



# What's In a Name

## Exodus 3:1-15

### August 28, 2005

#### INTRODUCTION

When I was in college, I had a part-time job at the reference desk of the library. It was a great job. Occasionally people would come get help, but most of the time I was free to read. Or sometimes I would explore the reference section for unusual items. I'd look up the U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps for my grandparents' mountain farm. That was cool. Once I found a whole book about names. It told the origin and meaning of every name you could think of.

So I looked up "Douglas." It came from Scotland, from the words *doughh glass*, meaning, "deep, dark water." Hmmmm. Then I looked up my middle name. "Ervin: from Scotland, from the River Erv that flows into the North Atlantic." Hmmmm. Then I looked up "Murray: from the Scottish town of Moray by the sea." Well! I knew I was part Scottish, but I didn't know how much! And I didn't know that all three of my names had to do with water. An interesting coincidence. There was more to my names than I had known.

People used to put a lot into names. Remember the movie "Dances With Wolves?" That was the name Kevin Costner was given by the natives who adopted him. He found that every name was chosen carefully to express the character of the person named. So there was "Strikes with a Fist," and other names like, "Walks with a Limp," or "Speaks with Stones in Mouth." The possibilities were endless to express an individual's origin or character.

If you had been born in such a time, what would they have named you? What would your name say about you, and your origins, and your character?

#### MOSES' NAME

Moses got his name when the princess of Egypt picked him up out of his basket in the waters of the Nile. "She named him Moses, 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.'" (Exodus 2:10) It was an Egyptian name, but it sounded like a Hebrew word *mashah* that meant "to draw out." His name told his story. Every time anyone called him Moses, it was a reminder that Moses had been rescued. Every time Moses told someone his name, it was a confession that it was only by the grace of God that he was still among the living. For the rest of his life, Moses would always be the "rescued one."

But rescued for what? For what purpose was Moses still around? He did not find out until his life was more than half over.

After letting granddad Pharaoh pay for his college tuition, Moses got in trouble, and murdered an Egyptian slave-driver, and went into exile in the wilderness, in Midian. There Moses married a daughter of a priest, started a family, and shepherded the family flocks. Life was good. Life was stable and secure. And maybe, life was a bit boring for someone who once walked the courts of Pharaoh. And maybe, out there among the sheep in the wilderness, Moses would wonder, “Is this what I’m going to do with the rest of my life? What am I still here for?”

On a day like that, a day like any day, Moses saw the burning bush, “blazing, yet it was not consumed.” As Moses watched the bush, God was watching Moses, to see what his reaction would be. When Moses changed course and started walking toward the bush, God spoke to Moses.

Now, before we get to what God said, note what a big deal this is already. For a few weeks we have been mining the treasures of the stories of Joseph in Genesis and Moses in Exodus. And in those stories, we have been surprised that they hardly mentioned God. Instead, God was behind the scenes; God was mentioned very seldom, and then only by a few people who stubbornly kept the faith that God was involved, despite evidence to the contrary.

But here with Moses, God steps out from behind the curtain. God steps in with fire, a trademark of God’s that no one can miss. And God speaks: “Moses, Moses!” God knows Moses’ name! And knowing his name, God knows all about Moses: the one who was drawn out from the water, the one who by the grace of God had been delivered from certain death. So Moses, the delivered one, faced God, the deliverer. Actually, “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.” (Exodus 3.6)

And then God told Moses that God was going to deliver more people, namely, the whole Hebrew people. And then God said, “So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people out.”

Moses stutters, “I - I’m not the guy for the job. W -who am I to do this?” God ignores the question, because you see it’s not about Moses at all. It’s all about God, and God makes this promise: “I will be with you...” God will make Moses the rescued into Moses the rescuer.

## GOD’S NAME

Then Moses has this question: “*If* I go and tell the Hebrews that you will deliver them, they will surely ask me what your name is. What’s YOUR name?”

Now, before we get to what God said, note what a big deal this is too. A mortal has asked the Almighty for his name. Some cultures believe that when you know

someone's name, you have power over that person. That's not too far-fetched. When I'm walking down the street and hear someone call out "Doug!" I'm going to stop and look around. Whoever knows my name has that power over me.

"What's your name?" Moses asked the Almighty. And God answered, "I am who I am." At least, that's what we think God said. That is what we guess the Hebrew meant: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*. "I am what I am," or, "I will be what I will be." What kind of an answer was that? What kind of a name was that? I think it was God's sly way of letting Moses know, "Even if you have my name, you have no control over me." A moment later, God told Moses the name in a shorter form, "Yahweh." I still remember my seminary professor John I Durham expressing the depth of the meaning of the name Yahweh, "Yahweh: the was-is, the is-is, the will be-is!!" God has a name, and it is Yahweh.

Do you know that the Hebrews revered that name so much that they hardly ever said it? To this day, whenever the name Yahweh appears in the Bible, our translations still substitute the term "THE LORD" in capital letters. I've also heard that the Hebrews revered that name so much that it was spoken only once a year, by the high priest in the Holy of Holies, and then only during a great crescendo of choirs and music, so that no one could hear it even then! God has a name, and God shared it with us, and it is Yahweh.

## GOD'S CHARACTER

And along with the Name, God also revealed God's character to Moses. Listen to what God says about himself, beginning with verse seven:

"I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey... (Exodus 3:7-8)

Just the verbs reveal volumes about God's character: I have observed, I have heard, I know, I have come down. God is not so high and lifted up that God does not see or hear or know or care what happens to God's people. God is a God who sees and hears, who knows and cares, and who will come down and do something about it. Until the burning bush, Moses had no idea that God was like that. But now God has a name, Yahweh. And, Yahweh's name stands for a God that is compassionate, involved, caring. And that God is no longer behind the scenes.

## MOSES' CHARACTER

So, at the burning bush, there is an exchange of names. Yahweh knows Moses' name. And now Moses knows Yahweh's name. And at the burning bush, there is an exchange of character, for when Moses encounters the character of Yahweh, the character of Moses is changed.

Remember, Moses was enjoying a very comfortable if somewhat boring midlife. Moses used to have a passion for justice, as when he stopped the slave-driver from beating a Hebrew. Moses used to have a passion for mercy, as when he drove off some rude shepherds from the well of his wife to be. But now, surrounded by the flocks and the family of his father in law, Moses had settled down to the life of an ordinary shepherd...until the burning bush. And then the burning passion and purpose of Yahweh ignited a passion and purpose in Moses. And Moses turned, and headed back to Egypt.

When Yahweh met Moses at the burning bush, there was an exchange of names, and there was an exchange of passion and purpose. And that is how it is when Yahweh God meets any human being. That is how it is when Yahweh God meets us.

### YOUR NAME AND CHARACTER

Do you remember a time when Yahweh God met you? There probably was no burning bush, but, has there been a time when you heard God calling your name, maybe not out loud, but inside you? Imagine that now: God calling your name once... twice... When God calls your name, God declares how God has rescued you too, as Moses was the rescued one. And when God calls your name, God aims to transform you into a rescuer too.

And more! When God calls you by name, God also reveals to you God's own name, that is, God's own character and passion. If you live in God's name, that holy passion and purpose will kick you out of any middle age crisis or teenage crisis or any age crisis, and set you on fire to be like Moses, a rescued one who rescues others. The passionate, purposeful character of God will burn in you until you leave your comfortable corner of life and risk your life to rescue someone else.

Let me tell you another Bob Clyde story, the ECU Baptist campus minister who retired this year. Bob loves to take students on mission trips, for on those trips they often hear God call their name and give them a purpose and a passion in life. Once, Bob took his students up to Washington, D.C. to work in a huge homeless shelter there. One day, they were working in the shelter when the doors swung open, and four plainclothes D.C. detectives strode in. They had come to pick up a man who was armed and dangerous. When they came in the door, they opened their long coats and pulled out four shotguns. They walked on into the shelter. For a few moments it looked as if they were walking straight for the ECU students. One of the men pumped a shell into the chamber: *cha CHUNK*. And at that moment, says student David Harris, "I heard the voice of *GOD*." They passed on by the petrified students, found their man, and took him away without a shot.

But seriously, in a weird way, that moment really did speak to David. He realized there in that shelter how fortunate he was to be a rescued one, one who had never had to face the deprivation and misery that the men in that shelter faced. And David heard God

calling his name, calling him to become a rescuer. Today, David manages a system of shelters in Wake County. God called him by name, and gave him passion and purpose.

What about you? Have you, like Moses, settled into a life that is very secure but also boring: comfortable, cautious, careful, with nothing to get excited about, with all the passion squeezed out of your life? Wouldn't you like Yahweh God to surprise you, if not with a burning bush, or a cocking shotgun, then with some other sign that would restore the fire in your belly to do something with your life?

Or maybe none of that has happened to you at all yet. Would you like to hear God call your name and invite you to meet God for the very first time, invite you to let the character of God to be formed in you?

Listen...to God calling your name. Listen to God reveal God's own name and character. Let God put a burning in your soul, a purpose and a passion in your life. Let God make you, a rescued one, into a rescuer for others who have no hope.

-- Douglas E. Murray