it.

Now, we're like adult children. We've been filled with the Spirit and now we have come to know God as Father. Abba. Abba isn't Daddy, but it is something like Dad. An intimate, personal, warm, relationship with the eternal, omnipotent God of the universe through faith in Jesus and the work of the Spirit.

The names by which call God are important because they help us understand not only who he is, but who he is to us.

May we praise the name of Yahweh, our Abba Father, forever.

Pray