

**Series: The Names of God**

**Title: Introduction**

**Text: Genesis 1:1**

## **Introduction**

What's in a name? Everyone has one. What does your name mean? Many people have a vague idea about the meaning of their name. But, few consider whether the significance of their name fits them. The study of names is called onomastics, (Which comes from the Greek word (*onoma*), which means "name." It is a field of study which brushes up against linguistics (the study of languages), history, anthropology, sociology, and philology (the study of the meaning of languages).

Generally, when a person asks about the "meaning of a name," they are most likely referring to the etymology, which is the original literal meaning of the name. Personal names are generally no more than labels to distinguish one person from another in our culture. Sometimes a person acquires a nickname that distinguishes something about that person. But even that doesn't come close to the significance of names in the Bible.

The names "God" or "Lord" convey little more than designations of a supreme being for many people today. It says little to them about God's character, His ways, and what God means to each of us as human beings.

In Scripture, the names of God are like miniature portraits and promises. The names of God reveal His true identity.

### **I. A Name Suggests Identity**

A person's name identified them in Scripture and stood for something specific. It was especially true of God. His name was a sign of authority and power, and special significance. God was the one who revealed His name to people rather than allowing them to choose their own name for Him.

There were times when God changed the name of a person. He changed:

- Abram (High Father) to Abraham (Father of a Multitude),
- Sarai (Contentious) to Sarah (A Lady or Princess),
- Jacob (Holder of the Heel/Supplanter) to Israel (Prince with God).

We see the significance of authority and power in names when Nebuchadnezzar changes the names of Daniel and his three friends.

- Daniel (God is my Judge) – Belteshazzar (Protector of the King)
- Hananiah (God is Gracious) – Shadrach (at the command of Aku (Babylonian moon god))
- Mishael (Who is like God) – Meshack (Who is like Aku)and

- Azariah (God has Helped) - Abed-nego (Servant of Nebo, Babylonian God of Wisdom)

There are several instances where a writer uses no specific name to refer to God. Only the word "name" is used in reference to God as a point of focus:

- Abraham called on the *Name* of the Lord (Genesis 12:8; 13:4).
- The Lord proclaimed His own *Name* before Moses (Exodus 33:19; 34:5).
- God warned Israel about profaning the *Name* of the Lord (Leviticus 13:21; 22:2, 32).
- The priests were to minister in the *Name* of the Lord (Deuteronomy 18:5; 21:5).
- The *Name* of God is called "wonderful" in Judges 13:18.
- To call on the *Name* of the Lord was to worship Him. (Genesis 21:33; 26:25).

In these instances, "the name of God" referred to the whole character of God. It was a summary statement that reflected the entire person of God.

In the New Testament, we see the same thing. The "name of Jesus" is used in a similar way as the Name of God in the Old Testament:

- Salvation is through His *Name* (John 1:12).
- Believers are to gather in His *Name* (Matthew 18:20).
- Prayer is to be offered in His *Name* (John 14:13-14).
- The servant of the Lord who bears the *Name* of Christ will be hated (Matthew 10:22).
- The book of Acts frequently mentions worship, service, and suffering in the *Name* of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:18; 5:28, 41; 10:43; 19:17).
- At the Name of Jesus, every knee will one day bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11).

Just as the Name of God in the Old Testament spoke of the holy character of God the Father, the Name of Jesus speaks of the holy character of God the Son in the New Testament.

## II. A Name Suggests Relationship

In Judaism, the Name of God revealed more than a distinguishing title. The name of God represents to the Jewish people the divine nature of God and His relationship to the Jewish people.

Jewish scribes of the sacred texts were to treat them with holy reverence. To convey the sacredness of the names of God was their extraordinary task. They were to show the utmost respect and reverence for the word of God. Before copying the name of God, the scribes began to substitute another term for God so that they could keep the actual name of God concealed. In Judaism, the names of God came to represent God as he is known, as well as the divine aspects attributed to him.

Theologians and philosophers have done the same thing. They have ascribed many attributes to God. They include omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, omnibenevolence, divine simplicity, and eternal and necessary existence. God has also been described as incorporeal (non-matter), a personal being, the source of all moral obligation, and the greatest conceivable existent.

The early Jewish, Christian scholars supported these attributes to varying degrees. Some of the great medieval philosophers spent a great deal of time developing arguments for the existence of God. They wrestled with the contradictions God's attributes seemed to imply and attempted to resolve them.

For example, God's omniscience implies He knows how free agents will choose to act. But if He does know this, is our apparent free will only imagined? However, if he doesn't know it, how can He be omniscient?

Similar difficulties arise from the proposition that God is the source of all moral obligation. If nothing is right or wrong without God's commands, doesn't that mean His commands appear arbitrary? But, if his commands are based upon fundamental principles that even He cannot change, how can He be omnipotent?

You can begin to see why the last few hundred years of philosophy have seen sustained attacks on arguments for God's existence. In response, many theists argue that faith is not a product of reason but of choice that requires risk. They would say that there is no free will without risk. If the arguments for God's existence are based upon the laws of logic alone, there can be no free will. In response, Pascal, the French philosopher, and mathematician, famously writes, "The heart has reasons which reason knows not of."

God is a God of relationship, and unless you have a relationship with Him, you can't know Him. God's names help us understand the relationship God wants to have with us. A name suggests identity and relationship and finally memory.

### **III. A Name Suggests Memory**

When a person's name is spoken or comes to mind, it stimulates your memory of them. God knows us by name and remembers us! And we must come to know and remember Him.

Do you know that God created you for a purpose? Each of us has a destiny to fulfill within the will of God. Our purpose, according to the Bible, is to glorify God. To discover and enjoy him forever. The only way we can glorify God and enjoy his presence is to get to know him better.

Knowing God is more important than knowing anything else in all the world. The prayer of Jesus for His disciples in John 17:3 was, "**And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.**" (John 17:3 NKJV)

The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:10 the great goal of his life is, "That I may know him." One author writes, "I suppose if sin had not entered the world, the acquisition of the knowledge of God would have been the high occupation of man forever and ever." We can never exhaust the knowledge of God. The prophet Hosea informs the people that they are destroyed for the lack of knowledge of God.

Many today are without spiritual power and life because they lack the knowledge of God. People today have very little knowledge of the One, true God. However, the better we know God and sense his power and presence, the stronger our faith becomes. When we believe like those early Christians that "Nothing is impossible with God," and "All things are possible to them that believe," we can see God at work. Like the Prophet Jeremiah, we too can say, "Is anything too hard for Him?"

There are many ways in which we could study God. The Book of Hebrews says, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds." (Hebrews 1:1-2 NKJV)

And this Son, Jesus Christ, while on earth said, "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You." (John 17:6-7 NKJV)

In verse 26, Jesus says, "And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (John 17:26 NKJV)

Paul told Timothy, "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NKJV)

A study of the names of God can only increase that knowledge. When Moses received his commission from God to go to the oppressed people in Egypt and deliver them from bondage, he said to God, "Indeed, *when* I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What *is* His name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Moreover, God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: 'The LORD 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* My memorial to all generations.'" (Exodus 3:13-15 NKJV)

In our English Bibles, the word God or even Lord conveys little more to us than the designation of a Supreme Being and Sovereign of the universe. It says little about

His character and ways. We cannot describe what the mysterious word "God" means to us until we know more about Him. And we can't know what the word God means until we go to the language from which the word God is translated. Since the Hebrew language has the first written record of God's revelation of Himself, we need to examine what He spoke to Moses and the prophets.

Missionaries and translators have always had difficulty finding a suitable word for the Hebrew word we translate God. Chinese translators have always been divided, and still are, as to which word is best to use for the name of God. One of the best of these translations prefers a word that means "Lord of Heaven."

A name in the Old Testament was often an indication of a person's character or some unique quality. But what one name could be adequate to describe God's greatness? After all, doesn't a name also impose some limitations? If the Heaven of heavens cannot contain God, how can a name describe Him?

What a bold request Moses makes when he asks God to define Himself with a name! How can the infinite God reveal Himself to finite man by any one name! We can't even understand or appreciate Moses himself unless we see him in his many-sided character of learned man and shepherd, leader and legislator, soldier and statesman, impulsive, yet meekest of men. We can only know King David when we see him also as a shepherd, warrior, king, prophet, poet, and musician.

The Old Testament contains several names and compound names for God. Each one reveals Him in some aspect of His character that reminds us of who He is and why He wants a relationship with us.

## **Conclusion**

Our purpose in this series on the names of God will be to examine and learn their meanings and significance and hopefully come to know God just a little bit better.

As you might expect, the opening statement of the Scriptures contains the name "God." " In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." ([Genesis 1:1 NKJV](#))

It all begins with God! So, that is where we need to start our search for purpose and meaning. The name "God" appears 2,570 times in the Bible. The name of God which occurs most is the word translated "Lord" in the King James Version and "Jehovah" in the American Standard Version. However, the name "Elohim" occurs in the first chapter of Genesis thirty-two times. After chapter one, the name "Jehovah" appears along with "Elohim," and in many places, a combination of the two exist as "Jehovah-Elohim."

I want us to dig into the word of God and come to know Him in a more personal and profound way as we study these Names of God.

As we study the different names ascribed to God and the circumstances which brought about that description, I believe we will discover that not only is he capable of doing the impossible, but that he is WILLING to do the impossible for you.