

The name of Jesus

When I lived in the Philippines in the 1950's, our gardener was named Jesus. Thinking this odd I did some casual research and found that it was common to name one's children after biblical



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characters such as John, Mary, Joseph and even Jesus. Parents hoped their children would be shaped by the life of their namesake.

Near the end of my mother's life she revealed that before I was born she prayed that God would use me to share his love with our world. This was during World War II. My name, "Michael," is the name of an archangel. I am certainly no angel, but God answered my mother's prayers! A name cannot shape your destiny or determine your character, but sometimes a name is a sign of your family's faith and values, a foreshadowing of what can be.

In the biblical narratives, names are often very significant and representative of a life purpose. We consider three brief passages today, one from Matthew and two from Luke.

Matthew is a very "Jewish" gospel account. We begin with Joseph hearing the name "Jesus" for the first time as God's angel tells Joseph that Mary will give birth to a son (not Joseph's) and "you shall call his name Jesus, for it is he who will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Jesus is the Greek form of the Jewish name Joshua, which means "the Lord is salvation." This child would be a different kind of Joshua, leading his people to a land of grace, forgiveness and new life! Unlike the familiar dream of a king more splendid than King David, more powerful than a conquering general, this Jesus would throw open the portals of heaven for all who believe. Matthew follows the Jewish custom of tracing Jesus' lineage through Joseph, a male descendant of David. Can you imagine the shock and confusion Joseph must have experienced at the news, first that Mary was pregnant, then that this child is the longed-for Messiah!?

When did you first hear the name

Jesus? Was it at Sunday School or Vacation Bible School? My earliest recollection is from my mother's voice and my grandmother teaching me in Sunday School in her beautiful downtown Chicago church. It took several years before I finally understood who Jesus is and surrendered my life to him. Today I know no more wonderful name!

Luke, our Gentile gospel writer, was fascinated by the stream of God's revelation to the "chosen people." So Luke explains the three ancient Jewish customs that shed light on Jesus' birth. First, there is the ritual of circumcising a Jewish boy on the eighth day after his birth and declaring his name on that same occasion. Joseph and Mary presented Jesus at the Temple on the eighth day, publicly declaring his name for all to hear (Luke 2:21).

Second, there was a custom called the redemption of the firstborn (Numbers 18:15-16). A firstborn male child was considered sacred to God. As a sign of gratitude to God, his parents were required to present the child publicly to the Lord at the Temple and give a gift of five shekels to the priests.

Third, for the mother there was a custom called the purification after childbirth (Leviticus 12). For 40 days following the birth of a boy child the mother was considered unclean. After the birth of a girl child the uncleanness doubled to 80 days. During this time a woman was not allowed to enter the Temple or participate in any religious services. At the conclusion of this seclusion, she was to bring to the Temple a lamb and young pigeon as sacrifices to God. Because a lamb was a very expensive sacrifice, provision was made for a poorer family to substitute a second pigeon for the lamb. This was known as "the offering of the poor." That Joseph and Mary offered the less costly sacrifice reminds us that although Joseph and Mary were descendants of the great King David, Jesus grew up in a humble household.

Luke moves well beyond the formal, usual rituals, to a delightful interruption of the expected, reminding us God is coming face to face with us in a way never known since he came to Adam and Eve in the garden called Eden.

Formations

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Scripture: Matthew 1:18-21;

Luke 2:21-24, 36-38

Luke is fascinated by the prophetess Anna and her celebration of the arrival of God's Messiah. Luke records her history: daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher; 84 years old; having been married for only seven years before her husband died; she had lived the majority of her life in the Temple, daily fasting, worshiping and praying.

In only three verses we are caught up in a whirlwind of joyous song as Anna celebrates God's ultimate gift to a lost world. How could this woman understand that God's promise had become reality? She must have let go of all the influences and demands of this world, immersed herself in selfless prayer and come to see the limitless love God has for broken humanity. What may have seemed a strange old woman long lost in her grief and hopelessness was actually a woman filled with joy by the coming of Jesus. This is a brief moment in history, but what a moment!

Our calendar has moved beyond the fun and food of Christmas, the wonderful musical programs and candlelight services. The angels have sung, the shepherds marveled, the wise men have made their impressive presentations. Now what? I grew up in a family where church was a common experience, where faith and love were valued, where money was often scarce and moves to new military assignments were frequent. But one midnight between Thanksgiving and Christmas in 1958, alone in my room, I discovered the name "Jesus" was so much more than the ultimate religious example. I came to understand Jesus is God's gift of himself, the Savior who died for me, the Christ who loves me. When you understand that, you can join Anna singing and even dancing for joy... you can live in the serenity of God's grace... you can give of yourself to others...you can truly live!

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.