DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 1

THE NAMES OF GOD

My parents chose names for all three of their daughters that start with the letter M. When my mom wanted one of us for something, she often would call out all three names and then point to the child she wanted. Sometime in my teen years I saw the definition of my name on a card in a gift shop and discovered that my name, Melissa, means Honeybee.

I never put much stock into the meanings of names until it was time to name my own children. As my husband and I went through a book of names, we would stop at a name we liked and read its meaning. We might like a certain name but discover that it meant “sorrow” or “bitter,” and so that deterred us from choosing it. While the meaning behind the name wasn’t our main criteria, it did play a part in our selection. We named our son Zachary, which means “Remembered of the Lord.” Our daughters are named Abigail, which means “A Father’s Joy,” Sara, which means “Princess,” and Rachel, which means “Lamb.”

In Old Testament times, the meaning of a name carried much greater weight than today. In a book about God’s names, Kay Arthur writes, “In biblical times a name represented a person’s character. God’s name represents His character, His attributes, His nature. To know His name is to know Him.”1 Throughout the Book of Numbers, we encounter several of God’s names that reveal His character.
Yahweh or Jehovah

Most often in the Book of Numbers we find God referred to as the Lord. The first sentence reads, “A year after Israel’s departure from Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the Tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai” (Numbers 1:1). In many translations, whenever the Lord appears in capital letters, it refers to the name Yahweh.

The name Jehovah, which many people are familiar with, is actually based on a misunderstanding of how to pronounce the Hebrew word Yahweh. The Hebrew language is written with consonants on the main line of text, while the vowels are mostly represented as a series of marks above or below the consonants that help readers pronounce the words. The word Yahweh is written as YHWH, with vowel marks above and below. But because of a longstanding tradition that the name Yahweh was too sacred to pronounce, medieval Jewish scribes avoided using the true vowels for that name and substituted the vowels for the word adonai, which means “lord.” Earlier Christian readers did not recognize the intention, and thought the proper pronunciation was “Yahovah,” or Jehovah. Most biblical scholars believe that the word was originally pronounced Yahweh.

Whether we use the name Yahweh or Jehovah isn’t as important as understanding God’s character behind His name, the Lord. Strong’s Concordance cites the Hebrew word YHWH meaning, “the existing One.” God is referred to as the Lord over 350 times in the Book of Numbers and over 6,000 times in all of Scripture.

This name for God reveals that He is self-existent. He was not created and stands outside the limits of time. He is who He is. His character is revealed in this name as a God who is holy. He is set apart—unlike us. We were created. We live in the confines of time. God does not. We can trust Him as the Lord who is greater and higher than we are. It is this name for God that is used in Proverbs 18:10: “The name of the Lord is a strong fortress; / the godly run to him and are safe.”

The Lord’s name is a place of security and shelter from the storms of life. When trials, fears, or simply the doldrums of life are threatening to steal your contentment, you can run to Yahweh. He is a strong fortress, and you can run to Him for safety.

We find many names of God that are compounded with Yahweh or Jehovah throughout the Old Testament, giving greater insight into the nature of the God we worship. Some of these include:

- Yahweh-Yireh (Jehovah Jireh), “The Lord will provide” (Genesis 22:14)
- Yahweh-Nissi (Jehovah-Nissi), “The Lord is my banner” (Exodus 17:15)
- Yahweh-Shalom (Jehovah Shalom), “The Lord is peace” (Judges 6:24)
- Yahweh Sabaath (Jehovah Sabaath), “The Lord of Heaven’s Armies” (Jeremiah 9:15)
- Yahweh Tsidkenu (Jehovah Tsidkenu), “The Lord Is Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6)

El

Another name in the Book of Numbers that reveals God’s character is El. This generic term for God that is used ten times throughout Numbers means, “God, god-like, mighty one.”
Elohim

The plural form of El is Elohim (or Elohiym), and this name is used twenty-three times in the Book of Numbers. Elohim is the name of God used in the story of Creation. Scholars debate whether this plural denotes the Trinity (one God in three persons), represents the heavenly host of angels alongside the Lord, or is a plural of majesty showing His greatness. Regardless of the exact reasoning for the plural, Elohim reveals God’s majesty and power as ruler of the earth.

It’s interesting to note that although the word may have originated as a plural, it typically functions as a singular word. For instance, in the Creation story of Genesis 1, the word Elohim is used to refer to God, and the verbs associated with that word are singular, not plural. This supports the idea that Elohim is a way of referring to the nature or character of the one God. Some other names of God that reveal His character are also compounds with the name El.

El Shaddai

El Shaddai is found in Numbers 24, verses 4 and 16. This name for God means the “all-sufficient One.” When the Spirit of God came upon Balaam the seer, he used the name El Shaddai in reference to the God who brought blessings on His people when others wanted God to curse them. God desired for His people to see that He is all-sufficient to meet their every need. Just as God was all-sufficient for the wandering Israelites, He wants you to cling to Him as all-sufficient in your life.

El Elyon

El Elyon means the “Most High God,” emphasizing God’s strength and sovereignty above all creation—including all heavenly beings. It is also found in Numbers 24:16 when God is blessing His people through Balaam. God reveals that He is mighty and powerful to help us.

Adonai

Adonai, which means “my lord,” functions more as a title than a divine name. It is the title of reverence that Moses uses as he intercedes for the people when God wants to destroy them in Numbers 14:17. He humbly calls on Adonai, the Lord with total authority. Then he asks God to remember His unfailing love, forgiveness, and slowness to anger.

I find it interesting that Moses used the name Adonai in this context. He acknowledged first that God has total authority to do as He pleases, but then he asked for grace. As we approach God as Adonai, we must remember He has the power to do as He desires; but like Moses, we can ask for mercy and appeal to God’s love and grace.

There are many other names in the Old Testament that reveal God’s character, such as Immanuel (“God is with us,” Isaiah 7:14) and El Roi (“the God who sees,” Genesis 16:11-14).
By studying God’s names, we can know Him better; and as we know Him more, we can love and trust Him more.

Where is the Lord calling you to trust in His name as a strong fortress today? He is the self-existent, all-sufficient, almighty God, and He longs for you to run to Him for safety. While our names have meanings that may or may not relate to our character, all of God’s names reveal His nature. The more we know and embrace God’s character, the more content we will be in focusing on Him rather than on our ever-changing circumstances.

2. For more on this subject, see “Is Jehovah God’s True Name,” Michael L. Brown, https://askdrbrown.org/library/jehovah-gods-true-name.