

What's in a Name?

“Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I” (Isaiah 52:6).

The Christian life is not a religion. It is a deeply personal relationship with the Creator of the universe and the Savior of all mankind. It is a relationship like no other, for it satisfies our human longing to be known, understood, and loved. Best of all, it is a relationship in which we are invited to intimately know, understand, and love our God. God wants us to know Him! He is immensely pleased when we take an interest in knowing and understanding Him! So it is that He introduced Himself to us and began to paint a lovely portrait of Himself by telling us His names and showing us in rich detail their significance.

William Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”¹ By this he meant that the flower’s name is not significant when it comes to the flower’s fragrance. Likewise for Juliet, Romeo’s name was unimportant.

However, as children, we women may have discovered differently. When someone called us “fatso” or “stupid,” no matter how often we invoked the “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” mantra, the names still stung. For us the names mattered.

The corporate world understands the importance of a name. Corporations spend billions of dollars each year solely to ensure that consumers understand the significance of a company’s brand on a product. Corporate balance sheets list and value all their assets, including their brands. “Brand equity” describes the premium (or discount) that a product can command, as compared to its competitors, by virtue of its brand name. For

corporations (and consumers!) brand names mean something about the value or performance that can be expected from products.

STUDY THE WORD

Names in the Bible

In the Bible, names often have special significance.

1. Explain the name that Adam gave his wife (Genesis 3:20).

Adam named his third son Seth (meaning “compensation”) because Eve believed God had given her another son to take the place of Abel, who had been killed by Cain (Genesis 4:25). Later, Lamech named his son Noah (meaning “rest”) because he believed Noah would bring comfort (rest) from curse-induced toil (5:29). Sometimes people received new names because of significant changes in their circumstances (e.g., Abram/Abraham, Genesis 17:5; Sarai/Sarah, Genesis 17:15; Jacob/Israel, Genesis 32:28).

Even place names often had special significance. The city of Zoar (meaning “insignificance”) is an example. Lot wanted to take refuge in that small, unimportant city before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:22). Zoar’s significance was its insignificance!

2. Another place-name involved Isaac. He separated from the herdsmen of Gerar to avoid a conflict over some wells (Genesis 26:19–22).
 - (a) What did he call the third place (v. 22)?

(b) Why did he give it that name?

3. Read Genesis 28:12–22 and 35:11–15. Why did Jacob call the place where he slept Bethel, or house of God? What significant events took place there?

4. Sometimes people changed their own names. Read Ruth 1:19–21.

The name “Naomi” means “pleasant” or “delight.”

(a) Why did Naomi change her name to Mara?

(b) Why do you suppose God continued to call her Naomi?

Of course, Old Testament men and women did not look through the *Baby Book of Names* to choose interesting names for their children. Biblical names were deliberately chosen for specific reasons. Four common ones were (1) to describe the child at his or her birth, the circumstances, or impressions surrounding the child's birth; (2) to state the child's purpose or future mission; (3) to illustrate a special message of God; to express that person's connection with God or faith in God; (4) to express someone's authority over another or a change in someone's situation or destiny.

These four reasons are illustrated in questions 5–10.

5. How do each of the following names describe the child at birth, the circumstances, or impressions surrounding the birth?

Peleg (Genesis 10:25)

Isaac (Genesis 17:17; 18:12)

Esau (Genesis 25:24, 25)

Jacob (Genesis 25:26; 27:36)

6. “Solomon” means “peace.” Read 1 Chronicles 22:8 and 9. How did

Solomon's name reflect the characteristics of his future reign?

7. "Jesus" means "Savior." What did Jesus' name reveal about His purpose on earth (Matthew 1:21)?

8. God told Hosea what to name his three children to illustrate a special message from God. According to the book of Hosea, why were they given these names?
 - 1:4—Jezreel ("God sows")

 - 1:6—Loruhamah ("no mercy")

 - 1:9—Loammi ("not my people")

9. Read Genesis 17:5. How did the change in Abram's name (which means "father") express Abraham's authority over another or a change in his situation or destiny?

10. Read Daniel 1:5–7.
 - (a) Who changed the names of the four Hebrew men, and what did he change them to?

"Daniel" was changed to _____ .

"Hananiah" was changed to _____ .

"Mishael" was changed to _____ .

“Azariah” was changed to _____ .

- (b) Read Genesis 41:45. Who changed Joseph’s name, and what did he change it to?

Names of God in the Old Testament

Throughout mankind’s existence, God has chosen different ways to reveal Himself to us: through His creation (Psalm 19:1–6; Romans 1:20, 21), through His prophets and by the words and works of His Son Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1, 2), and through His written Word (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21). One of the ways God reveals Himself in the Scriptures is through His names.

- The name “Elohim” speaks of God’s power and tells us that God is able to meet our needs in any situation.
- “El Elyon” tells of His majesty and sovereignty over all things, reminding us that God is the triumphant ruler over all the earth.
- “El Roi” tells of God’s ability to see everything, including each of us, wherever we are.
- “El Shaddai” refers to an Almighty God who is sufficient in every way.
- “Jehovah” reminds us that God is a personal God who is all powerful and works on our behalf.
- “Jehovah-Rohi” is the Shepherd of our souls, who guides and meticulously cares for His own throughout life’s journey.
- “Jehovah-Sabaoth” reminds us that God goes into battle with His children and secures their victory.
- The name “Jehovah-Tsidkenu” describes the God who is perfectly righteous and who clothes believers in His righteousness, giving them unconditional acceptance in His presence.
- “Adonai” is the name that reminds us that God is our Master to Whom we willingly submit.

These are nine of the most well-known names of God found in the Old

Testament. We will study these names in more depth in future lessons.

Three Important Names

The Old Testament uses three primary Hebrew names for God that will be important to remember throughout our study. These three names are Elohim, Yahweh (also transliterated Jehovah), and Adonai. Each name speaks of a different attribute of God and His relationship to His people. In many English translations of the Bible, these three names are differentiated using different capitalization. The name “Jehovah” is translated both as “GOD” and “LORD,” depending on the context, but it is always represented with a capital letter and small capital letters. Thus “God” is rendered “GOD,” and “Lord” is rendered “LORD.” The name “Elohim” is usually written “God,” and Adonai is generally written “Lord” or “Sovereign.” Thus you know that “LORD God” is a translation of “Yahweh Elohim,” that “Lord GOD” is a translation of “Adonai Jehovah,” and that “Lord God” is a translation of “Adonai Elohim.”

Note how the Hebrew name “Adonai” appears in this English translation of the Bible as “Lord”; Jehovah in all caps as “GOD”; and the name “Elohim” as “God.” Deuteronomy 10:17 illustrates these uses. “For the LORD [Jehovah] your God [Elohim] is God [Elohim] of gods, and Lord [Adonai] of lords.”

11. Read the following verses and identify which name of God appears in each: Adonai, Jehovah, or Elohim.

Psalm 147:5

Genesis 1:1

Exodus 6:6

12. Names ending in “iah” or “jah” refer to Jehovah, and names ending in “el” refer to God. For example, “Elijah” means “Jehovah is God,” and “Jeremiah” means “Jehovah has appointed.” How do the

names “Israel” and “Samuel” express the owner’s connection with God or faith in God?

Genesis 32:28; 35:10—Israel (“a prince of God”)

1 Samuel 1:20—Samuel (“asked of God”)

13. Read Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. What does the name “Immanuel” (“Emmanuel” in the New Testament) reveal to us about *who* Christ is?

14. In light of what you have learned about the significance of names in the Bible and according to John 3:18 and 20:31, what does it mean to believe in the name of the Son of God (Jesus)?

15. Read Acts 4:10–12 and Romans 10:13.

(a) Is it possible to call upon any name other than Jesus Christ to receive salvation?

(b) Why or why not?

Knowing and understanding God’s names helps us to learn who God is and to respond in appropriate awe and adoration. The more we understand the significance of His names, the more we will understand how He meets the needs of our hearts.

16. Read Psalm 9:10. Describe how knowing God better enables you to trust Him in your daily life.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Names in the Bible are meaningful, giving us a greater appreciation and understanding of Scripture. Yet no collection of names has more meaning or imparts more understanding than the many names of God. Knowing and understanding His names helps us know and understand Him, for our God cannot be described by comparing Him to any one thing, let alone by characterizing Him by one name or attribute. There is nothing in our world to compare Him to that exactly describes Him. He asks, “To whom will ye liken me, and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be like?” (Isaiah 46:5). Our God is unique and so great that no human description can ever adequately convey His beauty and wonder. Yet He delights to give us a little glimpse into His heart by revealing Himself through the names He has given to Himself in His Word.

EXPRESS THE TRUTH IN SONG

“I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving” (Psalm 69:30).

His Name Is Wonderful

*His name is Wonderful, His name is Wonderful,
His name is Wonderful, Jesus my Lord;
He is the mighty King, master of everything,
His name is Wonderful, Jesus, my Lord.*

*He's the great Shepherd, the Rock of all ages,
Almighty God is He;
Bow down before Him, love and adore Him,
His name is Wonderful, Jesus, my Lord.*

—Audrey Mieir

Note:

1. William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.1–2.