

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.

I can still remember when my mom first told me that she and my dad named me Nathaniel because that name means “gift of God.” It made a deep and lasting impression on me to learn that my name wasn’t just something my parents decided to call me at random; it had a meaning and was a confession of my parents’ faith. It made a lasting impression to learn that my parents put thought into naming me, and that they considered me a gift given to them by God. I also remember looking at and reading over and over again a clipped-out comic that was stuck to our fridge when I was growing up, of a girl standing up to introduce herself on the first day of school: “My name is Hallelujah. I have five older brothers.”

It’s with that background and from that perspective that I can’t help but notice current naming trends, even within my own family. 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: A favorite singer or character in a movie had that name. Or 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.

Now this practice is obviously not sinful or morally wrong in and of itself, but it does contrast sharply with the naming practices of many believers in the Bible. Adam named his wife Eve, “Life,” to reflect their trust in God’s gracious promise to save their lives and the lives of their offspring, even though they deserved death (Gen. 2:17; 3:15, 20). Parents named their sons Samuel (“God has heard”) or Saul (“asked for”), if he was an answer to their prayers, or Joseph (“May he give more”), if they were hoping and praying for more children after that one. And then there is the firstborn son of Mary. Imagine if he had simply been called the Aramaic equivalent of Jax or Gunner or Drake or Timber, because Mary and Joseph just wanted his name to be punchy and sound tough. No, God wouldn’t let Mary and Joseph do that. God wanted Mary’s son to have a name that proclaimed something truthful and beneficial, a name that proclaimed something about us and our need, and that proclaimed who her son was and what he would do to remedy that need.

1. A Name that Proclaims Our Need

God had separately told both Mary and Joseph, through angels, that they were to name Mary’s firstborn son Jesus. God also told Joseph the reason for that name: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” Jesus is the 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, as we translate it from Hebrew straight to English, Joshua. Joshua and Jesus are essentially the same name, which means, “the LORD saves *or* the LORD is salvation *or* the LORD is a savior.” But when the Old Testament Joshua’s parents named him, they were simply reminding themselves and their son and anyone else who would pay attention to their son’s name that salvation is found with the LORD. But when God told Mary and Joseph to name Mary’s son Jesus, he was having them actually identify Jesus as the LORD who saves. “He will save his people from their sins.”

But that name doesn't only say something about Jesus. It also says something about us and what our greatest need is. If our greatest need were financial security, then God would have had Mary and Joseph name Mary's miraculously conceived son Money or Wealth. If our greatest need were companionship, then Mary's son would have been named Friend. If our greatest need were self-esteem, he would have been named Affirmation or Approval. If our greatest need were popularity or the right connections or a leg up in the world, he would have been named Supporter or Ally. If our greatest need were social justice and earthly rights and privileges, he would have been named Lawyer. If our greatest need were good health, he would have been named Doctor or Physician. If our greatest need were protection against earthly enemies, he would have been named Soldier or Guardian.

But he isn't named any of those things. Well, I suppose you could say he is named some of those things in a way. But he isn't given any of those names as his main, regular name when he is circumcised, so that we don't misunderstand what those other names mean, and don't misunderstand who he is, what he came to do, or what our greatest need is. He is named Jesus, Savior-Lord. And when a child conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin is simply named Savior, you can't escape the conclusion that God's assessment of our condition is that we are totally lost and totally in need of rescue and could not be any worse off, and that our greatest need is not really physical, but spiritual. Our greatest need is that we are separated from God because of our sins.

That is, in fact, why Jesus had to be born of a virgin, isn't it? Our situation is so dire that if Jesus had been conceived and born in the normal, natural way, from two human parents, he would have failed in his mission before he had even begun. We are corrupt and lost from the very beginning, from our very conception. We aren't sinful because we sin; we sin because we are sinful. That's why, in our confession of sins, we first confess who we are by nature, and only then do we confess the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do, which simply serve to prove who we are by nature. We also prove who we are by nature when we think that our problems would be solved if we just had more money, better looks, more friends, more connections, more rights and privileges, better health, or better protection and safety. Such notions show how little we know of ourselves and how little we pay attention to history—since no one who has ever achieved any of those things has achieved perfect happiness and success.

Jesus is a name that proclaims, and if we're paying close attention, the first thing it proclaims is our dire need. It proclaims that we need a Savior from sin and its consequences, namely death and hell.

2. A Name that Proclaims Our Salvation

But precisely when we realize that is our greatest need, then Jesus's name shines in all of its beauty, and it proclaims a much more glorious truth—the truth that God has met our greatest need, the truth of our salvation. Mary's firstborn son is Jesus, the LORD who saves, the Savior-Lord. He is the God-man, come to rescue us from sin, death, and hell.

And we see him formally beginning his rescue mission right here, in his being circumcised. God first commanded circumcision to Abraham in Genesis 17, the First Lesson we heard earlier, and he 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, the Virgin Mary's firstborn son, 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 in 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 the apostle 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.

This was not only the first formal sign that Jesus was here to keep God's law in our place or the first ceremonial proclamation that Jesus was one of God's special people. It was also the first time that Jesus 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. It was his first sampling of the much more painful shedding of blood that he would undergo more than thirty years later.

And as he sheds these first drops of blood, his name is formally announced—Jesus, the LORD saves. Here he is—the Seed of the woman who would crush the devil's head. Here he is—the Son of David who would reign on David's throne forever. Here he is—Abraham's offspring through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed. Here he is—the One who would save his people from their sins. Just as the Old Testament Joshua led God's people into the Promised Land and led them in defeating their enemies, so the name Jesus identifies this child as the One who leads us to *the* Promised Land, heaven, and who defeats our enemies of sin, death, and hell. 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 our name has a deeper meaning in a human language or not, it means something to God and is precious to him, for the sake of Jesus.

When you are face to face with your greatest need, the world's greatest need, when you come to grips with the fact that your problems don't just trace back to an unfortunate lot in life, when you are beaten down, lost, and 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, your only Savior, from sin, death, and hell. Know and cherish his

name and acknowledge it as true in your heart. For then you are one of “his people,” whom he has saved and rescued from their sins. Amen.