The God Who Is

Text
Exodus 3:13-16  And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

The Question: What is his name?
If you wish to ask a person's name in Biblical Hebrew, you never say, as it is said here, "What is his name?" or "What is your name?" The proper way to inquire about a person's name is with the word “who” not “what”. In the Hebrew way of thinking, the name IS the “who.” A name was much more than just a moniker by which someone was known. I name was the very essence of their character. The name embodied all that the individual was. So you asked questions about the name with the word “who” not “what”. “Who are you?” “Who is He?” Or even, “Who is your name?” But you would never inquire about a name with the word “what.”

When the word “what” is associated with the word “name” in Hebrew, the question being asked does not pertain to the proper nomenclature but, rather, to the meaning of the name. The question is intended to reveal what character lies behind the name. In other words, if the Hebrew “name” is a statement of the “who”, then Moses is asking God “what” the “who” really is. What lies behind the name? You see, Moses already knows the name of God, this has been passed along since Abraham. The name that we will discuss tonight, the name that is eventually given in this passage is not a new name for God. But Moses, standing before the burning bush, hearing a call from God to abandon everything to pursue a dangerous rescue mission into the heart of Egypt, is asking God to identify himself. To, as it were, establish His credentials. He’s saying, “Tell me why I should serve you?” Why should I follow after you?

If the "Who" is God, then Moses is enquiring of the “what”, the character, the essential essence of God? In English we would say, tell me who you really are. I know your name, but what’s the revelation behind the name? If I’m going to surrender to you, if I’m going to sell out and abandon everything, if I’m going to trust you in the storms and valleys of this journey then I need to know a little more about you? What does your name mean? What is your name supposed to tell me? What is the source of my confidence in you? It’s a question of character. Moses is saying: I know you are God but what kind of God are you? The reason why this passage of scripture is considered to be the seminal statement regarding the identity of God is
because of the nature of the question. When Moses asks “What” God is instead of “Who” God is, the answer is going to be of profound theological significance.

The Answer: *I AM THAT I AM*
And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM. You might notice right off that God did not respond to the immediate question with a name. Now, in the latter half of the same verse, we will see the name of god expressed, but first God answers Moses’ question regarding the “What”. *I AM THAT I AM.* In that iconic phrase God establishes the significance of the interpretation of His name. *I AM THAT I AM.* It is a phrase that has been ingrained on the mind of every theological scholar. It is the seminal definition of who God is. It is the “what” that lies behind the concept of the “who”. We know He is God, but here we find what that means.

The answer is given in an almost poetic kind of prose. It is a Hebrew syntactical construction known as “idem per idem” where the same root with the same sense is repeated both in the principal clause and also in a dependent relative clause. Some common parallel Hebrew expressions that are found elsewhere in the Bible are: I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy; I will do what I will do; I will go where I will go.” A popular current manifestation of this same literary device is the frequently mentioned phrase: It is what it is. This literary device is used to express a totality, intensity, or emphasis to the phrase that is highlighted by the repetition. In the case of God’s answer to the “what” question, it the verb “to be” that is being repeated and emphasized. It is God saying emphatically, “I AM” in every possible sense of what I AM could possibly mean. God is declaring Himself to be: eternal; unchanging; unchangeable; constant; and faithful. HE is declaring Himself to be the infinite God who comprehends all things, all time, and all space, past, present, and future, but is, himself, beyond comprehension. Biblical scholars agree that the best way to understand this phrase is to view the “to be” verb in light of all the possible senses. *It literally means: I am what I am; I am what I have been; I am what I shall be; and I shall forever be what I am.*

Perhaps the most dramatic New Testament parallel is found in the Book of Revelation. Before God reveals the “things to come” in the last days, He begins, in Revelation 1:4, with this description of the God who is about to speak through His prophet, John: “Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come …” This is the essential essence of God, this is how he establishes his credentials. Only He can say, I AM THAT I AM. Only He can declare that He is the ONE who is, and who was, and who is to come! “I AM THAT I AM” is not a name, but it is the explanation of the name of God. It indicates that God is the ONE who is right where you are, wherever you are. He is the ONE that is always there, wherever there is. He is the ONE that was with you in all of your yesterdays. He was there, wherever there was. And He is the ONE that will be with you in all of your tomorrows. He will be there, wherever there is. He is the eternal, ever present, always with you, GOD. He never changes and He always remains. To put it simply and powerfully: He IS!
The Name: *I AM* (YahWeh)

That brings us to the name of God. God told Moses, “Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” The most common and the most important name for God in the Old Testament is a name that, in our English versions of the Bible, never even gets translated. As a matter of fact, the very pronunciation of the name is lost to antiquity. Scholars call it the “Tetragrammaton” which literally means “four letters.” The Hebrews had such a high reverence for the name of God that they would never speak it, lest they inadvertently speak it in vain, and, in writing it down, they removed the vowels from the name so as not to use the holy name of God lightly. What was left, after you removed the vowels was four consonants that transliterate to the Latin letter YHWH. We know this about the proper name of God in the Old Testament, it was derived from the Hebrew verb “to be” which is the functional verb of the phrase “I AM THAT I AM.” We also know that it was the foundation for a progressive revelation of God. That name would be combined with the various attributes of God as they were demonstrated to the people of God, making up the compound names of God that we are familiar with in the Old Testament. Incidentally, the most widely accepted pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton is Yahweh, but you are probably more familiar with the name Jehovah. Personally, I prefer Yahweh because Biblical Hebrew had no hard “J” sound in it.

So Moses tells the children of Israel that it was Yahweh that sent him to deliver them from bondage. And Yahweh becomes the proper name of God to the Hebrew people. It is used 6,828 times in the Hebrew text of the Bible. That’s more than three times as often as the next most used reference to God: Elohim. God, for all intents and purposes, becomes known to his people, first and foremost, as Yahweh. And the most important text in all of the Bible for understanding the meaning of the name Yahweh is this passage that we are looking at tonight. When God defined himself, he defined himself by saying, I AM THAT I AM. When his people refered to him as Yahweh, what they were saying is simple but profound: HE IS.

This is what I want you to get tonight, when the children of Israel called upon God in the good times and the bad, they called upon him from a frame of reference that said that He is the God that IS. He is the God that presently is with me RIGHT NOW. But that’s not all that He is. He is the God that was with me yesterday and He is the God that will be with me tomorrow. He is the God that will forever be what he has always been! He is Yahweh. On the mountaintop, in the good times, in the years of plenty, in feast and blessing they declared that He is the God of all blessing, the God who supplies my every need. But in the bad times, in the storms and trials of this life, from the deep dark valley they made the same declaration, the God who was God in the good times, He’s still God in the Bad times. But he’s not limited to my past, nor is he defined by my present, but He is the God of all of my tomorrows!

There was a future expectation that was aroused by the very mention of His name. He is the God who never changes. He is the God who is, who was and who forever
will be! It was not just I am what I am, not just I was what I was, but it was also I will be what I will be. And there was a certain future tense, forward facing faith involved in the very nature of God. To know Him, to call him by name, is to acknowledge that he will be, in my tomorrows, everything that he has ever been in my yesterdays. He is NOT limited by my circumstance, he is NOT defined by my current trial, The storm doesn't dictate who my God is, the valley doesn't shape my understanding of Him. He is the God who is in my situation with me, who was with me before the situation overtook me and who will still be with me when this present circumstance is long forgotten memory! He is the God Who IS!

The Significance: *This is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.*

So God tells Moses, this is my name forever, and this is my memorial unto all generations: I will forever be known as the God who IS! This was to be the definition of his character, his authority, his power, and his reputation forevermore. The essence of his Identity is that He is. He is the one that is and that was and that is to come! This is why the encounter between Jesus and the Pharisees, in John Chapter 8, is so significant. They asked Him, *Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead?* And His response, just a few verses later was: **Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.** Immediately those Pharisees took stones in their hands to stone him to death, but Jesus hid himself from them and walked away. Let me tell you why they wanted to stone Him. Because He declared himself to be The Great I Am. Yahweh of the Old Testament was known by many names, each of which declared some unique attribute of God, but Jesus Christ was the express image of God. The mighty God, the Ancient of Days, the Seed of Abraham, has made Himself known in the person Jesus Christ! He has declared God to us, he forever seals his identity when declares that He IS the great I AM! Let me tell you tonight who Jesus is: He is indeed, the Rock of Ages, He is indeed the Alpha and the Omega, He is indeed the one who Is, who Was and who forever will be!

The Hebrews had a longstanding oral tradition of sharing the stories of their past. Every Hebrew child was frequently perched on some grandparents knees as they were regaled and enthralled with the great and phenomenal stories of the incredible works of their God. Every young Hebrew child learned how that God ruined the mightiest nation on earth just to liberate his people, how he brought the Pharaoh to his knees. They sat captivated as they heard how the children of Israel found themselves in that difficult place with the armies of Egypt closing in on them and the impassable Red Sea before them. No doubt, their eyes gleamed as they heard how Moses, at the command of God, smote the sea with his rod and watched as God parted the waters so that his chosen people could pass through on dry ground. Then they heard the confident pride and faith filled tremble in the an old week voice as the patriarch began to tell them how God released that mighty wall of water just as Pharaoh’s army was trapped between the two banks, destroying the oppressor and liberating the people of God.
They heard the stories, from the earliest of years, how that God kept them in the wilderness. How manna fell from heaven, how water flowed from rocks, how the blessings of God kept their very shoes from wearing out. They were thrilled by the stories of the crossing of the Jordan, how God, once again, caused a river to be parted and his people to go across on dry ground, each of them heard of two pillars of stone that stood as a forever memorial that God had brought them into their promised land. They were thrilled with stories of judges and prophets, of priests who served God and Kings who were appointed by God. Every Jewish boy heard the tales of David and his mighty men, they all knew every detail of David's historic encounter with Goliath. Every story, every testimony, every time that God delivered his people and provided for their needs, each witness of the character and glory of God was shared, over and over again with the generations of Israel. And each young child was exposed to the unchanging declaration of the nature of God that was revealed to Moses that day before a burning bush.

With reverence and respect they were constantly reminded that the God that did all of these things is the God Who is. Not just the God who was, but the God who is. Not just the God who used to do great exploits, but the God who still does. And as they grew older and as they grasped the uncertainty of life, they diligently taught that the God that they served is not just the God of yesterday, and He's not just the God of today, but He is the God of all of your tomorrows. The God who was is the God who will be. What He has done in the past, He will do again. Wrinkled old granddaddies would hold their bouncing baby boys and lift their eyes to heaven and declare from a faith filled heart that God will do for you what He did for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He will do for you what He did for Moses, Aaron and Levi. He will be to you what He was to Esther, to Ruth and to the mighty King David. Because HE IS the God WHO FOREVER IS! He doesn't change. He's still the same. If He ever heard the cry of his people, He will still hear the cry of His people. If He was ever a deliverer, He's still a deliverer. If He was ever your healer, He's still your healer! If He ever made a way where there seemed to be no way, then He is still the God who makes a way when there seems to be no way. They raised their kids with knowledge, educated them with the understanding, our God is ONE and HE is the ONE that does not change!

CLOSE
I come to this pulpit tonight to remind someone of who God is. He is the God who is! He is the God who never changes. The same God that was God in your yesterdays, He is till God in your todays and will forever be God in all of your tomorrows! The same God that brought you through the storm before, He is still the God that will bring you through the storm again! Let me tell you who Jesus is: He is the great I AM! He is the same God who said to Moses: I am what I am; I am what I have been; I am what I shall be; and I shall forever be what I am. He hasn’t changed, he is still the same! He’s still God in your circumstance. He’s still God in your storm. He’s still God in your valley.
Tonight, your hope rests not in the God who was, not in the great tales of what he did in the past, but in the God who will be. Because, we can take great confidence from the declaration of His identity that what He was, He still is and He forever will be. There’s a reason why the mighty works of God in the book of Acts were recorded for posterity. They aren’t just there so we can rejoice in what God has done. They are there so we can look forward, in anticipation of what God is going to do. Because He is still God. He has not changed!

STAND
I refuse to believe that our best is behind us because HE’s not just a God of the Past! I refuse to accept that our present circumstances are as good as it gets because He is the God that IS. There is something in me that keeps telling me that better days are just ahead, that the best is yet to come.

This is the kind of faith that we must cultivate in our lives. It’s a kind of faith that is always looking ahead, that is never satisfied with what we have but is always reaching for something more. The Kind of faith that recognizes that we serve a God Who IS!