

“CHRISTIANITY 101: (#1) I AM”

(Exodus 3:13-15)

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PROP NEEDED: "Names of God" Countdown Video

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-7-24]

--I--

1. **[SHOW 5 MINUTE COUNTDOWN VIDEO: "*Names of God Countdown*"**
(WorshipHouseMedia.com, Beamer Films, Time: 5:00)]

2. Who is God? What does it mean to follow Jesus as Lord of our life? Who is the Holy Spirit? Why do we need the Church? How is the Bible an authority in life? and what's to be more important to a Christian than correct belief?

A--These are just a few of the questions I want to address in a new worship series we're beginning today called "*Christianity 101*," exploring some of the basics of Christian belief and practice, and how these can make a difference in our lives.

B--And we begin with a question that I was actually asked 32 years ago when I went before the Board of Ordained Ministry for our N.G.A. United Methodist Conference: "*BRIAN, WHO IS GOD?*" -- now, how would YOU answer that? ¹

3. Well, before sharing my own answer, let's start by acknowledging that belief in God (however defined) is one of the fundamental hallmarks of a Christian.

A--According to a June 2022 Gallup Poll, 81% of Americans say they believe in God. ²

B--But, what does that really mean? and can it really mean *anything* when we hear all of the *diverse* answers from people today about who God is? ³

C--Well, just because something is complex or has multiple ways of describing it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

1--To the contrary... the fact that people describe God in multiple ways (to me) merely *affirms* God's reality. ⁴

2--Yet, as Christians, we don't answer the question "*Who Is God?*" by trying to rationally *prove* God's existence (that's another sermon entirely).

3--Instead, we start with a *faith* belief that God *IS*, and then talk about what that means from there. ⁵ And that's what I want to do in today's message.

--II--

4. Let's begin by acknowledging that we DO, in fact, know *some* things about who God is -- glimpses that God has chosen to reveal about Himself throughout the pages of the Bible. ⁶

A--In fact, we could say that the Bible itself is not so much a story about *people* or certain heroic individuals but is instead (overall) the story of *God*.

1--God is the central personality and driving force in both the background and foreground of all that's recorded there. Even the New Testament stories of *Jesus* point us towards *God* -- so if we want to know who *God* is, we first need to know how He's described in scripture.

2--There are many names, titles, and descriptions of God found in the Bible (*you saw some of these in the 5-minute countdown video before worship, today and some of you are studying 52 of these in a weekly Bible study called The Names of God by Ann Spangler*).⁷

B--But there's one description that I believe captures the essence of nearly all the others -- its the one found in **today's scripture from Exodus 3**, where we find Moses' reply to God, who's been speaking to him from a burning bush. Listen to its words...

"13 But Moses said to God, 'If I now come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' they are going to ask me, 'What's this God's name?' What am I supposed to say to them?'" 14 God said to Moses, "I AM Who I AM. So say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" 15 God continued, "Say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, Abraham's God, Isaac's God, and Jacob's God, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how all generations will remember me."

C--Now one question we may ask is WHY Moses so interested in knowing God's name?

1--Well, in biblical times, a name told you about a person: their nature, character and reputation. So, to know God's name was to know these things about God -- for Moses not only to know *who* God was, but *why* God could be trusted.

2--And here, God said His name was... **"I AM."**

D--Now, in Hebrew this is translated "YHWH," and since it was written *without vowels*, there is no clue even as to how to pronounce it.

1--The most common pronunciation was "*Yahweh*," but in the Latin alphabet it's spelled JHVH, and pronounced "*Jehovah*."

2--But however it was pronounced, the Hebrews understood this to be the *personal* name for the God of Israel, and they used it 6800 times in the Hebrew/Old Testament... more than any other name/term for "God."

3--In fact, it was considered *so* sacred and personal that by 3rd century BCE, the name YHWH was no longer even pronounced aloud or written, but the Jews instead began substituting other Hebrew words for it, such as...

- (a) ...*Adonai*, (their word for "Lord" -- Psalm 97:5),
- (b) ...*El Shaddai* (their word for "God Almighty" -- Gen. 49:25),
- (c) ...& *Elohim* (a word describing how Yahweh is above all other gods--Gen. 1:26).

E--But even if the Hebrews occasionally substituted other terms, the name "I AM" (YHWH) was always understood to capture the essence of God's nature & character.

--III--

5. So what does this mean for us to today? What does it mean for you and I (as Christians) to call God the great "I AM"?

A--In Hebrew, the verb *to be* (which is the root of "I AM") carries with it a sense of past, present and future tenses.

1--So, God's name not only points to what *has been*, and what *is now*, but also to what *will be*.

2--And this, in turn, means that God is not a *temporary* god -- that, just as with time itself, God is always present with us as we live in and experience life.

3--And this presence can make a difference, in that that presence gives us a foundation for hope -- i.e., that no matter what we may face in life (past, present, or future) God *is*, always *has been*, and always *will be*, here for us.

B--Too often in life, though, people (including, unfortunately, many of US) rush around, troubled about this situation, or that problem, or that circumstance, thinking that we're all alone and that there's no one around to help us with or in life.

1--In practice, we're living life (*functionally*) as if God is NOT... as if He were either dead, or never existed in the first place -- the founder of Methodist Christianity John Wesley used to call this "practical atheism." ⁸

2--The story is told that Martin Luther (founder of the Protestant Reformation), was once so depressed over a situation he faced that his wife one day came downstairs wearing all black. So Martin asked her, "*Who died?*" "*God has,*" his wife said. But Martin insisted, "*God hasn't died.*" ...to which she replied, "*Well, live like it and act like it!*" ⁹

C--She was reminding her husband (as it should remind us today) that if we believe that God IS, then we should live and act like it by our words and actions!

--IV--

6. Do you remember at the beginning how I talked about my Board of Ordained Ministry interview group 32 years ago asking me the question "*Brian, who is God?*"

A--Well, I'm *not* usually good thinking up quick comebacks when I'm on a hot seat like that, but for some reason, that day all I could think of was the answer that I ended up blurting out... "*GOD IS!*"

B--And if we think about it, that's really the only answer that matters, because its not only the *primary* description of God in scripture, but its also the one that can make the *most difference* in our lives.

7. The author of Psalm 46:10 says it this way... "*Be still and know that I AM God!*"

A--In other words...

1--Because God IS,... we can have purpose and meaning to our lives.

2--Because God IS,... we can have peace even in the midst of life's raging storms.

3--Because God IS,... we ARE "somebody."

4--Because God IS,... we can have wholeness and healing even in the midst of pain and brokenness.

5--Because God IS,... there is nothing that we ever need to face alone.

6--Because God IS,... we need not fear anything or anyone.

B--Shakespeare posed question "*To be or not to be?*"

C--Well, the good news of scripture is that because God IS,... WE can be also.

8. As we close, I want to invite you to pray with me in unison a prayer from Sir Paul Reeves called "*The Listener's Prayer*" that you'll see on the screen. Let us pray..

(FOLLOWING WORDS ON SCREEN...)

"God, Grant me to be silent before you that I may hear you;

At rest in you that you may work in me;

Open to you that you may enter;

Empty before you that you may fill me.

Let me be still and know you are my God.

In Jesus' name. Amen." ¹⁰

9. [CLOSING SONG: UMH#77 -- "How Great Thou Art"]

10. [HOLY COMMUNION]

ENDNOTES:

¹ This is, after all, a very complex question... one that people of faith have been trying to answer since the beginning of time. And its a question that can lead us down paths of arrogant thinking, if we're not careful. The 4th-century desert monk Evagrius of Pontus once said that *"God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could,... he would not be God"* (Evagrius of Pontus, "Eastern Orthodoxy," Christian History, no. 54). And the fifteenth-century Jewish Rabbi Joseph Albo said that *"God is [the one who] has no definition."* [Joseph Albo (c. 1380c. 1435). In the Bible, Job 11:7-8 says *"Who can find out the deep things of God? Who can find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven; what can you do? Deeper than Sheol; what can you know?"* You see, in the end, all human efforts to describe God must fail because the nature and character of God is so great and so unfathomable that our human efforts at description always fall far short. So today, as we explore who God is, the first thing we need to acknowledge is a **reverence and awe for the mystery/paradox** of the God whom our minds can never fully comprehend.

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393737/belief-god-dips-new-low.aspx>. Note that 81% is the lowest this percentage has been since the 1940s when this polls was established.

³ For instance, consider the answer to the question "Who Is God?" purportedly given by 8-year Danny Dutton of Chula Vista, CA for a school homework assignment one day in this way...

"One of God's main jobs is making people. He makes them to replace the ones that die, so there will be enough people to take care of things on earth. He doesn't make grownups, just babies. I think because they are smaller and easier to make. That way He doesn't have to take up His valuable time teaching them to talk and walk. He can just leave that to mothers and fathers.

God's second most important job is listening to prayers. An awful lot of this goes on, since some people, like preachers and things, pray at times beside bedtime. God doesn't have time to listen to the radio or TV because of this. Because He hears everything, there must be a terrible lot of noise in His ears, unless He has thought of a way to turn it off.

God sees everything and hears everything and is everywhere which keeps him pretty busy. So you shouldn't go wasting His time by going over your Mom and Dad's head asking for something they said you couldn't have. Atheists are people who don't believe in God. I don't think there are any in Chula Vista. At least there aren't any who come to our church. ...

...If you don't believe in God, besides being an atheist, you will be very lonely, because your parents can't go everywhere with you, like to camp, but God can. It is good to know He's around you when you're scared in the dark or when you can't swim and you get thrown into real deep water by big kids. But...you shouldn't just always think of what God can do for you. I figure God put me here and He can take me back anytime He pleases. And that's why I believe in God."

While the reality of this essay is indeterminate according to snopes.com, its content is nevertheless consistent with what some people think about God (Read <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/god-defined/>).

⁴ ...Because multiple, diverse people in multiple, diverse places and locations around the world experience the *same* need for divine reality that's larger than themselves.

⁵ The early Christians expressed this when they wrote the Apostle's Creed, where they began by saying *"I believe in God, the Father Almighty..."* In the 4th-century AD, Augustine of Hippo said that *"God is more truly imagined than expressed, and he exists more truly than is imagined"* [--Cited in Edythe Draper, Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992). Entry 4611].

⁶ A book published in 1370 called The Cloud of Unknowing said that *"Only to our intellect is God incomprehensible; not to our love."* In other words, even if our minds can't comprehend who God is, our spirits can -- and our spirit is something that defies reason.

⁷ The weekly Bible study many of our women are in are studying the book The Names of God by Ann Spangler (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2009), covering 52 names and titles of God. Similarly, in the popular Henry Blackaby Bible Study “Experiencing God”, the appendix gives at least 592 “*Names, Titles, and Descriptions of God.*” And we can usually lump these into various categories. For example, we find in the Bible that God is often described in terms of certain characteristics/qualities: **omnipotent** (meaning all-powerful and Almighty); **omnipresent** (meaning always present everywhere); **omniscient** (meaning all-knowing); **eternal** (meaning He has no beginning and no end -- God’s eternity is like the paper on which the line of time is drawn); **transcendent** (meaning He is totally different from anything here on earth). In other cases, God’s personal/moral attributes are used as description. For example, we say that “*God is Love,*” or “*God is mercy, justice/holiness, compassion, goodness.*” Sometimes the Bible refers to God in terms of His activity and what he *does*: He is the **Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer**; He is **Jehovah-rophe** ‘ God our healer (Exod. 15:26); **Jehovah-jireh** ‘ God our provider (Gen. 22:14); **Jehovah-shalom** ‘ God our peace (Judges 6:24); **Jehovah-nissi** ‘ God our banner (Exod. 17:15; Num. 2:2); and **Jehovah-(tseh’-dek) *tsedeq*** ‘ God our righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16). In still other places, God is described in terms of relationship and in family images. For instance, in Isaiah 66:13 God is described as having the comforting strength of a **mother**, and in the New Testament, God is described as “**Abba/Father**” -- this is image that Jesus used more than any other, and it’s not a reference to God’s sex, but to His personal, intimate, caring nature. And the Christian church itself has referred to God as the “**Holy Trinity.**” It’s a way of describing the relationships *within* God’s very self.

⁸ John Wesley, Sermon #125, “*On Living Without God*”.

⁹ Robert Russell, “Releasing Resentment,” Preaching Today, Tape No. 136.

¹⁰ “*The Listener’s Prayer,*” offered by New Zealand Archbishop Sir Paul Reeves (1932-2011) in February 1991 at the World Council of Churches (WCC) Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia, cited in Christianity Today, Vol. 35, no. 11.