

Names of God

Student's Guide

Names of God is a four-part Bible study meant to help Christians better understand what God reveals about himself through the various names he uses for himself. Each session should be about an hour long, depending upon the amount of discussion.

This study was written by Marilyn Miller, a WELS staff minister at Abiding Word Lutheran Church, Houston, TX. The theological content was reviewed by Professor Lyle Lange.

Lesson 1

God the Creator (Elohim)

*O LORD, our Lord, How Excellent is Your Name in all the Earth! –
Psalm 8:1*

As the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible, he gave us many different names for God, each of which tells us a bit more about the essence of God and the awesome work that he does. Some of the Old Testament names are difficult for us to understand because the Hebrew names are so much richer in meaning than what we read; much is lost in the translation into English. The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper appreciation for God through the various names he uses to reveal himself to us.

Opening Prayer

Introduction

How important is your name to you? How do you relate to it? How do others react when they hear your name?

Elohim (el-o-HEEM) – God the Creator

Elohim is the first name God calls himself in the Old Testament. This is the God of Genesis 1, the Creator. Elohim is used 31 times in the creation account alone and over 2500 times in the Old Testament. It is usually translated simply “God”. Scan the creation account in Genesis 1 and identify 4 or 5 qualities that God reveals about himself.

God gave human beings a special place in his creation, telling them to “fill the earth and subdue it...rule over it” (Genesis 1:28). How does the way we take care of this world reflect the honor we have for its Creator?

Elohim is the plural version of El, a word meaning God and often paired with other words that help us understand additional attributes of God; for example: El Elyon (el El-yuhn) – The God Most High, El Olam (el o-LAHM) – The Eternal God, or El Roi (el ROY) – The God Who Sees Me; Roi is also the God of Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd. Of all the Semitic languages, only Hebrew has this plural form for God. What additional things might we learn about God as he uses this plural name for himself?

As people moved about and began speaking different languages, the true nature of Elohim and El was corrupted as people began worshiping the sun, moon and numerous other idols. To see how the word Elohim is used in a way other than to point to God the Creator, look at the following passages:

- Genesis 35:1-4
- Genesis 31:19
- Exodus 32:3-4

For your meditation: Have you ever abused God's name, in either your thoughts or your actions, by elevating something or someone above him? Have you ever trashed his name with your words? Pause for repentance, beg for mercy, accept God's forgiveness, ask God to help you guard your thoughts, words and actions in the future.

What is God trying to do when he uses the word elohim in reference to idols in Exodus 20:3?

(Note that our English Bible translations, through capitalization, usually make it clear when the word Elohim is being used as God's name and when it is being used in reference to an idol.)

The name Elohim is used in a secondary way in Exodus 4:14-16 ("...Elohim to him"), in Psalm 82:1, 6, and several other places in the Old Testament. Why would God use this term for a human being?

Discuss what this means to someone put into a position of authority over others in the church/family, as well as what it means to those put under the authority of a leader.

When have you stood in awe of Elohim, God the Creator?

If you would pray to God, Elohim, what might you include in that prayer?

For your personal study: Read Psalm 68, where Elohim is used 26 times. How does the meaning of this name enhance your understanding of the psalm?

Closing Prayer

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty CW 234 vs 1, 2, 5

*Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!
Let all who hear Now to his temple draw near, Joining in glad adoration!*

*Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things is wondrously reigning
And, as on wings of an eagle, uplifting, sustaining.
Have you not seen All that is needful has been Sent by his gracious ordaining?*

*Praise to the Lord! Oh, let all that is in me adore him!
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before him!
Let the Amen Sound from his people again; Gladly forever adore him!*

References:

Girdlestone, Robert Baker, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, WM B Eerdmans Publishing Co,
Grand Rapids, MI, 1951. Pg 18-44
Jeske, John C, *Connecting Sinai to Calvary*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 2005
Rose Publishing, *Names of God* pamphlet
Spangler, Ann, *The Names of God*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009

Lesson 2

God Almighty (El Shaddai) & The Lord (Adonai)

*O LORD, our Lord, How Excellent is Your Name in all the Earth! –
Psalm 8:1*

Opening Prayer

El Shaddai (el-shaw-DIE) – God the Almighty

When God calls himself El Shaddai, he is reminding his people that he is God Almighty, the God who provides every good and perfect gift, the God who makes even the impossible happen. This name is most often translated “God Almighty”.

The first use of this name is in Genesis 17:1-2. Why might El Shaddai be a good name to use at this time?

Look at other places where El Shaddai is used and discuss how knowing the meaning of this name helps us better understand the message of the passages.

- Genesis 28:3-4
- Genesis 35:9-12
- Genesis 49:22-25

Have you ever experienced the power of El Shaddai, God Almighty?

If you were to pray to El Shaddai, what might you include in that prayer?

Adonai (ah-doe-NI) – The Lord

Adonai is a Hebrew word meaning Lord (distinct from LORD), a name of respect that implies a relationship: God is Lord, we are his servants. Adonai and Yahweh (God's personal name or LORD—to be studied later) often appear together. In these cases, the NIV translates it as "Sovereign LORD," while other translations use "LORD God". In the NIV, the word sovereign refers more to God's position of headship exemplified by his grace and mercy, rather than to his supreme or unlimited power. Like Elohim, Adonai is a plural, giving a hint of the Trinity.

God uses this name more than 300 times in the Old Testament. Read the following verses and discuss what we learn about God and our relationship to him.

- Psalm 8

- Isaiah 40:3-5

What does it mean to us, in everyday life, to live in a master/servant relationship to the Lord?

In Exodus 4:1-5, 10-15, Moses calls God his Lord, Adonai, (verses 10, 13) while also expressing reluctance to obey him. Have you ever done the same? What held you back from doing what the Lord was asking?

What does Psalm 114 tell us about the Lord, Adonai?

If you were to pray to Adonai, what might you include in that prayer?

Closing Prayer

Take My Life and Let it Be CW 469, vs 1, 5, 6

*Take my life and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.*

*Take my will and make it thine;
It shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart—it is thine own;
It shall be thy royal throne.*

*Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee.*

References:

Girdlestone, Robert Baker, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, WM B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 1951. Pg 18-44
Jeske, John C, *Connecting Sinai to Calvary*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 2005
Rose Publishing, *Names of God* pamphlet
Spangler, Ann, *The Names of God*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2009

Lesson 3

LORD (Yahweh or YHWH)

*O LORD, our Lord, How Excellent is Your Name in all the Earth! –
Psalm 8:1*

Opening Prayer

Yahweh (ya-WAE) – LORD, God’s personal name

In Isaiah 42:8a we read “I am the LORD; that is my name!” This is his personal name; all others are descriptive names.

For Jews this was a sacred and incommunicable name. It was spoken aloud only by priests worshipping in the Jerusalem temple. After the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, the name was not pronounced at all. “Adonai” was substituted for Yahweh whenever it appeared in the biblical text, and eventually the correct pronunciation was lost. In Hebrew this name is formed with four consonants: YHWH. In the tenth century, Jewish scholars began supplying vowels to Hebrew words. Since Adonai had been substituted for YHWH, the Hebrew vowels for Adonai were inserted making it YaHoWaH, or Yahweh, or Jehovah.

But God has told us he does want us to know him and call on him. Through the Scriptures he has revealed exactly what he wants us to know. Though he uses his personal name, Yahweh, over 6,800 times in the Hebrew Bible, many still may consider him hidden because he reveals himself in such mind-boggling ways we can’t begin to comprehend the magnitude of who he is. Yet we know him intimately because of the faith he has put in our hearts and the ways he continually feeds and guides us.

In Exodus 3:14-15 God tells Moses his name: “I AM WHO I AM... (tell them) I AM sent you.” The letters of the Hebrew stem for the word “I AM” are the same letters used in Yahweh. After God calls himself “I AM”, he closely connects “I AM” with the name “the LORD”, the God of their fathers, and sends Moses on his way to lead Israel. We see “I AM” frequently in both the Old and New Testaments.

In our Bibles this name is translated LORD (as opposed to Lord, for Adonai). It is sometimes used in a shortened version as “Jah”, as in Hallelujah (Praise Jah [the LORD]) and Elijah (God is Jah [the LORD]).

Yahweh, LORD, is the name most closely associated with God’s covenant relationship with his people; this is the God of the patriarchs and of Old Testament worship.

What was instituted in Genesis 4:25-26 and why?

What is the significance of the name Yahweh, LORD, in Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 13:3-4?

In the People's Bible, Jeske says, "God deals with us as he dealt with Abram, not in terms of demand but primarily in terms of promise." (p119) What does this mean?

It has been said that Yahweh, LORD, is the God who controls and directs history, and that his actions are directional and their goal is his kingdom. Do you agree? What does this mean for you in your life?

From Philippians 3:7-11, 13b-14, what did this truth mean to Paul?

For discussion and personal meditation: What specific things are hindering your complete focus on this God-ordained goal?

What do we learn about Yahweh, LORD, from Isaiah 43:1-3a?

How might this passage influence your life?

What do we learn about Yahweh, LORD, from Exodus 34:6-7 and what does this mean to you?

The phrase “the LORD your God” is used in 240 of the 959 verses of Deuteronomy, for a total of 280 times. Over 50% of the occurrences of this phrase are in this book of law. What does this teach us about God’s law?

If you were to pray to Yahweh, LORD, what might you include in your prayer?

Closing Prayer / Psalm

Psalm 103 (NIV 11)

¹ Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
² Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—
³ who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,
⁴ who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,
⁵ who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.
⁶ The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
⁷ He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel:
⁸ The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.
⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever;
¹⁰ he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;
¹⁴ for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.
¹⁵ The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field;
¹⁶ the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.
¹⁷ But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children—
¹⁸ with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.
¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all.
²⁰ Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.
²¹ Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.
²² Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the LORD, my soul.

References:

Girdlestone, Robert Baker, *Synonyms of the Old Testament*, WM B Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 1951. Pg 18-44

Jeske, John C, *Connecting Sinai to Calvary*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 2005

Jeske, John C, *The People's Bible – Genesis*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 1991

Rose Publishing, *Names of God* pamphlet

Stein, Stanley C, *Theological and Practical Aspects of the Tetragrammaton*, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File, 2000

Wendland, Ernst H, *The People's Bible – Exodus*, CPH: St Louis, MO, 1992

Lesson 4

New Testament Names

*O LORD, our Lord, How Excellent is Your Name in all the Earth! –
Psalm 8:1*

Opening Prayer

Jesus – The Personal Name of the Son of God

Jesus' name is intimately linked to Yahweh; his name means "Yahweh is Savior." What comes to mind when you say the name "Jesus"?

Jesus was a common name in first century Palestine. To distinguish him from others, Jesus is sometimes referred to as Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the son of Joseph, or the carpenter's son. Read Matthew 1:20-21 to see how we are introduced to Jesus in the New Testament. Comment on any significance of giving the Son of God the name of a common man.

Why did Jesus come to this earth? Luke 19:10, John 3:16, Romans 5:9-11

Immanuel – God With Us

Though it seems a common name to us, the name Immanuel is used only three times in Scripture. Look at Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 8:8 and Matthew 1:22-23. How does knowing that God is always with us make a difference in your life? (Also see Psalm 139:7-12, Matthew 28:18-20, John 14:15-21, John 15:9-12, 1 Corinthians 3:16)

Christ / Messiah – The Anointed One

In the New Testament Jesus is identified as Christ or Messiah over 530 times, often in his own words. If anyone else claimed this title, it would be blasphemy. The Hebrew name “Messiah” and the Greek name “Christ” both mean “the Anointed One.” What does it mean to be anointed?

- Exodus 30:22-32
- 1 Samuel 15:1
- 1 Samuel 16:11-13

Why can we call Jesus the Messiah, the Anointed One? Read Isaiah 61:1 and Luke 4:16-21; also read Matthew 26:62-64a.

When was Jesus anointed?

The word “christen” comes from the Greek verb *chrío*, “to anoint”. How does this expand on your view of the blessings of christening or baptism?

Jehovah - I AM

As we learned last time, in Hebrew God’s personal name is formed with four consonants: YHWH. In the tenth century, Jewish scholars began supplying vowels to Hebrew words. For centuries, Adonai had been substituted for YHWH, so it was natural for the Hebrew vowels for Adonai to be inserted making it YaHoWaH or Yahweh or Jehovah. Jehovah is the New Testament (Latin) Yahweh, the God of the covenant promise.

In Exodus 3:13-14 God identifies himself as “I AM”, and the Jewish people always knew him as Yahweh, the true God, the God of the covenant promises. What do we learn about Jesus in John 8:48-59?

Can you think of other “I am” statements that Jesus made about himself? What do these images reveal to you about Jesus?

Has this study of God’s names given you new insights into your Bible reading and worship? What meant the most to you?

Closing Prayer

Christ the Word of God Incarnate CWS 750, vs 1, 6

*Christ, the Word of God incarnate, Lord and Son of Abraham;
Christ, the radiance of the Father, Perfect God, the great I Am;
Christ, the Light, you shine unvanquished, Light and life you bring to all;
Light our path with your own presence, Grant us grace to heed your call.*

*Christ, the Alpha and Omega; Christ, the first-born from the dead;
Christ, the life and resurrection; Christ, the Church’s glorious head:
Praise and thanks and adoration And unending worship be
To the Father and the Spirit And to you eternally.*

References:

Jeske, John C, *Connecting Sinai to Calvary*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 2005
Lange, Lyle W, *God So Loved the Word*, NPH: Milwaukee, WI, 2005
Spangler, Ann, *The Names of God*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2009