

“What’s In a Name?”

What’s in a name? Names, and why people are given names, can be fascinating. Before our first child was born, Nancy bought a book titled *What To Name Your Baby*. At first I thought this was unnecessary – who needs a book in order to name your baby? But as I looked through it, it proved interesting. It had 4,000 boys' and girls' names, and the derivative of each name.

I peeked at my name - Harry. Nothing splashy in its derivative. It comes from the Anglo-Saxon word “Harold”, which mean “army power”. It also is derived from the German word “Henry”, which means “home rule”. A bit boring, huh. But I got more reaction when I looked up the name Harry in the dictionary. The noun harry means “the Devil, Satan”. Or as a verb it means “to torment and harass” or “to rob and plunder”!

Some names are funny. I once read a news story about a Hogg family (from Texas, as I recall). They had 2 children. They named one Ima and the other Ura. Imagine carrying those names through life; that would make for some interesting introductions! I sang in one church choir where we had 4 men in the choir. There was me - Harry. And Homer. And another "H" - Horatio. Well, the other man broke with being an H. His name was Clarence! My family doctor’s last name is Superdock! He is a super doc!

Sometimes we don’t like names we are given. Perhaps you have an unusual or hard to spell name. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve said, “That’s Kaufhold – K A U F (as in Frank) H O L D (as in David)”! Some prefer using their middle name, or a nickname: I often wish I had early on used my middle name, which is Lee.

Some people even go to extent of having their name changed legally. There was this young man named William Stinks. He hated his name. So he went to an attorney, wanting to do the necessary paperwork to petition a court to change his name. He introduced himself to the lawyer, “I’m Bill Stinks, and I’d like to have my name changed.” The attorney tried hard not to laugh, but he could hardly contain himself. Finally, when he regained his composure, he said, “I can see with a name like William Stinks that you would want it changed. What do you want it changed to?” The young man responded, “Jeffrey Stinks”.

Sometimes names are more than just a name. A person can be named after someone else. I’ve heard of people named for the doctor who delivered them, or for a movie star or a sports hero. Some of us are “juniors”. Or we have a middle name that may be that of our grandfather or grandmother. Sometimes people are given names of Biblical characters: Matthew, David, Esther, Deborah, Rachel. As we thought about having our first child, I suggested that if it were a boy we could give him a good biblical name: Mahershalahashbaz. Well, Nancy wasn't very keen on that, so I suggested another name from the Bible: Mephibosheth. We could call him “Phib” for short!

What’s in a name? For some of us, our name tells a story, it communicates something beyond just the name itself! *For people in Bible times, names were even more significant.* A name expressed a person's character, or indicated something God was doing or was going to do

through that person. The ancient Hebrews believed there was a power to bring something to pass by giving a person a name or changing a person's name!

Mary and Joseph had no problem deciding what to name the baby Mary was going to have. An angel appeared to Mary, and told her what to name the child. "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus'" (Luke 1:30-31).

An angel also appeared to Joseph with the same instructions: "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'" (Matthew 1:20-21). The angel is saying, "Don't you pick the name! God has a name for this special child. Call him 'Jesus'. That will tell everyone what God's going to accomplish through Him!"

Call His name "Jesus". The Greek word is *ἰησοῦς* (ee-ay-soo). This word is the Greek for the Hebrew word "Joshua", which means "God saves", or "God is salvation".

Christmas is the good news that Jesus saves! "Call his name Jesus, for he shall *save* his people from their sins..." (Matthew 1:21). In Luke's birth narratives, an angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the fields with this message: "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a '*Savior*', who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). During the Christmas season, I've seen not only preachers, but even newspaper editors, radio/TV commentators, reflect on "the real meaning of Christmas". But the bottom line is this: the real meaning of Christmas is that a *Savior has been born, so that we can be saved!*

Does our generation need to be saved? My goodness, yes! The world situation's a mess. Some of our family situations are a mess. Some of our personal lives are a mess – in spite of how "nice" we may present ourselves on the outside! I remember hearing about fights that broke out a few years ago at stores on Black Friday. One happened at a Walmart store near Philadelphia. Newspaper reporter, Mike Bertha, wrote about it:

"Nothing captures the human experience quite like dropkicking a stranger for the final iPad Air at 6 a.m. on the day after Thanksgiving. While many of us dragged our bloated selves out of bed to head to the office or simply migrated in a state of manatee from the bed to the couch to ride out the day, other, more intrepid persons made their way to America's premiere retail destinations to beat the hell out of each other over material goods.

"Ladies and gentlemen, meet "Walmart Fights". It's everything you need to entirely dismantle the foolish notion that we're all here for a reason and that man isn't wicked. Pictures and videos popping up all over the Internet have been conveniently emblazoned with the "Walmart Fights" hashtag to help the rest of us gawk at the horrendous spectacle from the comfort of our own homes. Ugh. It's so depressing. Happy holidays?"

For some, both outside the church and even *inside the church*, talk of “being saved” is distasteful, or it generates a lot of negative feelings. But “salvation” is what the Bible is all about! The Bible is the story of how God has acted to save humankind.

Maybe people today aren’t asking the question, “What must I do to be saved?” in those words. But we are expressing this same human need with other questions: Is there a God? And if so, is this God really interested in me? What is the meaning of my life? Is there more to life than just eating, sleeping, working to pay bills, and trying to grab a little pleasure from life when we can? How can I be a better person? How can I overcome those parts of me that I don’t like or can’t control? How can we have a world free of greed and selfishness, war and terrorism – a world where people really do get along with each other? Is there any kind of meaningful life beyond death? How can I face my own death with hope and assurance?

Christmas says there is a Savior who came as The Answer to these haunting questions. Jesus is the One who can give us a meaningful relationship with God, the One who can help us overcome the evil side of our human nature, the Savior who can give us a new capacity to truly care about our neighbor. This can happen when we take a step of faith and trust Him as our Savior, and commit our past and present and future to Him!

“What’s in a name?” Let’s think for a moment how this Jesus can impact *our name and character*.

Through Jesus, God knows and calls us by name. During my teen years I was extremely shy and quiet, especially in school. I went to McCaskey High. Big school, large classes. I had a lot of anxiety that a teacher might not know me by name. One math teacher – I’m not sure he ever connected my name to my face. If a teacher doesn’t even know your name, how can you feel *important*? Like if you know my name, then you’ll know *me* as person.

One of the things I’m sensitive about as a pastor is that I know the names of those in the congregation. It’s hard to be a trusted pastor if one doesn’t even know the names of his or her parishioners. Or if you forget the name of a guest. Of course, it’s easier in a small church than a large church, but it still can be a problem. I talked once with a retired pastor who said he knew it was time to retire when he looked out over the congregation and couldn’t remember the names of people he knew well! (I’ve thought, you *really know* it’s time to retire if you look in the mirror and can’t remember the name of the person you’re looking at!).

A little girl was praying the Lord’s Prayer, and she got mixed up a bit: “Our Father, who art in heaven, *how do you know my name?*” *Does the Almighty, the Creator of all there is, know my name? Does the God who created me really care about me?*

In John, chapter 10, Jesus says sheep hear their shepherd’s voice, “and he calls his own sheep by name.” Then Jesus goes on to say, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own, and my own know me” (John 10:14). Through Jesus we can be adopted into God’s family and become His sons and daughters. As a son or daughter of the Living God, God calls us by name: “Dave, you are my

valued son." "Jill, you are my beloved daughter." "Chris, you are my precious child."

But Christmas is also great news that through this Savior named Jesus we can be given a new name! In the Bible, different times when people would encounter God and have their lives and character transformed, they would be given a new name to symbolize that change. Jacob ("supplanter" "heel grabber") is renamed Israel, "he who strives with God". When childless Abram is told he'd be the spiritual father of a multitude of descendants, God renames him Abraham, "father of many". Isaiah 65:15 says, "to his servants he will give another name."

When we meet Jesus, our lives are changed. When we turn from our sinful, self-centered way of living, and commit ourselves to Him and His will, this begins a lifelong process of becoming a different person! It's like getting a new name! Jesus wants to take the ugly parts of us, the weak and ineffective parts of us, and make them something beautiful and strong.

Maybe we need a new name today! From "doubter" to "believer". From "lukewarm church member" to "fired-up disciple of Jesus". From "Ms. Negative" to "Ms. Positive". Maybe Christ needs to change your name and character from "stingy" to "generous", from "guilty" to "forgiven", from "resentful" to "forgiving", from "defeated" to "victorious" in Christ! One of the most exciting things about Jesus is that when we put our faith in Him and trust Him as our Savior, He begins to change us, and it's like getting a brand new name!

What's in a name? A lot, especially if the name is *Jesus!*

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