

“CHRISTIANITY 101: (#1) I AM”  
(Exodus 3:13-15)

**[PROPS NEEDED: YouTube Video “*The Names of God*”]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 1-13-08]

--I--

[SERIES TEASER AT BEGINNING OF SERVICE...

Today we’re beginning a new 6-part sermon series called “Christianity 101” in which we’ll be exploring the fundamentals of our faith, and how they can make a difference in daily life.]

1. Read Text: Exodus 3:13-15 and Pray.
2. **[SHOW YOU-TUBE VIDEO “*The Names of God*” (Time – 1:00)]**
3. A March 2007 Newsweek Poll revealed that 91% of Americans say they believe in God or a universal force of some sort. <sup>1</sup>

A–But what does that really mean? And does it make any difference in our lives to say that we believe in God? After all, who is God anyway?

B–Well for starters, listen to how 8-year Danny Dutton of Chula Vista, CA defined God for a 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade homework assignment one day...

“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 grown-ups, 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.” [--From *inspiration@inspirationlist.com*]

C–Considering the imposing task he had, I think Danny did a pretty good job

4. But let's be honest: trying to define God is a particularly tricky thing to do – there's so much that *could* be said that there's really no reasonable way to say it or get it across in one 25-minute sermon.

A–In fact, people of faith have been trying to answer that one question “Who Is God?” since the beginning of time, and we've got to be careful in presuming to know too much.

1–The 4<sup>th</sup>-century desert monk Evagrius of Pontus once said that “*God cannot be grasped by the mind. If he could,... he would not be God.*”<sup>2</sup>

2–And the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish Rabbi Joseph Albo said that “*God is [the one who] has no definition.*”<sup>3</sup>

B–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.

C–So today as we explore who God is, the first thing we need to acknowledge is a **reverence & awe for the mystery/paradox** of the God whom our minds can never fully comprehend.

–II–

5. And yet, just because something is difficult to understand and accept doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

A–I mean, I don't understand fully how a car runs or how a computer works, but that doesn't mean that cars or computers don't exist.

B–So as Christians, we don't answer the question “Who Is God?” by trying to *prove* God's existence,<sup>4</sup> and today I'm not going to begin by trying to rationally/intellectually convince us of God's existence (that's another whole sermon).

C–Instead, I want to start with the presumption that God IS, and then talk about what that existence means today.

6. Now, let me begin by saying that we DO, in fact, know *some* things about who God is.

A–These are things we know because God in his great wisdom has chosen to give us *glimpses* of his nature and character by revealing himself to humanity in various ways throughout history.

1–A book published in 1370 called The Cloud of Unknowing said that “*Only to our intellect is God incomprehensible; not to our love.*”

2–In other words, even if our minds can't comprehend who God is, our spirits can – and our spirit is something that defies reason.

B—So as Christians, our spirits accept “by faith” that the God we believe and trust in is the one revealed and described in and through the pages of the Bible.

1—In fact, you could say that the Bible itself is not so much a story about *people* or certain human individuals.

2—But instead, taken as a whole, the Bible is the story of God -- He’s the central personality and driving force in both the background and foreground of all that’s recorded in its pages.

3—So if we want to know who God is, we need to read the Bible front to back!

–III–

7. Now, the Bible is actually filled with many different ways that people of faith have addressed, referred to, and described God.

A—We saw many of these flash across the screen in the opening video. And in the popular Bible Study book “Experiencing God,” the appendix gives at least 592 “*Names, Titles, and Descriptions of God.*”<sup>5</sup>

B—But there’s one description that I believe captures the essence of most all of the others – the one that we find in today’s scripture from Exodus 3, where we find the story of Moses confronted by God, speaking to him out of a burning bush.

1—In Verses 13-14, we find him asking God... [NRSV] “*If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.’*”

2—[OR Verses 13-14 in MSG] “*Then Moses said to God, ‘If I come to the people of Israel & say to them ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ & they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”*”

C—Why, you may ask, was Moses so interested in knowing God’s name?

1—Well, in biblical times, a name told you about a person. And so, to know God’s name was to know what God was like, how God acted, & how God communicated.

2—In short, to know God’s name was to know *who* God was. Knowing it made a difference to Moses in how he could trust God.

3—And so God said his name was “**I AM.**”

D--Now, in Hebrew this name is translated “YHWH,” and since it’s written without vowels, there are no clue as to how to even pronounce it.

1--The most common pronunciation was “Yahweh,” but in the Latin alphabet it’s spelled JHVH, and pronounced “Jehovah.”

2--The Hebrews understood this to be the *personal* name for the God of Israel, and so we find it used more than any other term or name in the Hebrew/Old Testament– used over 6800 times.

3--In fact, it was considered *so* sacred and so personal that by 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, 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 substituted other words, throughout the Bible the name “I AM” was always understood to describe the very essence of who God was.

8. So I want us to think today: What does it mean for us 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--The point of this is that God is not a temporary god – just as with time itself, He’s always present with us as we live in and experience life.

3--And the difference that this should make is that His presence gives us a foundation for hope – no matter what we may have to face in life (past, present or future) He’s always there for and with us.

B--[STORY OF MARTIN LUTHER]

The story is told that Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Reformation, once was so depressed over a prolonged period that one day his wife came downstairs wearing all black. Martin Luther said, "*Who died?*" She said, "*God has.*" He said, "*God hasn't died.*" And she said, "*Well, live like it and act like it.*" <sup>6</sup>

C--You see, she was reminding her husband (as it should remind us, too) that if we believe that God IS, then we should live and act like it! It should make a difference in our lives to call God “I AM,” because that means that He IS.

9. Too often, though, we rush around today and live life as if God is *not* -- as if He does not exist, and as if there is no one to ever help us in life.

A--But God says in Psalm 46:10 "*Be still and know that I AM God!*"

B--So let me summarize it this way...

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.

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

D--Well friends, the good news of the Bible is that because God IS,... WE can be also.

10. On the screen, you'll find a prayer that I invite us to PRAY together as we close...

*"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."* (Sir Paul Reeves)<sup>7</sup>

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

12. [Invite persons to sign up after Benediction for Small Groups beginning this week]

#### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Article "Newsweek Poll: 90% Believe in God," by Brian Braiker, found online at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17879317/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17879317/site/newsweek/print/1/displaymode/1098).

2. Evagrius of Pontus, "Eastern Orthodoxy," Christian History, no. 54.

3. Joseph Albo (c. 1380-c. 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?*"

4. Instead, it's something we accept "by faith." 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 4<sup>th</sup>-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].

5. 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) tsedeg** = God our righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16).

And 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.

6. Robert Russell, "Releasing Resentment," Preaching Today, Tape No. 136.

7. Offered by Sir Paul Reeves at the WCC Seventh Assembly in Canberra, Australia, cited in Christianity Today, Vol. 35, no. 11.