

The God Who Hears – Exodus 1-6 (Part 4 of 7)

“I AM Who I AM”

Exodus 3:1-22

Mark Vroegop

“Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, ‘I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.’ When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.’ And he said, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the LORD said, ‘I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.’ But Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?’ He said, ‘But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.’ Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’ But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”” (Exodus 3:1–22, ESV)

There are few passages in the book of Exodus more famous than chapter three and the record of Moses’ experience with God at the burning bush. If you grew up in church, you can probably review the key elements of this story. But even if you didn’t grow up going to church or reading the Bible, you probably heard about a “burning bush moment” or the reference to taking off one’s sandals because the place on which you are standing is holy ground.

The Burning Bush narrative is a pivotal point in this book of Exodus, and it fits into the storyline of the first six chapters, as we learn about a “God who hears.” By way of review, we learned in chapter one that the people of Israel were greatly oppressed as they became the slaves of Egypt. In chapter two we learned that in the midst of this dark and even murderous season, an Israelite baby was born, hidden, and then adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh. He was named Moses because he was “drawn out of the water” (2:10). Moses grew up as an Egyptian but eventually identified with the people of Israel, thinking that he would be their rescuer. But Moses’ plan back-fired, and he fled to the land of Midian, where he was introduced to Jethro, married Zipporah, and had a son named Gershom, whose name meant “a sojourner in a foreign land.”

The situation in Egypt was oppressive and dark for the people of Israel, and the circumstances of Moses’ life were disappointing. So both the people and its future leader were in seemingly impossible circumstances. But this is all a set-up for what is to come.

The book of Exodus is not primarily about Israel, nor is it primarily about Moses; Exodus is about God, and we see this begin to take shape at the end of chapter two:

“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.” (Exodus 2:23–25, ESV)

But it is in chapter three that this theme becomes even more pronounced and a clear focal point. God does something amazing here: He reveals himself. And this revelation becomes foundational for what happens in the New Testament and specifically in the life and ministry of Jesus. Exodus three shows us the revelation of God, and what you’ll find here is that when God reveals Himself, it is glorious, it is frightening, and it is redemptive.

The Context of God’s Revelation

Before we look at a number of stunning things that we learn about God, let’s first set the context in the first three verses.

First, notice that Moses was “keeping the flock of his father-in-law” as the story starts. This is important because it shows us again the state of Moses’ life. The adopted son of Pharaoh was now relegated to serving as a shepherd, a profession that the Egyptians disdained (see Gen. 46:34), and he was managing someone’s sheep. In other words, Moses has fallen far from the pinnacle of power and esteem. He was now a mere household worker for Jethro.¹

Second, we learn that he came to “the west side of the wilderness . . . to Horeb, the mountain of God” (3:1b). This will be a place to which Israel will return, a place that you know as Mt. Sinai (see Ex. 19).

¹ Doug Stuart, *Exodus – The New American Commentary*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2006), 108.

Third, we learn about the angel of the Lord and the burning bush. This was the first time in Exodus that God appears and speaks. Prior to this time the reader is aware of what is going on in God's heart, but now God intervenes. Notice four things here:

- **God inhabits a bush.** As is often the case (e.g., mountain, tabernacle, temple, human flesh) God manifests Himself in supernatural ways by inhabiting familiar and earthly elements.
- **God reveals Himself through fire.** Throughout the Bible, and especially in Exodus, God expresses His presence (theophany) through the appearance of fire. For instance: Abraham and the pot of fire (Gen. 15:17), the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21), Mt. Sinai (19:18), Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 1:4), and Daniel's vision (Dan. 9:27). But we also find this to be true in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3) and Jesus is described by John in Revelation as having eyes with fire (Rev. 1:4, 2:18).
- **God appears as the angel of the Lord.** This means more than an angel. This is something special. It is used 67 different times in the Old Testament, but only once here in Exodus. The structure of the name, combined with use of Yahweh (LORD) means 1) someone specific and 2) someone who shares the qualities of Yahweh.² Further, since "angel" can simply mean messenger, and since verse 4 removes the title "angel" simply saying "the LORD saw," it seems that this term likely referred to the pre-incarnate Christ. In other words, before Jesus became a human being and took on the form of man, He served the triune Godhead as God's personal presence on earth.
- **The bush was supernaturally preserved.** Moses recorded that he was amazed that the bush was not consumed. It was burning "and behold the bush was not consumed" (v 2). This is the first of many supernatural works that God will perform.

Let's review the context because it is important. In the midst of a wilderness, we find Moses tending his father-in-law's sheep near the future Mt. Sinai. He encounters a supernatural phenomenon – a bush that is burning but is not consumed. And this bush is inhabited by the fiery presence of God mediated through the Angel of the Lord, whom I believe to be the pre-incarnate Christ. That's quite a context, isn't it?

The Character of God Revealed

What follows next is the central point of this text, and it lays the foundations for the biblical development of our understanding of what God is like. And it is the character of God which will form the basis of the future redemption comes through Christ.

There are at least seven character qualities or aspects of what God is like that can be observed in verses 4-22. Each of them helps us understand the kind of God who is going to deliver His people and what kind of God is going to come and dwell among His people.

1) Love

The first quality of God that is revealed in this encounter is the love of God. You might wonder where we see this, but we don't hear what Moses heard when he turned aside to see this bush and suddenly God spoke. Verse four says, "God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!'" God is doing more here than just getting his attention; He was calling to him in a way that was endearing

² In Hebrew both elements in a title must be either definite or indefinite. Since "Yahweh" is very definite, then it follows that "angel" must also be definite; thus "the angel of the LORD" vs. "an angel of the Lord."

or affectionate. "In Semitic culture, addressing someone by saying his or her name twice was a way of expressing, endearment, that is affection and friendship."³ You can probably think of other examples in the Old and New Testaments:

- 1 Samuel 3:4 – the Lord calls "Samuel, Samuel"
- 2 Samuel 18:33 – David cries out for his beloved, but rebellious, son "O my son Absalom! O Absalom my son, my son Absalom"
- Matthew 27:46 – Jesus, on the cross cries "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- Matthew 7:21 – Negatively, not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven."
- Acts 9:4 – "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?"⁴

God talked to Moses this way because a dominate character quality of God is His love. When God described himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6, here is what He said:

"The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." (Exodus 34:6, ESV)

When Moses heard his named used this way, he would have known that he was being addressed by someone who loved him. This is a very precious thing to consider, because often supernatural events are frightening. Remember the moment in the classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy, the Lion, the Tin-man, and the Scarecrow come before the Great Oz? They are trembling because everything about this strange scene is so surreal that it is scary – "Who dares come into the presence of the Great Oz!" But Moses' introduction to God is one of supernatural love. This is what God is like – full of power but leading with love. "For God so love the world, that He gave His only begotten son . . ." (John 3:16).

2) Holy

After Moses responded to this call, God began to teach him another very important aspect of His character: His holiness. The immediate response from God was "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (3:5). Moses learned, in this moment, a lesson which will be communicated over and over through the Old and New Testaments: God is not like you, and this difference is dangerous. Therefore, Moses must not come any closer, and he must take his shoes off, a sign that he is the presence of a superior.

Exodus 3 introduces us to God's holiness, and this central quality of God is the reason for distance, laws, and restrictions that we read about in the Old Testament.

"the LORD said to Moses, "Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments and be ready for the third day. For on the third day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. And you shall set limits for the people all around, saying, "Take care not to go up into the mountain or touch the edge of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death." (Exodus 19:10–12, ESV)

The design of the tabernacle and the limitations of who could enter the "Holy Place" or the "Holy of Holies" were both designed to show God's people that He is holy and separate (Ex. 26:33-34). Even

³ Stuart, 113.

⁴ See note 22 on Stuart, 113-114.

when Aaron entered, he had to wear holy garments, and a sign had to be placed on his turban that said "Holy to the Lord" (Ex 28:36-38). Laws were given so that people would understand God's holiness:

"Because the LORD your God walks in the midst of your camp, to deliver you and to give up your enemies before you, therefore your camp must be holy, so that he may not see anything indecent among you and turn away from you." (Deuteronomy 23:14, ESV)

The holiness of God means that He is sinless, perfect, pure, righteous, and therefore distant or separated from what is sinful. And, of course, this is the beauty of what Jesus has accomplished:

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ." (Ephesians 2:13, ESV)

Exodus 3 establishes the problem for which Christ comes to die – to bring sinful people into the presence of a holy God. Moses learns a lesson that every person needs to learn, namely, that God is holy and human beings are not. And without atonement, God's holiness is dangerous. Notice Moses' response in verse six after God identifies himself as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." He hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.

3) Compassionate

The third character quality that we observe in this text is God's compassion or His kindness. In verse seven, Moses is told something very similar to what we read in 2:23-25. Moses is informed that God is aware of the suffering of His people and, by implication, He is moved.

"Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings." (Exodus 3:7, ESV)

Notice the number of emotive and involved terms that are used here: "I have surely seen the affliction of my people . . . have heard their cry . . . know their sufferings." This is the love of God, combined with the kindness of God, often connected to the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is the way in which God kindly and compassionately keeps His covenant. It is the word used in Exodus 34:19, a passage we looked at a few minutes ago, to refer to God's steadfast love. In other words, God doesn't abandon His people or His promises. His covenants are irrevocable because His compassion never fails (Lam. 3:22).

4) Deliverer

The next character quality we see is central to the story-line of this book and the New Testament. Like so many other aspects of Christianity in the book of Exodus, we see the emergence of a God who delivers His people. Remember that this will become defining in terms of God's relationship with His people. God will be known as the God who brought you out of Egypt.

God has not just seen and heard and known about the suffering of His people; He aims to rescue them. Moreover, He plans to bring them into a future land of blessing and bounty.

"and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold,

the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.” (Exodus 3:8–9, ESV)

God had “come down” to deliver. This is what He did in the Exodus, and this is what God did through Christ. Remember what happened at Jesus’ baptism? The Holy Spirit descended on Him and the Father spoke: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). Even Jesus himself put it in these terms:

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” (John 6:51, ESV)

Central to who God’s character is His plan to deliver his people. It is who He is and what He does.

5) Present

God next reveals His plan to Moses: “I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (v 10). So God is going to deliver, but He plans to use Moses. Notice his response in verse 11 – “Who am I?” No doubt Moses remembers the results of his first attempt to be a deliverer. It didn’t go so well.

Now I don’t think that Moses is being disobedient or disrespectful. I think that this is probably a real and genuine sense of humility. In the presence of God, Moses probably felt a bit like Isaiah – “Woe is me for I am ruined . . . because my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts” (Isaiah 6:5).

But notice God’s response. His encouragement to Moses wasn’t “You can do this” or “You’ve grown up” or “You’ve learned your lesson.” After all, Moses was going up against the largest superpower in the Near East. Instead, God pointed Moses back to Himself:

“He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”” (Exodus 3:12, ESV)

“I will be with you” will become Israel’s only hope as they leave Egypt and face many challenges, and it is where the book of Exodus ends – with God dwelling in the tabernacle. Israel will be known as a nation favored by God, a God who fights for them, a God who is with them.

Do you remember what the name Immanuel means? It means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

6) Self-Existent

What happens next is really the climax of the passage. Moses dialogues with God about what will happen when he goes back to the people of Israel and says that “the God of your fathers has sent me to you” (v 13). Moses anticipates that the people of Israel will ask, “What is His name?” Why would they ask that?

The culture in which the Israelites lived, especially the Egyptian culture, emphasized numerous gods, and often these gods were connected to aspects of nature. It appears that over the past 400 years, Israel had begun to assimilate this worldview, or it could be that they knew their God by different names, since God is called many things in Genesis (God Most High, God Almighty, The God Who Sees, and the God of Bethel). So Moses wonders what God should be called.

What happens next is remarkable! God doesn’t answer his question at first. Instead, God describes Himself in terms that supersede all notions of deity. In verse 14 God says, “I AM WHO I AM.” This is

not a name; it is a statement of being. The Hebrews words mean “to be” (Hebrew – yah). So the first thing God does here is to give Moses a verb, not a noun, and God does this to set himself apart from all other so-called-gods. Before He gives Moses His name, God defines His essence or His character. God is saying that He is the creator and the sustainer of all that exists. From Him flows everything that is or ever will be. God is who He is and that is all there is.⁵ He is everything!

In the later part of verse 14, God restates this concept with “I AM.” This means many things. It means that God is unchanging and eternal. It means that He is the One who always is. But it also means that He is self-existent. He causes everything to be, since He never wasn’t. God doesn’t own His being or essence to anyone else. God is who He is all by Himself. He is dependent upon nothing outside of Himself; He is totally and eternally self-sufficient.⁶ Matthew Henry said the following about God: “The greatest and best man in the world must say, ‘But by the grace of God I am what I am; but God says absolutely – and it is more than any creature, man or angel, can say – I am that I am.’”⁷

Finally, verse 15 actually gives us the name that we will see all over the Old Testament.

“God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.” (Exodus 3:15, ESV)

God now uses a third-person form of his essence to create his name. It is found in your Bible as LORD, and in the Hebrew it would read YHWH or Yahweh. This was the sacred name of God, rooted in the very character and essence of God. And it means that He is above and beyond everything else in life. God simply and eternally IS.

It is no wonder that the scribes and Pharisees were astounded when Jesus said, “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

7) Sovereign

The final character quality we see in Exodus 3 is the sovereignty of God. The term “sovereign” means that God rules, reigns, and controls all events in life. It means that God possesses all power and rules over all things.

The deliverance of Israel from Egypt, in combination with the Ten Plagues, which directly assaulted the gods of Egypt, is one of the greatest displays of God’s power and rule that is recorded in the Bible. It is Moses versus Pharaoh and God versus the gods of Egypt.

Verses 16-22 provide a thumbnail sketch of what is to come. Notice the way in which God is going to deliver his people with power.

“Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ‘I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’” And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of

⁵ Philip Ryken, *Exodus – Saved for God’s Glory*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Publishers, 2005), 97.

⁶ Ryken, 98.

⁷ Ibid.

Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.' But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go. And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians." (Exodus 3:16–22, ESV)

God aims to deliver His people out of slavery so that they can be His people and worship Him. He will powerfully rescue them from the impossible, oppressive existence in which they find themselves. And in their deliverance, God will richly bless them. They will come out of Egypt as God's people, destined for the promised land and richly blessed.

Does any of this sound familiar? It should. Because Ephesians 1:3 says this: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places . . ."* (Ephesians 1:3, ESV). Throughout this message I've tried to keep connecting us back to the message of the gospel, and there are two things I want you to know in light of this text.

First, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. In other words, what you see to be true about God in Exodus 3 is still true about Him today. He is loving, holy, compassionate, a deliverer, personally present, self-existent, and sovereign - which means He is still trustworthy and righteous and ruling over everything. I AM WHO I AM is still I AM. Nothing has changed with God.

Positively, that means that He is still trustworthy, that He'll still be with His people, and that He is a delivering God. But there is another side too. It also means that God is still holy. Sin cannot come near Him. You cannot be near Him in your sinful condition. You must be made holy in order to be near a holy God.

Second, the greatest display of God's deliverance was the permanent reconciliation of God and man through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Exodus points us toward Jesus who called Himself "I AM" and yet also took our penalty on the cross so that we could be brought near to God. Jesus brought us near to God, and the only reason that we can stand in the presence of a holy God is because we are wearing the righteousness of Christ. Everything we have and ever hope to be is only because of Jesus.

And for those who understand that Jesus paid their debt, have repented of their sins, and put their faith in him for their redemption – the Bible tells us about a coming beautiful day where we are able to behold the beauty of God because of Jesus:

"We know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2).

No need to hide our eyes or ourselves from the purifying gaze of Jesus. We shall be like Him. We shall see Him – the Great I AM WHO I AM. And it is all because of Jesus.

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