

August 30, 2026

“Name Above All Names”

Exodus 3:1-15

Intro:

Picture in your mind’s eye a lonely balcony. Beneath the balcony, hidden in the shadows, is a young man who is deeply in love. On the balcony stands the young lady who is the object of his love. The young lady speaks:

Juliet:

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.

Romeo:

[Aside] Shall I hear more, or shall I speak at this?

Juliet:

'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name which is no part of thee
Take all myself.

Romeo:

I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

Of course, this is one of the more famous passages from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet".

Juliet is trying to make the point that names don't really matter when something greater – like love, is in play.

The importance of names – their meaning, familial connection, and history – varies from culture to culture, and from generation to generation. For some people, their name carries great significance and pride. Other people have more neutral feelings about their name and don't give it much thought. Still others feel that their name doesn't fit them at all and they make an effort to change it at the first opportunity.

Let's take my name, for example.

I believe that, officially, Ryan is a Gaelic word (or comes from the Gaelic word) meaning "little king". When I was a kid, I had a sign on my bedroom door that read "Ryan: Gentle Charmer". My name Ryan was chosen, if memory serves properly, because it was a name that couldn't easily be manipulated in teasing ways by other kids and, at the time, wasn't what everyone else was naming their kids.

My middle name, which is Blake, is after the poet William Blake and was chosen by Mom on the spur of the moment because back in the day you weren't allowed to leave the hospital without having been given a full name. Dad was rather sick at the time and wasn't there to give his two cents (they hadn't settled on a middle name by the time was born). Over the years, I have had several nicknames, with the name "Alan" being the one that had the longest run. I have no idea where that came from, but I had it for much of the year I was in Calgary attending our denominational gap-year program called The Baptist Leadership Training School (now replaced by Kurios).

Context:

Why are we talking about names here? Well, in this morning's Scripture passage we find God giving Moses His Name, and it is an interesting and significant moment in that narrative.

Most of you are familiar with the larger narrative. The Israelites – meaning the descendants of Jacob, who is also called Israel, are living and prospering in Egypt after Joseph rescued them from famine. Some time after Joseph and his generation died out, a new king (Pharoah) comes into power who did not know about Joseph or what he had done for Egypt (or chose to ignore that part of Egyptian history). He determined that the Israelites were becoming a threat to Egyptian power and so he enslaved them. It is during this period of time that a boy named Moses is born to an Israelite family and through God's provision is raised by Pharoah's daughter in the royal palace. Moses grows up, gets into trouble and flees into the wilderness where he eventually finds a wife and settles down as a shepherd to raise his family. You can catch up on the details by reading Exodus 1 and 2.

When we begin chapter 3, Moses is encountering God in the burning bush. It is a remarkable event and there is much that can be said about the whole scene, but for our purposes this morning, I want to draw your attention to verses 14 and 15. God tells Moses that he has heard the cries of the Israelites about their harsh enslavement and that he is going to send Moses as his representative to free them from Egypt. Moses tries to come up with every excuse he can to avoid this assignment.

In verse 13, Moses tries the approach that no one will believe him if he is not able to provide a legitimate name for God. Moses assumes this is how the people – both Israelite and Egyptian, will respond because names are important and every deity has a name that people know. If there is no name to give them, they will see the message as not being legitimate and therefore won't listen to Moses telling them they are to leave Egypt to go and worship.

It is a strange excuse to me, as the people have been crying out to God already. So why wouldn't they know who He is? God must also have thought this effort to avoid the task was weak, as he doesn't give him a name right away. The phrase "I AM Who I AM" is more than just an expression of cheekiness from God. It is more accurately translated "I will be who I will be". It means that God is beyond the bounds of a name and can not be restricted by such a thing. He determines what he has done, is doing, and will do. He is the author of his own agenda and direction. All of that is so far beyond human comprehension that it could easily be seen as God shifting as though by a whim, but it is in fact not. It is also a reminder to Moses that God cannot be limited to a human idea.

Why all of this important is, again, the perception of power that knowing a name gives someone. In the ancient world context (and possibly even still today in some cultures and religious expressions), if a person knew the name of the god they were calling out to, it meant that they could control that deity's response and action. So, by praying to a god by the god's proper name, they would essentially be god, or at the very least have the perception that this was a way of being able to wield that god's power.

God is not controlled like this. He is not a patsy, to be brought out and shown around for our pleasure and amusement. He is the creator, we are the created. We are not in a position to presume any leverage over what He will or will not do.

And so, God deliberately gives Moses a name that is beyond the bounds of manipulation. The name given (I AM, or more comprehensible to humans, Yahweh) is not a concession. It is a reminder. A reminder that He had already committed to being their God long before they had been born. It is a reminder that the respected patriarchs of this people group – the Israelites, had not only acknowledged, but had submitted to, God's divine overlordship – without having needed to ask his name.

Conclusion:

Over time, the name of God has been both expanded and protected. The name Yahweh, which by itself is a study for another time, was the name that for much of Israelite history no one was allowed to speak. It was too holy, so the people found other ways to address God without losing any of the reverence He is due. As you read through the Old Testament especially, you will come across different names people used for God: Jehovah; Jehova Jira; El Shaddai; Elohim; and so on. These are names that are intended to manipulate God, but to acknowledge a part of His unfathomable character. Each name only scratches the surface of who God is, and who He is to each person.

Who is God to you? Have you spent any time reflecting on the character of God, and how you would put a name to Him? When you pray, when you speak God's name (or one of the descriptives given to Him), do you hold those words in your mouth as holy?

When Moses approached the burning bush, he was told to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. When we speak the name of God, we are uttering holy words. Do we treat His name as holy?

I would encourage you this morning to pay attention to how you speak God's name – when you pray, when you sing, in conversation about Him with others. Are the names just words of convenience? Are you trying to get to the right formula of names in order to get the desired response or outcome to your prayer? Or are the names holy windows that offer a glimpse of who God really is?

Let's pray.