

# The Great 'I Am'

by Mariano Di Gangi

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding God's nature and attributes as foundational to Christian faith and life.*

**Duration:** 32:47

**Scripture:** Genesis 17:7, Exodus 3:1-15, Malachi 3:6, Matthew 6:33, John 8:58, Hebrews 13:8, Revelation 1:8

**Topics:** "Character Of God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that God is knowable and desires to make himself known to us. He distinguishes between natural revelation, where God reveals himself through the world he has created, and supernatural revelation, where God reveals himself through his word. The speaker highlights the importance of having a proper understanding of God, as it impacts our worldview, ethics, and beliefs about life and death. He acknowledges that our knowledge of God is limited due to our finite nature, but asserts that God reveals himself in ways that we can trust. The sermon references the story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus 3 as an example of God making himself known to humanity.

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## Transcript

In case you're wondering, I've got a copy of the Toronto Star here, well-supplied with extracurricular reading material. This is my own consumption, not yours. Now, I'm delighted to have the opportunity of teeing off this particular term of adult Bible curriculum, and I'm delighted that a systematic approach to the doctrine of God is what is on the menu for the next several weeks, indeed, the next several months.

It's of extreme importance that we have a proper concept of God, because that affects our view of life, it affects our view of conduct and ethics, it affects our view of death and beyond. What we think of God is of the utmost importance, it's basic to everything else in our faith and in our life. If there's any one passage that is basic to this whole matter of the doctrine of God, it is the one found in the Old Testament book of Exodus, chapter 3. The third chapter of Exodus, and I'll be reading the first 15 verses.

Exodus 3, beginning to read at verse 1. And if in the course of what I'm saying, questions arise in your mind, don't feel intimidated. There will be an opportunity for you to ask questions, and I'll make some attempt, however feeble, at answering them. So there will be a question and answer opportunity at the close of today's session.

Exodus 3, beginning to read at verse 1. Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire, it did not burn up.

So Moses thought, I will go over and see this strange sight. Why the bush does not burn up? When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, Moses, Moses. Moses said, here I am.

Do not come any closer, God said. Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. Then he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

At this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. The Lord said, I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt, and I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them out of the land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hittites, and Jebusites.

And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? And God said, I will be with you, and this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you.

When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain. 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? God said to Moses, I am who I am. This is what you were to say to the Israelites.

I am has sent me to you. 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 by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation. Here we have a basic passage on the revelation of God. God makes himself known to us.

It is not we who imagine. It is not we who have intuition. It is not we who grope and grasp.

It is God who makes himself known to us. And immediately, this passage stands counter to all sorts of views and philosophies of another sort. Over against atheism, which says there is no God.

Here is a God who reveals himself. Over against agnosticism, which says there may be or there may not be, I can't be sure. Here is a God who comes into dynamic encounter with a man named Moses.

In contrast to those who followed the philosophy of deism, which was very popular during the French Revolution, that God in the beginning made the world, wound it up, and then left it to run down entirely on its own, looking at it from a great distance. Here we have a God who is involved in the human predicament. A God who knows the plight of his people.

A God who is concerned for the liberation of his people. Not remote, but involved. In contrast to the Shirley MacLaine kind of new age pantheism, that God is everywhere, and I am one with God, and I am God because God is all over the universe.

We have a God who is a person distinct from the creation that he has made, and yet involved in it and concerned over the plight of his people. Over against those who follow polytheism, a multiplicity of gods. For example, in the Hindu religion, at the last census, as reliable or unreliable as it might be, there were supposed to be some 300 million gods and goddesses.

Here we have the one true and living God over against polytheism. One God who will reveal himself ultimately in three persons, father, son, and Holy Spirit. In this passage, God describes himself as I am.

He did not come into being, he is there from the beginning. He will never fade into non-existence. He continues to be there right through.

He is the I am. The God without past. The God who is not limited by the future.

The God who everlastingly is. There's a man by the name of Thomas Oliver, who in 1770 was so gripped by this concept, that he wrote one of our best loved hymns. It begins, the God of Abraham praise who reigns enthroned above.

Ancient of everlasting days and God of love. Jehovah, great I am. By earth and heaven confessed.

I bow and bless the sacred name. Forever blessed. God making himself known.

Apart from his creation, sovereign, unique in his being, and yet involved in the work of his hands, and concerned over the plight of his people. Now we're going to be majoring on theology. Theology proper, the doctrine of God.

Theology, of course, has a great many aspects to it. For example, there's the aspect which we call anthropology. The biblical doctrine of man.

And that, of course, includes women. So I need not, in order to use inclusive language, say his, her, he, she, you understand what I'm talking about. When I speak of man, that includes woman.

Grammatically, at least man embraces woman. And we just take that for granted. The Bible has a doctrine of man.

The Bible has an anthropology all its own. That God made man, that God made male and female in his image. But God gave them the task of developing the earth for their good and for his glory.

The doctrine of anthropology is stated in scripture in very clear terms. Not only is man created in God's image, not only is sexuality, the difference between male and female, a gift of God, but man and woman are given a task of work. Work is not something that entered the human scene after the fall into sin as part of God's curse on humanity.

Work was part of God's intention for man from the very beginning. What sin added was the dimension of frustration. Labor management tangles of which we have seen something in our day.

That is how sin affects and infects the world of work. But work in the beginning was part of God's intention for man that the earth might be developed and the human potential might be expressed in the process. The Bible not only has a doctrine of anthropology, the doctrine of man, who we are, the fact that we're made in God's image and for fellowship with him, but the Bible also has a doctrine of soteriology.

It comes from the Greek word *soter*, which means savior. And therefore the doctrine of soteriology has to do with God's plan of salvation. A salvation that became necessary because of our fall into sin.

A salvation that is worked at from two aspects. The work of Christ for us in dealing with the penalty and power of sin and the work of the Holy Spirit in us, regenerating us and helping us in the process of our sanctification. So you've got anthropology, the doctrine of man, and you've got soteriology, the doctrine of salvation.

Then you've got ecclesiology, and you've guessed it. It has to do with the doctrine of the church, because we're all acquainted with things that are ecclesiastical, things that have to do with the church as a visible body and entity upon the earth. And this, of course, relates to the matter of the body of Christ, over which he is the head and of which we are members.

It has to do with the matter of Christian communion and community. It has to do with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It has to do with the matter of worship and Christian education and the expansion of the gospel through world mission, the nature and mission of the church.

Ecclesiology is another branch of theology. And then, of course, you've got eschatology, that which deals with the eschaton or the end, that which deals with the last things, the Christian view of death, the Christian hope of the Lord's return, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the final state. All of these things are involved in the doctrine of eschatology.

But anthropology, the doctrine of man, soteriology, the doctrine of salvation, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, and eschatology, the doctrine of the end, all of these depend on theology, on our view of God. And therefore, the study on which we embark beginning today and continuing through the autumn is basic to everything else that can be built up on it. If we have a defective theology, a defective view of God, then our anthropology is going to be out of whack, our soteriology will be distorted, our ecclesiology will go haywire, and our eschatology will take paths unknown.

So it's very important to have a proper view of God. And I'm delighted that this is the subject of study this term. Now, how many of you have ever heard of Stephen Charnock? One.

Is that all? Two. No, he does not play for the Blue Jays. He's not one of the late summer call-ups in view of the possibility of playoffs.

Stephen Charnock lived from 1628 to 1680. He was a Puritan. He served as a pastor.

He was a great writer. He was also a man who was afflicted with what is known in history as the Great Ejection. Now, that immediately conjures up a supersonic jet and the pilot ejecting, bailing out, and the thing going hurtling into space.

By the Great Ejection, theologically speaking, we mean what happened in England after the restoration of Charles II when many Puritan pastors, many Congregationalists and Presbyterians were ejected from their parishes, put out on the street, because they believed that Christ alone and not the King of England was

the head of the church. Well, Stephen Charnock was one of these who was ejected from his pastorate and put out on the street because of his religious convictions. Charnock ministered at Oxford and at Dublin for most of his ministry.

But he is best known today, by at least two people, for his work called Discourse on the Existence and Attributes of God. And he takes 802 closely packed pages to deal with that subject. It's a marvelous illustration of the fact that the Puritans not only exhausted their subject but exhausted the reader in the process.

What does he say in this work that can be an overview for the balance of this course? Well, for one thing, he stresses that God is knowable. God can be known and God wants to make himself known to us. It's customary in theology to speak of natural revelation and supernatural revelation.

By natural revelation, we mean God revealing himself in the world that he has made. By supernatural revelation, we mean God revealing himself in the word that he has given. Natural revelation is accessible to all mankind.

People see the changing seasons of seed time and harvest and should conclude that there is a creator God who providentially governs his universe. Supernatural revelation is only accessible to those who exercise their faith. God has revealed himself supernaturally in his scriptures and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

And so God has made himself known in his work of creation and providence in the world that he has made. God has made himself known in biblical revelation written down in the scriptures and in a personal way embodied in his Son, Jesus Christ. That's why Jesus could say, he who has seen me with eyes of faith and understanding has actually seen the invisible God.

So we have a God who is knowable because he has revealed himself to us. Now there are things that he has not revealed to us such as the year, the month, the day, the hour of his Son's return. There are some prophetic preachers who feel that they have gotten beyond the curtain of secrecy and they have penetrated into the inner shrine of the deity and they can tell you that before the end of this year something like that is going to happen.

Well, he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh and send their timetables into oblivion. He's done it time after time. The time of the end, the time of the return of the Messiah is something that God has not revealed to us.

But he has made himself known to us. Now how can we who are finite really know him who is infinite? How can a bucket of one liter contain an ocean? Well, the answer is that it can't. Our knowledge of God is not comprehensive.

He is incomprehensible. The infinite cannot be contained by the finite. And yet, that one bucket can scoop up of the vastness of the ocean and it is truly seawater.

So we are finite and our knowledge of God is not unlimited, but it is an accurate and true knowledge of God because he makes himself known to us in ways that we can trust. We get clues as to the reality of God and the nature of God when we think of some of the names of God. God has given us his name and we must remember that according to the Hebrew way of thinking, a name is more than a label of identification.

A name is something that describes the character of the individual. The relationships that he has to others are made known by his name. For example, he is called Jehovah, the God who is self-existent.

We depend on him for our existence. He depends on no one for his existence. He is self-existent.

He is the fountain of life and the giver of life, but he draws life from no one else. That's why the kids question, well, who made God is utterly irrelevant because God is unmakeable. He is the maker of all else.

He is self-existent. He is known as El Shaddai, God omnipotent. He is known as El Elyon, for example, God most high.

He is revealed as Adonai in the Old Testament, the Lord, the ruler, to whom we ought to be subject and willingly obedient. He is known as Abba, dear daddy, to those who are on speaking terms with him. And so we have among the names of God in scripture clues as to his character, clues as to the relationship that he would sustain to each of us.

When we come to consider the attributes of God, and I know that this will be given to you in considerably more detail than one can do in a brief introductory overview. We find that some of the attributes of God are communicable and some are incommunicable. We usually hear that word communicable in connection with the Center for Communicable Diseases in Atlanta, Georgia, telling us what latest strain of Asian flu is going to strike us senior citizens.

Well, that word communicable with reference to the attributes of God means characteristics and qualities of God which we ought to manifest on our creaturely level. The incommunicable attributes of God are the qualities of the nature and being of God which belong to him and to him alone and to which we ought never aspire. For example, there is the self-existence of God, the independence of God.

We depend on him for our life. He depends on no one for his continued existence. He is self-existent.

Or think of the eternity of God. Before time came into being, God is. And our Lord Jesus takes that phrase and applies it to himself.

Before Abraham was, I am. And incidentally, we ought to see the statements of Jesus descriptive of himself in the light of the Old Testament name of God, the self-existent one who describes himself as the I am. Think, for example, of that statement in John chapter 6. I am the bread of God, the bread of life, the bread of heaven.

Or in John 8, I am the light of the world. He who follows me does not walk in darkness but has the light of life. Or, I am the resurrection and the life.

Or, I am the way, the truth and the life. Or, I am the true vine. Or, I am alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

No stronger statement in support of the divinity of Jesus Christ could come from any other passage of the Bible than the I am statements of Jesus on the background of God's revelation of himself to Moses as the great I am, the self-existent one. Also, a characteristic of God, the self-existent and eternal one, is the characteristic of immutability. He is a God who does not change.

He is not in the process of becoming wiser. He is not in the process of becoming holier. He is not in the process of becoming mightier.

What he was, he is, and ever shall be, the immutability of God. We have a God who does not change. And Jesus Christ partakes of that immutability for we read of him in Hebrews 13, verse 8, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.

The immutability of God. And yet some people say, didn't he threaten to wipe the Ninevites off the face of the earth if they continued on in their godless ways? And how come he let them off the hook? How come he forgave them? God changed his mind. Therefore, God is mutable.

Not at all. God showed himself to be utterly consistent. If you continue in your ways of perversity, you will be punished.

If instead with contrite and broken hearts you repent, I will forgive your sins. God responds to our changes. He remains utterly consistent with himself in his promises and in his warnings.

The immutability of God. And the unity of God. That great statement in Deuteronomy chapter 6, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.

We do not have a multiplicity of gods. We have one God, but revealed in three persons. The Trinity.

And this, of course, will come up for further study and discussion. And I know that it will be profitable. Another incommunicable attribute of God is his omnipresence.

He is everywhere. In a way that you and I cannot be and shouldn't even try to be. Although I know some ministers who make a desperate effort at that.

There is the omniscience of God, who knows not only of our actions, but of our attitudes. Who weighs not only the deeds that we do, but the motives behind them, which are not always known to others. We cannot aspire to omniscience.

That's an incommunicable attribute of God. But then you've got the wisdom of God. A God who wisely plans for our good and for his glory.

And this is an attribute toward which we should strive that we might be wise. The fear of the Lord being the beginning of real human wisdom. Or the holiness of God.

And this is the only legitimate use of the word apartheid. God's separateness. God's otherness when compared to the sinfulness of our race.

God who is in a class by himself. His moral majesty. His spotless purity.

His matchless holiness. But that also happens to be a communicable attribute. For we are told to be holy as he is holy.

Then you've got the attribute of his righteousness. The justice of God. In our days we speak of remedial justice.

Reformative justice. Justice in terms of restitution. But the Bible gives a further dimension which is sadly lacking in the justice system of our day.

And that is justice in terms of retribution. And the God of the Bible is a God of righteousness and of justice. He's also a God of goodness.

His compassion. His mercy. His grace.

His love. This is an aspect of God that we should mirror. It's a communicable attribute that should also be found in us in our dealings with one another.

Or take the attribute of veracity. The truthfulness of God. God is omnipotent but he can't lie.

And he doesn't lie. Because he is true in all that he reveals himself to us. And this is a communicable attribute.

We are to be men and women who speak the truth. We speak it in love but we must speak the truth. And then there's the incommunicable attribute of sovereignty.

A God who works all things after the counsel of his will and brings his plan to fulfillment. The Westminster Shorter Catechism sums up what I've been trying to say. In a very straightforward answer to the question.

What is God? Here's the answer they came up with in the 1640s. And it really hasn't been improved on in our day. God is a spirit.

Infinite. Eternal. Unchangeable.

In his being. Wisdom. Power.

Holiness. Justice. Goodness.

And truth. His eternity. Omniscience and omnipresence.

His omnipotence and self-sufficiency. Immutability and sovereignty. Are not communicable.

But his spirituality and wisdom. His knowledge. Holiness and righteousness.

His goodness and truthfulness. Ought to be seen in us and will be seen in us. As his Holy Spirit recreates his likeness in your life and mine.

This by way of introduction and overview. To what will be discussed in greater detail during the weeks to come.

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