

Is God's love exclusively for believers in Christ?

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"I Am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6)

This text is used very commonly by those who argue that a person can not be saved without becoming a Christian. But is this what it means? Is this what Jesus wanted to convey? What did Jesus mean when he said he was the 'I Am'? And what does 'coming to the father' imply? Was Jesus referring to baptism and Church membership when he spoke of having access to the Father through him? Let us try to come to the correct meaning behind what Jesus said.

1. Jesus is 'I Am': The meaning of divinity.

We begin with a small study tour into the Gospel of John. Let us start with Jesus claim that he is the 'I Am' of Exodus 3:6 & 7&13-14.

Admittedly this is by inference, for Jesus does not refer to the event specifically.

All of us accept Jesus is the son of God. But what are the implications of the divinity of Jesus? In John's Gospel, there is an attempt to show us the full implications of our belief.

We start with the events at the Garden of Gethsemane(see Jn18:1-6). Judas and the men from the High Priests come to arrest Jesus. They say they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. Then Jesus responds by saying, 'I Am'. Immediately, those who have come to arrest Jesus draw back and fall to the ground. This is because they have heard the unutterable divine name, 'I Am' God told Moses that the Name of God was 'I Am' (Yahweh in Hebrew and Ego Eimi in Greek) so in obedience to the third commandment which forbids anyone to use God's Name in vain, Jewish tradition imposed a total ban on the Jewish people never to pronounce this name of God. This ban was so strictly enforced that even reading out the name from the Bible was not allowed. Instead, wherever the name appeared in the Bible, it was read out as "Lord". But Jesus used the divine name without any hesitation. And when they heard 'The Unutterable', pronounced, those who had come to arrest him drew back and fell down.

The second significant occasion when Jesus used 'I Am' with the double reference to himself and to the eternal God was when the Jewish people asked him whether he was greater and older than Abraham.(Jn.8:57-59). Jesus said "Before Abraham was, I Am". We know that the Jesus who was born of Mary did not exist before Abraham. But the God who was revealed to Moses at Midian was one who existed from before the time of Abraham. It was this God 'I Am' who had become human in Jesus. So Jesus often used 'I Am' not simply to point to himself the person in flesh and blood but to the God who was present and acting in and through him. Why did Jesus use this particular name repeatedly? If we are to understand why, we need to refresh our memory of the incident at Midian (Exod.3:1-12) The bush was burning without being consumed. Moses turned to see this miracle. God called out to Moses from the burning bush. The text is very clear that God's voice was heard from the bush and not from heaven.(Exod 3:4) The bush represented the people of Israel under slavery in Egypt. The fire symbolized their suffering. The bush remained green showing that in spite of the many attempts to wipe them out, they were thriving. This was possible because God was in their midst. God gave courage to midwives like Sipra and Puah to defy Pharaoh who had asked them to

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kill all male children born to Hebrew women (Exod. 1st 1st -12). A princess and probably many other Egyptian women saved abandoned babies like Moses (Exod.2:1-10). God shared in their suffering and inspired many with courage and faith. This is the secret of how God works. It is the 'I Am' God who shares in the sufferings of the persecuted and who leads them to freedom who became a human person in Jesus. That Jesus wanted this meaning perceived is clear from Jn. 8:28 "When you have lifted up the Son of Man then you will know that I Am". Here he refers to the lifting up to the cross to be crucified. But this is also the moment of revelation. Just as Moses turned to see the burning bush people of faith perceive in 'the Crucified' the very presence of 'God I Am'.

2.The coming to the Father through the 'I Am': Are Christian believers especially privileged?

Believers in Christ are indeed greatly privileged because they can perceive God differently from most religious perspectives. However, Jesus was not saying that only those who believed that he was the Messiah would gain access to the Father. Rather, all those who have the eyes to see that God is present in the midst of all suffering come to the Father through the eternal 'I Am' who is before Abraham was. There are many who do not have faith in God. They have become disillusioned with the images of God in religion – a God who favours the pious even if they are arrogant and unjust and who supposedly is the cause for all human suffering as he is punishing people for reasons known only to him - Many such disillusioned people have profound human compassion. They fight against injustice. They support the oppressed. They are involved in resolving conflicts and are concerned for peace with justice. All these people even without faith are people who have come close to God through the son of Man who is lifted up. This is because the son of Man is another self reference of Jesus which shows that in him are incorporated all those who suffer unjustly. So any expression of solidarity with suffering humanity is in fact an expression of solidarity with Christ. This is exactly how Moses believed in Christ although Christ came nearly 1400 years later. See Hebrews 11:23-26. Moses grew up in a palace in Egypt. One day, he was told that he was a Hebrew and not an Egyptian. So he set out to visit his people. He saw that they were suffering under the whip of cruel task masters and killed one of the task masters. This act of Moses stepping out of his palace and expressing solidarity with his own enslaved and persecuted people is interpreted as an act of faith in the Christ whom he had not seen. Jesus' saying "I Am the way" therefore, should be seen as having a double reference. First it refers to Jesus the historical incarnation of 'God I Am'. All those of us who are privileged to know God can surely rejoice. But of course our faith has to be faith in the 'Lifted up son of Man' i.e. our faith in Jesus must lead us to work for justice and liberation of all the oppressed with whom Jesus, I AM was in complete solidarity even as he was being crucified. Secondly, it also refers to all those who even without an understanding of 'God I Am' respond to human suffering, seeking justice and their liberation. These words of our Lord do not allow us reason for any exclusive pride. We commend our Lord in evangelism to the unbelieving world not because all of them are condemned but because personal knowledge of Jesus and commitment to his cause is indeed a most joyful experience. However, we must all the time be willing to recognize that many times, those without a confessional faith are nevertheless more effective partners of God and many of us who claim to know Jesus personally have no clue as to the implications of our discipleship.