

**“On a Stack of Bibles”**

Exodus 3:7-15

*Series: Breaking Bad: God’s Commands for a Better Life*

*Week 3. Do Not Misuse God’s Name*

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When the California hippies of the 60s had children in the 1970s they didn't name them Melissa or Paul. They called them things like Time Warp, Spring Fever, and Moonbeam. Can you imagine being a teacher with a classroom full of such names? So to make the first day of school run smoothly, Joan asked the parents of her kindergarten students to write the child’s name on a name tag. That’s when she met Fruit Stand. By now Joan was used to such names and she wanted to make him feel at home. “Would you like to play with the blocks, Fruit Stand?” she asked. “Fruit Stand it’s time to clean up.” “Fruit Stand, come get your snack.” At dismissal time, the teachers led the children out to the buses. “Fruit Stand, do you know where to get off the bus?” He didn't answer. He hadn't answered them all day. It didn't matter. The teachers instructed the parents to write the child’s bus stop on the back of their name tags. Joan turned over the tag. There, neatly printed, was the word "Anthony." <sup>1</sup>

What is your name God?

A Voice speaks to Moses from a burning bush and says:

So now, go. I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:10).

That seems like a big job for a nobody like Moses. So he says,

‘Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’  
And God said, ‘I will be with you’” (Exodus 3:11-12)

Right. Yeah. Sure. You’ll be with me. So...who are you?

Moses said to God, ‘Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?’” (Exodus 3:13)

It’s a fair question. After all, if Moses says to the Israelites, “Okay guys. It’s quittin’ time. You can stop building the pyramids. We’re outta here.” They’ll say, “Oh yeah?

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<sup>1</sup> Luanne Oleas in Salinas, Calif., *Reader's Digest*.

Who told you it's quittin' time?" "Uh, this Voice from a burning bush told me." They'll say, "Right. Yeah. Sure. Sounds like you've been smokin' some burning bush."

Why doesn't Moses know God's name? After four hundred years in Egypt, did they forget? Were they confused by all the Egyptian gods? Perhaps God never told them His name. This God is different. He forbids them to make any images of Him, He demands they only worship Him and He keeps His name a secret. Invisible, indivisible and indescribable – this is one strange God.

Why does God conceal His name? Names are doorways. They allow you to get near someone, to know someone. You know you are close to someone when you are on a first name basis. Legendary singer Frank Sinatra hated it when comedians did impressions of him. He actually had his lawyer send cease and desist letters to anyone who'd even think of imitating him. He sent these to everyone except Joe Piscopo on Saturday Night Live. He actually liked Piscopo's impression of him. Joe recalls,

And when I met him, he said, "Hey Joe, baby, come here." I felt so comfortable, I said, "Can I call you Frank?" He said, "No." He was just a wonderful guy.<sup>2</sup>

We call certain professionals, such as physicians and professors, by their last names to show our respect. When I go to Physical Therapy conventions with my wife we often run into her students. They praise her up and down to me. "Dr. Hoglund gave this wonderful lecture. Dr. Hoglund has a great way of explaining hard concepts. Dr. Hoglund knows so much." And I feel about this big next to her. Then they say, "What's your name?" And I puff out my chest and say, "The REVEREND Dr. Hoglund." They just stare at me and then go back to praising my wife. A few older members of my first church didn't like calling me by my first name. They were taught to show the utmost respect to their pastor. They probably called me other names behind my back, but they were always reverent when the reverend was around.

Names can open doors. When I call some of you on the phone, I hear that suspicious defensive greeting you save for telemarketers ... until I say my name. Then the tone in your voice changes ... most of the time.

And names reveal something about their owners. Some of our last names came from the occupations of our ancestors: Smith, Carpenter, Miller. Others are named for their place of origin. My mother's maiden name was Goomrigian. Imagine a lifetime of hearing teachers butcher that name. There probably weren't enough spaces on the SAT form for it. My grandfather found creative ways to deal with his name. In a restaurant, my grandfather would give his name for a reservation. When the waiter called out "Smith, party of 4" he'd say, "Cone on. That's us." But when I went to Armenia last fall, they told me a host of information I never knew about my family. All because of a name.

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<sup>2</sup> James Miller and Tom Shales, *Live From New York: The Complete, Uncensored History of Saturday Night Live* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 2015) 226f.

“What is your name God?” Moses asks. God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:14)

In Hebrew, God’s name is *Yahweh*. It is based on the Hebrew verb: to be. He is not the storm god, the sun god or the earth god. He is the Source of all things. He is the Creator of all things, He is the Lord of all things. He is. He was before there was anything and He will be after everything is gone. This is the God who sends Moses to free His people. This Lord, the one true God, wants the Israelites to know Him, to be close to Him, to have access to Him, to be on a first name basis with Him.

Yahweh gives His name to the Israelites so they can call Him for help. In the Bible, when you make a promise in the name of Yahweh, when you take a vow in the name of Yahweh, when you sign a covenant in the name of Yahweh, when you cry out in the name of Yahweh you are asking for the awesome, incredible power of the Great I AM to help you. There is power in the name of the Lord – a power that should never be abused. For this reason, the third commandment states,

You shall not misuse the name of Yahweh your God, for Yahweh will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (Exodus 20:7).

Does this rule forbid us to use swear words? Certainly no Christian should ever use the name of the Lord or the name of Jesus as a curse word. Jesus said that filthy words on our lips come from filth within (Mark 7:15). In last week’s Scripture Paul said,

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. (Ephesians 5:4)

Profanity in our day is out of control. Words that once were forbidden on television are now coming out of kids’ mouths. Curse words are like second hand smoke. They poison the atmosphere and they are harmful to children. Let’s stop polluting the air. Let’s be counter cultural. Let God change your vocabulary.

Yet the third commandment is not so much about swearing with God’s name as it is swearing in God’s name. Recently Lisa and I had to sign our names thirty times on multiple documents. Why do they make it so hard to get a library card? Your name is you. When you sign your name, you agree, you promise, you commit yourself. When you make a promise in the name of the Lord, you ask God to help you keep your vow. It’s as if you are asking God to sign the document with you. If you make a promise in the name of the Lord with no intention of keeping it or if you break it because it is inconvenient or difficult, the prophet Jeremiah says it is as grave a sin as theft, murder, adultery and idolatry (Jeremiah 7:9). Since God keeps His Word, he expects us to keep ours.

In Jesus’ day, some avoided making a promise in God’s name by making it in the name of heaven or earth or in the name of Jerusalem (Matthew 5: 33-37). They set up clever loopholes with an escape clause. It’s similar to swearing on a stack of Bibles.

Since they didn't make a vow in the name of the Lord, they can break it whenever they wish. Jesus confronts this head on. God is in heaven, in Jerusalem and everywhere on earth. No promise can be made without Him knowing it. So if you say, "Yes" to a promise, then follow through and do it. Otherwise just say, "No."

Our world needs people who will keep their word. Every day we make promises. Some are small, such as washing the dishes or taking out the trash, some are important, such as taking your child on an outing or visiting a friend in the hospital. And some promises are life changing: job contracts, community service, wedding vows, baptismal vows, commitments to your Growth Group, ministry or mission. Your entire life is shaped and guided by your promises. You are the promises you make.

Sadly, it seems many today are breaking their promises. I know there are many reasons why people break their vows and I don't wish to heap more guilt upon you. Yet why do we break a promise? Keeping a promise always costs you.

- Keeping your promise to spend time with your family may cost you the chance to get ahead in your business.
- Keeping your promise to read God's Word and pray may cost you time spent binge watching TV shows or playing video games or sleeping.
- Keeping your promise to save for your future or give to the poor may cost you the big vacation you want to take or the expensive item you wanted to buy.
- Keeping your promise to your spouse will definitely cost you the temptation to flirt with someone else. In fact all temptations involve breaking a promise.
- Keeping your promise to share your faith may cost you the approval of friends.

Keeping promises is costly. But ultimately, what it costs us can be traced back to self-centeredness – what I want to do with my time, money and energy. It comes down to a question of whose time, money and energy is it and who is in charge? The world tells us these things belong to us and we should spend them the way the world says. The Lord says our time, money and energy come from Him. He blesses us with them. He wants us to bless others with them. And He wants to help us keep our promises. When you feel like breaking a promise, ask yourself, "What will it cost me to keep this promise?" and "Why am I unwilling to pay that cost?" Then ask, "Who can help me keep it?"

If you are finding it hard to keep the vows and promises you make to God, why not keep God at the center of your vows and promises? Draw on the incredible power of God. Invite the Lord into your marriage, into your relationship with your child or your parent, into your work, your ministry at Woodside. Don't try to do it on your strength. God always keeps His promises and He will help you keep yours. How do we know God keeps His promises? In the Old Covenant God says "I AM." In the New Covenant God says, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). The Old Covenant is carved on stone tablets. The New Covenant is carved in the flesh of Jesus, sealed with His blood, powered

by the Holy Spirit. And if Jesus was willing to die for you, you can bet your life that He will keep His promises to you.

There is another way we can misuse God's Name. We can give God or Jesus a bad name by the way we act as Christians. Three charges often leveled at the Church are hypocrisy – our walk doesn't match our talk, cruelty – we condemn and hurt others, and lethargy – we don't do anything. Do our actions reflect badly on God's reputation?

Former NBA star Edward Arnett Johnson has a strong character and community service. He works with children and giving motivational speeches. But when another former NBA star Eddie "Fast Eddie" Johnson—was arrested in 2006 for assault and burglary some media outlets around the country confused the two men, resulting in a case of mistaken identity. Edward Johnson's phone started ringing off the hook with shocked friends and callers who pointed fingers. Johnson's day quickly fell apart. He said,

The thing that disappointed me the most is some people were overzealous enough to think it was me and attack me with a ferocity I can't comprehend. That's the part that didn't allow me to sleep last night. My name is everything.<sup>3</sup>

If we bear the name of Jesus, are we giving Jesus a bad name? Not one of us is perfect like Jesus. We will make mistakes. We continue to sin. Yet that's not an excuse for trying to give Jesus a good name. Some Christians hit others over the head with God's Truth. Other Christians are so loving they never tell God's Truth. The solution is for you and I to live God's Truth while we give God's Love. If Christians are known for compassion not condemnation, then people will want to know the God of Truth. The number one question Christians ask is "How do I live in this world and not be of it?" This Fall we will focus on this question with a church-wide study called "Different." We'll learn how to think different, be different, make a difference. We ask every person and every Growth Group to join us. Let's lift up the Name of Jesus and draw all people to Him!

Hiram earned a bad name for himself. He failed at business and lost money in bad investments. His greatest success in life came from serving in the military which he had to resign because of his greatest weakness – alcoholism. Now completely destitute he was forced to swallow his pride and accept the charity of his in laws in order to feed his wife and four children. Both his parents and his wife's parents thought Hiram a disgrace. He proved them partially right when he made a mess of farming and was reduced to selling firewood on the streets of St. Louis. One Christmas he pawned his gold pocket watch just to buy presents for his children.

He projected a defeated air on the St. Louis streets, a man with the life beaten out of him. His injured pride cast a deep gloom over him. The depression visible in his expressionless face, seamy clothes, and absence of mirth were discernible to

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<sup>3</sup> Eddie Pells (AP National Writer), Houston Chronicle (8-11-06)

those around him. His need to sell firewood on the streets, huddled in a faded blue army coat, broadcast his decline to the world.<sup>4</sup>

He reached the bottom when he slunk back home to be a clerk in his father's store.

At this point Hiram had nothing to his name...except the loving support of his wife, his friend John, and his deep and abiding faith in God. These three helped him to keep his promise to avoid alcohol. Despite a few slips over the years he stayed sober and started to rise from destitution and depression. Before she died his mother-in-law said,

Remember what I say. That little man will fill the highest place in this government. His life is now hid under a bushel, but circumstances will occur, and at no distant day, when his worth and wisdom will be shown and appreciated.

She was right. Hiram returned to a military life and rose through the ranks to eventually command the largest army in the world. It was a failed businessman, farmer and recovering alcoholic who succeeded in saving the Union of the United States. Hiram, or as we know him by his middle name Ulysses Grant, not only won the Civil War but went on to be the two-term 18<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Even more than Lincoln, Ulysses Grant helped America keep the promise of the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. He adamantly fought for the civil rights of newly freed slaves during Reconstruction. When he died in 1885 one and half million people attended the seven mile long funeral procession in New York City. Today his equestrian statue sits outside the U.S. Capitol building of the nation he fought to save in war and peace.

In the Name of God, with the help of God, he kept his promise.

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<sup>4</sup> Ron Chernow, *Grant*, (New York, NY: Penguin, 2017)

