

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you

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“For Thy Name’s Sake” The Promise of Holiness by Bob DeWaay

“He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.” (**Psalm 23:3**)

“Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; And deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name’s sake.” (**Psalm 79:9**)

Many Christians view holiness as a threat rather than a promise. They assume that calls to holiness involve legalism or some manner of inappropriate demands being made upon them. What they do not realize is that God has placed His own honor and glory at stake in the lives of those whom He has chosen out of the world. God will change us and conform us to the image of Christ in order to demonstrate His holy character. God has so identified with His people that His character is displayed and His glory made known as He is powerfully at work changing us. Holiness is a promise, not a threat.

In this article we will examine the significance of God’s “name” as revealed in the Bible, its contrast to the pagan gods, the meaning of the oft repeated phrase, “for thy name’s sake,” the profaning of God’s name by His people, the honoring of God’s name by His people, the promise of holiness and the missionary significance of God’s name being honored among the nations. When Paul wrote, “Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who **names the name** of the Lord abstain from wickedness’” (**2Timothy 2:19**), he was standing in a long Hebrew tradi-

tion concerning the holiness of God’s name. Bearing the name of God is both a gracious gift from God and an awesome responsibility. We will see how God intends to glorify His name in all the earth by calling forth a people who will be forgiven and changed for the honor of His name.

The Name of God

Most people are aware of the fact that though the Bible has many names for God, the particular covenant name by which God revealed Himself to Moses and Israel ceased being pronounced by the Jews. It is called the “tetragrammaton” because it has four consonants and unknown vowels. This name was called “Jehovah” in the King James Bible, but more recent scholarship thinks “Yahweh” is a more likely pronunciation. It is clear that God’s revealed name had great significance to His people and indicated His covenant keeping love for them.

In **Exodus 6**, this name is linked to God’s covenant with Israel and His saving act of grace in bringing them out of Egypt. “Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, ‘I am the Lord [Yahweh], and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians’” (**Exodus 6:6,7**).¹ The name of God was His self-disclosure, and was closely linked to His attributes and covenant relationship to His people. It was more than just a means of verbal identification, it was closely linked to His character.²

Harris, Archer and Waitke describe the close identification of God’s covenant name with His person:

In some passages *sh m Yahweh* is

so inextricably bound up with the being of God, that it functions almost like an appearance of Yahweh (Ex 23:20-21; Isa 30:27). Cf. the tabernacling of the Name at various spots almost like a Christophany (Ex 20:24; Deut 12:5; II Sam 7:13, etc.). The name of God also signifies the whole self-disclosure of God in his holiness and truth (Ps 22:22).³

That God’s name was very concrete and was closely linked to God Himself in the Old Testament is seen in numerous places. For example, “The name of the Lord is a strong tower; The righteous runs into it and is safe” (**Proverbs 18:10**).

The name of God is holy because God is holy. He has chosen a people to bear His name and has promised to make them holy for the glory of His name. Through this, testimony will be born to all the nations of God’s person and attributes. This heightened significance in the Hebrew conception of names (particularly that of God’s name) must be understood if we are to make sense of the many Biblical passages that draw on this concept. The holiness of God’s name and His willingness to invest it in a people lays at the heart of the Biblical teaching on sanctification. As **Psalm 23:3** says, the reason He guides us in righteous paths is for the sake of His name.

God’s Name Contrasted to the Pagan “gods”

Some critics of the Bible suggest that its “name theology” is merely an example of the practices of the pagans, whose gods had names that were deemed powerful and were often kept secret to all but certain elite followers. It is true that in the ancient world names generally were linked to a person’s character and destiny. It is not true that God’s name(s) functions in the same way for His people as the name of pagan gods did for their followers. The basic pagan idea was that the knowledge of one’s name (including that of a “god”) gave one power over that person or being. If the Bible indeed were following this

pattern, knowing God's name would give one power over God and make one able to force God to do one's bidding.

That the pagans believed this way is discussed in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*:

The magic papyri are full of expressions showing belief in the power and efficacy of names. Expressed here is the primitive belief that knowledge of names gives power over their bearers, that the simple utterance of a name puts a spell on its owner and brings him under the power of the speaker . . . If a man utters the name of a god and then demands or asks something, it will be fulfilled as and because he speaks the name. . . . The one who knows the names of a god . . . can often conjure the god.⁴

Sadly, many Christians mistakenly think that this pagan approach is what the Bible is talking about, for example, when we are commanded to pray in Christ's name. It is as if uttering Christ's name gives us power over Him to force Him to do our bidding.

The truth is that the Biblical understanding is in contrast to the pagan one. The names of pagan gods often were kept secret because of this fear that their destiny and power could be used by anyone who learned the pronunciation of their names. God, however, willingly disclosed His name to a special people so that they could bear testimony to the whole world of His character and nature. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* discusses this, "This name of Yahweh is not an instrument of magic; it is a gift of revelation."⁵

That the pronunciation of the name would be lost because of fear of profaning it, was not the result of any Biblical command not to pronounce the name, but because of a misunderstanding of later rabbis.⁶ Ironically, the passage they cited to justify this non-pronouncement (**Exodus 3:15**), actually teaches the

opposite: "And God, furthermore, said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 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, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.'"⁷ It is hard to see how a secret, unknown name could possibly serve as a memorial to all generations.

There are other contrasts to the pagan gods. According to the Bible, there is only one God and He has power over all other so-called "gods." There is no danger that His unique status as creator and ruler of the universe will be forfeited if some lesser, created entity finds out how to pronounce His name! God does not change and He is revealed as the eternal I AM who is known because He has chosen to reveal Himself and speak authoritatively to humans. Nothing can change His status, including the actions or knowledge of any other beings, spiritual or otherwise. The status of the pagan gods was always in jeopardy and thus they were subject to possible takeover or manipulation.

God always remains sovereign, and the Biblical command to not "take up" (literal translation) His name in vain is a moral command that God has the power to enforce. God will certainly preserve the honor and glory of His name through a holy remnant. Others who bear His name and yet profane it will be judged. But in no case is God's character and status as almighty judge of the universe compromised by any other being. It is absolute. This Biblical understanding shows that the Bible was not merely a borrowed version of ancient pagan name theology.

To keep the name of God holy, according to Old Testament teaching, was to honor the covenant relationship that God had initiated with His people. It was not to hide his name or fail to pronounce it. God willed that His name be made known to the nations: "All nations whom Thou hast made shall come and worship before Thee, O Lord; And they shall glorify Thy

name" (**Psalm 86:9**) Also consider **Isaiah 64:2b**, "To make Thy name known to Thine adversaries, That the nations may tremble at Thy presence!" God's gracious and powerful work through His people Israel is to be a testimony to all nations so that God's name might be honored and glorified.

The pagan gods had no concept of grace nor of revealing their names to all people. This would, according to many pagan beliefs, grant people magical power to manipulate the gods. So their names were hidden and their jurisdiction was deemed to be territorial. God did not grant magical power to those who knew His name, He granted forgiveness of sins, a covenant relationship, and a responsibility to honor His name by keeping covenant and being a testimony to all people of His lovingkindness. These were not granted to people based on their knowledge of divine secrets, but were revealed by God as an act of grace. God's revelation is public, not private.

The contrasts with paganism are stark. Those who approach God like the pagans show a gross ignorance of scripture and the nature of God. God is not called up or invoked by the use of secret formulae or utterances that force Him to act. He graciously grants us a relationship in Christ by which we have access in prayer to our Father who has our best interests in mind.

For His Name's Sake

When God became angry with His people and threatened to wipe them out and raise up a new people through Moses, Moses pleaded based on God's glory and merciful nature:

Now if You slay this people as one man, then the nations who have heard of Your fame will say, 'Because the Lord could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness.' But now, I pray, let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, 'The Lord is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and

transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now. (**Numbers 14:15-19**)

God shows His glory and power to all the nations by calling forth a people to bear His name, forgiving their sins, and fulfilling His promises of redemption. The result is that God is glorified. Here is God's response: "So the Lord said, 'I have pardoned them according to your word; but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord'" (**Numbers 14:20,21**).

For us, we can rest assured that if God has called us, He will sanctify and ultimately glorify us in Christ.⁸ The honor of His name is invested in His people. If we are called by His name we are called to be partakers of His holiness. This has many roots in the Old Testament: "And what one nation on the earth is like Thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a **name** for Himself, and to do a great thing for Thee and awesome things for Thy land, before Thy people whom Thou hast redeemed for Thyself from Egypt, from nations and their gods?" (**2Samuel 7:23**). God is showing His eternal attributes and the honor and glory of His holy name in His covenant keeping faithfulness to His chosen people. By the grace of God revealed in the person of Christ, Gentiles who were strangers and aliens, have been given the undeserved privilege of being grafted into the Jewish olive tree (**Romans 11:17,18**) and made "fellow citizens with the saints and are God's household" (**Ephesians 2:19**). Thus we too share the awesome responsibility of bearing God's name.

The Profaning of God's Name

Why did God redeem a people? — "But I acted for the sake of My **name**, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they lived, in whose sight I made Myself known to them

by bringing them out of the land of Egypt" (**Ezekiel 20:9**). Why does God forgive sins? — "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins" (**Isaiah 43:25**). Too often we have too little appreciation for the holiness of God.

Much contemporary teaching is so man-centered that important Biblical doctrines have become distasteful to many Christians. The transcendence (that God is "other" i.e. above and beyond the creation) and holiness of God are among these. David Wells asserts, "[U]nless God is understood to be transcendent in his holiness, the world can have no objective moral meaning, no accountability beyond itself, no assurance of salvation through Christ's death, and, in the end, no assurance that God will be the final line of resistance to all that is evil."⁹ Yet when passages such as those quoted above are referenced, many feel that God acting for the sake of His name is unsatisfactory. They think the purpose of all things should be the temporal happiness of man rather than the eternal glory of God.

Yet, if we think about it for a moment, the holiness of God is a surer ground of hope, since it is an eternal aspect of His character and will not be compromised. If God's own holiness is His reason for showing mercy and forgiveness to His people, then nothing will ultimately stand in the way of it. When people bear God's name, His name is at risk of being profaned. It is profaned when His people break covenant and live in ways that misrepresent God's will and purpose. But even in such situations, God promises to act to save a holy remnant for the honor and glory of His name.

Ezekiel 36:21-33 is a marvelous example of this principle. **Verse 21** describes the problem: "But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they went." Since God had made Israel His special people and they had transgressed the covenant, their actions caused God's name to be

profaned in the sight of the pagans. This serves as a backdrop for God's future action of salvation:

Therefore, say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord God, It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord, declares the Lord God, when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land" (**Ezekiel 36:22-24**).

God will gather a remnant of the people and thus show the holiness of His name. This undeserved, saving act of God is based on His eternal holiness, not the worthiness of its recipients.

God's vindication of His holy name involves sanctifying a people whose profane nature would seem to have made them impossible cases. So it is with all of us who know the Lord. Ezekiel continues on this theme of God vindicating His holy name by powerfully working in the lives of the very people who had profaned it: "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (**Ezekiel 36:25,26**). Interestingly, in **Ezekiel 36:23-30**, God says "I will" twelve times. The regathering and salvation of the remnant of Israel is clearly a sovereign act of God. God is vindicating His holy name on no other basis than His own holy nature. If it were up to man, it would not happen.

Walter Brueggemann comments on this section of Ezekiel: "This theological posture does not resonate very easily with our therapeutic

inclination, . . . but, I submit, we arrive here at a surer ground of hope. Indeed, this harsh claim is the bedrock base for serious evangelical faith. It asserts that all hope for the future rests in the very character of God, for this God will take seriously being God.”¹⁰ It is true that our “therapeutic inclinations” make the message of God’s holiness seem either frightening or incongruous. It seems the modern consciousness that has man at the center and his personal happiness the ultimate goal makes statements about God acting for the sake of His holy name hard to fathom. Yet the theme is found throughout the Bible. The problem is the modern pre-occupation with self, not the Biblical theme of God’s holiness.

What happens when God vindicates His holy name by sanctifying His people and giving them a new heart? According to Ezekiel it will be something that modern selfism is loath to allow! “*Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations*” (**Ezekiel 36:31**). It is no wonder that a generation that has been submerged in self-esteem has so little to do with holiness. Even a small glimpse of God’s transcendent holiness and His holy purposes for His people is likely to produce the results predicted in **Ezekiel 36:31**. So we tend to avoid the topic.

The Honoring of God’s Name in the New Testament

I am not making the mistake of confusing Israel and the church. I believe that Ezekiel 36 will literally be fulfilled for a Jewish Israel (**Romans 11:26**). But the principles of God’s saving actions are the same for all people. **Hebrews 10:22** may well be an allusion to **Ezekiel 36:25**. The theme of God’s holy name and God forgiving sins for the sake of His name are repeated often in the New Testament and applied to the church.

The New Testament links Christ’s death on the cross to God glorifying His holy name. For example, when Jesus contemplated His death on the cross and the purpose for which He came into the world, He prayed, “*Father, glorify Thy name*” (**John 12:28a**). The following is God’s response: “*There came therefore a voice out of heaven: ‘I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again’*” (**John 12:28**). John wrote to Christians, reminding them

of why their sins were forgiven: “*I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake*” (**1John 2:12**). Clearly this teaching stands solidly in the tradition of the Old Testament. God shows his eternal nature, compassion and holiness by forgiving the sin’s of His people.

The “Lord’s prayer” begins with the petition “hallowed be Thy name” (or “let be sanctified thy name”)¹¹ and includes a petition for forgiveness and for God’s will to be done. God will be honored in all the earth when He demonstrates His great power and mercy by redeeming people from all nations. In the book a Revelation a song is heard that is like the great songs of salvation sung in the Old Testament; it is called “*the song of Moses. . . and of the Lamb*” (**Revelation 15:3**). It reverberates with the fulfillment of the longings expressed throughout the ages in the hearts of believers who have a vision of God’s holiness: “*Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy; For all the nations will come and worship before Thee, For Thy righteous acts have been revealed*” (**Revelation 15:4**).

The Promise of Holiness

Holiness is a promise that is based not on the merit of fallen man, not on the sincere intentions of Christians, but on the holiness of God Himself. God will make His people holy for His name’s sake. In so doing, His name will be honored among the nations and the testimony of His righteous acts will be born before all. “*For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts*” (**Malachi 1:11**). Paul’s apostolic ministry was to this end: “*Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name’s sake*” (**Romans 1:5**).

As we ask God to fulfill His holy purposes in our lives, let us think about Jesus’ prayer for His followers in **John 17**. In it we find the heart of God for His people. Jesus prayed, “*And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was. I manifested Thy name to the men whom Thou gavest Me out of the world; Thine they were, and Thou gavest them to Me, and they have kept Thy word*” (**John 17:5,6**). How will Christ and the Father be glorified? — “*Sanctify them in the truth;*

Thy word is truth” (**John 17:17**). Christ’s prayer will be answered in the lives of those the Father gave Him. If we are truly His, we will delight in His purposes and long that His name might be honored and not profaned in our lives. We know that He will cause us to walk in paths the righteousness, because He is doing it for the sake of His holy name.

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End Notes

1. "Lord" here is *YHWH*, the tetragrammaton. The New American Standard Bible indicates this by rendering it in all caps "LORD." In Exodus 6:3 God had told Moses that this name was going to take on new significance for him and the people.

2. see R. Laird Harris, Gleason J. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) s.f. (*shem*) name, vol. II 934.

3. Ibid.

4. Hans Bietenhard, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Friedrich, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) s.f. ὄνομα (name) Vol V, 251.

5. Ibid. 255.

6. Ibid. 269. "The sharp commands of the Rabbis against uttering the name led in time to a forgetting of the original pronunciation of the tetragrammaton."

7. Ibid. Bietenhard discusses how Exodus 3: 15 was taken to mean non-pronouncement.

8. Romans 8:28-30.

9. David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 117.

10. Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination — Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 79. I cannot endorse everything taught by Brueggemann, but he has put his finger on an important point about Ezekiel 36.

11. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 329. The verb "sanctified" is 3rd person, aorist, imperative, passive in the Greek.

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