

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2:21)

Jesus Took His Name

Have you ever heard of “christening”? My grandparents and great-parents used that word for “baptizing.” That’s the basic meaning of the word. But it often implies naming something. In fact, today, you’re much more likely to hear that a ship was christened, than you are to hear someone invite you to their baby’s christening. The reason that we speak of christening as giving a name is because in most European cultures, a baby was named on the day it was baptized, usually within a day or two of the baby’s birth. In many Catholic countries, you automatically gave the baby the name of the saint for that day. Martin Luther was baptized on St. Martin’s day so that’s what his parents named him. That custom of naming a child at his or her baptism had roots in the Old Testament, at least for boys. On the day of their circumcision, Jewish families officially named their sons. We see that twice in the first two chapters of Luke, for Jesus and for John the Baptist. Now there was no saint’s day involved, but Jesus took his name on the day he was circumcised. Now, it would be easy to dismiss this as a minor incident in Jesus’ life. But the truth is, only a small part of Jesus’ life is recorded for us in the Bible. You can’t call any of the gospels a true biography of Christ. God tells us almost nothing about Jesus’ life before he was 30, so the details he does give must have meaning. That is true about this incident today: **Jesus took his name.**

I.

Luke says, “**On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.**” Circumcision is a choice today. The doctor asks you if you want to have it done to your baby. But for Israel, it wasn’t a choice. God commanded it. **Jesus took his name on the day he fulfilled the Old Testament law.**

God originally commanded circumcision not to Moses, but to Abraham, a full five hundred years before Moses was born. God promised that he would be with Abraham, that he would make his descendants into a great nation, that his covenant with Abraham would last forever – all promises that find their true fulfillment in Christ. God commanded circumcision as a sign of faith in the promises he was making. But it was a requirement for Abraham and his descendants, to be carried out when the child was eight days old. When God later gave the Mt. Sinai covenant to Moses, he repeated that command to circumcise every male child on the eighth day after he was born.

Circumcision came to represent all the laws God gave Israel at Mt. Sinai. We’re familiar with some of those laws: Jewish people don’t eat pork for example, and they worship on Saturday instead of Sunday. But there were many more Old Testament laws for Israel. There were many laws about what they could and could not eat. There were worship laws, laws about sacrifices, laws about the priests and laws about ceremonial cleanness, which said who could and could not enter the temple. Today, God has released us from those ceremonial laws. We are still bound by what we call the moral law – what God says is right and wrong. That includes things like do not murder, do not steal, do not commit adultery. But those Old Testament ceremonial laws only lasted until Christ came.

Why did God give them? For one thing, to set his people apart from the world. He was teaching them that we belong to him and not to any of the people or things that make a claim on us here. And in one way or another, all those Old Testament laws taught about Jesus. Some were prophecies in pictures: the sacrifices foretold Jesus laying down his life to save us. Some were lessons on our relationship with God. The tabernacle taught that God is holy and sinners cannot come into his presence. But all of them were mandatory for Israel until Jesus came. He kept all those laws. He didn’t keep the ceremonial laws. He kept the whole law, including the moral law, perfectly.

Why? Very simply, because we needed him to. First and foremost, church is not about this life. It’s about the life to come. We gather here because we know that we are all going to die some day. When that day comes, we have to stand before God. Will he let us into heaven? That depends on one thing: were we perfect? The price to get in is a perfect life. If we weren’t perfect, not just in what we did and said but also in what we thought and felt, we will not be admitted into heaven. If that seems harsh to you, think about all the situations

in life where that's equally true. Last week, I had to take one of my kids to a doctor's appointment. They had a sign up that said that you had to pay your deductible before you saw the doctor and if you didn't have the money, they'd be happy to reschedule the appointment. Sure enough, I had to pay for the appointment before we went in. If I would've been just a few bucks short, we would not have seen the doctor that day.

To get into heaven, you must be perfect. It doesn't matter how hard you try. Perfect means perfect. Someone once explained it by comparing it to trying to jump across the Grand Canyon. If a world class athlete tried to jump across the Grand Canyon, they might make it out eighteen, maybe even twenty feet, whereas if I tried to jump it, well, I'd be lucky to hit five feet. But would there be any difference in the outcome? We'd both be splattered on the rocks below. God says be perfect. If you aren't, no matter how good you think you are, you will spend eternity in hell.

God is a God of justice. He must punish those who sin. But God wants all people to reach heaven. So how could he satisfy both his justice and his love? He sent Jesus to be perfect in our place. His Son entered this world and was born as a baby. He took the name of Jesus the day he was circumcised and he lived in our place. In his heart and in his mind, in his words and in his actions, he kept God's law perfectly. He kept the moral law – what we summarize with the Ten Commandments. But he did even more than that. He kept all those Old Testament ceremonial laws that we don't have to keep today. Beginning when he was circumcised, Jesus did it all for us. There's nothing left for us to do to get into heaven.

Now, maybe you're thinking that Jesus didn't really do all that. After all, his parents brought him to be circumcised. And that's certainly true. But God chose faithful Jewish believers who would obey the ceremonial law while his son was still too small to do it. More than that, remember that hidden inside that baby was the Son of God. None of this happened by accident. By a miracle of God's grace and power, Jesus made sure that every law was kept from the time he was conceived until the moment he died. He did that so that when we die and God demands that we show him a perfect life to get into heaven, we can point to the life of Jesus as our life. If I would've come up short at the doctor's office this week, but a stranger would've stepped up and paid, the clerk behind the window wouldn't have cared who paid. She would've accepted his money and credited it to our account. Jesus was perfect for you. God has given you credit for his life.

II.

That keeping of the law began on the day Jesus' parents had him circumcised, just as God commanded. When Mary and Joseph gave him his name that day, there was no doubt what name they were going to use.

Jesus took his name on the day his parents obeyed the angel's word.

God picked the name his Son would have in this world. He sent the angel Gabriel to Mary and announced that the Holy Spirit would cause her to conceive while she was still a virgin, and even before it happened the angel gave her that name. Later, Gabriel came to Joseph because he was about to end his engagement to Mary. She was pregnant and Joseph knew he didn't have anything to do with that. But Gabriel explained that the child was the work of the Holy Spirit. And he repeated the command to name the child Jesus. But he added a word of explanation: **“Because he will save his people from their sins.”**

What does the name Jesus have to do with saving us from our sins? Obviously for us, the name Jesus and his work as Savior are intimately related. But were they for Mary and Joseph? The answer is yes, but for a different reason. “Jesus” was a very common Jewish name at that time. It was the Greek version of the Hebrew name Joshua. Joshua means something: the LORD saves. So very simply, you can say that Jesus means Savior. God could've chosen any number of names for his son when he came into the world. He was the descendant of King David, so God could've called him David to point out that he was the promised King. He was a great prophet, so God could've called him Isaiah or Jeremiah. He was going to found a new people, the New Testament Church, so God could've called him Moses or Abraham. But God didn't choose any of those names. He chose the name that means Savior. Forever after that, when his mother called him to supper or his disciples spoke about him, his human name testified to his true role in this world.

Mary and Joseph were the human agents that Jesus worked through to make sure that the angel's commands were obeyed. And that shows us the other side of keeping the Old Testament. Jesus fulfilled the prophecies. Gabriel gave two of the last prophecies about the coming Christ. And the life of Christ conformed to those prophecies perfectly. That pattern of fulfilling what God had promised continued throughout the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Again and again, the Scriptures say, “This happened so that what was

written might be fulfilled.” Many times in the Old Testament, God had pointed to the future and taught his people what his Son would be like, so that when he came the world could see him for who he truly was.

He was and is our Savior. He not only kept all the law in our place, he died and paid for all the times and all the ways that we have failed to keep it. My friends, we have failed to live up to what God commands us. We have sinned. The biggest problem with either of the illustrations that I used before is that you could walk away from them thinking that you almost made it. You were almost good enough to get in. You were just a couple of bucks short of paying for the doctor’s visit and someone could loan you the difference. In other words, maybe you weren’t perfect, but you were pretty good and Jesus just finished out the work. OK, maybe nobody can jump the Grand Canyon. But you were in that world class athlete range, living the kind of life that anybody would be proud of. People know that you’re a good person.

To be fair, I rarely encounter people saying those things out loud about themselves. But I often hear them say them about people they loved who have died. If I can believe that this person I loved was a good person so they’re in heaven today, doesn’t that imply that I think that I can be like they were and get there? The truth is, none of us is good. The Bible says that nothing good lives in us, that is, in our sinful nature. We can’t jump the Grand Canyon. At best, we can only stumble and fall in. We’re sinners through and through. But Christ came and he paid for that sin. He died on the cross. He suffered our hell. He paid for it all. Most of all, he paid for that stubborn sinful pride that keeps trying to find a way to make me look good, to make it look like I deserve what Jesus did. He died even for that sin. He rose and wiped it all away. We are forgiven because God entered the womb of the Virgin Mary and took the name that means “Savior.” Then he lived the life that fulfilled that name.

That’s the name we’re celebrating today. January 1st is not just New Year’s Day. It’s also a festival called “The name of Jesus.” Because of his name, you and I have another name. We’re called “Christians.” “Christening” literally means “Christianizing.” It’s a good name for baptism because that’s where God gave us that gift. Most of us became believers when our parents did the New Testament equivalent of circumcision. They brought us to be baptized. The Holy Spirit put faith in our hearts. The name of Christ was laid on us. God claimed us as his own and promised us eternal life. That’s why Jesus took his name. Amen.