

The Significance Of God's Name

THE BIBLICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NAMES

In Bible days, a name was usually chosen for its meaning. The Old Testament records many instances in which the name given to a child related to the circumstances surrounding the child's birth or to the aspirations held by the parents for their child. "In biblical thought a name is not a mere label of identification; it is an expression of the essential nature of its bearer. A man's name reveals his character...The name in the OT is the essence of personality, the expression of innermost being.

God Himself placed great significance upon names. He changed the name of Abram ("exalted father") to Abraham ("father of many") to signify His promise to make him a father of many nations (Genesis 17:5). After Jacob wrestled with God, his name was changed from Jacob ("heel catcher, supplanter") to Israel ("contender with God"). In the New Testament, Simon ("heard") became Peter ("a rock").

GOD'S CHARACTER

In a similar manner, God used names and titles to reveal Himself. To Moses God said, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD [Jehovah] I was not known to them...Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm...Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Exodus 6:3, 6-7, NKJV).

Abraham used the name Jehovah (Genesis 22:14); however, God did not make known to him the full significance of this name in its redemptive aspect. Abraham saw God's omnipotence as displayed in miracles, but he did not have occasion to see and understand the fullness of God's delivering power. In Exodus 6, God promised to reveal Himself to His people in a new way. He associated His name Jehovah with a new and greater understanding of His character.

To know God's name is to know His true identity, nature, and character. For example, those who know God's name will know that He is faithful and so will trust in Him. "They that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, LORD, hast not forsaken them that seek thee" (Psalm 9:10).

In Exodus 34:5-6, the name represents God's character and glory as revealed to Moses: "And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." God also told Moses, "The LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exodus 34:14). His name signifies that He will not countenance the worship of other gods, who are false.

Throughout the Old Testament, God progressively revealed more about His character to His people, and this progressive revelation was often expressed by new names, such as Jehovah-Jireh (Jehovah our Provider) in Genesis 22:14 and Jehovah-Rapha (Jehovah our Healer) in Exodus 15:26. People expressed a desire to know more about God by asking to know His name (Genesis 32:29; Judges 13:17; I King 8:43).

Pointing to the Incarnation, God promised that one day His people would know Him plainly, and He expressed this truth by saying, "Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I" (Isaiah 52:6). When Jesus reigns over the earth in the Millennium, the truth of God's oneness will be apparent to all, and His essential oneness is represented by His name: "And the LORD shall be king over all the earth: in that day shall there be one LORD, and his name one" (Zechariah 14:9).

God's name is so closely identified with His character that sometimes the Bible uses His name as a synonym for Him. A man was executed under the law for blaspheming "the name," or in other words, "God" (Leviticus 24:11, 15). Many passages in both testaments admonish us to fear, love, bless, praise, and thank God's name, meaning that we are to fear, love,

bles, praise, and thank God Himself. (See Deuteronomy 28:58; Psalm 5:11; 54:6; 96:2; Hebrews 6:10; 13:15; Revelation 11:18).

GOD'S POWER

God's name reveals not only His character but also His power. God told Pharaoh through Moses, "And in very deed for this cause have I raised thee up, for to shew in thee my power; and that my name may be declared throughout all the earth" (Exodus 9:16). All nations saw the power of the God of Israel when He defeated the Egyptians, the mightiest kingdom of the day. When people heard the name Jehovah, they thought of Jehovah's omnipotence. Rahab explained to the two Israelite spies, "We have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red sea for you, when ye came out of Egypt...And as soon as we had heard these things, our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man, because of you: for the LORD your God, he is God in heaven above, and in earth beneath" (Joshua 2:10-11).

In particular, God's name represents His saving power. Thus David prayed, "Save me, O God, by thy name, and judge me by thy strength" (Psalm 54:1). Salvation is in the name of the LORD (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21). God will save those who love Him, call upon Him, and know His name (Psalm 91:14).

GOD'S AUTHORITY

In addition to power (might, ability), God's name represents His authority (right, warrant). When God promised to send an angel to lead the Israelites, He charged them, "Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not:...for my name is in him" (Exodus 23:20-21). The angel (perhaps a manifestation of God) carried divine authority because God invested His name in the angel.

God signifies that people come under His authority by placing His name upon them. (See Deuteronomy 28:10; Amos 9:12). They are thereby identified with Him, become His possession, and enter into an intimate relationship with Him.

Thus God's people can "call on the name of the LORD" in petition (I Kings 18:24, 36-37; II Kings 5:11) as well as in worship (Genesis 12:8). By the authority invested in His name, they can expect Him to work miraculously on their behalf.

GOD'S MANIFESTED PRESENCE

The divine name also represents God's immediate presence – His manifested glory, attention, concern, and prayer-answering work. Referring to locations where the Israelites would build an altar of sacrifice, God said, "In all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless" (Exodus 20:24). God manifested Himself temporarily in these locations. He also promised that He would manifest His presence permanently in the Temple by placing His name there: "But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come...Then there shall be a place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there" (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11).

When Solomon prayed at the dedication of the Temple, he acknowledged that the omnipresent God could not be confined to any physical location (I Kings 8:27). Yet he asked for a unique manifestation of God's presence by asking God to place His name in the Temple, as He had promised. Solomon prayed, "That thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou has said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place" (I Kings 8:29). God answered Solomon's prayer by causing His visible glory to fill the Temple and by placing His name in it (II Chronicles 7:1-2; I Kings 9:3).

SUMMARY

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible explains the significance of God's name in Biblical usage:

The name...of God is the key to understanding the biblical doctrine of God

God's self-revelation in history is accompanied by the giving of his personal name, by which his people may worship and address him as "Thou." Thus God's name signifies the personal relation between God and people, which is the supreme characteristic of biblical faith.

To know the name of God is to know God as he has revealed himself...

That which is called by Yahweh's name is his possession and therefore comes under both his authority and his protection...

When used of God, 'name' in the OT has a revelatory content. The name of God means primarily his revealed nature and character – the Savior God as he has manifested himself and desires to be known by man...As expressing essential nature, it [God's name] implies the most complete divine self-disclosure, while the identification of name and person safeguards the unity of God...

The name of God is frequently used as a synonym for God himself...To know the name of God is to know God himself as he is revealed...

When God acts for his name's sake, he is acting in accordance with his revealed character and to uphold the honor of his revelation...

To call upon the name of God is to invoke him on the basis of his revealed nature and character.

As chapter 1 has shown, the New Testament uses the name of Jesus Christ in the same way that the Old Testament speaks of the name of

Jehovah, thereby revealing the identity of Jesus as the one God incarnate. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* explains how the doctrine of God's name in the New Testament proclaims the deity of Jesus:

With the name of God there is now linked the name of Jesus Christ, who declares it and so "fulfills" the OT revelation...In him there has been given to men the complete revelation of the divine nature: he has manifested and declared the name of God ([John] 12:28; 17:6, 26)...

The distinctive feature of NT usage is the way in which the name of Jesus is either substituted for, or placed alongside, the name of God. Phrases which are used in the OT of the name of God are applied in the NT to the name of Jesus...

The full disclosure of his [God's] nature and character is given in Jesus Christ, who has manifested his name.

God's name signifies His self-revelation, particularly His character, power, authority, and manifested presence. Jesus is the incarnation of the one true God in all His fullness, and therefore the name of Jesus is the supreme revelation of God today. The fullness of God's character, power, authority, and presence is invested in the name of Jesus and is made available to us when we believe on Jesus and invoke His name.

"For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:9-10, NKJV).