

Sunday 12th January 2025 - Know My Name: The Name of God

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We are starting this new Sunday series this morning called Know My Name, in which we're going to be looking at the importance and the significance of names in the Bible and in our lives.

Names for God, names given to people and places, names as a way of understanding or revealing who someone is, perhaps including ourselves as well.

But indeed, our names are kind of key ways in which we can be identified. I'm glad we've got names. Imagine how tricky community life would be if there wasn't any names among us.

You know, who you're talking about? Oh, it's that bloke with the big nose and the comb over or whatever. How we'd identify each other would be a bit tricky, wouldn't it? Just as Helen got us to share our names or our middle names at the beginning with each other.

Names, they're important and they matter to us. And on the whole, names are a positive thing. They help us to be known and they help us to belong to a community.

[1 : 06] And if you're given a nickname by anyone, that can be a sign of affection or that you've been included and accepted into a group. And yet, names can sometimes also be used in a perhaps more slightly more negative way.

Now, for example, certain names can trigger perhaps bad memories for us. I know when teachers have children, they take their time because every child is associated with someone. So they try to find a baby there if you're a teacher is a tough call.

I know. Maybe some of the names you were called growing up or in childhood, they can still cut deep and so on. And I guess not every nickname that we might be given is always complimentary.

For example, for most of my time in high school, back in London, I was saddled with the nickname T-Fal. T-Fal. Okay.

Now, you see, back then, and I guess now, I have got quite a big head. Okay. So, kind of curtains haircut that I used to have, it kind of accentuated my not insignificant size forehead with this.

[2 : 11] But there was an advert at the time of growing up for T-Fal, which was this one here. If you remember this, back in the mid-80s, non-stick T-Fal stuff, irons and saucepans.

And so I was reckoned to have a resemblance to this guy here. So for years, I was stuck with the name T-Fal. Bit savage, if you ask me, really. As I say, though, nicknames are not always the most complimentary of things.

And yet, for better or worse, names, nicknames, titles, you know, not only do they serve to identify us, but they can also reveal, I think, quite a lot about the relationships that exist between people.

And I'd say that's never more true than when it comes to the names that we have for God. See, I don't know if you've done much of this in your sort of faith journey.

But for me, it's fascinating, really, to unpack some of the ways in which God is identified in the Bible, particularly when we delve a bit into the original language in which the Old Testament, you know, the Hebrew scriptures were written.

[3 : 26] So, for example, if we start at the very beginning and take the first line of the first story of the first book in the Bible, which is Genesis chapter 1, verse 1, we're told this, that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Famous words. And this, I guess, as this first chapter unfolds, this is the part, this is a chapter where we're told about the way in which God creates the world in seven days, a kind of picture, poetic way of describing the ordered way in which God brought things, including us, into being.

Now, the Hebrew word that's translated into English here as God is this word in Hebrew, Elohim. We're going to say some Hebrew this morning because we like that here.

One, two, three. Elohim. Got to get that going, which at this time of year is maybe not the nicest of things to do, but Elohim. Now, Elohim is an interesting word because it's not so much a name as it is a title.

It's a bit like saying king rather than Charles for our monarch, if you like. But as well as being a title, it's also a very generic term for God.

[4 : 49] Indeed, Elohim and its root word, El, that was used not just by the people who wrote the Bible, but by all sorts of other cultures to describe their God or their gods as well.

And that continues to this day. So the Arabic term for God, Allah, that's derived from this word, El, Allah. There's a similarity there. Arabic word of Allah comes from this Hebrew root of El and Elohim and so on.

Now, there's lots we could unpack about this El, Elohim title. But suffice to say for now, it's basically used in this opening story of Genesis as a way of describing the big God, if you like.

You know, the cosmic creator God. Indeed, the Hebrew word El means strong one, strong one. So that's the kind of picture of God that's painted in the first verse in the first book of the Bible.

God as a strong one. So far, so good, we might think. But then when we turn to Genesis chapter 2, there's a second, quite different creation story, story of Adam and Eve.

[6 : 06] And in many ways, that's kind of a much smaller creation story. But the Hebrew word that's used for God in that second story is a very different one.

So whereas Genesis chapter 1, verse 1 says, in the beginning, God, Elohim, created the heavens and the earth. The second story, which starts at Genesis chapter 2, verse 4, it says this.

It says, when the Lord God made the earth and the heavens. Now, this word God we know about, that's Elohim in Hebrew. But this word Lord, well, it's offered as a translation of another Hebrew word, which is this one, which is Yahweh.

Yahweh. So exactly, Tom. Yes. It's all joining with Tom. Ready? One, two, three. Yahweh. Excellent. Excellent. Now, we'll talk a little bit more about as to why the word Lord there is in capital letters in our English Bibles in a bit.

But this word Yahweh, it's not a title for God, as in Elohim, but is rather a name for God. Indeed, it is the name of God.

[7 : 24] How do we know this? Well, it's going to take a look at a passage from the book of Exodus, in which God first reveals the name Yahweh.

It's an encounter that involves a guy called Moses and a mysterious burning bush. Let's have a look at this. Now, Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian.

And he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush.

Moses saw that though the bush was on fire, it did not burn up. When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush.

Moses, Moses. And Moses said, here I am. Do not come any closer, God said.

[8 : 48] Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Then he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

At this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. The Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt.

I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So now go.

I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

Moses said to God, suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your fathers has sent me to you. And they asked me, what is his name?

[10 : 06] Then what shall I tell them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites.

I am has sent me to you. Yeah, I am said God. That's what you are to call me.

In other words, that's my name, which is Yahweh in Hebrew. It's almost like whatever is good, whatever is kind, whatever is just, whatever is holy, whatever is eternal, whatever you can imagine a loving God would be at any time.

I am, I am, says God. And as God says in the next verse after that reading in Exodus, he says, this is my name forever by which I am to be remembered.

Now, because this name for God, I am Yahweh, because it became in time seen to be so holy that it shouldn't be even said out loud.

[11 : 14] When these stories were shared, indeed, when the eventual written versions like we have in the Bible were read out loud, this Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, it was substituted for another Hebrew word, the word Adonai, which means Lord.

So Adonai Elohim means the Lord God. And so in our English translations, that's why whenever we see the phrase Lord God, the word Lord is written in capitals, really as a nod to say, look, pay attention here.

This is really talking about Yahweh, this very personal name of God. But out of respect for those who don't want to say God's name out loud, we're going to substitute Yahweh for this phrase Lord God.

Does that make sense? Kind of, yeah, hopefully, hopefully. Now, why might this be significant, though? Well, if we go back to Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, and these two creation stories that we have, one with the big cosmic creation, the other one a bit more focused on Adam and Eve, the kind of God who's portrayed, and the name or the title God is given, they reckon to be pretty revealing about the kind of character God has.

So if we recall, this Elohim title for God, very much in keeping with the kind of God portrayed in that first Genesis account, a big cosmic kind of out there God, who is a good creator, yeah, but who is also seen to be perhaps maybe distant, maybe impersonal, Eve.

[13 : 10] And so when Genesis 1 gives this awesome God a title, Elohim, it's about this big God, this strong God, if you like.

And so when, for example, humans are created, we're told about it in very broad strokes because this God is a cosmic God. So it says this, so God, Elohim, created man in his own image, in the image of God, he created them, male and female, he created them.

That's the first story. And yet in the second creation account in Genesis, in which God's name is not Elkhim by itself, but Yahweh, a very different side to God's character is revealed.

Yes, God is still this awesome creator, but it's much more personal. You know, we might say much more hands-on. So we get this description of how humans were created.

It says, then the Lord God, Yahweh in Hebrew, formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

[14 : 22] See the difference there? In Genesis 1 and 2 at least, Elohim is this big cosmic God. Yahweh is this more personal down-to-earth God.

And this personal theme, well, it continues. As we're told things like this, now the Lord God, Yahweh, had planted a garden in the east.

So it's a very hands-on picture of a green-fingered God, if you like. God as the gardener. Well, we're told this, that the Lord God, Yahweh, said, it's not good for man to be alone.

I'm going to make a suitable helper for him. It's a bit like match.com, it seems. Going to sort of matchmake people together, again, a very personally involved kind of way.

Well, then most remarkably, perhaps, we're told this, that then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God, Yahweh, as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

[15 : 21] It's a beautifully relaxed, kind of human-like description of God. Someone who's enjoying taking an evening stroll as the sun goes down.

What's more, at this point, we're told that the Lord God called to the man, where are you? Implying that this Yahweh God, someone who wants company, maybe even someone who needs company, who wants to relate to us.

And there's even a suggestion here, that this God is not all-knowing, since he doesn't seem to know where Adam is. The God, it seems, who experiences the world, very much, perhaps, like we do.

Now, how to explain these different ideas, these different perceptions, these different names for God? Well, it's about 250 years ago now, that biblical scholars first began to explore the idea that these different names revealed that these accounts in Genesis were written, not as it was traditionally reckoned by Moses himself, but were instead written by different people, from different times, with sometimes very different views about God.

Now, that understanding of, in fact, multiple writers and sources of Genesis, who were then edited together centuries later to make one big story, that's become the pretty accepted view of how Genesis, and indeed many of the books in the Bible, came to be as they are.

[17 : 05] Now, sometimes, as with the creation stories, these different views and understandings of God, they're kept separate, like Genesis 1 and Genesis 2.

But sometimes, such as in the story of Noah's Ark and the flood, these different sources are kind of interwoven, a verse here, a verse there, a verse there.

So if you have a close look, if you're bedtime reading tonight, perhaps, at the rest of the story of the flood, that's why sometimes God is simply called God, Elohim, and other times, in the same story, he's called the Lord God, which is, yeah, God Elohim, but Lord Yahweh, because there are probably two different tales of the same flood put together and woven together, edited together, to make one complete whole.

And that's why, when we read the creation stories, or the flood story, or indeed, the different Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John gospel accounts of Jesus' life, there do sometimes seem to be these contradictions, or at least very different understandings, of who God really is.

Because those who put the Bible together, it seems, are happy to draw on different people's views, in order to try and give a more complete understanding of the nature and the character of God.

[18 : 33] I appreciate, for a Sunday morning, that might all feel a little bit technical and literature kind of stuff, hopefully a little bit interesting, maybe, but really, so what?

So what? With all this? What difference does knowing this make to our faith, and the way that we might relate to God today? Two thoughts, really.

Two thoughts. Thoughts that we'll probably continue to explore, as this series goes on. Firstly, I think I'd say the fact that the editor of Genesis, probably a guy called Ezra, maybe some others, the fact that he's content to include, for example, these two different creation stories, side by side, even though they call God different things, and portray God in different ways, I think that's a genius move, on his part, because it's inviting us, to make up our own mind, about who we think God is.

Is, for example, our God this distant creator, who is strong and powerful, beyond our understanding, as we were singing, cosmic in scale, a God who the writer of Genesis 1 describes as Elohim, or is our God this intimately relational being, someone who is as close to us as the one who walks with us in the garden in the cool of a summer's evening, a God who the writer of Genesis 2 describes as Yahweh, or, and perhaps this is the point of it, is God both of, and more, of these two names, you know, these two ways of understanding, in that sometimes, yeah, God feels as close as our breath, while at other times, God feels as transcendent, and beyond us, as the stars in the sky.

It's not that anyone who calls God Elohim, can't see God as personal, and anyone who calls God Yahweh, can't see God as cosmic, rather it's that God can be understood, in different ways, to different people, at different times.

[20 : 56] You know, I think that's the beauty of this, I am name of God, because it encapsulates it all, you know, you want to know my name? I am who I am.

You can't define God, in that way. God defines, himself, herself, you know, and perhaps the adventure of faith, is discovering the beauty, of the multi-faceted diamond, who is, the divine.

And for us, well I'd say, I don't think we therefore need to get hung up, on how, we best encounter, or experience God, or indeed whether it's through our hearts, our souls, our minds, or our bodies, that best enable us to express, our worship for God, the God who made us, and loves us.

Your experience of God, is no better, or more valid than mine, just as mine, is no better, or more valid, than yours. You know, there's permission, and I think there's encouragement, for it all, through the different ways, in which faith encounters, are described in the Bible, people, and I hope we can take encouragement, from that, for our own, individual, faith journeys, as well.

But then secondly, and perhaps most helpfully, I'd also suggest, that all this, is where Jesus, comes in. You see, what's fascinating, as we read through, the Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, is the general sense, of direction, they seem to take, when it comes to, people's, awareness, of God.

[22 : 36] You see, in general, whether they, use the name, for God of Elohim, or Yahweh, or someone else entirely, or there are lots of others. We see a God, who starts off, in all the stories, seemingly having, these very personal encounters, with people, from Adam and Eve, in the garden, to Abraham, by his tent, at the trees of Mamre, you've got Jacob, as he wrestles, with God, by the Jabbok River, you've got Moses, as we saw, speaking to God, through that burning bush, or face to face, even with God, at the top, of Mount Sinai.

But as time goes on, and as the Old Testament, goes through, these personal encounters, with God, they generally seem, to be replaced, a bit, by say, prophets, who, deliver messages, from God, to the people, or, priests, who offer, sacrifices, and prayers, on behalf, of the people, and indeed, there's a temple, in the bottom right there, as that becomes, the place, a location, to encounter God, so people's ability, to encounter, and relate to God, outside, of that religious, system, seems to lessen, a bit over time, it seems to be diminished, whereas God, first appears, to people, in a series, of revelations, you know, revealing his presence, to people, in time, these revelations, seem to be replaced, by prayers, as people seek, and try to know, and understand God, for themselves, and indeed, by the end of our Old Testament,

God, it seems, has gone very quiet, you know, as people wait, on God, to once again, reveal, who he really is, that kind of quietness, if you like, that's the context, in which Jesus, first appears, you know, the one who comes, as Elohim, the God, the one who is, the cosmic, word of God, involved in creation, but also, as Yahweh, himself, the one, in Jesus, who is, I am, when he says, I am, the good shepherd, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the resurrection, and the life, I am the way, and the truth, and the life, they're all, I am's, indeed, this same Jesus, is the one, who we see, like Yahweh, in the garden of Eden, he walks alongside his people, in all of their pain, and in all of their joys, similarly in gardens, whether that's in the garden of Gethsemane, with his disciples, or significantly, in the garden, of the empty tomb, as he meets,

Mary Magdalene, having come back, from the dead, equally, this same Jesus, is the one, who takes Peter, James and John, up a mountain, so that they might see him, in his glory, in the same way, that Moses, saw the glory of God, revealed to him, at the top of Mount Sinai, this same Jesus, is the one, who talks with, and commissions Peter, around the charcoal fire, just as Moses, encounters, and is commissioned, by God, at the flames, of the burning bush, this same Jesus, is the one, who gives us his Holy Spirit, so that we can know, for ourselves, the power, of this cosmic God, in an intimate, personal, life-shaping way, not needing priests, and temples, to encounter God, but to know God, as the people of God, wherever we gather, in his name, and through whatever ways, we find, to live out, his loving kindness, that's why,

I would say, and as we'll explore, over the coming weeks, Jesus, is indeed, the name, that is above, every name, because, it's by Jesus, through Jesus, and in the name, of Jesus, that all things, come together, for good, and for his glory, and so, in our service now, as we turn, perhaps to a time, of song worship, in a bit, and indeed, throughout this week, I pray, that each of us, will know, and encounter, the God, who, through Jesus, and by the power, of his spirit, is both, the cosmic creator, of all things, and the God, who walks with us, leading, and lighting, our way, step by step, and day by day, Amen, Amen.

[27 : 22] Thank you.