

Back to Basics: God the Father

Genesis 1:1-5 ¹

Her name was Eunice. A native of Romania, she had come to the States with her new husband not long after the overthrow of Nicolai Ceausescu, Romania's long-time Communist dictator.

Eunice was very bright and persistently inquisitive. She wanted to become a psychologist, and she took several of my courses in the psychology of religion. Never afraid to ask questions in class, Eunice also visited me frequently in my office to pursue her quest for understanding.

It was during one of those office visits, as I was trying to understand Eunice's passion more fully, that I happened to ask what her name was in her own language. Although I don't remember what she told me, it was a Romanian name that sounded nothing at all like "Eunice," and in a moment of culture-shock I realized that if I didn't even know her "real name," I didn't know the real Eunice at all.

For the next five weeks, my morning messages will be on the theme of "Back to Basics." The five messages will be "God the Father," "God the Son," "God the Spirit," "God's Book," and "God's Purpose." This morning we begin with the First Person of the Trinity, whom we often call "God the Father."

As was the case with my relationship with Eunice, when you or I are first introduced to someone, the very first thing we usually want to know about them is their name. If we don't know someone's name, it's difficult and uncomfortable to address them or to carry on a conversation with them.

You may remember a famous conversation of that sort that Moses had in the Sinai desert with a burning bush that talked: ¹³ *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?"*

¹⁴ *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.'* " ¹⁵ *God also said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you.' 'This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation'" (Exodus 3:13-15).*

Scholars believe that this Name given to Moses is pronounced **YAHWEH**, but the truth of the matter is that we don't really know how to pronounce this Name. Because The Name represents God's power, God's authority, and God's very nature, the Jews would not—and still do not—speak or write the Name, for they consider The Name too holy for such use.

So for the last 3,000 years, no one has been sure about the pronunciation, and whenever YHWH (the "Tetragrammaton") appears in the Scriptures, the Jews pronounce the word, ADONAI, instead. Through the centuries, when scribes came to the Name, **YHWH**, in the text, they wrote the vowels from ADONAI as a reminder to the reader not to pronounce The Name.

"ADONAI" means "Lord," and whenever the word "LORD" appears in all caps in your Bible, it is translating the Tetragrammaton. In some English Bibles, notably the King James

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on October 14, 2012.

Version, the Tetragrammaton is translated as “Jehovah,” which is a name for God that comes from combining the consonants of YHWH with the vowels of ADONAI. The word “Jehovah” doesn’t actually appear in the biblical text, and it’s a relatively recent word, going back only to about the sixteenth century.

Just as the introduction of a human person involves the disclosure of a personal name, so God’s self-revelation in the Bible is accompanied by the giving of God’s Name. There are many names given for God in the Bible, and each one helps us see a different facet of Who God Is. Think, for example, of the various dimensions of your own personality represented by various combinations of your given names and by your various nicknames. Variations on YHWH in the Hebrew Scriptures include:

Yahweh-Jireh: “The Lord will Provide” (Genesis 22:14);

Yahweh-Nissi: “The Lord is My Banner” (Exodus 17:15);

Yahweh-Mekaddesh: “The Lord Sanctifies” (Exodus 31:13);

Yahweh-Shalom: “The Lord is Peace” (Judges 6:24);

Yahweh-Sabaoth: “The Lord of Hosts” (1 Samuel 1:3; Jeremiah 11:20);

Yahweh-Rohi: “The Lord is My Shepherd” (Psalm 23:1);

Yahweh-Tsidkenu: “The Lord is Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:5-6, 33:16);

Yahweh-Shammah: “The Lord is There” (Ezekiel 48:35).

The most frequently used name for God in the Old Testament is “**Elohim**,” which is translated simply as “God.” Elohim is a plural word in a form that we call the “plural of majesty.” The plural of majesty is what the Queen of England uses when she speaks of herself. You’ve probably noticed that she never says, “I,” but rather, “we.”

The plural of majesty is an indicator of greatness, an indicator that would be extremely presumptuous for anyone to use who is not actually a king or a queen. Even the President of the United States doesn’t use that form of self-address.²

The root of Elohim is “El,” a fairly generic Middle-Eastern attribution of deity from which “Allah” also comes. The Hebrew Scriptures add several modifiers to “El” to reveal various attributes of God’s character:

El-Shaddai: “God of the Mountains” or “Almighty God” (Genesis 17:1-2; Exodus 6:3);

El-Elyon: “The Most High God” (Numbers 24:16; 2 Samuel 22:14; Psalm 18:13);

El-Olam: “God of Eternity” or “God the Everlasting One” (Genesis 21:33; Psalm 90:2; Isaiah 26:4);

El-Berith: “God of the Covenant” (Judges 9:46);

El-Roi: “God Who Sees Me” (Genesis 16:13).

Other familiar words with this root include “**Isra-el**” (“One Who is Ruled by God”), “**Beth-el**” (“House of God”), and “**Peni-el**” (“Face of God”). When Jesus cried out to God from the Cross, “*My God, My God,*” He used a variant of this word, “**Eloi**” (Mark 15:34).³

² It is also possible that the plural Elohim implies the idea of the three persons of the Trinity, a reality that would only be revealed in the New Covenant.

³ Other symbolic titles for God include “**Ancient of Days**” (Daniel 7:9, 13, 22), “**Rock**” (Deuteronomy 32:18; Psalm 19:14; Isaiah 26:4), “**Refuge**” (Psalm 9:9; Jeremiah 17:17), “**Fortress**” (Psalm 18:2; Nahum 1:7), and “**Shield**” (Genesis 15:1; Psalm 84:11), among many others.

But the key change Jesus made in our understanding of the First Person of the Trinity was His invitation to us to call God “our Father” (Matthew 6:9). While the Hebrew Scriptures refer to God as “father” a few times,⁴ there is no suggestion in the Old Testament of that radical relationship to which Jesus and the New Testament invite us with the term, “**Abba**,” which literally means, “Daddy” (Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6).

Jesus referred to the Creator as “my Father” more than three dozen times in the Gospels, but even more amazing, Jesus told us that “**Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father**” (John 14:9). In Jesus, God has revealed Himself to us as **passionate and personal**. God is not the impersonal “force” of Star Wars. God is not an “it.”

In Jesus, we’ve seen God’s love. Through Jesus we have access to God and to God’s heart (John 14:6). And to those who place their faith in Jesus is given the right to become God’s children, together with the privilege of calling God “Father” (John 1:12).⁵

Following Jesus, the authors of the New Testament refer to God more than three dozen times as “*the Father*” (Acts 2:33), as “*our Father*” (Romans 1:7), and as “*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Corinthians 1:3). Although on one level, thinking of Jesus’ relationship with His Father is not difficult, being understood through the template of our own human relationships, the relationship between Jesus and God the Father and between Jesus and God the Spirit is far more complex than that. We refer to Father, Son, and Spirit together as “**the Trinity**,” and thinking about that requires more time than we have this morning. I’ll write about the Trinity in this week’s *Laptop*.

The truth of the matter is that we could talk for hours and hours *about* God. We could talk about how God is self-existent, unchanging, unlimited by time or space and with neither beginning nor ending. With the psalmist, we could agree that God has unlimited, perfect knowledge, and that God is present in all places at once. These attributes are surely important. They help us understand a little more about God. But God’s invitation to us and our chief spiritual goal is **to know God in personal relationship, not simply to know about God**.

For some of us, the idea of God as Father is winsome and welcome, because our lives have been blessed with earthly fathers who have made it easy to think of God in such a way. For others of us, the failings of our earthly fathers make the very idea of God as Father frightening, repulsive, or simply unimaginable.

Robert Mulholland, Jr. once knew a woman whose life was the result of an unwanted pregnancy. She struggled immensely with the idea that God purposed us into being before the foundation of the world. She struggled with this idea of God as her Father. Here’s how he told her story:

“Her mother was a prostitute, and she was the accidental byproduct of her mother’s occupation. Although her life’s pilgrimage had brought her to faith in Christ, blessed her with a deeply Christian husband and beautiful children, and given her a life of love and stability, she was obsessed with the need to find out who her father was. This obsession was affecting her marriage, her family, and her life.

“She told how one day she was standing at the kitchen sink, washing the dishes, with tears of anguish and frustration running down her face into the dishwasher. In her agony she

⁴ See Exodus 4:22; Psalm 68:5, 89:26, 103:13; Jeremiah 31:9; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 2:10.

⁵ All humans are God’s creatures, but not all humans are God’s children, though all are invited to become so.

cried out, ‘Oh, God, *who* is my father?’ Then, she said, she heard a voice saying to her, ‘I am your father.’

“The voice was so real she turned to see who had come into the kitchen, but there was no one there. Again the voice came, *‘I am your father, and I have always been your father.’*”

“In that moment she knew the profound reality of which Paul [speaks in many of his letters]. She came to know that deeper than the ‘accident’ of her conception was the eternal purpose of a loving God, who had spoken her into being before the foundation of the world.”⁶

John Fountain, a professor of journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, told a similar story in the NPR series, “This I Believe”:

“I believe in God,” he wrote. “Not that cosmic, intangible spirit-in-the-sky that Mama told me as a little boy ‘always was and always will be.’ But the God who embraced me when Daddy disappeared from our lives—from my life at age four—the night police led him down the stairs, away from our front door, in handcuffs. The God who warmed me when we could see our breath inside our freezing apartment, when the gas was disconnected in the dead of another wind-whipped Chicago winter, and there was no food, no hot water, and little hope.

“I believe in the God who held my hand when I witnessed boys in my ‘hood swallowed by drugs, by hopelessness, and by death; the God who claimed me when I felt like ‘no-man’s son,’ amid the absence of any man to wrap his arms around me and tell me, ‘everything’s going to be okay,’ to speak proudly of me, to call me son.

“I believe in God, God the Father, embodied in his Son Jesus Christ. The God who allowed me to feel his presence—whether by the warmth that filled my belly like hot chocolate on a cold afternoon, or that voice, whenever I found myself in the tempest of life’s storms, telling me (even when I was told I was ‘nothing’) that I was something, that I was his, and that even amid the desertion of the man who gave me his name and DNA and little else, I might find in Him sustenance.

“I believe in God, the God whom I have come to know as father, as Abba—Daddy. It wasn’t until many years later, standing over my father’s grave for a conversation long overdue, that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized that in his absence, I had found another. Or that he—God the Father, God my Father—had found me.”⁷

And that, my friend, is the God Who invites you into a Love and into a Family like none you have known before. While it’s not always easy to talk *about* God, it’s often easier to talk about God than it is to truly *know* God. And it’s much easier to know things *about* God than it is to *know* God. And yet such knowledge is God’s invitation . . . to you.

Through Jeremiah, God promised that “*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*” (Jeremiah 29:13).

⁶ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 35-36.

⁷ John W. Fountain, “The God Who Embraced Me,” *All Things Considered*, www.npr.org,

The Names of God

(A partial list; see also pp. 220-221 in workbook.)

A Consuming Fire (Deuteronomy 4:24)	My Friend (Job 16:20)
A Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14)	My Hiding Place (Psalm 32:7)
A Sure Foundation (Isaiah 28:16)	My Hope (Psalm 71:5)
Bread of Life (John 6:35)	My Redeemer (Psalm 19:14)
Comforter in Sorrow (Jeremiah 8:18)	My Salvation (Exodus 15:2)
Defender of Widows (Psalm 68:5)	My Savior (Psalm 42:5)
Faithful & True (Revelation 19:11)	My Strong Deliverer (Psalm 140:7)
God Almighty (Genesis 17:1)	My Stronghold (Psalm 18:2)
God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3)	My Support (2 Samuel 22:19)
God who avenges me (Psalm 18:47)	Our Father (Isaiah 64:8)
God who saves me (Psalm 51:14)	Our Guide (Psalm 48:14)
Good Teacher (Mark 10:17)	Our Help (Psalm 33:20)
Head of the church (Ephesians 5:23)	Our Leader (2 Chronicles 13:12)
Holy One among you (Hosea 11:9)	Our Peace (Ephesians 2:14)
Jealous (Exodus 34:14)	Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)
King of Kings (1 Timothy 6:15)	Refuge & Strength (Psalm 46:1)
Light of Life (John 8:12)	Righteous Judge (2 Timothy 4:8)
Lord of Lords (1 Timothy 6:15)	Sovereign Lord (Luke 2:29)
Lord of the Harvest (Matthew 9:38)	The Good Shepherd (John 10:11)
Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5)	The Most Holy (Daniel 9:24)
My Advocate (Job 16:19)	Wonderful Counselor (Isaiah 9:6)
My Confidence (Psalm 71:5)	Your Life (Colossians 3:4)