

Jesus Christ, the great “I AM”

Exodus 3:1-17

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In the book of John we find multiple times that Jesus used the phrase **“I Am”** to describe Himself. In John 6:35 Jesus says, **“I am the bread of Life.”** In John 8:12 Jesus says, **“I am the Light of the World.”** In John 10:11-15 Jesus says, **“I am the Good Shepherd.”** In John 11:25, Jesus says, **“I am the Resurrection and the Life.”** In John 14:6 Jesus says, **“I am the Way and the Truth and the Life.”**

It is on these self-proclamations that we will be focusing for the next 6 sermons. It will help us to know Christ more as we dig deeper into these names that Jesus used to identify Himself.

To understand these “I Am” statements we first must understand the importance of the words “I Am” in the mind of a Jew of Jesus’ day. These words were a lot more important than they seem.

That is proven in John 8:53-59. In those verses we see Jesus in the temple entangled in a debate with the religious leaders. At one point Jesus states this:

“Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” So, the Jews said to Him, “You are not fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” “Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.” So they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple.

Let’s stop for a moment and look back at those words. It happened in the Temple courtyard. Jesus and the Jews were engaged in a heated discussion. Jesus had already told the Jews earlier in the conversation that they would die in their sin. That they were slaves to sin. That the devil was their father. If you read the entire chapter, you see them going back and forth. They had endured many of Jesus’ words against them, but at this one point, when Jesus said, **“Before Abraham was, I AM”**, it was as if a theological bomb went off in the minds of the Jews. Immediately the Jews began to pick up rocks to stone Jesus for designating Himself as the “I AM”. Why? What was so offensive about those two words that it would deserve death? For the answer of this question we must go back to Exodus, chapter

3, in the Old Testament. It is the story of Moses and a burning bush that took place around 1,300 years before Christ lived.

In Exodus 3 we find Moses. Moses was a Hebrew, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At Moses' time of birth his people lived in Egypt as slaves. The Egyptian Pharaoh had ordered that every baby boy that was born to the Hebrews be killed by being thrown into the Nile River. In response, Moses' mother put Moses in a small basket made of bulrushes and covered with pitch. She set the basket in the reeds on the edge of the Nile River.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to the river's edge to bathe and found the basket. She had mercy on the baby and took the baby Moses to be her son. Because of this, Moses was raised in the palace of Egypt. ***"Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds"*** (Acts 7:22). One day, when Moses was 40 years old, he visited his people who were still slaves in Egypt. He saw an Egyptian mistreating one of the Hebrews. Moses killed the Egyptian and had to flee for his life. For the next 40 years, Moses worked as a shepherd in the wilderness. It was during one of these days, watching over his sheep, that the story in Exodus 3 occurred:

¹ 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.

This would become a very significant location in the history of the Nation of Israel. This "Mountain of God" was also referred to as "Mount Horeb" in the Old Testament. It also was referred to as "Mount Sinai." It was at this mountain that Moses and the children of Israel would later receive the Ten Commandments. Much later we would also see the prophet Elijah flee to Mount Horeb as he ran from the wrath of the evil queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:1-8). It was there Elijah would encounter a violent windstorm, an earthquake, a fire, and then finally hear the still small voice of God. It was here at Mount Horeb that this story occurred.

² 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. ³ And Moses said, "I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned."

The word Horeb means "dry" or "desert". That gives us a picture of what the terrain looked like. The bush was likely a wild acacia or thorn bush, which were quite common in that desert. It is the type of setting that one spark could set off a brush fire that would spread rapidly and would consume a huge area. That is why Moses ***"turned aside to see this great sight."*** To see a bush on fire in this arid place, but not being consumed, was very rare and unexplainable.

⁴ 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." ⁵ Then he said, "Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶ 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.

This practice of taking off one's shoes was very common in Moses' day, when one would come to worship. This was the norm in the Egyptian temples with which Moses would have been very familiar. In many Western churches, people will take off their hats when they enter church, but in the East, even today, many worshippers still take off their shoes. In the West, the taking off of one's hat is a sign of reverence. In the East, taking off one's shoes meant even more. It was a sign of reverence, but it was also a confession of impurity or unworthiness to enter the presence of a holy God. It was in keeping with this idea that God commanded Moses to take off his shoes.

God then identified Himself as ***"the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."*** This designation is important. With this description God first set Himself apart from the gods of the Egyptians, with whom Moses would have been very familiar. Secondly God connected Himself to Moses personally by identifying Himself as the God of Moses' father. In Exodus 2:1-2 we read that Moses' father was a Levite. That means that he was part of the tribe of Levi, who had been one of the 12 sons of Jacob.

God then referred to Himself as ***"the God of Abraham"***. Now this phrase "God of Abraham" starts to help Moses understand, but it was still unclear if God was referring to the god who was worshipped by Abraham's first son, Ismael, or if He was referring to the God of Abraham's second son, Isaac. Even today this designation of "God of Abraham and God of Isaac" is necessary. The Jews trace themselves back to Abraham, but so do the Muslims. It is only as one also designates their God as the "God of Isaac" that it becomes clearer. But even this is not enough. If you stop with Isaac, then it would be unclear because Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. The descendants of Esau were known as the Edomites. The Jewish historian Josephus told how the Edomites worshiped a variety of gods. It was only as God referred to Himself as the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" that His divine identity would become clear. This designation of "God of Jacob" was enough since all of Jacob's descendants were included in the Abrahamic covenant that God had spoken to Jacob (Genesis 28:12-15). The descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob would become the 12 tribes of Israel. One of these tribes would be the tribe of Levi, to which Moses belonged. God was communicating that He was not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He was coming to be the God of Moses.

In the following verse, God told Moses of how He had seen the afflictions of the Hebrew people and heard their cries. God knew their suffering and had come down to deliver them out of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey.

God then told Moses that He was sending Moses back to Egypt, to deliver His people. God reassured Moses that He would be with Him. The sign of God's working would be when Moses was once again back in this place, with the children of Israel, receiving the Ten Commandments on this Mountain (Sinai).

¹³ 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?" ¹⁴ 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.' " ¹⁵ 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.

In biblical times one's name was more than just how others referred to you. It was a statement about your identity, your character, who you were as a person. In this situation the name of God would also communicate the character of God.

Moses wants to know what to tell the people of Israel if they ask what is the name of the God who has sent him. And God says, **"I AM WHO I AM."** *"Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*

To us that does not make sense, but like always when we study the Bible we must ask, "what did it mean to the original hearers?"

This phrase "I am" in Hebrew would be similar to "I am" in English. You would usually connect it to a description. I am hungry. I am tired. I am her father. But in Hebrew, when it was stated alone it took on a totally different meaning. **"I AM"** became the ultimate proclamation of total independence. He is above all. He is totally self-sufficient. He does not depend on any else. He does not need anyone else. He does not ask permission from anyone else. He was not brought into being by anyone else. He always has been and always will be, and there is no one or no-thing that can change that. He carries out His will completely in all regards to what He wants to do, when He wants to do it, how He wants it done, and for whatever reason He so chooses. He is **"the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."** (Revelation 1:8) He is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving, and our ever-present help in time of need.

This was exactly who the children of Israel needed. They had been in slavery for hundreds of years. For generations their people had been brutally enslaved by the Egyptians in an utterly hopeless situation. They had been held down by the powerful Pharaoh of Egypt, and no one less than the great **"I AM"** would be able set them free. They had cried out for hundreds of years, and finally their prayers would now be answered.

In Hebrew the phrase **"I AM WHO I AM"** is the four letters **YHWH**, which we pronounce **Yahweh**. This is the name that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is to be remembered by throughout all generations.

Jews of the first century were very careful not to use "Yahweh", God's name, unless it was absolutely necessary. They sensed that any casual use of God's holy name might inadvertently break the Ten Commandments by taking God's name "in vain" (Ex. 20:7). To avoid this possibility they developed ways of referring to God without pronouncing his name. As a binding rule, they substituted the words Adonai (my Lord) or Elohim for Yahweh when reading Scripture. The name Yahweh, "I Am", demanded ultimate reverence and worship. It was a name that was above every other name. That is why when Jesus referred to Himself as **"I AM"**, the Jews picked up rocks to stone Him. Jesus was declaring Himself to be Yahweh, God. To them this was blasphemy to the ultimate degree. It would have been blasphemy except for one thing, it was true. Jesus of Nazareth was truly **Immanuel, "God with us"**.

Moses was not only supposed to announce the name of Yahweh to the children of Israel. He was also supposed to introduce Yahweh to Pharaoh. Most translations use the word LORD in all capitals in place of Yahweh in their translation, but the Holman Christian Standard Bible actually uses the name Yahweh. In Exodus 5:1-2 we see Moses and Aaron's conversations with Pharaoh:

Later, Moses and Aaron went in and said to Pharaoh, "This is what Yahweh, the God of Israel, says: Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival for Me in the wilderness." ² But Pharaoh responded, "Who is Yahweh that I should obey Him by letting Israel go? I do not know anything about Yahweh, and besides, I will not let Israel go. (Exodus 5:1-2)

In many ways Pharaoh saw himself as a god, a great "I Am" in his own right. He was not willing to recognize Yahweh and submit to Him. This is the sin that plagues all mankind. We want to be independent. We think we are self-sufficient. We want to be lords over our own lives. Because of this, we, too, are slaves like the children of Israel, but we are not slave to the Egyptians, we are slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). Like the children of Israel, our only deliverance comes when we cry out to Yahweh God. In our hour of desperate need, Jesus Christ, our Great "I am", has come. His deliverance comes to all who will turn from their sin and put their faith in Him. Today, will you do that? Will you turn from your sin and trust in Jesus Christ? If so, the deliverance of Yahweh can be yours as well.

If you have already put your faith in Christ, return to this point often. At salvation we submitted to Christ as Lord of our lives, but practically speaking, what areas of our lives still need to be subjected to the Great "I Am?"

At times we refuse to let God be LORD over every part of our lives. We submit where it makes sense to us or fits into our agenda, but in those moments when God leads us in one direction and we want to go in the other, we turn away from our Yahweh God who is Lord of all.

May we each repent of that. Let us submit ourselves to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to show us the areas where we are still wanting to be the lord of our own lives, and confess that to Yahweh God. Ask for forgiveness, submit to Him anew, and allow the Spirit of God to begin to work in our lives to restore full lordship. Like the children of Israel, it is in this submission that we will find the faithful Deliverer, the Great "I Am", who we so desperately need.

Discussion questions:

1. What in this sermon was most interesting or meaningful to you?
2. If you had been Moses in the story, what would have been the most difficult things for you to handle?
3. The name of God also communicated the character of God. What words might you use to describe the character of God that you have experienced in your life?
4. How would you explain the meaning of "I Am" when it is used as God's name?

5. The children of Israel cried out to God for deliverance and He heard their cries. Have you had times in your life that you cried out to God for deliverance?
6. Following God means He is the Lord and master of every part of our lives. What part(s) of your life do you find difficult to let God be the master over?
7. What from this sermon do you need to remember?
8. How can we pray for you about this?