

Incarnation: What's In A Name?

**Matthew 1:18-21
Luke 2:8-11**

*Jesus was born to be our
Savior—in lots of ways!*

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One of William Shakespeare's most enduring and popular plays is *Romeo and Juliet*, which continues to be produced in various forms even today. The tragic conflict in the play is that Romeo and Juliet belong to different families that are sworn enemies of each other. Juliet, a Capulet, cannot have a friendship, much less a romantic relationship, with Romeo, who is a Montague. One of the most famous lines in that play comes from the lips of Juliet in the balcony scene where she expresses her love for Romeo: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."¹ A name shouldn't mean that much, she argues, but—alas and alack, as Shakespeare would say—it does.

Names have been significant since ancient times, often expressing the character or purpose of a person. Many times in the Bible, names were changed due to an encounter with God that transformed a person's life. Abram became Abraham; Jacob became Israel; Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter; and Saul became Paul after he encountered the risen Christ. Jesus did not change his name, but his name is significant for what it tells us about who he is and what he is here to do. "Jesus" is one of the names that informs our understanding of the incarnation—God becoming flesh in the baby born in Bethlehem.

Jesus is the English version of the Greek spelling of a Hebrew name. The original Hebrew name was *Yehoshua*, which was shortened to *Yeshua* and transliterated into Greek. The original name meant "God saves, God helps, or God delivers." The English word equivalent is "Savior." Today "Jesus" is not even on the list of popular baby names in America; if you go to Spain or Mexico, Jesus is about number 20.² But in Scripture, Jesus is the most popular name of all, appearing over 1,600 times in the New Testament—and mostly about one guy.³ Obviously, "Jesus" is an important name. What does it mean, and what can it tell us about the Incarnation?

The first and most obvious answer is stated in the Gospel of Matthew. The angel tells Joseph, "*You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*"⁴ The

mission of Jesus, from the very beginning, was to forgive sin. When he is introduced in the Gospel of John, Jesus is called, “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.*”⁵ But what does that mean?

The Greek word for sin in the New Testament is *hamartia*, which means “missing the mark,” as in archery. Every human being, from the beginning of time, has missed the mark of perfection, with the exception of Jesus. Adam and Eve started the train rolling by listening to the serpent and choosing to disobey God in the garden of Eden. That story in Genesis is more than a lesson in ancient history; it is a description of the human condition.

Paul, the greatest apostle, constantly struggled with his inability to hit the mark. He wrote, “*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.*”⁶ The fight got so intense that Paul finally cried out to God, “*Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*”⁷ Sounds like he needed a Savior.

We understand where Paul is coming from. We struggle with temptations all the time—lack of discipline, lustful thoughts, imperfect personalities—we live in a hot mess most of the time. As Adam Hamilton explains it, sin is both a tendency to stray and the act of straying.⁸ Because we are human, we have an inclination to sin, but we also have the actions of sin. Jesus came to save us from both.

Jesus saves us by forgiving us of our sin. By his sacrifice on the cross, Jesus accomplishes our forgiveness. The death of Jesus did not make God love us and accept us; it powerfully showed the world how much God already loved and accepted us. The sacrifice did not procure grace; it proved that God would go to any length to bring us home. As Paul said in Romans, “*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*”⁹

By the grace of God shown to us on the cross, we can repent of our sins and be forgiven. Mistakes forgotten, guilt removed—it is such a deal! But beyond merely wiping our slate clean, Jesus re-creates us in his own image. We become a new person in Christ. Paul wrote, “*So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!*”¹⁰ It’s a process; it doesn’t happen overnight. But it’s the process of salvation.

Jesus saves us from our sins, but there is more to it than that. Being our Savior, Jesus saves us from the existential threats to our lives. Everyone at some point questions his or her existence. Why am I here? What meaning does my life have? What is my purpose? Is life even worth living? Left unchecked, these existential threats can lead to hopelessness, depression, despair, and even suicide. In Jesus, we never have to live that way.

You have seen these signs in people’s yards around town; maybe you even have one. They say, “You matter.” They are signs that every life is important in some way. God gave us a sign when God sent his only Son into the world. Jesus gave us a sign when he gave his life on the cross. You matter. Your life has meaning and purpose. You are so valuable that the Son of God would take on flesh and be born as a human being and then would offer that life on the cross to make us whole. That should clear up any misconceptions about our worth.

In his book, *Incarnation*, Adam Hamilton writes, “In Jesus, God came to us to save us from the despair that comes from believing there is no meaning to life or to our lives in particular. He came to save us from our sense that we have no value and worth, and that

there is no reason to go on. He came to rescue us from feeling there is no hope. With him by our side, there is always hope.”¹¹

Understanding our dignity and worth before God, we understand that what we do with our lives matters as well. It matters how we live, how we spend our time, how we spend our money, what we do and say, and how we treat other people. It all matters, because it’s all important to God.

Jesus saves us from our sins; Jesus saves us from hopeless despair; and Jesus saves us from loneliness. If there is anything we need in life, it is the need to be loved. As the Beatles sang, “All you need is love.”¹² We need to know somebody cares for us. We need to know we are not alone in life. What do you think is the motivating factor behind the incarnation? Have you ever heard this verse? “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”¹³ Everything that God does is based on love, because God is love,¹⁴ and Paul promises that nothing—nothing in life or death, nothing in all creation—will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.¹⁵ We are never outside the boundary of God’s love. Sometimes we may be alone, but we need never be lonely, because we are always loved.

Because we are loved by God, we can love and be loved by God’s people. There is a connection here. We do life and faith and love in community. Jesus came to save me and you and this one and that one, so that’s one thing we all have in common: we are loved.

The poet Christina Rossetti wrote a poem in 1885 which became one of my favorite Christmas hymns:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.¹⁶

The last thing Jesus saves us from is what Paul called “the final enemy,” which is death.¹⁷ As human beings, we will all die. But this is the ultimate good news: death is not the end of life. We have the promise of eternal life in Jesus Christ. He promised it to his disciples on the night before he met his own death on the cross: “*Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.*”¹⁸

Paul then affirmed the promise of Jesus in his great essay on the resurrection in I Corinthians 15, where he says that our mortal bodies will put on immortality, and our perishable bodies will put on imperishability. Then, in exultant words that leap off the page, he says, “*Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? ...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!*”¹⁹

I hope none of you have to discover the truth of that promise any time soon. But what a difference it makes now to know what the future holds for us. Whatever trials, hard times, troubles, difficulties, and obstacles we face today, we know that’s not the end of the story. We have a promise. We have hope. We are saved from the power of death. We will know eternal life in Jesus, the Savior, the Incarnate One.

The late Fred Buechner had a wonderful statement in his novel, *The Final Beast*: “The worst isn’t the last thing about the world. It’s the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It’s the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring. Can you believe it? The last, best thing is the laughing deep in the hearts of the saints, sometimes our hearts even. Yes. You are terribly loved and forgiven. Yes. You are healed. All is well.”²⁰

The worst thing is never the last thing. All is well. We have a Savior who saves us from our sin, our hopelessness, our loneliness, and even our death. That’s good news! We should have a meal to celebrate.

This week I had a birthday. Through the machinations of my wife and my sons, we all got tickets to see the Arkansas/Duke game on Wednesday. My older son and two oldest grandsons came from St. Louis. My younger son and his family live in Fayetteville. So we all got together and had dinner before the ball game. The game itself was great, but what really made it special for me was that they all cared enough to be there and that we got to share a meal together. That was the real celebration.

Today we have a lot to celebrate. We come to the Lord’s Table to celebrate what God has done. God became flesh in a baby, and he became our Savior. He saves us from our sins. He gives our lives meaning and purpose. He assures us that God loves us unconditionally. And he gives us the promise of eternal life. His name is the name above all names. His name is Jesus!

¹ William Shakespeare, *Romeo And Juliet* (1595), Act 2, scene 2, line 43.

<https://www.azquotes.com/quote/267276>.

² https://www.babycenter.com/baby-names/most-popular/most-popular-baby-names-in-spain_10341136.

³ Adam Hamilton, *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 48.

⁴ Matthew 1:21.

⁵ John 1:29.

⁶ Romans 7:19-20.

⁷ Romans 7:24.

⁸ Hamilton, 54.

⁹ Romans 5:8.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

¹¹ Hamilton, 71.

¹² John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “All You Need Is Love,” Capitol Records, 1967.

¹³ John 3:16.

¹⁴ I John 4:8.

¹⁵ Romans 8:38-39.

¹⁶ Christina Rossetti, “Love Came Down at Christmas,” *United Methodist Hymnal* #242.

¹⁷ I Corinthians 15:26.

¹⁸ John 14:1-3.

¹⁹ I Corinthians 15:54-57.

²⁰ Frederick Buechner, *The Final Beast* (New York: HarperCollins, 1982).