

The Great I AM

MEG JENISTA

One of my favorite privileges as a pastor is pronouncing a couple husband and wife for the very first time. It is kind of a power trip to be able to identify and name a new reality into existence, because names matter. They give us our identity, our sense of belonging. Today on Groundwork, we conclude our series by discussing the names Jesus chose for Himself throughout His ministry. From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Meg, you talked in the top of the program in the intro about the wonderful moment in a wedding service when, as a pastor, you pronounce a couple husband and wife in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is great; and actually, I just did that a few weeks ago for our youngest daughter. That made it even more special, believe me, to be able to say to my new son-in-law and to my beloved baby child, “I pronounce you husband and wife.” It is a new reality, as you said; and the naming of it almost makes it so.

MEG JENISTA

It does make so. I have so much fun at rehearsal not saying it, because by saying it or by signing that piece of paper at the end of the ceremony a new reality comes into existence.

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes; and the name of God in the Bible, which is so overwhelmingly important, just through and through and through we have this reference again to the name – the holiness of the name – the nature of the name: For My namesake I will do this. A name much more than a label or a tag, but something that somehow is connected to the inner reality, the utmost being of who God is; and then the names of Jesus that He used for Himself and all through the Bible. We have been looking at the “I am” sayings, and in a sense, they are seven more names that Jesus gives Himself.

MEG JENISTA

Right; and when I think about the “I am” statements, when I think about the reality of coming to know God through His names, I am reminded of the story of Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3.

DAVE BAST

Right. That is the story where Moses has been exiled from Egypt. He has murdered an Egyptian. He has had to run away; and he finds himself in the Sinai Desert tending sheep, and forty years go by, so quite a while. Moses is now actually an old man, and he has this experience of God calling him out of a mysterious vision of a burning bush – a bush that is on fire, but it is not being consumed.

MEG JENISTA

Right. God makes the promise that He is at last going to redeem and rescue His people; a new generation of Israelites in Egypt will be led out of slavery; and oh, by the way, Moses, I need you to go to Pharaoh and make that happen.

DAVE BAST

Who, me? I can't talk. I am not... God, I think You must mean someone else, right?

MEG JENISTA

And God promises: I will be with you. But that is not enough for Moses. Moses says: But I am going to need a name. I am going to need You to tell me who You are if You are going to ask me to do this thing. And in verse 14, God gives Moses His name. God says:

¹⁴“I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites. I AM has sent me to you. ¹⁵Say to Israel, the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob has sent me to you, and this is My name forever; the name You shall call Me from generation to generation.

DAVE BAST

So, like Moses, maybe we should take our shoes off because this is some of the holiest ground in all of the Bible, God revealing His personal name – His innermost being – His true identity.

MEG JENISTA

But it is interesting because it was not exactly what Moses was looking for. Moses was looking for a specific, and God actually opens up this whole path of exploration and journeying: I AM WHO I AM – I will be who I will be – is also an appropriate translation of the Hebrew – it is an invitation to Moses to come and see; to watch; to journey; to discover who I AM in the process of relationship with Me.

DAVE BAST

And also to trust, I think, maybe along the way...

MEG JENISTA

Yes.

DAVE BAST

Because you could say: I always will be what I always have been. I am the same yesterday, today, and forever, as Hebrews says; but it is a name of mystery, too. I mean, yes, you find out who He is by trusting Him and by sort of joining the journey, but it is not exactly... I mean: I AM WHO I AM – that is a little bit hard to wrap your head around, isn't it?

MEG JENISTA

I think it is intentional. We do not want a God that we can name and label and box and put away on a nice, neat, safe shelf. We need a God who puts us in the middle of an adventure. It reminds me of Samwise Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy; and at one point, he talks about how he used to think that adventures were things that brave people went out and found and things that they did and they conquered; but he goes on to say, “But that is not the way of it with the tales that really matter. Folks seem to have just landed in them usually. I expect they had a lot of chances of turning back, but they didn't.” Then he goes on to say, “I wonder what sort of tale it is that we have fallen into?”

DAVE BAST

And that is what it is like to fall into the story of God – the God who is and was and is to come – the Great I AM – Jehovah. Actually, that is interesting, isn't it? That phrase: Jehovah, which occurs in some of the older translations of the Bible. So holy did this personal name of God become that the key to pronouncing it was lost because devout Jews refused to say the name. They would make references to it in other ways, as I know you know from studying Hebrew and the Old Testament and all that.

MEG JENISTA

And still today Orthodox Jews will not pronounce the name. They will use a different name of God because this mystery is too great and too wonderful for us to be able to sort of put a stamp on it and say: Oh, there it is. That is exactly how God is and who God is. Instead, we wonder: What kind of tale have we fallen into?

DAVE BAST

Yes, but we also might wonder, or perhaps the listener is wondering at this point: What does this have to do with the seven sayings in John; and why, by the way, this is an eighth program in this series? Well, maybe you can now hear what Jesus' listeners would have heard with all of these "I am"s echoing throughout; and sure, He would add qualifiers, but each one began with: I am – I am – I am: I am the bread of life; I am the good shepherd; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the true vine. Wow, every single one of them echoes all the way back to Exodus 3 and the burning bush.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

Hi. Welcome back to Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

MEG JENISTA

And I am Meg Jenista. Today is our eighth in a series on Jesus' "I am" statements, but there were only seven "I am" statements in Jesus' ministry.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they are all recorded in John, beginning in Chapter 6 with "I am the bread of life," and carrying through to Chapter 15, "I am the vine."

MEG JENISTA

So why are we doing an eighth section, then? It is because what Jesus does with His "I am" statements actually echoes back into eternity past and echoes forward into eternity future; and so Jesus' "I am" statements are grounded in God's revelation of Himself in Exodus 3 when He says, "I AM WHO I AM;" what was a mysterious, eternal statement is then given temporal, concrete form in the person of Jesus Christ.

DAVE BAST

So in a sense, it is an answer to: Well, what exactly are You? Okay, You always are, You always have been, You always will be the same, but exactly what is it? Can You pour some content into this? And God says: Yes, just wait a couple of thousand years – 1,500 years, Moses – until I come in person; and here is Jesus now, opening that up to us.

MEG JENISTA

And the beautiful thing about Jesus' "I am" statements is that He echoes the story of Israel in His own retelling of Himself; so He says, "I am the bread of life," reminding the Israelites that when they traveled through the wilderness, He fed them on manna. He says, "I am the light of the world," reminding the people that when they were wandering through the wilderness, He led them by a pillar of fire.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; and that theme of journey, as we pointed out, carries through up to the last one, where He says: Now here is where you put down roots. You abide in Me because I am the true vine and you are the branches, and you will live if you are connected to Me; and if you are not connected to Me, there is no life. But, not only does this sort of recap the seven "I am" sayings in John, there is an eighth "I am" saying in John.

MEG JENISTA

A hidden, covert, "I am" statement.

DAVE BAST

You are right, and a lot of people probably have skimmed past it and not even recognized it, and in a way, it is the most startling and amazing – can we say outrageous – of all the things Jesus said.

MEG JENISTA

It takes place in John 8, where Jesus is standing in the Temple. He is surrounded by the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law and the Israelites, and He pronounces, "I am the light of the world," and they know that He is adopting language from their own tradition and their life together. It is language that God uses to define who God is; and here is this man, who is making outrageous claims; well, what authority does He have to do that? Who is this rabble rouser in their midst? And, in fact, it is that question that is a current throughout Jesus' ministry that eventually leads to His trial and His crucifixion and His death.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and it is a current that runs straight through the rest of John Chapter 8, which, admittedly, is a pretty difficult chapter. There are some things in here that are hard to follow exactly what Jesus means. There are some other things that make us a little bit nervous. At one point, He says to the Jewish leaders: You are of your father, the devil. Yikes!

MEG JENISTA

Yes, yousa!

DAVE BAST

Is that what Jesus... I mean, one of our most cherished assumptions is everybody is a child of God, right? God loves everyone? Well, yes, except Jesus can just say these terrible, literally damning things; and that is not easy; but the key here is the challenge that they make to Him on the question of authority: What gives you the right to claim these things about yourself?

MEG JENISTA

And the answer to that seems to come in verse 51, when Jesus responds and says, "Truly I say to you, if anyone keeps My word, he will never see death." And they again go crazy, and Jesus says, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day."

DAVE BAST

Yes, wow; because they jump in and say: Wait a minute. We have got Abraham as our father. In other words, they appeal to their tradition, their religion, their heritage: We are the in-crowd. We know we are the children of Abraham; and Jesus says: Well, actually, Abraham... What he was really interested in was Me.

MEG JENISTA

Right; that is amazing; in fact, Jesus says exactly, "Truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM."

DAVE BAST

And that sets them off even further: Huh? What? Before Ab... Wait a minute! You are not only claiming that You existed before Abraham, You are saying, wait a second, 'before Abraham was, I AM?' I AM. Not before Abraham was, I was... 'before Abraham was, I AM...' Well, they got it. They heard that. We do not, maybe, get it. Maybe you have read that before and you have kind of skated past it, but go back to Exodus 3; what is He actually saying?

MEG JENISTA

Right; He is drawing the connection between Himself and God. He is saying: I am eternal. I am the word. I was present in creation. I was present with the Father in Abraham's story; in Moses' story; in every story that has existed until this day.

DAVE BAST

And not to put too fine a point on it, we do not know exactly how the personal name of God would have been pronounced, but most modern scholars, and even some modern versions of the Bible use the word, Yahweh. It is the four letters of the Hebrew word: To be, or I am; and then they put these vowels in and say... So,

what Jesus is actually, literally saying here is the name – the unpronounceable name – the name so holy no Jew would say it or repeat it – He is saying: I am Yahweh; and their reaction shows that they were not only deeply offended, but determined to kill Him for that.

MEG JENISTA

In fact, the end of the story comes where they pick up stones to stone Jesus – to kill Him – to run Him out of town; and somehow in the midst of that He slips away and the story continues; but eventually, the religious leaders and Pharisees have their way, and Christ is crucified; and that is their predominant accusation against Him.

DAVE BAST

So, this is the ultimate “I am” saying. It is the ultimate name that Jesus claims for Himself. It is the ultimate outrageous statement; and it seems to me that ultimately there are only two reactions that anyone can make to this: They either want to get rid of Him – kill Him – either literally like the original enemies did, or metaphorically: Let me just dump Him. I don’t want anything to do with Him; or they acknowledge it, they turn to Him; and let’s look at that real choice that faces each of us in just a bit.

Segment 3

MEG JENISTA

This is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Meg Jenista.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Meg, maybe this is a good point as we draw to the close of this whole series on the “I am” sayings, and Jesus’ greatest “I am” saying, which is simply, “I AM” – “before Abraham was...

MEG JENISTA

Full stop.

DAVE BAST

I AM.” Full stop. For the famous C. S. Lewis quote – maybe one of the most famous quotes ever. It is from *Mere Christianity*, about the choice that Jesus gives us because of His claims; and this is what Lewis wrote in a section he called: The shocking alternative: I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice: Either this Man was and is the Son of God or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon, or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God; but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

MEG JENISTA

I think that would be the saddest result of our series on the “I am” statements if people walked away and said: Oh, that is nice. That is nice that Jesus is the bread; I feel hungry sometimes and I feel better because of Jesus; or: Oh, He is the way and sometimes I feel lost, so that is nice. We do not serve a nice God – a nice savior. We serve the God of the universe Who was and is and is to come; and that is the choice we have to make.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. My thoughts when you say that phrase: He was and He is and He is to come – my thoughts turn to the book of Revelation – as you intended to direct them, I know – where the One who sits on the throne says that.

MEG JENISTA

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

I am the beginning and the end.

MEG JENISTA

That is the impulse of this section as we conclude the “I am” statements is that God has been God in all of His great mystery and majesty through eternity in the past; and God reveals Himself to Moses as I AM, but God reveals Himself to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. And the “I am” statements flesh that out – pun intended – and give us an opportunity to see again that Jesus is not just a great moral teacher. Jesus is claiming to be the God of eternity.

DAVE BAST

It goes back to the way, truth and life, and Jesus’ comment to Philip when Philip says: Hey, just show us God, will you? Tell us something about God. And Jesus says: Philip, don’t you get it yet? He who has seen Me has seen the Father – you want to know what God is like, look at Me – I AM. In revelation again not only does the One who sits on the throne say: I am the first and the last Who was and is and is to come; the Lamb says it too. The Son of God, Jesus Himself in His glorified being says: I am the Alpha and the Omega - everything from A to Z – I AM WHO I AM.

MEG JENISTA

It turns out Samwise Gamgee was a pretty wise Hobbit after all when he talks about the fact that we have landed in a journey and in a story that we do not fully understand, and that we have had opportunities to turn back, but at each turn we have the opportunity to continue journeying with Christ – to continue exploring and learning more and investing more in this God who is so far beyond our understanding. I wonder what kind of tale it is we have fallen into?

DAVE BAST

Well, and it is a tale about a dead man who is alive. You know, when Paul was hailed before one of the Roman officials, I think it was Festus in the book of Acts, and Festus is trying to figure out this case that he has inherited from his... he is the Roman governor. He says to somebody else: Well, it is about this dead man, Jesus, that Paul claims is alive. And as we think about these claims and this ongoing journey with the Christ who is alive – the One who is and was and is to come – why should we believe it? The answer is because He rose from the dead. It is one thing to make a claim. Anybody can claim anything. The lunatic – the man who thinks he is a poached egg – but why do we believe Jesus when He says: I AM. I AM THE GREAT I AM?

MEG JENISTA

Because He rose from the dead. He did not stop with words. He came alive again.

DAVE BAST

Exactly. You know, someone has said that the resurrection of Jesus is the great apologetic fact of Christianity – it is the thing that makes us believe it is all true. I think of a scene in one of Shakespeare’s plays, *Henry IV*, part 1, where a character says rather boastfully: I can call spirits from the vasty deep. And someone replies: Well, so can I; so can anyone; but will they come when you call them? You know, it is easy to make claims. Anybody can claim anything; but when Jesus makes these astounding statements and when He climaxes it by saying, “Before Abraham was, I AM,” we believe it because He rose from the dead. If He did not rise, there is no reason to listen to anything He said. If He did rise, then every claim is true. It is God’s stamp of vindication. It is God’s way of saying: He is telling the truth. He is who He claims to be.

MEG JENISTA

And as the risen Christ, He is also now ascended into heaven, and so we have the words from Revelation as our closing doxology: ^{1:4}Grace and peace to you from Him who is and who was and who is to come; from the seven spirits before His throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. For it is Him who loved us and freed us from our sins by His blood. ⁶And has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God our Father; to Him be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

DAVE BAST

Amen.

MEG JENISTA

Thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future Groundwork programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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