

God has a name  
What you believe  
about God  
will shape who  
you become  
by John Mark  
Comer



2x **New York Times** bestselling author of  
**The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry**

**God has a name**

## **Also by John Mark Comer**

*My Name Is Hope*

*Loveology*

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*The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*

*Live No Lies*

*Practicing the Way*

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*God Has a Name*

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# The path

*Exodus 34:4-7*

*Prologue: The God on top of the mountain*

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**Note to the reader:**

Like most English translations of the Bible, the NIV translates the Hebrew name for God, “Yahweh,” into English as the title “the LORD.” For reasons that will become clear as you read, we added Yahweh in brackets. Each time you read it, remember that God has a name.

## Exodus 34v4–7

**So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD [Yahweh] had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the LORD [Yahweh] came down in the cloud**

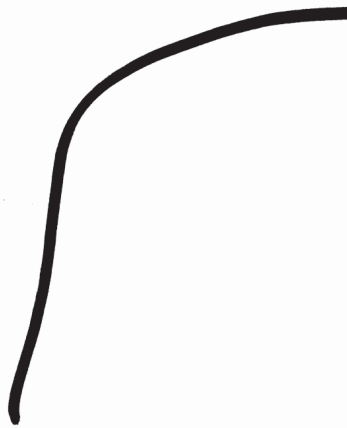


**and stood there with  
him and proclaimed  
his name, the LORD  
[Yahweh]. And he  
passed in front of  
Moses, proclaiming,  
“The LORD [Yahweh],  
the LORD [Yahweh],  
the compassionate  
and gracious God,  
slow to anger,  
abounding in love  
and faithfulness,**

**maintaining love  
to thousands, and  
forgiving wickedness,  
rebellion and sin. Yet  
he does not leave the  
guilty unpunished; he  
punishes the children  
and their children for  
the sin of the parents  
to the third and  
fourth generation.”**

# Prologue







# The God on top of the mountain

Last week, an atheist came up to me and asked how I could believe in a God who made parents eat their children.

Naturally, I was a little confused. A lot of people have odd ideas about God, but *cannibalism*? That was new.

I was speaking at an event, and the theme that weekend was the Bible—in all its weirdness and mystery and drama and truth and lies and violence and nonviolence and sarcastic donkeys and dying Messiahs and what-in-the-world-is-up-with-*this* story-ness.

The event was supposed to be for pastors and church leader types, but a number of atheists crashed the party.

It turns out a lot of people have issues with the Bible.

Even more of us have issues with God.

So this guy, Micah, comes up to me with a quote from *Leviticus*. (Why is it always *Leviticus*?) He had accidentally torn a line out of context and misread it. It happens.

We had a nice chat about how God isn't actually a cannibal, and then I had to go up on stage and teach. But it struck me later that Micah the atheist and myself the pastor were both talking about God, but the two of us had radically different ideas about *who God is*.

For me, God is the Creator of all that is good, beautiful, and true—the God I read about in the Scriptures and then see in Jesus of Nazareth.

For Micah, God is a sadistic monster who made ancient Hebrews eat their young.

Same Bible, *very different* God.

Then a few weeks back, my son Jude asked me about the resurrection of Jesus. He wanted to know if Jesus was a zombie, like in *World War Z*.

Jesus zombie?<sup>1</sup>

We act like the English word “God” is a common denominator, but it's not.

When we talk about God, it turns out we're all over the map.

In the West, we still live in a hangover from our Christianized past. There was a time when you could say “God,” and people would immediately think of the God we read about in the

Scriptures and see in Jesus. Most people would even come to the same basic conclusions about this God.

That time has long since gone the way of the earth.

Today, when I say “God,” you might think any number of things, depending on your country of birth, language, religion, church experience, background—and, of course, whether or not you have cable.

All of this brings me to the question at the heart of this book:  
**Who is God?**

I’m not writing this book to prove that God exists. If you’re an atheist like my new friend Micah, welcome to the table. We’re glad you’re here. Just know that I won’t go into a litany of reasons that I’m right and you’re wrong. There are a lot of people *way* smarter than me—the kind with extra letters after their name—who’ve already had a crack at that.

I can only speak out of my own life, and, for me, God’s existence was never the question. I’ve been down the road of doubt, had a crisis of faith—a few actually—thought long and hard about Jesus, and had a list of questions about the Bible stretching to Florida and back (I live in Portland—it’s a long trek). But for me, the question was never whether God exists. The way I’m wired, that was axiomatic and self-evident.

Have you been outside recently?



For me, the far more interesting question was always, “What in the world is God *like*?”

Is God a he?

Or a she?

Come on, sisters . . .

Is God a they?

Or an it?

Is the tree in my front yard full of the divine?

*Am I?*

Is God even a person? Or is he/she/they/it/the tree/maybe-even-me more of an energy force or a state of mind?

Or is Micah right? Is God just a myth? A carryover from a world that all smart, thinking people have moved on from? Now that we have science and technology, “we know better.”

Let’s assume for now that there *is* some kind of an invisible-but-real being who made everything, and for now let’s call this being “God.” If so, what is this God *like*?

Kind, or cruel?

Close by and involved in my life, or far-off and aloof?

Strict and uptight like a fundamentalist preacher, or free and easygoing like a good, educated progressive?

Does he vote Democratic? Or is he a Republican? Maybe Green Party?

Or how about this one: Is God even good for the world anymore? Fewer and fewer people answer yes. What if God and religion are just an endless source of violence and hatred and bigotry and hypocrisy and really bad music?

Who is this “God” we love, hate, worship, blaspheme, trust, fear, believe in, doubt, cuss in the name of, bow to, make jokes about, and most of the time just ignore?

I would argue that how you answer this question will *define* you.

The twentieth-century writer A. W. Tozer made a stunning claim: “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”<sup>2</sup>

Really?

*The* most important thing?

More than our gender or sexuality or ethnicity or family of origin or the town we grew up in or where we went to college

or our tax bracket or whether our sport is American football or *futbol* football?

Absolutely.

Here's a truth that cuts across the whole of the universe: **we become like what we worship.**

Tozer went on to write, "We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God . . . Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes to mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man."<sup>3</sup>

Put another way, what you think about God will shape your destiny in life.

If you think of God as homophobic, racist, and mad at the world, this distorted vision of reality will shape you into a religious bigot who is—wait for it—*homophobic, racist, and mad at the world.*

If you think of God as a Left-Coast, educated, LGTBQ-affirming progressive, that will shape you into the stereotype of the wealthy bohemian with the "We Will Not Tolerate Intolerance" bumper sticker on the back of your hybrid.

(Don't take that as a slam. I'm writing about half of my neighbors and friends.)

If you think of God as the cosmic version of a life coach, there to “maximize your life,” that will shape you into a self-helpy yuppie, even if you dress it up and call it following Jesus.

You see what I’m getting at?

The ISIS terrorist beheading the infidel, the prosperity gospel celebrity preacher getting out of his Hummer after late-night drinks with Kanye West, the Westborough Baptist picketer outside a military funeral screaming “God hates f—s!”, the Hindu sacrificing a goat to Shiva, the African witch doctor sacrificing a little boy, the U.S. Army sniper praying to God before he takes the shot, the peace activist risking her neck to stop *another* war because she believes in Jesus’ teachings on enemy love, the gay singer who stands up at the Grammys and says thank you to God for his song about a one-night stand, the Catholic nun giving up a “normal life” to live in poverty and work for social change—all of these men and women do what they do because of what they believe about God.

So clearly, what we think about God *matters*.

*Who God is* has profound implications for *who we are*.

Here’s the problem: we usually end up with a God who looks an awful lot like *us*.

As the saying goes, “God created man in his own image. And man, being a gentleman, returned the favor.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a human bent in *all* of us to make God in our own image.

My friend Scot McKnight is a New Testament professor in Chicago. For years, he taught a class on Jesus, and he would start every semester with two surveys. The first was a set of questions about the student: what they like, dislike, believe, and so on. The second was the same set of questions, but this time about Jesus. He told me that 90 percent of the time, *the answers were exactly the same*.

That's telling, isn't it?

Here's how you know if you've created God in your own image: *he agrees with you on everything*. He hates all the people you hate. He voted for the person you voted for. If you're a Republican, so is he. If you're a Democrat, she is too. If you're passionate about \_\_\_\_\_, then God is passionate about \_\_\_\_\_. If you're open and elastic about sexuality, so is he. And above all, he's tame. You never get mad at him or blown away by him or scared of him. Because he's *controllable*.

And, of course, he's a figment of your imagination.

Often what we believe about God says more about *us* than it does about God. Our theology is like a mirror to the soul. It shows us what's deep inside.

Maybe the truth is that we want a God who is controllable because *we* want to be God. *We* want to be the authority on

who God is or isn't and what's right or wrong, but we want the mask of religion or spirituality to cover up the I-wanna-be-God reality.

The most ancient, primal temptation, going all the way back to Adam and Eve in the Garden, is to decide for ourselves what God is like, and whether we should live into his vision of human flourishing or come up with our own. All so we “will be like God, knowing good and evil.”<sup>5</sup>

This is why theology is so incredibly important.

The word *theology* comes from two Greek words—*theo*, meaning “God,” and *logos*, meaning “word.” Simply put, theology is a word about God. It's what comes to mind when we think about God.

It's not like some of us are into theology and others aren't. We *all* have a theology. We *all* have thoughts and opinions and convictions about God. Good, bad, right, wrong, brilliant, dangerous—we all theologize.

But the problem is that much of what we think about God is simply wrong.

I know that's blunt, but I don't really know how else to say it.

Much of what we read in the news or see on TV or pick up on the street about God and the way he works is wrong. Maybe not *all* wrong, but wrong enough to mess up how we live.

In the modern world, we start with the assumption that we know what God is like, and then we judge every religion or church or sermon or book based on our view of God.

A while back, I read an interview in *Rolling Stone* with a celebrity who said he grew up in the church but left it in college because he “couldn’t believe in a God who would limit sex to one man and one woman for life.”<sup>6</sup>

What was shocking to me wasn’t the sex part. This *is* the modern world after all. And the dude was a rock star . . .

What was shocking to me was the bizarre twist of logic.

*I couldn’t believe in a God who \_\_\_\_\_?*

As if what we think and feel about God is an accurate barometer for what he is actually like.

The Scripture writers come at it the other way around. From Moses to Matthew, they just assume *we have no idea what God is like*. In fact, that a lot of what we think about God is totally off base. If history teaches us anything, it’s that the majority are often wrong.

And don’t think that if you’re religious—or even if you’re a Christian—you’re off the hook. Jesus spent the bulk of his time helping religious people see that a lot of what they thought about God was wrong too.

*You've heard it said . . .*

*But I say to you . . .*

Or he would start a teaching by saying, “The kingdom of God is *like* . . .” and then tell a story that was radically out of step with how people in his day and age thought.

For Jesus and all the writers of Scripture, the starting point for all theology is the realization that:

**we don't know what God is like, *but we can learn.***

**But to learn, *we have to go to the source.***

And that means we need revelation. Otherwise we end up with all sorts of erroneous and goofy and untrue and maybe even toxic ideas about God.

By “revelation,” I don't mean the last book of the Bible or foldout charts from the 1970s about the end of the world. I mean, God himself has to reveal to us what he's like. He has to pull back the curtain of the universe and let you and me look inside. But here's the thing: revelation, by definition, is usually a *surprise*. A twist in the story. A break from the status quo. So when God reveals himself, it's almost always different from what we expect.

All of which leads us to Moses on the top of Mount Sinai.



Yup. That's where we're going.

I am a follower of Jesus, not a Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or Jedi Knight (sadly). So everything I think about God is through the lens of the Scriptures and then Jesus himself.

Scripture is first and foremost a story. And it's a story about God. We want to make it a story about *us*—about how to get ahead in life or have great sex or up our portfolio or just be happy. And there are all sorts of “success principles” in the Bible, but honestly, that's just not what the story is about. If you strip the Bible down to the core, it's a story about God, and about how we as people relate to God.

And in the story, there are climactic moments when the door swings open and we get a brand-new, compelling, and at times terrifying vision of who God is.

Often these moments take place on a mountain.

If you've ever read the Bible, you know that the second book is called *Exodus*.<sup>7</sup> The setting for the book is Israel in the desert, en route from slavery in Egypt to freedom in a new land. But it's a bumpy ride, to say the least.

At the head of the people of God is the prophet Moses, who has a totally unique relationship with the Creator. We read that God “would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”<sup>8</sup>

In Exodus 33, we get to eavesdrop on a conversation between Moses and God. Moses is asking for God to go with the Israelites every step of the way, and at one point he asks, “Now show me your glory.”<sup>9</sup>

In ancient Hebrew literature like *Exodus*, to speak of God’s glory was to speak of his *presence* and *beauty*.<sup>10</sup> Moses is asking to see God for who he really is. To see God in person.

For Moses, head knowledge isn’t enough. He wants to *experience* God.

God graciously tells Moses that he can’t see his face or he will die, “for no one may see me and live.”<sup>11</sup> But he’ll do him one better. God tells him, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD [Yahweh], in your presence.”<sup>12</sup>

So *God*

has a *name*.

The next morning, Moses gets up early and climbs to the top of Mount Sinai. Then we read one of the most staggering paragraphs in the entire Bible.

**“The LORD [Yahweh] came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD [Yahweh]. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD [Yahweh], the LORD [Yahweh],**

**the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”<sup>13</sup>**

This is one of those watershed moments when *everything* changes. It’s one of the few places in the entire Bible where God describes himself. Where he essentially says, “This is what I’m like.” Think of it as God’s self-disclosure statement, his press release to the world.<sup>14</sup>

Because of that, it’s quite possibly **the most quoted passage in the Bible, by the Bible.**<sup>15</sup>

The writers of the Bible circle back to this passage over and over and *over* again. *Dozens* of times. Moses and David and Jeremiah and Jonah—they quote it and allude to it and pray it and sing it and claim it and complain about it, but above all, they *believe* it.

This is ground zero for a theology of God.

But what’s striking to me is how very different this passage is from what you would expect.

For those of us who live in the West, we tend to think of God in the categories of philosophy. Pick up a book about God, and it’ll often start with the *omnis* . . .

God is omnipotent (he's all-powerful).

God is omniscient (he's all-knowing).

God is omnipresent (he's everywhere at once).

And all of that is true. I believe it.<sup>16</sup> But here's my hang-up: when God describes himself, he doesn't start with how powerful he is or how he knows everything there is to know or how he's been around since before time and space and there's no one else like him in the universe.

That's all true, but apparently, to God, it's not the most important thing.

When God describes himself, he starts with his *name*. Then he talks about what we call *character*. He's compassionate and gracious; he's slow to anger; he's abounding in love and faithfulness, and on down the list.

Which makes sense. Starting with the omnis is kind of like somebody asking about my wife, and me saying she's thirty-three years old, five foot one, 120 pounds, black hair, brown eyes, Latin American ancestry . . .

That's all true, but if you sat there as I was spouting off all these facts about my wife, my guess is that at some point, you would interrupt me and ask, "Yes, but what is she *like*? Tell me about *her*. What's her personality? Is she laid-back or type A?"

Social or shy? What is she passionate about? What made you fall in love with her? What makes her, *her*?”

Most of the time, this is how we talk about God—we rattle off a bunch of stuff about God that is true; it’s just not the stuff that makes him, *him*.

That’s why this passage in Exodus is such a breath of fresh air. It turns out that God is better than any of us could imagine.

Now, maybe you’ve read this passage before in passing, or maybe it doesn’t ring a bell, but this passage is *central* to the story of the Bible. The rabbis make a huge deal out of it. In Jewish culture, it’s called the “Thirteen Attributes of Mercy,” and orthodox Jews pray it on holy days like Yom Kippur, before reading the Torah, and at the synagogue.<sup>17</sup> It’s like the John 3v16 of Judaism. If you’ve spent any time in the church, I’m sure you know John 3v16 like the back of your hand: “For God so loved the world . . .” But oddly enough, little or nothing is said in most churches about Exodus 34v6–7, even though it’s quite possibly the most quoted passage *in* the Bible, *by* the Bible.

Let’s change that, shall we?

Now, here’s the map for how we’ll come at this book . . .

We’ll talk about Exodus 34v6–7 *line by line*, taking time to soak our imaginations in each word. Each chapter will run something like this:

First, we'll talk about the original Hebrew. It's amazing what you can find when you dig into the language.

In TWO: Stories, we'll look at a story or two where this passage is quoted by later Scripture writers—stories where we see God display his character.

Then in THREE: Jesus, we'll fast-forward to Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, I very much believe that the God on top of Mount Sinai—the God of thunder and lightning and fire and smoke and a voice like a trumpet blast with a subwoofer in the back trunk—took on flesh and blood as the rabbi Jesus of Nazareth. And in Jesus, we see more clearly than ever before what God is like.

And finally, in FOUR: Us, we'll take a step back and think about what *who God is* means for *who we are*, and how it has the potential to reshape our lives from the ground up, unlocking the weights that hold us back from the full, deep, wide, boundless, difficult, invigorating, I-can't-believe-this-is-my-life kind of existence that God made us for and Jesus put on display.

Sound like a plan?

I hope you're sitting there and thinking to yourself, *Let's do this.*

Now, before we wrap up this opening salvo, let me put all my cards on the table.

Writing a book about God is terrifying. Who am *I*? Not only is it a daunting task, but think about what's at stake.

You could read this book and get a *wrong* view of God. That would be no small blunder on my part.

Or you could read this book and radically overhaul the way you relate to God, and in doing so, terraform your life from the ground up.

So as I sit here typing away, I feel both the pulse and throb of my heart beating through my chest—this sense that I *have* to write this. But I also feel this weight on my shoulders. This gravity and seriousness. This sense that I've got to get this right.

So I'll do my very best, but in the end, well, I'm not God.

And even if I *was* God, and this book was the transcript of my conversation with John Mark Comer, you would still walk away with questions, just like Moses did. And the poet Job. And the prophet Habakkuk. And the disciple Peter. And pretty much every single person who has ever had an encounter with the God who is totally Other.

There is a mystery to God that we never quite figure out. After all, we're dealing with a being who is totally unlike any other in the universe.

It's not like you'll finish reading this book, lean back in your chair, and think to yourself, *I got this*.

That's not how it works.

At one point in *Exodus*, Moses asks God his name, and God answers: "I AM WHO I AM."<sup>18</sup>

Well, that *really* clears things up, doesn't it?

God can be mysterious and vague and elusive and hard to catch at times. At the top of Mount Sinai was a cloud, not an engineering schematic. And everybody was invited up the mountain, but only Moses had the courage to step into the cloud.

So I say we start with Moses' prayer: *Show me your glory*.<sup>19</sup>

Even if all we see is a glimpse and all we hear is an echo, it's more than worth the trek.

But before we start the journey, ask yourself, *Do I have the courage to step into the cloud?*

It's one thing to read a book about God; it's another thing to scale a mountain in the middle of the desert and plunge headfirst into the darkness. To abandon yourself to a life of dangerous, risky, I-won't-stop-for-anything pursuit of God.

Hopefully this book will give you the courage to climb the mountain, no matter what you find at the top.



# Chapter 1

## Yahweh





**“The LORD [Yahweh], the LORD [Yahweh], the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”**

# One simple idea that could radically alter how you relate to God: a name

So God has a name.

And just to clarify, it's not *God*.

It's Yahweh.

That might sound unimportant, like it's just semantics. Trust me, it's not. The fact that God has a name is *way* more important than most of us realize. I would argue it has the potential to radically alter the way we relate to God.

I mean, *Yahweh*.

But first, a little backstory . . .

In ancient writings like the Bible, a name was way more than a label you used to make a dinner reservation or sign up for a spin class or file your taxes with the IRS.

Your name was your identity, your destiny, the truth hidden in the marrow of your bones. It was a one-word moniker for the truest thing about you—your inner essence. Your inner Tom-ness or Ruth-ness.

One Old Testament scholar writes, “In the world of the Hebrew Scriptures a personal name was often thought to indicate something essential about the bearer’s identity, origin, birth circumstances, or the divine purpose that the bearer was intended to fulfill.”<sup>1</sup>

Names are revelatory of the *nature* of a person.

Think of the story of Abraham. Originally, he is just called Abram. But then Yahweh makes him a promise: “I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you.”<sup>2</sup>

And then God *renames* him—

from Abram

to Abraham.

Now, look at this.

Abram means “exalted father.”

Abraham means “father of many nations.”

It's more than a new label. It's a new identity, a new destiny.

And it's not just Abram/ham. Think of his son Isaac. Isaac means "laughter." When his mom, Sarah, heard that she would have a son in her old age, it was so preposterous that she started to laugh. So when Sarah finally gave birth to the miracle child, Abraham named him *Laughter*.

Or think of Isaac's son Jacob. Jacob means "heel grabber," a euphemism for a liar and a cheat. And his biography is exactly that—one con after another. Until an odd story where he wrestles with God and says, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."<sup>3</sup> Then God *renames* him, from Jacob to Israel, which means "he struggles with God." From then on, he's a changed man.

Is this coming into focus for you? Getting clearer? Names were way more than labels to pick up your coffee at the end of the bar. Names were your autobiography in one word.

So when Moses is on Mount Sinai, asking to see God's glory and instead Yahweh says, "I will proclaim my *name*, the LORD [Yahweh], in your presence,"<sup>4</sup> it's an incredibly weighty and significant moment. God is saying that he'll reveal his *identity* to Moses. He'll let Moses in on his inner God-ness, the deepest reality of his being.

And this climactic moment of revelation doesn't come out of nowhere. It's the apex of a long, drawn-out story that's been

gathering motion and speed ever since the opening page of the Bible.

## **TWO: Stories**

Let's take a few minutes and trace this story line through the Scriptures . . .

In the first line of *Genesis*, we read, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Before there was time and space and Adam and Eve and sex and ice cream and New York City and Instagram, there was a God who *was*.

But so far in the story, this mysterious Creator-of-everything doesn't have a name. Later in *Genesis*, the Creator comes to Abram. He calls him to abandon the worship of his Mesopotamian gods and to go a new land. To pack up the U-Haul and head south on I-5, with no clue where he's going. A gigantic leap of faith.

Abram goes.

And becomes Abraham.

Abraham's relationship with the Creator is stunning. So stunning that three of the major world religions trace their

roots back to Abraham's encounter with God.<sup>5</sup> But even Abraham doesn't ever learn God's name.

When God comes to Abraham, he says, "I am God Almighty."<sup>6</sup>

In the original language, it's, "I am *El Shaddai*."

*El* was the Canaanite word for the king of the gods.

The Creator calls himself *El Shaddai*, which is a way of saying, "I'm like *El*, but *I'm so much more*."

In other places, God calls himself "*El Elyon*" (God Most High)<sup>7</sup> or "*El Olam*" (God Everlasting),<sup>8</sup> to put it in language that would make sense to Abraham and his world.

Usually, he's just called "the God of Abraham."

Which god?

The god my dad worshiped.

Oh, *that* one.

All that changes when we get to Moses. In one of the best-known stories in the Bible, the Creator calls to Moses out of a bush on fire in the blistering heat of the Sinai Peninsula. Moses was a Hebrew—one of the descendants of Abraham. And by this point in the story, the Hebrews were in a bad



spot—in slavery in Egypt, the global military superpower of the day.

So the Creator comes to Moses and says, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”<sup>9</sup>

Basically, “I’m your dad’s god.”

Then God and Moses get into a conversation. And yes, you heard me right—a *conversation*. The first of many. God tells Moses that he sees the injustice, the oppression of Israel. He’s ready to do something about it. He wants Moses to lead them out of slavery.

To which Moses basically responds, *Wait—what?!*

But after God talks Moses into it (God can be pretty convincing), Moses wants to know what he should tell the Israelites when they ask him about this God. Apparently going back to them and saying *my dad’s God wants to set you free* just won’t cut it.

And Moses’ question is fascinating. In Hebrew, it’s *mah shemo?* And it’s translated, “What is his name?”<sup>10</sup>

But if you were an ancient Hebrew reader, your ears would perk up right here. It’s different from the typical way you would have asked someone their name. If you lived in a Hebrew refugee camp in 1500 BC, you would walk up to a stranger

and ask, “*Miy shimka?*” which is more literally, “Who is your name?”<sup>11</sup>

But that’s not what Moses asks. He asks, “*Mah shemo?*”

And as we all know, the difference between a *miy shimka?* and a *mah shemo?* is legendary.

*Mah shemo?* is more like, “What is the meaning of your name?” Or, “What is the significance of your name?” Or, “What makes you . . . you?”

Moses isn’t just asking for a label like Bob or Hank or Lazer. (I actually know a kid named Lazer. How cool is that?) He’s asking the Creator God, “Who are you? What are you like? Tell me about your character.”

And that’s when the Creator speaks his name. For the first time. Ever. I imagine a tremor in the ground under Moses’ feet . . .

“I AM WHO I AM.”

In Hebrew, it’s *ehyeh-asher-ehyeh*.

One of the ways to translate this Hebrew phrase is “whatever I am, I will be.” Meaning, whatever this God is like, he’s that way consistently. He’s unshifting, stable, 24/7.

So, for example, if God is compassionate, *then he's compassionate all the time.*

If God is gracious, *then he's gracious all the time.*

If he's slow to anger, *then he's slow to anger all the time.*

Have you ever *thought* you knew somebody really well? Trusted them deeply? Thought they were a stand-up person, and then you get the email, the phone call, the knock at the door, and you discover a shocking double life hidden in the shadows?

*Actually*, your friend is wanted by the police.

*Actually*, the story she fed you is a lie.

*Actually*, your husband is a cheater.

God's not like that. There's no facade. No "once you actually get to know him." He's true to his character. This is a God you can rely on.

So God tells Moses his name and then tells him to go back to Egypt and convey to the Hebrews the following:

"Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Yahweh], the 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,  
the name you shall call me  
from generation to generation.”<sup>12</sup>

For those of you thinking, *Wait, I'm confused. Why is God called Yahweh here? I thought his name was "I AM WHO I AM" . . .*

Okay, stay with me, this next part is a little technical. Okay, it's *really* technical. But strap in tight, because there's a huge payoff if you can survive the next page or two . . .

In ancient Hebrew, there were no vowels in the written language. That sounds crazy, but imagine a world with no computers or even paper and pens. A world where you had to carve every letter into clay or stone. Writing was all about economy. And writing with no vowels actually works pretty well.

Imagine if I wrote, “Ths s sntnc.”

Can you see it?

Yeah . . .

Well done.

It says, “This is a sentence.”

That's what reading ancient Hebrew is like.

(Some of you are thinking, *I never want to read ancient Hebrew.*  
Fair point.)

Here's why this matters: in God's name—Yahweh—the vowels aren't in the original text. The Hebrew Bible just reads, “Y-H-W-H.” Four letters, that's all.

In scholarship they call this the *tetragrammaton*, and it was the energy source used by Doc Brown for the flux capacitor.

I'm just kidding about that last part.

*Tetragrammaton* is a Greek term that means “four-letter word”—but not *that* kind of four-letter word.

YHWH is from the exact same root word as I AM WHO I AM, but *ehyeh* is in the first person, and *Yahweh* is in the third person.<sup>13</sup> Say them out loud right now, and you'll notice the similarity.

So . . .

*Ehyeh* means “I am.”

*Yahweh* means “he is.”

Which is why . . .

When God says his name, it's *ehyeh*.

But when *we* say God's name, it's *Yahweh*.

Make sense?

Now, Yahweh is incredibly hard to translate into English for a couple of reasons. For one, we don't actually know what the vowels are because they were never written down. Almost all Hebrew scholars think Yahweh is right, but honestly, it's still a best guess.

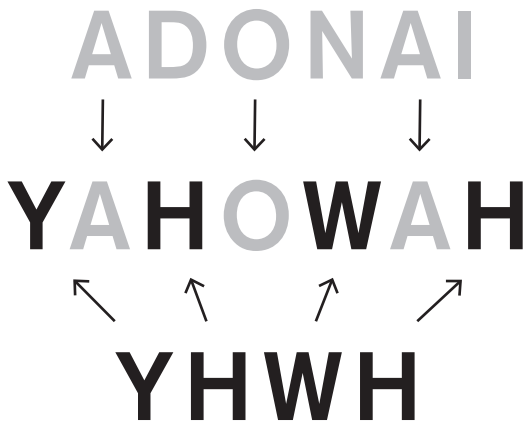
But the main reason is that over time the Hebrews stopped saying the name of God out loud. One of the Ten Commandments is, "You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God."<sup>14</sup> Over the years, they grew so scared of accidentally breaking this command that they just stopped saying his name altogether.

Instead, they would call him other names. A popular one was simply *hashem*, "the name." But the most common title was *adonai*, a Hebrew word meaning "Lord." In the ancient Near East, that's what a servant would call his master, so they used that title for God.

This is also where we get the name Jehovah. Anybody remember that name for God? It was big in the 80s.

Jehovah is the vowels from *adonai* put into the consonants of YHWH.

Like this . . .



(Note: Hebrew is a guttural language, so the y's sound like j's and the w's sound like v's, hence Jehovah instead of Yahowah. Think Klingon, you Trekkies.)

Okay, we're *almost* through the thick part. Stay with me!

Because of the Jewish switch to *adonai*, usually YHWH is translated into English as “the LORD.” This is how the vast majority of translations write out God’s name, and so it’s what most followers of Jesus call God. We hear it in prayers and songs and teachings and books—it’s ubiquitous.

In my opinion, it’s a dangerous move that could make us miss out on a key facet of how we relate to God. Why? Because “the LORD” isn’t a name; it’s a title, like the doctor or the judge or the president. Calling God “the LORD” is like me calling Tammy “the wife.” That would be *weird*. Why? Because I’m in a close relationship with her, and that’s not the language of intimacy.

What you call somebody says a lot about your relationship.

To my wife I'm *Love*, but to the receptionist at the dentist's office I'm *Mr. Comer*.

To my kids I'm *Dad*, but to the clerk at Whole Foods I'm *sir*.

I'm also son/brother/friend/dude/hey you/pastor/reverend/JM/and—my least favorite of all time—*John-O!* Each of these names says something about the kind of relationship I have with another person.

My sister's name is Elizabeth. She's this gorgeous, tall, modelesque blond who lives in Hollywood. Her name is regal, and it's fitting for her person. But I never call her Elizabeth. I call her by her childhood nickname—Betes. No matter how old we get, I'm still the ornery older brother at heart. She *hates* the name Betes. If she ever reads this book, I doubt I'll get a Christmas present for the next five years. But I'm her brother. An unwritten law of the universe says I have the right to call her by any nickname I choose.

Why? Because I'm in relationship with her. So I don't call her Mrs. Mosser; I call her Betes. I call her by *name*.

In the same way, God wants to be called by his name, not a title. Remember that line of poetry?

“This is my name forever,  
the name you shall call me  
from generation to generation.”<sup>15</sup>



I would argue that we need to get back to calling God by his name. I think the gradual shift from calling God “Yahweh” to using the title “the LORD” says something about the human condition. For all our talk about a “personal relationship with Jesus,” there’s a part of us that’s scared of intimacy with God. We see the fire and smoke up the mountain, and we shrink back in fear.

Jesus took this even one step further. He taught us to call God “Father”—the most intimate relational name there is. As one poet so eloquently said, God “waits to be wanted.”<sup>16</sup> He’s aching for a relationship with you.

Now, back to Moses’ question: *mah shemo?* What is the meaning of your name?

Does God answer the question? Kind of, but not really. Moses gets the name—Yahweh—but he doesn’t get the meaning or the significance of God’s name until later in the story.

A few chapters later, Yahweh says to Moses: “I am the LORD [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*], but by my name the LORD [Yahweh] I did not make myself fully known to them.”<sup>17</sup>

In other words, Yahweh only showed part of himself to Abraham and his sons. This is God’s *modus operandi* in the Scriptures. He doesn’t give revelation all at once, but in bits and pieces, giving his people time to absorb and grapple with who God is.<sup>18</sup>

It's not until Moses is on top of Mount Sinai that we get the full, complete answer to his question about the meaning and significance of God's name.<sup>19</sup> There, in the terrifying cloud that was God's glory, we read that "God proclaimed his *name . . .*

*Yahweh*

*Yahweh*

*The compassionate and gracious God*

*Slow to anger*

*Abounding in love and faithfulness*

*Showing mercy to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin*

*Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."*

(By the way, for those of you thinking, *What is up with the last line about God punishing kids?* we'll get there later. It's so good . . .)

This moment of revelation on Mount Sinai where we learn God's name—it's *the* moment in the Hebrew Bible. The rest of

what we call the Old Testament is just story after story of this God in action.

## **THREE: Jesus**

The narrative arc of the Bible is anything but straight. It bends and zigzags and makes wrong turns, but eventually the story all leads to a dramatic climax: the coming of Jesus.

In his biography of Jesus, the New Testament writer John makes a profound statement:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”<sup>20</sup>

It’s hard to see it in the English translation, but this language is straight out of Exodus 34.

For example, the phrase “made his dwelling among us” is literally “pitched his tabernacle among us.” That’s a reference to the tabernacle that Israel put up at the base of Mount Sinai.

“Glory”? That’s a reference to the cloud at the top of Mount Sinai.

And “grace and truth” is actually an odd reading of the Hebrew phrase translated as “love and faithfulness.” (We’ll talk about why later.)

Usually people read “grace and truth” and talk about how Jesus was the perfect balance of grace and niceness and love mixed with truth and backbone and the courage to say what needed to be said.

That’s totally true.

It’s just not remotely the point that John is making.

John is ripping all this language out of *Exodus*—“tabernacle” and “glory” and “love and faithfulness”—as a way of retelling the Sinai story around Jesus. He’s making the point that in Jesus, we see the Creator God’s glory—his presence and beauty—like never before. In Jesus, Yahweh *becomes a human being*.

Later in John, we get to eavesdrop on Jesus’ prayer to the Father: “I have revealed your *name* to those you gave me . . . I have made your *name* known to them.”<sup>21</sup>

Remember, God’s name is a stand-in for his character.

Eugene Peterson translates the verse this way: “I have spelled out your character in detail.”<sup>22</sup>

I love it.

In Jesus, we get a new, evocative, crystal-clear glimpse of what God is actually like.

The early Christians were quick to pick up on the gravity of Jesus' claims to be the embodiment of God. In order to become a Christian, there was a statement, a slogan, a creed that you had to say out loud before you could be baptized:

*Jesus is Lord.*

People would *die* over this statement. Literally. Christians were burned alive and thrown into the mouths of wild beasts in the arena. This phrase had a gravitas to it.

Why?

Well, "Lord" is *kyrios* in Greek. For one, that was the title for Caesar, which made the claim that Jesus is Lord tantamount to treason. The Roman Empire already had a *kyrios*.

But more importantly, for Jews, this was the Greek word that was used to translated the Hebrew word *Yahweh*. So in saying that Jesus is Lord, the first Christians—most of whom were Jewish—were saying that Jesus was Yahweh in flesh and blood.

That's a bold claim to make about an itinerant peasant teacher.

But we see this kind of blatant, provocative language all over the writings of the New Testament. The first Christians were *adamant* that Jesus is the bedrock for everything we believe to be true about God.

For years, I thought of Yahweh in the Old Testament as

parallel with the Father in the New. Like Jesus is a newcomer in the story. That's wrong, and dangerous. It leads to a twisted caricature, as if the Father is the grumpy old warmonger in the Old Testament, and Jesus is the son who went off to Berkeley and came home with all sorts of radical ideas about grace and love and tolerance and basically said, "Come on, Dad, let's not kill everybody. How about I die for them instead?"

This is a gross misreading of the story the Scriptures tell.

Jesus is the long-awaited human coming of Yahweh, the God on top of Sinai.

## FOUR: Us

Whew . . .

You still alive out there? If so, well done. That was a lot to take in. Now, let's take a step back and talk about the staggering implications this has for how we relate to God. Honestly, this was life-changing for me.

For starters, this means that **God is a person**. By person, I don't mean he's male or female or human.<sup>23</sup> By person, I mean he's a relational being. Not an impersonal energy force or a chapter in a systematic theology textbook or a world religion. He's a relational being who wants to, well, *relate*. To people like you and me. He wants to know and be known.

But knowing God isn't just knowing a bunch of facts *about* God. I'm all for theology—heck, it's kind of what I do for a living—but God isn't a doctrine. He isn't a question on a multiple-choice exam that you study to get right so you can “go to heaven when you die.”<sup>24</sup> He's a person who wants to be in a relationship with you.

We hear the cliché “a personal relationship with Jesus” a lot in the church. But honestly, I don't think we have any clue just how explosive this idea is.

Remember how Moses and God had conversations?

Later in the story, we read that God would speak to Moses “face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”<sup>25</sup>

God has friends?

Yup.

And Moses and God relate to each other like, well, friends.

Then we read a great story in which Moses vents to Yahweh about how Yahweh has been telling him to lead Israel, but Israel is a dysfunctional mess and Moses feels all alone.

So God says, “My Presence will go with you.”

Then Moses asks, “Teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you.”

And God essentially says, “I will.”

Then Moses gets even bolder and says, “Show me your glory.”

And God says, “You, me—on the mountain tomorrow.”<sup>26</sup>

This is *not* how you would expect a conversation between the Creator of the universe and a human being to go. It has a pliability to it. A bend. A give and take.

It sounds like two friends talking. Almost as if Moses and God are on equal footing. Of course, they *aren't* on equal footing, and that's what makes it so striking.

There's another story in *Exodus* where Israel goes off the rails and starts worshiping other gods. This, after Yahweh had just saved them in the Red Sea and gave them food and water in the middle of nowhere—ridiculous, extravagant love. And they spit on it.

As you can imagine, the God who is slow to anger finally gets angry and tells Moses that he's going to destroy Israel and start over with Moses, take it back to square one, reboot the entire franchise. God is clearly upset.

The theologian Gerry Breshears says, “This is God processing his feelings with a human partner.”<sup>27</sup>

God processing his feelings?



I love it.

This isn't the energy-in-the-universe or chapter-3-in-the-systematic-theology-textbook God that a lot of us grew up with. This is a person. A person with *feelings*. Yahweh is mad—understandably—and he makes the decision to wipe Israel off the map.

And what happens?

*Moses talks him out of it.*

He essentially tells Yahweh, “If you do this, then all the other nations will talk trash about you. You made a promise to lead your people through the desert. Your *name* is at stake here.”

Then we read, Yahweh “relented and did not bring on the people the disaster he had threatened.”<sup>28</sup>

The word *relented* is *naham* in Hebrew. It can be translated as Yahweh “changed his mind,” or even “repented.”

Yahweh *nahamed*?

He changed his mind?

He repented?

That's what it says.

Now, that doesn't mean God was in sin or doing anything wrong. The word *naham* carries this idea of regret or remorse over a decision. The idea isn't that God was off base, at all; it's that God was moved emotionally; he regretted his decision to judge Israel so harshly, and so he changed his approach.

**All of this leads to a vision of a God who *responds*.** Who is open to our ideas, dynamic—involved in our lives, but not “in control” in the automated, what's-going-to-happen-is-going-to-happen-with-or-without-me kind of way.

God is more of a friend than a formula.

Most of religion—including a lot of popular “Christian” religion—is about deciphering the formula to get the life we want from God.

Usually the formula looks something like this:

**Morality + religious stuff – sin = God's blessing.**

So, for example . . .

**Bible reading + church – having sex with  
my girlfriend = God's blessing.**

As if God was an algorithm for a computer software program

that we just have to plug the right numbers into and—*boom!*—out comes our dream life.

But God doesn't work this way. If you treat God like a formula, you'll just end up mad and confused. With God, the math rarely adds up. God is far more interactive and interesting.

But that said, there is a *pattern* we see all over the Bible:

*"If you \_\_\_\_\_, then I will \_\_\_\_\_."*

For example . . .

*"If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it."<sup>29</sup>*

You see the pattern? The if/then?

Notice how *interactive* this is. There's a relational back-and-forth that few of us have actually come to grips with.

We speak, and God speaks.

We act, and God acts.

We pray, and God answers, but not always in the way we want.

We ask God to show mercy, and he *nahams*.

This isn't a formula. It doesn't always play out like this. But it's a way of being in relationship with God.

Yahweh isn't the "unmoved mover" of Aristotle; he's the relational, dynamic God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God who *responds*. Who can be *moved*, influenced, who can change his mind at a moment's notice. And this isn't a *lower* view of God; it's a much *higher* view. The theologian Karl Barth called it the "holy mutability of God."<sup>30</sup> He would be less of a God if he couldn't change his intentions when he wants to, or be open to new ideas from intelligent, creative beings he's in relationship with.<sup>31</sup>

This is so simple, so easy to wrap our heads around, but *hardly any of us interact with God this way*. We read a story about Moses getting God to change his mind, and it sounds shocking because it's so far from our own experience. Most people just explain it away: "Well, it doesn't *actually* mean that God changed his mind"—because that's just too much to handle.

Maybe because it feels irreverent. I agree. It *does* feel a little irreverent. There are prayers in the Scriptures—in the books Moses wrote and especially in *Psalms*—where I cringe, half expecting lightning to strike the person dead. But it doesn't. In fact, God seems to love that kind of raw, uncut prayer, skirting

the line between blasphemy and desperate faith. He's not nearly as scared of honesty as we are.

Maybe because our theological system is adamant that *God is sovereign* and *in control* and *everything that happens is the will of God*, as if there's some invisible blueprint behind every event in our life—good or bad—some secret script we live out, and we don't dare ask God to deviate from it.<sup>32</sup>

We'll talk more about this in the next chapter, but I deeply believe this way of thinking about God's involvement in our life is *so far* from what the Scriptures teach. The future is not set in stone. The prayers we pray and the decisions we make in the here and now have a direct, line-of-sight effect on what does—or does not—happen down the line.

Because God *responds*.

But often we read these stories about Moses and David and Jesus and Paul and we think,

*That was for them, not for me.*

As if the point of the Bible is to tell you how *other* people relate to God.

But Jesus came and lived and died and rose from the grave to make the kind of relationship he and Moses had with Yahweh available to *everybody*.

Right before his death, Jesus prayed to the Father, “I have made your name known to them, and will continue to make your name known *in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.*”<sup>33</sup>

This is Jesus’ agenda for his followers—that you and I will *know* Yahweh like he did. And to join Moses and the characters of the Bible in friendship with God.

Think of how this could rewire how you pray.

A lot of people feel guilty because they don’t enjoy prayer. Some people dread it. Others just push through it because they know it’s the right thing to do. Most of us avoid it.

That’s because most of us don’t actually *pray*.

Prayer is what Moses did with God in the tent. What Jesus did with the Father in Gethsemane. It’s brutally honest, naked, and vulnerable. It’s when your deepest desires and fears and hopes and dreams leak out of your mouth with no inhibition. It’s when you talk to God with the edit button in the *off* position and you feel safe and heard and loved. It’s the kind of relational exchange you can’t get enough of.

And our prayers make a difference. Most of us don’t actually believe that prayer changes reality. But it does.

The philosopher Dallas Willard wrote, “God’s ‘response’ to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is

answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does not do. The idea that everything would happen exactly as it does regardless of whether we pray or not is a specter that haunts the minds of many who sincerely profess belief in God. It makes prayer psychologically impossible, replacing it with dead ritual at best. And of course God does not respond to this. You wouldn't either."<sup>34</sup>

Prayer can move the hand of God. Prayer can get God to change his mind—think about the gravity of that.

Prayer is when your life trajectory is going in the wrong direction, so you dialogue with God and he *responds* and your life goes *another way*.

This thing was going to happen, but now it's not.

This other thing was *not* going to happen, but now it *is*.

Because I just had a conversation with God.

As the writer James put it, "The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective."<sup>35</sup>

Now, there's a lot of mystery here, plenty of unanswered questions. How exactly does God's will interact with our will? The classic "sovereignty versus free will" debate. Honestly? I don't know. But I'm sure of this: prayer is not just going through the motions. It does something. Our prayers have the

potential to alter the course of history. And God's action *in* history is, in some strange way, contingent on our prayers.

My friend Skye Jethani quotes the philosopher Blaise Pascal's line, "God has instituted prayer so as to confer upon His creatures the dignity of being causes" and interprets it like this:

"We are not merely passive set pieces in a prearranged cosmic drama, but we are active participants with God in the writing, directing, design, and action that unfolds. Prayer, therefore, is much more than asking God for this or that outcome. It is drawing into communion with him and there taking up our privileged role as his people. In prayer, we are invited to join him in directing the course of his world."<sup>36</sup>

Oh man, that's so good.

"In prayer, we are invited to join him in directing the course of his world."

From the beginning of human history, God, the Creator of *everything*, has been looking for friends, for free, intelligent, creative partners to collaborate with on running the world.

*That's* prayer.

If this take on prayer makes you nervous, if it's too close to the edge, if right now you're thinking, *Who am I to come to God that way?* then remember that when you come to God, you come in Jesus' name.



I assume you're familiar with that cliché—"in Jesus' name"? For the record, that was never supposed to be a tag line we drop at the end of a prayer to get what we want. To pray in Jesus' name means two things.

First, it means to pray in line with his character, to pray for the kind of stuff he wants to see happen in the world.

Pray for a new Range Rover or dream vacation to Hawaii, and you may get it, but the odds are God will let you down.

Pray for healing, justice, the courage to stand up for your faith in the corrosive soil of Western secularism, the kind of stuff Jesus is all about? Well, keep your eyes open.

But secondly, and more importantly, to pray in Jesus' name means that whenever we pray, we have the same access to God that Jesus does.

One New Testament scholar said it this way: "To pray in Jesus' name . . . means that we enter into Jesus' status in God's favor, and invoke Jesus' standing with God."<sup>37</sup>

So for those of you thinking, *I can't interact with God in this kind of a back-and-forth way, like a friend or a coworker helping God build out his world. I'm no Moses, and I'm definitely not Jesus!*—true, that makes two of us. But if you're a follower of Jesus, then when you come before God, you come *in Jesus' name*. You invoke his status with God. You come, not as a beggar off the street, but as a royal daughter or son of the Father.

And what you find waiting for you is Yahweh, the *person*, who wants to *relate* to you.

And you don't even have to climb a mountain. All you have to do is open your lips.

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