

**+ Philippians 2:9-13 + Theme: Focus on Jesus in the New Year! +
+ New Year's Day/Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus + 1 January 2017 +**

Michael Phelps. Usain Bolt. The Chicago Cubs. Pearl Washington. Muhammed Ali. David Bowie. Prince. Alan Rickman. Carrie Fisher. Debbie Reynolds. Fidel Castro. John Glenn. Hillary Clinton. Donald Trump. Names. Lots of names. In the past year, every one of those names has meant something. For many of those names, they were the names of famous actors or musicians or leaders who died in 2016. Others are the names of athletes or teams that achieved glory in 2016. Still others are the names of politicians who dominated the national stage during the recent election. Now if I were to say Walter Beckmann, Ilgvars Briedis, or Winston Slattengren, an image or memories or thoughts may or may not immediately come to mind, as far fewer people know or knew them. Nevertheless, a name can mean so much.

You see, names can have significance when they come from history or current events or your own family. Perhaps your own name came from a beloved relative, a long-gone ancestor, or historical figure. Think of all the people named after celebrities. Yet generally in our culture, names don't have a strong relationship with the things they name as Shakespeare once wrote, ***"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet."*** (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II)

Back in Bible times, however, names had significance, especially the names of people. For good reason, Adam means "the man," while Eve means "living" because she would be the mother of all the living. Abraham means "father of many nations" because God promised to make him that, while Isaac means "laughter" because he brought his mother laughter in her old age.

Names became so significant that when an infant boy would be circumcised eight days after his birth according to God's ceremonial law, he would also receive his name. The choice of a name was significant because it described the person. In rare, special cases, God himself chose the child's name or changed the name of an adult. Nowhere is that more significant than with ***"the name that is above every name"***—the name of Jesus, which we celebrate today as the Christian church remembers the naming of Jesus on the eighth day and rejoices in the One who came to save.

That little boy had to bear the name of Jesus, which literally means "he saves" or "he delivers." It was a rather common name among Jewish boys because Israel's great leader Joshua had delivered God's people into the Promised Land. The Lord, however, made the name Jesus something special. A year earlier, a young virgin named Mary had been engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. While they were making their final wedding plans, the Lord sent an angel to inform Mary that she would be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that ***"the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means 'God with us')."*** (Matthew 1:23) She would be the virgin mother of the Son of God. How could Mary possibly explain this news to Joseph? Being a faithful believer who genuinely loved his bride-to-be, Joseph made plans to divorce her quietly to avoid disgracing Mary publicly, but God himself had other plans.

God told Joseph through an angel, ***"[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus [literally, 'He saves'], because he will save his people from their sins."*** (Matthew 1:21) This child would be the world's Savior from sin, the world's only Rescuer. So Joseph took Mary in as his wife. Nine months later, Joseph delivered the child in the smelly, unsanitary confines of a Bethlehem stable, and eight days later, Joseph faithfully carried out God's command to circumcise and name the child. ***"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)

That little boy had to bear the name of Jesus, but what made that name so significant that God himself specifically directed the child's adopted father to give that name? The apostle Paul explains in the verses that precede our text. ***"...Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"*** (Philippians 2:5-8)

That little boy had to bear the name of Jesus because he would be the only Savior who could be our Substitute. By setting aside ***"equality with God"*** and all the glory that comes with it, by making ***"himself nothing"*** rather than a great king of glory, by ***"taking the very nature of a servant"*** and becoming a human being, by even becoming ***"obedient to death...on a cross,"*** the Savior fulfilled all that his heavenly Father had promised.

Jesus the Savior set aside his glory to put himself in your place. Jesus the Savior had every opportunity to establish a grand, eternal empire on earth, but he chose to take on the humble lowliness of your life and mine.

He put himself in your shoes as a servant of the holy God rather than the mighty ruler over all the earth. He even subjected himself to the power of death, though he deserved it not, because he knew you needed a Savior who had faced death and would rescue you from death and all its terror by the certainty of his own glorious resurrection from the dead.

In doing all that, the Savior fulfilled everything God had promised in that holy name of Jesus. Just think about that. All that the Son of God accomplished is wrapped up in the simple name of Jesus. In the end, that little boy had to bear the name of Jesus not for himself, but for you and me and the entire world. There was and is no other Savior as the apostle Peter once confessed, ***“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”***

With all that packed into the name of Jesus, it’s no wonder, then, that ***“God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*** That marvelous, rescuing name of Jesus—the only saving name—rings sweetly above all others in the ears of every believer, even as that simple name humbles the proud and the arrogant in their conceit. On the Last Day, every knee in every corner of God’s creation will bow before the name of Jesus and joyfully or humbly recognize him as Lord of all to God’s eternal glory.

Sometimes in certain families, the name of a father is passed on to a son and then on to a grandson. He becomes a junior, a III, or an even later generation. The family is proud of the heritage of the one who first bore that name. So the name passes from father to son or mother to daughter. In some cases, there is a certain expectation for the one who bears the family name. If the holy name of Jesus means so much not just for our past, but for our eternal future, it should be no surprise that those who follow Jesus should also faithfully bear his name in the world.

Paul writes, ***“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*** Now you might wonder if Paul is a little mixed up here by urging his readers to ***“continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,”*** but consider his audience. He’s writing to faithful believers who received the name of Jesus through Holy Baptism and who now bear that name out in the world. He’s writing to believers who already had a beautiful track record of faithful, humble service to the Lord. He’s telling his readers what it means to continue bearing the name of Jesus out in the world.

Bearing the rescuing name of Jesus means you’ve been set free from your sin so now heaven is your home and you want to live as a free person. Bearing the saving name of Jesus means you rejoice to do the will of God because you are empowered and enabled by God himself ***“to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*** In so doing you recognize that it is your Savior who produces godly thoughts in your head, godly words from your mouth, and godly deeds from your hands. Bearing the holy name of Jesus means, then, that you seek what pleases God rather than what pleases your sinful self or the sinful desires of those around you.

Bearing the name of Jesus means knowing he is both your Savior and the Judge of all, so that you serve him daily with holy fear and trembling while rejoicing in the reality that Jesus has saved you from sin and death. Bearing the name of Jesus means focusing on him, fixing your eyes on him amid all the distractions in this life and in the world around you. Bearing the name of Jesus means humbly submitting to his all-knowing will while trusting his wisdom. Bearing the name of Jesus also means taking the name of Jesus out into the world so others see why the name of Jesus is no ordinary name, but the most beautiful, most marvelous name in all the earth.

In 2016, we heard a lot of names—famous and infamous, well-known and obscure. Yet in the past and in the years to come, there is one name that is worth bearing above all others. There is one name that is above every name—the holy, saving name of Jesus. That name means everything because it’s the name of your Savior. It’s the name of your Rescuer, your Life, and your Salvation. It’s the name that opens the gates of heaven for you and assures you of eternal life just as it assures you of God’s faithfulness and forgiveness in the past, in the present, and in the future. As we enter this new year, may we faithfully focus on the One who saved us, gladly bearing his name, until that Day when every knee in all creation will bow before the saving name of Jesus. Amen.