

*26 In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." 29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. 31 You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." 34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. 37 For nothing is impossible with God." 38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

“What’s in a name?” Depends. People come up with names in a spontaneous moment sometimes. Other times people put a lot of intentional thought into the name they choose.

What’s in the name decided upon by God and given to this baby born of Mary? **Vs.30-31.** *“The angel said to Mary, ‘...you will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.’”*

The sight of the baby Jesus in the manger isn’t far off. Realistically you might have a hard time concentrating today because of that. Your mind maybe is already looking ahead. Anyone? You might want to stay all cozy with your eyes on that tranquil scene. But there is a topic that we encounter today on our way to the manger that is contentious. I’m not talking about a hotly debated political issue. A much longer running, much weightier debate has occupied people’s attention. It is over the question: What’s in this name, God-given here in Luke ch.1?

It has been stated: “Without a doubt, the name ‘Jesus’ is the most controversial name in the world.” Wait a minute! Where did the controversy come from? I don’t see any controversy when I look back across the years and get a glimpse of a tiny baby in a manger in Bethlehem. And I don’t think you or much of anyone else would either. Where is the controversy? It’s in the name, for there is meaning – a message – in this name that cannot be ignored!

Some get that, and right away put up the hand (stop sign). The name “Jesus” is often avoided and sometimes hated. Think of how you observe this. It’s flung around as a foul-mouthed interjection, which is either acceptable or overlooked in common conversation. At the same time, any use of it in its right sense can be considered harassment in many of the very same settings.

What is the source of contention? It’s in the name!

Even when people speak the name Jesus respectfully, it’s not necessarily because they know and trust the message it carries. In fact, often they are using it disconnected and at-odds with its true meaning. That has very practical implications for us. We should be alert to this, so that we don’t get misled. And also this... we see how much opportunity there is to share the truth. Here, look at this:

- A new Pew Research Center survey finds 73% of American adults surveyed believe that Jesus was born to a virgin – 81% believe he was laid in a manger – 75% believe wise men guided by star brought gifts of gold, frankincense & myrrh – and 74% believe an angel announced Jesus’ birth to shepherds. 65% of those surveyed believe all 4 of those key elements of the Christmas account.

Are you surprised? I was. And yet, before you weigh too heavily those numbers, the *Meditations* devotion from Thursday this past week gives a surprising 65% statistic of its own. Did you read this week’s devotions?

- A 2009 pew forum study revealed that 65% of *Christians* [those who label themselves Christian] believe that many religions can lead to heaven, even though Jesus said, ‘I am the way... No one comes to the Father except through me.’

There is a “gap” in many cases between those who believe various facts of the Christmas narrative, and those who get why Jesus came. Here’s an example that I think illustrates the “disconnect.” (Keep in mind the two sides of why it is good for us to be alert to this: to guard against being misled, and to see opportunities to share the truth.)

- A Monday Fayetteville Observer article (p.2) describes the 33<sup>rd</sup> annual “Christmas in Washington” concert. Pres. Obama was in attendance, and: “Following the carols, [Pres.] Obama reminded guests of the reason for the holiday. ‘Jesus lived a life of peace, love, kindness and forgiveness. During the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, may we all do our best to follow his example.’”

It’s true – isn’t it? – that Jesus lived a life of peace, love, kindness and forgiveness. You hear some facts there. But that’s just the point we’re talking about. You’ve got the name Jesus mentioned, and you’ve got some things about him right. But what’s missing? If all that we are left with is “may we all do our best to follow his example” & “that’s the reason for the holiday,” God’s meaning of Christmas is totally absent!

The name Jesus is the Greek form of the name Joshua, which means: the Lord saves. That same name, which the angel passed on to Mary, was also proclaimed to Joseph by angel courier: “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

There! Now do you hear the source of contention? "...he will save his people from their sins." Some do not want to admit any need of a savior. They have no desire to acknowledge that one exists.

But here in this baby's name is a declaration from God with 2 key truths: 1) our absolute helplessness and need for rescue. Jesus' name says just that, in God-chosen syllables. Run down your list. Not a Christmas list of what you want. The list of all you've done wrong. Pride. Greed, dissatisfaction, materialism or selfishness. Lying, deception, gossiping, hating. You and I and all people would have forever remained stuck in the quagmire of our sin, if left to ourselves – we have no way to free ourselves. The other declaration from God in this name is: 2) He is the solution. *He* – this one, Jesus – came to save us from our sins.

Mary understood this and trusted the reality, as evidenced by her words recorded later in this chapter: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in *God my Savior*" (vs.46-47).

It took this child to solve the problem of our sins.

**Vs.35.** *The angel again spoke to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

Did you hear the rest of the names heralded concerning this child? The angel calls the one to be born of Mary "the holy one." Jesus was born holy and he remained holy his entire life. God requires holiness for us to be in heaven with him. Jesus lived holy in our place. And then, Jesus suffered the punishment for our sins. God's justice requires that all sin be punished. Jesus took our punishment.

The angel calls the one to be born of Mary "God the Son." It took just Him to be our way out of hell and to be our way into God's eternal kingdom.

**Vs.37.** The angel told Mary: "For nothing is impossible with God." It's interesting... Jesus would later use these same words. When the disciples one time asked: "Who then can be saved?", Jesus replied, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:25-26). It took God – God the Son – in order to open the door to God's never-ending kingdom, so that we can be saved.

We are part of the audience for the angel's message, which we hear today. Listen! "Jesus." "The Lord saves." "He saves his people from their sins."

We started with the question: "What's in a name?" Not many people have a problem with the name "God." Some. But it's the name "Jesus" that stirs more controversy, at least when you get down to what his name means: "Savior from sin."

I don't know how many people have a problem with the statement in vs.37: "For nothing is impossible with God." Some. But more contention arises when we start looking closely at what we need God to do for us. The issue isn't over what God is able to do. It is over what we must admit we can't do.

Many contend that we don't need God to rescue us. They either deny sin or claim that we are capable on our own to solve the problem well enough to receive God's acceptance. Some contend that we only need God to help us, and the rest we can do ourselves, in order to make it to his side in his eternal presence.

God says otherwise. How do I know? He said so in the name: Jesus. "*He* will save his people from their sin." Think about it. Trust it. Thank God for it. Look forward to the eternal life that results from it for all who believe this news. Live every moment of life with a view of it. Include in that, looking for opportunities to discuss this message in as many places, with as many people, on as many occasions as possible. Amen.