

Romans 12:9-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Marks of the True Christian

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.^[a] ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;^[b] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;^[c] for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Exodus 3:1-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Moses at the Burning Bush

3 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ²There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." ⁴When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And

he said, "Here I am." ⁵Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." ⁶He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

⁷Then the LORD said, "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, ⁸and 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, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ⁹The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." ¹¹But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" ¹²He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

The Divine Name Revealed

¹³But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" ¹⁴God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."^[a] He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD,^[b] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,
and this my title for all generations.

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Romans 12:9-21; Exodus 3:1-15

The God of Your Ancestors Becomes “I Am”

Kerra Becker English

The name of God matters. What one does in the name of God may matter even more. Moses is not so sure what he's getting into when he is commissioned by a voice from the burning bush. Who am I, he says, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Even a divine revelation presented on holy ground isn't quite enough to make him feel confident about this particular task. Go to the guy with the power of life and death at his fingertips and lead the charge to take away his free labor? Um, *mysterious voice from the burning bush*, are you sure that's what you want me to do? I dare say that many a prophet, apostle, and holy teacher have asked themselves the same question, “Why me, God?”

But after Moses reluctantly accepts his charge, he has another question for the voice coming from the burning bush. Who are you, exactly? Who is behind all this? What do you call yourself? Under whose authority shall I say that I'm bringing this message? If you're going to act in God's name, it's wise to have an idea about who God is, and what God represents. You could say to your neighbor, “Hey the god of my refrigerator told me that I need to come and take the steaks from your refrigerator and bring them home and sacrifice them to the god of the grill,” but I'm not sure that would get you very far. Let me know what happens if you decide to try it. But...the authority of God is powerful, not because I said so, but because of what we understand to be happening in the world because of who God is.

The response Moses receives from the voice tells us a few things about who God is or at least about how the God who spoke to Moses prefers to be understood – 1) We are connected to the God of our ancestors. History matters. What happened in the past is meaningful to remember as we try to make decisions about our future. The God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob is the same God we trust and worship now. And it's worth remembering that God has a much longer memory than what our short lives can give us. 2) God calls and commissions human beings, in this case Moses, to represent divine desires in the world and to carry out holy plans. God is not simply pulling the strings or “acting alone” but God shows compassion for the world through human beings who have agency, who can act with their own vision and voice. 3) And God's “forever” name is dynamic. God declares Godself to be more verb than noun. The great “I AM” is in this present moment, and will be in every present moment now and into the future. God does not stop, or sleep, or die to human concerns. And (lastly) as some mystical thinkers have suggested, God's name in this Hebrew context sounds like breathing, and is as close to us as the breath that sustains us.

So as Moses begins to act out of his calling and declare God's intentions into the world, he tethers himself to the past where God has called and chosen, and blessed and cursed, and provided and challenged, and bargained with and accepted all the fragility and all the tenacity that has blossomed within humanity. Moses looks back to how his people have known God, but he doesn't stay stuck in that place, he uses that place as the fulcrum to leverage God's promise of deliverance, deliverance out of slavery and into the Promised Land. He puts his trust fully into the God who was then, is with us now and will ever shall be, world without end, Amen. And then he uses that confidence of being led himself to sustain his leadership for the valiant cause of freeing Hebrew slaves.

In that way, I am behind Moses 100%. God is the one who frees the captive, and delivers the oppressed. That is some good news right there for God's people. They will be free – because of God. And yet, God will smite the terrible Egyptians, send them plagues of blood, and frogs, and locusts, and death, and God will drown the chariots that pursue the Israelites into the parted sea. God leads his people to victory. Yeah God! That is, Yeah God, unless you are an Egyptian parent whose son perishes during the plague known as Passover, or you are the spouse of a chariot driver, or you happen to already be a native in the Promised Land when the Israelites come to claim it – by force. Or did you forget that part? God then makes the switch from Deliverer to Punisher or Conqueror. Perspective is pretty dang important when it comes to understanding who God is, and what acts can truly be considered God-willed or God-chosen. It matters if you listen to this story and see God as the one who hears the cries of the distressed, or as the one who delivers the captive to freedom, or as the one who brings victory to the chosen, or as the one who gives permission to the God-fearing to claim the Promised Land for their own.

The name of God matters. What gets done in the name of God may matter even more. The story of the Exodus is formative, rich, and nuanced. How we read it and see ourselves in it is important, but simply appropriating it to our own context is dangerous. Can you see the view from the perspective of the Hebrew slaves? Good. That's what the Bible hopes you will see. But can you sympathize with the Canaanites who are already living in the Promised Land? Can you recognize the prosperity of your own times in the lure of turning back to Egypt rather than living with difficulty in the wilderness? Are we the Israelites, the Egyptians, or the Canaanites? Are we still trying to get out of Egypt or are we luxuriating in the Promised Land? Our story is not the same story, and yet being people of the book, we are encouraged to repeat the stories, to pray the Psalms that recall the saving power of God in times when deliverance is the only appropriate

metaphor. But in telling those stories over and over, we must recognize that we could be God's faithful chosen whose cry of distress has been heard, or we may be more closely associated with the ones who have entrapped and wounded God's beloved people, or we might be the ones who reached the Promised Land and promptly forgot it was God who brought us there. It's worth taking a deeper look at ourselves through these lenses.

Back to the name of God... since the God of the Exodus is the God of right now, how will we know whom God has chosen to speak God's desires into our world? Who will be the ones carrying out God's holy plans this week? Who speaks for God in the days after Moses, and now after Jesus? Well, having read many biblical stories, and been around many deeply faithful people, usually I find it's still the one trembling and asking, why me? Jesus received the mantle of the Holy Spirit during his baptism, as Moses received the weight of his calling at the burning bush. Those events marked an acceptance of the calling to live divided no more, to do only what God would have them do, to step out in faith even if it meant they would be challenging authority and risk their lives in the process.

We who are God-fearing but of the more ordinary variety of Christian, may or may not have a significant call story to tell involving God's voice in our ears. That burning desire to do one specific thing, or make known God's love in the world so profoundly that it would stir up hatred to the point of a cross, well, our lives may be simpler or less dramatic than that. And yet, I think we can still look to what gets done in the name of God as an indicator of who God is and how we understand our relationship to God in the world.

The name of God matters. What we do in the name of God may matter even more. It matters even more if we want to draw people closer to God rather than push them farther away. Paul, as one of the apostles wants to say, clearly and often, what it means to be a follower of the

one who saved him, Jesus Christ. It matters what Christians do under the banner of their Christianity, and we have to look no further than the Bible for our best examples of that. Sure even Paul had some ways I would find “misguided” in his cultural tone and context, but in this passage of scripture, he makes an excellent case for what are sometimes known as the Marks of True Christianity. These are the ones that we can choose to follow, whether or not we have heard God’s voice from a burning bush or a heaven descended dove.

He says, “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

This is sound advice my friends, the very picture of doing what’s right, what’s good in the name of God, or if you would, in the way of Jesus Christ. I know that in our world right now a lot of what is being done in the name of Jesus doesn’t look a lot like what Jesus was doing according to the gospels. It doesn’t match up with this picture Paul paints of blessing our persecutors and living peaceably. Striving for genuine love, honor, hope, patience, takes all the

prayerful perseverance we can muster. Reaching out to the stranger and feeding the hungry (even if or especially if they are our enemies), that's a tall order. It's a reminder though that when disaster hits, like it has in Texas with all the flooding, we put on our muck boots and get out there and help each other. That's what Christianity looks like. It's harder when we're dealing with internal evils rather than the results of bad weather. We have to be reminded, by the likes of Paul who knew the kind of evil that would kill another for what he or she believed, that we cannot be overcome by evil, but must seek in our own lives to overcome evil with the good.

Friends, the name of God matters. Who is the God of your life? Take some time to explore that intimate question. I don't even expect you to have all the same answers. God is for you, who God is for you. Remember, God is known by the name: "I AM." But always remember what you do in the name of God matters more. People know your God by how they know you. Let your love be genuine. You have been called – by your own baptism – to make God's love known. Amen.