

WHAT'S IN A NAME? EXODUS 20:7 SERMON NOTES

June 21, 2026

When you see or hear a name, in an instant your mind is filled with information: a face, a voice, mannerisms, personality and character traits, personal encounters and shared experiences. These mental gymnastics occur because our names are containers for our identity. The idea of a name containing identity and character is especially true with God, and He is very jealous that that name be honored, revered, and used appropriately. For this reason the Third Commandment reminds us, **"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain."**

The Hebrew word is *shav*; it means vanity, emptiness, falsehood, or worthlessness. The Third Commandment is a solemn warning against treating the name of God with triviality and calling His truthfulness and integrity into question. It is basically the act of emptying the container of God's name, pouring its contents out onto the ground as if they were worthless. Small wonder, then, that **the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.**

As with all the commandments, we humans have broken the third in ways that are both subtle and egregious, from outright blasphemy to mindless chatter to mild oaths. These are born out of our tendency to embellish what we say for effect. The Apostle James warns us, **"Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven, or by earth, or by anything else. Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'No', no, or you will be condemned."** (James 5:12) That may sound harsh to us in our day but such is the importance of our words to God.

We can train ourselves to keep this commandment by rigorous discipline but keeping the letter of the law is no guarantee against breaking it in the heart, and the heart is where God wants to do His work. A more effective way would be to know the contents of God's identity, i.e. what has He poured into the golden chalice that is His name. What follows is not a comprehensive list of God's various names but it is sufficient to bring us into alignment with God's attitude toward His name and His command to keep it holy.

1. **Elohim** (Genesis 1), a plural word meaning "gods," but in context refers to a Supreme Deity. It's intriguing that the Creator God of Genesis, Christians understand this plurality as the revelation of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each present and fully engaged at the creation of all that we know to exist.

2. **Yahweh**, "self-existent, eternal." Appearing first in Gen. 2:4, the meaning of this name was not explicitly explained in Scripture until Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:14-15). God wanted His chosen people to know that there is only one who in and of Himself possesses being, which leaves no room for any other being to worship. That this was indeed a new revelation is confirmed in Exodus 6:2-3, where we read that **"God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them.'"**

3. **El Shaddai**, "God Almighty."

4. **Adonai**, "Lord and Master." Historically, the devout Jew has heeded the warning to not misuse God's name and have avoided pronouncing and even writing the sacred name. Every time readers of the Hebrew bible encountered YHWH they would say 'Adonai' instead. The vowels of Adonai placed into the consonants of YHWH give us the name we use, Yahweh or Jehovah.

5. **El Elyon**, "God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth." (Gen. 14:18-20) In his capacity as priest of God Most High, Melchizedek was a type or prefiguring of Jesus Christ. Abraham recognizes this and gives Melchizedek a tenth—a tithe—of the spoils of war. The name El Elyon reminds us of God's ownership of all there is, and His grace and generosity in allowing us to be His stewards. It calls us to praise Him exuberantly and also to imitate His generosity toward our neighbor.

6. **El Olam**, "Everlasting God" (Genesis 21:33). This seemingly inconsequential vignette in which Abraham settles a dispute over a well with his Philistine neighbor, Abimelech, reminds us that the Everlasting God is involved in the smallest of our experiences, especially our interactions with those with whom we come into close contact. We are ambassadors of El Olam. See also Ps. 90:2.

7. **El Roi**, "God of Seeing" (Gen. 16) Abused and cast out into the wilderness by her mistress, Sarah, Hagar is confronted by the angel of the Lord, who knows her plight and tells her to return to Sarah, that the child she will bear will be called Ishmael, and through him her descendants will be beyond number. So (Hagar) called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," (or El Roi) for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (Gen. 16:13) As the all-seeing, all-powerful, supreme God, there is nothing that can or will escape His knowledge. This is at once unsettling and comforting, for although "nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight," (Heb. 4:13) "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose." (Rom. 8:28)

8. **Yahweh Jireh**, "The Lord will provide." (Genesis 21), The promise of a great nation descending from Abraham was put to the test when God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. But just as the fatal stroke of the knife was to fall God called out to Abraham and stopped him. Abraham's reward was righteousness in God's eyes and the return of his son. Sacrifice demands blood, however, and God provided for that through a ram who had gotten tangled in a thicket. , too. Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide," (Gen. 22:14)

9. **Yahweh Rapha**, "The Lord who heals." (Ex. 15:26) The heart of Yahweh Rapha is to heal the brokenness of mankind. He has the power to heal a broken, diseased body; broken, unraveled emotions (Ps. 34:18); broken, confused minds (Dan. 4:34); and most importantly,

broken, sin-ravaged hearts (Psalm 103:2-4) Our greatest disease is the sickness of sin, which has the power to destroy the soul and keep us from the God who loves us.

10. **Yahweh Rohi**, “The Lord, my shepherd” (Gen. 48:15) The Lord may not always heal the way we want to be healed, but as our Shepherd, he knows how to heal the way we need to be healed. Yahweh Rohi’s shepherding is tender and nurturing, but also fiercely defensive against those who seek to steal and destroy. (Ps. 23, Ezekiel 34:11-16)

11. **Yahweh Sabaoth**, “The Lord of Hosts” (I Sam. 1:11) As Yahweh Elohim, the Lord of Lords, He commands the entirety of the heavenly armies against the schemes of the devil and his demons. Yahweh Sabaoth is used throughout the writings of the prophets, signaling the pervasive, demonic idolatry that polluted the land. As believers, we fight our spiritual battles in the might of the Lord of Hosts when we put on the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6 and resist the forces of darkness that assail us. Yahweh Sabaoth becomes Yahweh Nissi, the Lord our banner.

12. **Yahweh Nissi**, “The Lord our Banner” (Ex. 17:11-13, 15) In war, the battle standard was fiercely defended because it was a source of inspiration and courage. Throughout the fight against the Amalekites, Moses himself was a human battle standard as he stood on the top of a hill with the staff of God in his upraised hands, a picture of intercessory prayer. But as his hands grew weary, he needed his brothers-in-arms to assist him. Yahweh Nissi is our battle standard, but sometimes we need the unwavering faith of our brother or sister to embody that standard.

13. **Yahweh Shalom**, “The Lord is Peace” (Judges 6:23-24) Through all of life’s trials it all, God grants something the world pines for but can’t attain—peace. This name was first spoken by a man who professed meager abilities but was chosen by God to bring peace to Israel—Gideon. In man’s world, peace comes through strength and might. In God’s world, peace comes from being humble and yielded to Yahweh Shalom. This shalom is beautifully expressed in Isaiah 26:3, **“You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”** Mankind is desperate for peace, yet despite all of the mantras and pleas, we seem to live in as hostile and violent a world as ever was. This is because the much-craved peace can only come through the One who can truly subdue the conflict within—Yahweh Shalom.

14. **Jesus**. All of these names of God find their fullest measure in the person of Jesus Christ. Before his incarnation, he was known as the angel of the LORD, interacting with select individuals to carry out God’s will in redemptive history. At his incarnation he became the man, Jesus, which means “Yahweh is salvation.”

In Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1:19). Chosen before the creation of the world to be our Savior and Redeemer, he came to reveal and explain God the Father (John 1:18). He is the incarnate El Olam, God eternal (John 1:1); he is El Shaddai, God Almighty, commanding man and nature, even death itself, to do his bidding; he is El Roi, the

God who sees into our hearts, and knows our deepest needs. He is Yahweh Rapha, the Lord who heals our iniquities by the death-strikes he received at the hands of sinful men. He is the very embodiment of the Lord who provides, Yahweh Jireh, freely giving of himself to take the sacrificial knife for our sins. And making peace through the blood of his cross, he is our Yahweh Shalom. He is our Yahweh Rohi, our good and faithful shepherd, who tends, nurtures, guides, protects, and preserves his flock. He goes before us as our Yahweh Nissi, the banner under which we carry the truth of his gospel to sinners weak and wounded, sick and sore.

Now, having ascended to the right hand of the Father and one with the Father, Jesus sits enthroned as El Elyon, God Most High. From that exalted position, he is preparing to summon the armies of heaven and that great cloud of heavenly saints to return as Yahweh Sabaoth to reclaim this earth for his glory. And having brought heaven and earth into unity, our Adonai, Jesus, will be acclaimed by all humanity as Yahweh Elohim, the Lord of Lords. On that great day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ—the name that is above every name—that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:10-11)

15. **Abba** “Father” (Gal. 4:6) This last name is reserved exclusively for God’s true children, Jesus’ brothers and sisters in faith. But just not “father” in a distant, formal sense. “Dad”, “Daddy,” even. What a privilege! The great I AM, Yahweh Elohim, says we can call him “Dad.” The One who shook the earth when He gave His holy law, and who will shake the heavens at the end of days, the One who gave us life and commands our destiny—that God—is our Dad. The Jews feared even pronouncing or writing the name. We can call it out at will. Equal reverence—different standing, all because of Christ.

There are other names we could put in the container, but this is enough for us to ask the question: Is that the name we want to misuse? Is this the name we want to trivialize? Is this the name we want to empty of its eternal power and attributes in order to emphasize something that catches our fancy? God’s name—whether we speak of God the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit—is a name that commands our reverence, our worship, and our full attention. And those are the actions that turn the negative command into a positive affirmation.

The Psalmist declares, **“O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt His name together.”** (Ps. 34:3) The verse exhorts us all to take the truth contained in God’s name and “blow it up”—write it large for others to see. We are people of the Name, and are called to worship and exalt that name in all of its divine prismatic colors. And when we do that together as the body of Christ on earth we tap into the ongoing heavenly concert of praise and transmit the glories of His name to everyone we encounter here on earth. Misuse the Name above all Names? May it never be! You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain. But you shall praise it in all of its wondrous glory! Amen!