

LUKE 2:21. (EHV)

After eight days passed, when the child was circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Today is New Year's Day, but New Year's Day is also always a Christian festival, known either as the Circumcision of Christ or the Name of Jesus. We celebrate this festival on New Year's Day because Luke tells us that Jesus was circumcised and given his name eight days after he was born—we would say a week after, since the Jews counted days inclusively—and January 1 always falls one week after our observance of Jesus's birth on December 25.

So today let's first consider Jesus's circumcision, and then the name he was given.

God first commanded circumcision to Abraham in Genesis 17, and said that this procedure was also to be performed on all his male descendants when they were a week old. It was a physical sign that served as a seal and reminder of God's promise in Genesis 12 that, through Abraham's offspring, all peoples on earth would be blessed. Since that promise related to Abraham's seed or offspring, God put this seal or reminder on the part of Abraham's body, and the body of his male descendants, from where their offspring came.

God's promise that all peoples would be blessed through Abraham ultimately found its fulfillment in Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus. Yet, even though Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise, he himself was also circumcised because, as the apostle Paul says, Jesus was born under the law to redeem those under the law (Gal. 4:4–5). Even as an infant, he subjected himself to God's law in order to fulfill God's law on our behalf.

But even though circumcision was an Old Testament law, it was law only its shell, so to speak. Its kernel was gospel. It was sort of an Old Testament sacrament—the way that God sealed and marked Abraham's descendants and Jewish converts as his special people, as the recipients of his favor and saving blessings. In that respect, circumcision was the Old Testament equivalent to baptism, as Paul himself makes clear in Colossians 2. Paul also explains that physical circumcision was a symbol of the spiritual circumcision that really matters—the cutting away of the sinful nature and its inclinations, from the heart—just as God spiritually circumcises our hearts through baptism today.

Jesus was certainly already one of God's special people. He was God's own Son, as the angels that announced his birth to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds made clear. But Jesus's circumcision was the first ceremonial proclamation and seal of that fact in Jesus's life.

We should also note that this was the first time that Jesus would have shed blood in a painful procedure during his saving mission as a human on earth. This was not the blood that atoned for our sins, but it was blood shed as part of his substitutionary obedience to God's law for us. It was blood shed as part of his winning of our righteousness.

Now let's consider the name given to God's Son in the flesh—namely Jesus. The angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary to give him that name. An angel also told his earthly father Joseph to give him that name, and he also told Joseph the reason why: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Jesus is our English version of the Greek name Yesous, and Yesous is the Greek version of the Aramaic name Yeshua, and Yeshua is the Aramaic version of the Hebrew name Yehoshua or Joshua, which means “the Lord

saves” or “the Lord is salvation.” In this case, though, as the angel made clear to Joseph, Jesus wasn’t just receiving this name to remind himself and others that the Lord saves. He was also receiving this name to actually identify him as the Lord who saves, who specifically saves humans from sin.

What a blessed name! All of us humans, except for Jesus, are in fact conceived and born in sin. Jesus himself once told Nicodemus that sinful flesh gives birth to sinful flesh (John 3:6), and the apostle Paul tells us that the mind of the flesh is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). We are God’s enemies by nature, deserving of his wrath and eternal punishment in hell. But here is the one marked as our divine Savior from sin! Here is the one who would keep God’s law perfectly in our place! Here is the one who would suffer hell for us on the cross and would bleed and die to pay for our sins and to conquer the death we deserve.

There is an interesting connection to the Old Testament here. The apostle John tells us that the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Moses is the embodiment of God’s law and God’s wrath over our sins. Jesus, the New Testament Joshua, is the embodiment of God’s grace and his salvation from our sins and forgiveness of our sins. Now think back to the Old Testament. What did Moses the lawgiver accomplish? For all of his faithful service to the Lord and faithful leadership of God’s people, the people fell short of the Promised Land and ended up wandering around in the wilderness under his ministry. It was Moses’s successor, Joshua, “the Lord saves,” who actually led the people across the Jordan River to the Promised Land and led them in conquering their enemies.

So too today, we need Moses. We need God’s law. We need to see how we have fallen short of the glory of God. We need to see our need for a Savior. But we don’t reach heaven through God’s law and our obedience to it. We cannot in fact obey it as God demands that it be obeyed—perfectly, from the heart. We only reach heaven through our New Testament Joshua, Jesus, who has saved us from our sins and conquered our enemies of death and the devil.

Permit me one sidenote: It seems like more and more today, parents are coming up with names to give their children that really have no deeper meaning than this: They wanted their child to have a one-of-a-kind name, and they thought a certain name sounded cool or beautiful the day their child’s birth certificate was filled out. That’s not wrong, but the naming of Jesus reminds us how powerful it is to have a name that actually proclaims something truthful and beneficial. Consider resurrecting the practice of giving your children names with meanings that proclaim or remind you of Christian truths. When they are old enough for you to explain to them what their name means, that will be an experience they will remember the rest of their lives.

The circumcised name of this Child of the Virgin Mary reminds us that our baptized name, whatever it might be, is written in God’s book of life. Whether it has a deeper meaning in a human language or not, it means something to God and is precious to him. When you are beaten down by life, lost, overwhelmed by the temptation and sin within you and around you, or crushed by guilt or despair, remember this name and the God-man who bears it—Jesus. He is your divine Savior from sin, death, and the devil. Amen.