

EXODUS 3:1–15. (EHV)

Now Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, a priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The Angel of the LORD appeared to him in blazing fire from within a bush. Moses saw that the bush was on fire, but the bush was not burning up. So he said, “I will go over and look at this amazing sight—to find out why the bush is not burning up.” When the LORD saw that Moses had gone over to take a look, God called to him from the middle of the bush and said, “Moses! Moses!” Moses said, “I am here.” The LORD said, “Do not come any closer. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” He then said, “I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. The LORD said, “I have certainly seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry for help because of their slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now indeed, the Israelites’ cry for help has come to me. Yes, I have seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Come now, I will send 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 that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” So he said, “I will certainly be with you. This will be the sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will serve God on this mountain.” But Moses said to God, “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what should I say to them?” So God replied to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He also said, “You will say this to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.” God also told Moses, “Say this to the Israelites: ‘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 this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation.’”

The LORD, all capital letters.

Yahveh, some say it, guessing at how it might have originally been pronounced.

Jehovah, some say it.

Who is this LORD, this God whom we worship? The first time he gave some details about this special name, the first time he stressed the importance of this name, was when he appeared to Moses at Horeb.

1. Who He Is

Even though Moses had been raised in Pharaoh’s household in Egypt, he fell out of Pharaoh’s favor after killing an Egyptian who had been striking a Hebrew. He fled to Midian, on the other side of both arms of the Red Sea, where he stayed with a priest named Jethro and married one of his daughters. While living with Jethro, he tended Jethro’s flock. As a shepherd, Moses lived a somewhat nomadic life, leading the flock from place to place where he could find

water and pasture for them. His shepherding eventually brought him to Horeb, a mountain range in the southern part of the Sinai Peninsula, the mountain range that included Mt. Sinai, where God would eventually give the Ten Commandments.

Now this story is interesting, because even though it is told in the third person, Moses is the one telling the story about himself, and it would have been one of the most memorable experiences he had, because it ended up defining and sharing the course of the rest of his life. And when we hear about a bush burning with fire that wasn't getting consumed by the fire, it's easy for us as adults to be tempted to wonder how true this story could be. Maybe the heat was getting to Moses. Maybe he was suffering from heat stroke. Maybe he was dehydrated.

But in addition to the impact this event had on Moses and all the Israelites, which would be hard to explain if this was just a delirium from which Moses later recovered, Jesus himself refers to this story as a true one and uses it to teach about God. This actually happened.

So what exactly happened? Moses says that he saw a thorny bush of some kind in the distance—some people guess it was a blackberry bush, but we don't know for sure. The bush was enveloped in a flame of fire, but was not actually being consumed. None of the leaves of the bush were drying up, igniting, and turning to ash. None of the branches of the bush were shriveling up, igniting, and falling off. It was clearly on fire, but just as clearly not burning up. Imagine sitting in front of a campfire that is burning with real flames and is giving off heat, but there's no crackling sound and the wood continues to look just as it did when you first stuck it in the fire. That's sort of what Moses saw.

So Moses turned aside to take a closer look at this phenomenon. But as he drew near, a voice called to him, "Moses! Moses!"

Moses said, "Here I am."

The voice said, "Do not come any closer. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." The voice then introduced himself: "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses then realized that this was God and he hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. He doubtless also did what he was told and took off his sandals. Moses specifically realized that this was the Angel of the Lord, which we can gather from various passages is a technical name for God the Son when he makes appearances in the Old Testament, before he took on human flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary and received the name Jesus.

The Lord who appeared to Moses appeared as a burning fire with a voice, a voice that commanded attention. He appeared as a holy presence that could not be approached too closely, a holy presence that required deep humility and respect in order to be approached at all, a holy presence from which mortals had to hide their faces.

The Lord then told Moses why he had appeared to him and that he was sending him to Pharaoh to bring his people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses began dragging his feet and making excuses and trying to get out of it. We don't know exactly if he felt intimidated, if he thought he was too old, if he was enjoying his quieter, more remote life too much, or if there was some other reason he didn't want to go.

First he told God that he didn't think he was qualified for the job. God didn't deny that, but he told him that he would be with him, and even gave him a sign that he would be successful:

Once he had brought the people out of Egypt, they would worship God on the same mountain where Moses was now standing.

Then Moses told God that he wasn't sure how to convince the Israelites that God had sent him. After all, if he told them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they asked him, "What is his name?", what would he tell them?

And here God gave Moses three answers, and all three are essentially the same answer. First he told Moses, "*Ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*. I AM WHO I AM." Then he said, "You will say this to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you." Then he told Moses to tell the Israelites: "The LORD"—all capital letters—"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 this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation." The Hebrew name translated LORD in all capital letters looks very similar to the word for "He is," the third person version of "I am." From God's perspective, he is I AM WHO I AM. From our human perspective, he is HE IS WHO HE IS.

What does it mean when God calls himself I AM WHO I AM? Jesus himself gives us a good starting point when he later told the Jewish leaders that Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing his day and that he did see it and was glad. And when they responded, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?", Jesus replied, "Amen, Amen, I tell you: Before Abraham was born, I am" (John 8:56–58). In other words, God is eternal. He is before all else comes to be. He remains after all else passes away.

This name also tells us that, even though he has revealed himself to Moses and to us, has revealed everything we need to know about him in order to be saved, he is utterly unique and ultimately defies definition and explanation. He is who he is. Sometimes political commentators will say about our president: "Love him or hate him, he is one of one." Similarly, when Zion in Valentine has issued calls and I have made contact with the men they have called, I have encouraged them also to talk to our circuit pastor, Pastor Windsperger. I will tell them that they need to talk to him themselves because he is a personality better experienced than described. How are you going to describe him? Pastor Windsperger is Pastor Windsperger. Now please do not mistake me: I am *not* putting our president or Pastor Windsperger on the same plane as God. I am only drawing this comparison: The president is the president, Pastor Windsperger is Pastor Windsperger, and on an infinitely greater level, the true God simply is who he is.

And because he simply is who he is, he is also absolutely independent. The president may be one of one, but he still came from his father and mother and needs other people in order to live. Same with Pastor Windsperger. But God doesn't derive his life from anyone or anything else; everything else derives their life from him. Similarly, the true God doesn't need to defend or prove his existence, and he doesn't need others to defend or prove it either. All other gods are not, and so you need to come up with all sorts of religious props to keep their religion going. But the true God is. So you can either take him or leave him; he'll continue to exist just fine either way and won't be any better off or worse off. We will be the ones worse off if we choose to live as if he does not exist.

This is who the LORD is—a burning fire, an attention-commanding voice, a holy presence before which we must show respect and hide our faces, eternal, utterly unique and defying explanation, absolutely independent.

2. His Concerns

If you had all these traits, what would be your concerns? What would you care about? Would you be appearing as a flame in a thorny bush to a fugitive shepherd in the wilderness? I don't know about you, but if I had all these traits, I wouldn't concern myself with anyone else at all, or if I did, they would merely be my amusements and playthings. I don't know if you're familiar with the game *The Sims*. It's a computer game where you basically create and are then in control of your own little digital world. You get to decide: This is going to be an industrial zone; this will be a residential zone; this is going to be a business district; and so on. Then, when the people start populating in your little world, you can either let their lives run on auto-pilot, following the game's programming, or you can zoom in and control any character's life that you want to in that digital world. People who play that game are essentially the god of that little world, and guess what they tend to do? At some point, even if in just one little corner of that little world, they create chaos just to see what happens—for fun, for amusement. Or at best, they eventually get bored with the world they've started, and so they quit that one and start a new one. Time for something new and different. The people in that world are their amusements and playthings.

So what are the concerns of the great I AM? The fact that he is even talking to Moses in the first place, a fugitive shepherd, tells us something about him. And he introduces himself not as the God of heaven, or the God of the universe, or the God of the angels, but as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. This is a God who concerns himself with humans, who reveals himself to humans, who makes promises to humans, and who still remembers those promises and cares about them after those humans have passed away from the earth. He had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give their descendants the land of Canaan and that all nations on earth would be blessed through them. This was a promise that was ultimately fulfilled when the Messiah was born from the line of these men, and he was born, suffered, died, and rose in what was once the land of Canaan.

This isn't a God who couldn't care less about human affairs or who finds entertainment in them. This is a God who is aware of the suffering of those to whom he has revealed himself, of those who believe in him. He hears their cries for help. He has compassion on them, and he comes down to deliver them from slavery, so that he can keep his promises to them. This is a God who selects and involves human agents in his saving plan, and who is with them to equip them when he calls them into his service.

This tells us something else about the name I AM WHO I AM. He is completely faithful to his promises. Because he is eternal, because he lives in the eternal now, because he always is, when he says something, it doesn't matter if the people to whom he said it have passed away, and it doesn't matter how many years have gone by. His word and promise is still current, is still now, and cannot be broken.

This is why he called Moses. This is why he delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This is why he brought them to the Promised Land. This is why he preserved the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This is why, when the time was right, he sent his Son to be born of a woman, to be born under law, to redeem those under law from slavery to the law, from slavery to sin, from slavery to death. This is why his Son rose three days after giving up his life for humanity. And because all of this was as good as done already when God appeared to Moses,

this is why God didn't say, "I was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," but, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Because of what he would accomplish through the Messiah—from our perspective, because of what he did accomplish through the Messiah—all who believe in him never really die. Instead, death has become the gateway through which they get to participate in his own eternal life.

This is the LORD, the Lord who appeared to Moses. It is the same Lord who made his appearance to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ, the same Lord who comes to us in his Word, in water, in bread and wine. He is the eternal Lord, the Lord of the universe, the only true God, and he is your God and deliverer, and he is mine. Amen.