

THE
NAMES
OF
GOD

LESTER SUMRALL

THE
NAMES
OF
GOD



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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THE NAMES OF GOD

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The great poet William Shakespeare once posed this question:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet.

And most people today would agree. Our modern society places little significance on the meaning of a name. Parents usually name their children after beloved relatives or well-known persons. Sometimes they pick a child's name merely because it "sounds good." But seldom would they give any thought to the meaning of a name.

Yet names do mean something. Ideally, they correspond directly to the one designated by the name. For example, did you know that the name *Kenneth* comes from the Greek word meaning "to know"? So a person named Kenneth is supposed to be knowledgeable. Since the name *Diana* comes from the Greek word meaning "of a god," a girl with that name is supposed to be "simply divine" in

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her beauty or other qualities. Other people's names are derived from words of the ancient Greek, Latin, Norse, or other languages. And most of those names have some special meaning.

The same is true of place names. You probably know, for example, that the name *Philadelphia* means "city of brotherly love." It comes from the Greek words *phileo* ("to love") and *delphos* ("city"). The name *Jerusalem* means "city of peace," being derived from the Hebrew word *shalom* ("peace"). There is probably some significance behind the name of your town or city.

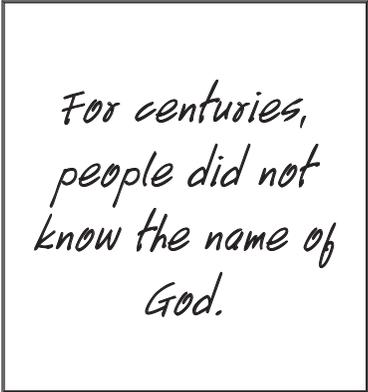
My point is simply this: While it may have been all right for Shakespeare to shrug off the importance of a name, we should not take names so lightly. Often a name provides an important clue to the nature of a person or place.

This is certainly true of God. The Bible refers to God by many different names, and each one reveals some aspect of God's character or His relationship with us. The translators who gave us the King James Version and other English versions of the Bible simply translate His name as "God" or "LORD"; but significantly, several Greek or Hebrew names are used in the original manuscripts. If you want to become a serious student of the Word of God, you should be familiar with those Greek and Hebrew names because they contain a wealth of truth about the wonderful God we serve.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

GOD'S CREDENTIALS

For centuries, people did not know the name of God. That may come as a surprise to you, but it's true. When God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, it wasn't necessary for them to know His name because they knew Him intimately. They did not need to call upon Him or invoke Him in prayer for He was their daily companion. Then they disobeyed Him and were driven out of the garden, forced to make a living by the sweat of their brow and the labor of their hands. They and their descendants began offering sacrifices to Him and calling upon Him in prayer.¹ In fact, Genesis 4:26 says it was not until the birth of Adam's grandson Enos that men began *"to call upon the name of the LORD."* The Bible says Adam was one hundred and thirty years old when Seth was born (see Genesis 5:3), and Seth was one hundred and five years old when his son Enos was born (see Genesis 5:6). So for over two hundred years, despite the Fall, men and women did not find it necessary to call on God by name. They were still that aware of His presence.



*For centuries,
people did not
know the name of
God.*

I often wish that we could regain that intimate state of communion with the Lord! In my own prayer life, I have

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felt very near to Him at times—so near that it was not necessary to offer Him any formal prayer. It was enough just to be in His presence. The Bible says, “*Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you*” (James 4:8), and that’s the kind of experience He has given me in prayer. Yet none of us has regained the depth of intimacy with the Lord that would let us worship Him heart-to-heart, as Adam’s family did.

Paul knew that one day he would meet God. He affirmed, “*Then shall I know even as also I am known*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). All of us look forward to such a day. But for now we are limited by our human imperfections and the distractions of this carnal world. We must shut the door of our prayer closets and focus our thoughts on God if we are to have any fellowship with Him. The human race has needed to pray this way ever since the days of Enos.

Humankind fell into deep corruption in the centuries that followed Adam. Finally, God had to destroy most of the human race with a worldwide flood, saving only a godly man named Noah and his family in one last effort to salvage humanity. The Bible says that when the flood waters receded and Noah’s great wooden ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, he left the ark to build an altar and offer sacrifices to God. (See Genesis 8:18–21.) He wanted to make a fresh beginning for the human race, and he started by worshipping God.

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Centuries later, God spoke to a godly man named Abram and invited him to leave his native homeland (in what is now Iran) and travel to Canaan. As soon as Abram arrived in that land, he also built an altar and offered sacrifices to God. (See Genesis 12:7.)

Notice how important the worship of God was to these men. Each of them celebrated the landmark event of his life by building an altar, burning a sacrifice on it, and uttering praise to God. Worship was a way of life for them. Yet God had to remind them who He was again and again.

He put a rainbow in the sky to remind Noah that He was a benevolent God and would never again destroy the earth with water. (See Genesis 9:14–17.) When Abram worshipped Him, He said, *“Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward”* (Genesis 15:1). He also said, *“I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it”* (Genesis 15:7). Finally He said, *“I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect”* (Genesis 17:1). It was as if God had to present His credentials every time He talked with them because they kept forgetting who He was.

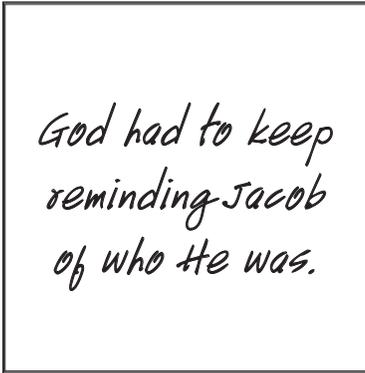
“THE GOD MY FOLKS WORSHIPPED”

When Abraham’s grandson Jacob dreamed of a ladder reaching to the throne of heaven, God said to him, *“I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac*

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[Jacob's immediate father]: *the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed*" (Genesis 28:13).² God had already promised the land to Abraham and his descendants; now He would fulfill that promise to Jacob and his immediate family.

But God had to keep reminding Jacob of who He was. When Jacob went to work for his Uncle Laban in the land



God had to keep reminding Jacob of who He was.

of Haran, God spoke to him in another dream and said, "*I am the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, and where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred*" (Genesis 31:13).³ Yet when

Jacob talked about God, notice how he referred to Him: "*the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac*" (Genesis 31:42) and "*the God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father*" (Genesis 31:53).

If Jacob ever knew God's name, he seems to have forgotten it! He referred to Him only as "the God my folks always worshipped."

I'm afraid this is the only way many people identify God today. "Sure, I know God," they say. "My folks have worshipped Him for years. He and I are not personal

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

friends, but He's a good friend of my parents." Yet there is a world of difference between knowing God and knowing *about* God. Someone who knows Him only as "the God my folks worshipped" simply knows *about* Him. We need to become so intimately acquainted with God that we fall on our knees and say with Thomas, "*My Lord and my God*" (John 20:28).

Of course, Jacob may have referred to God as "the God of Abraham and Isaac" as a gesture of respect. He may have been underscoring the fact that God had been faithful to his forefathers and was also faithful to him. Some Bible commentators interpret Jacob's words this way.

But I think Jacob's spiritual "track record" says otherwise. He was a cunning, deceitful man who tricked his older brother out of his birthright and made off with part of his uncle's flocks. Only in times of crisis did Jacob turn to God. Jacob's brother Esau learned he was coming home and went out to meet him. Jacob was desperate. He wailed to the "*God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac, the LORD which saidst unto me, Return unto thy country*" (Genesis 32:9). Jacob was still on very formal terms with God, not friendly terms.

Only after Jacob's faith had been tested a great deal more, did God appear to him again and say, "*Thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name*" (Genesis 35:10). The Hebrew name *Israel* literally means "ruling with God."

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And God said unto him, I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall be of thee, and kings shall come out of thy loins. (Genesis 35:11)⁴

Not only did God give Jacob a new name, but He revealed more of His own divine nature to him. He revealed that He was all-powerful and able to do anything He promised to do. So His vow to bring “*a nation and a company of nations*” out of this man was no casual promise.

It carried the authority of an omnipotent God, a God whom Jacob had come to trust.

“TELL THEM ‘I AM THAT I AM’ SENT YOU”

I am giving you a quick review of God’s early relationship with humanity so that you can see how individuals tried to perceive God. Sometimes people had a special name for God (as we’ll see in the following chapters); sometimes they could only refer to God in terms of something He had done for them. Through it all, humankind was reaching out to God, trying to understand who He was and that He should be worshipped. We see this occurring most vividly about four hundred years after the death of Jacob (or Israel), when God called a man named Moses to lead Jacob’s descendants out of Egypt.

Moses himself was an Israelite who fled from Egypt after he murdered a government official. He was tending

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the flocks of his father-in-law in the craggy wastelands of the Sinai Peninsula when God appeared to him. To make sure that Moses recognized Him for who He was, God appeared in a bush that burned without being consumed. That sight was bound to attract a shepherd's attention! So Moses said, *"I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt"* (Exodus 3:3). And as he came near to the bush, he heard God in the midst of it, saying, *"Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground"* (Exodus 3:5).

God explained to Moses that He had appeared previously to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (verse 6). Then He gave Moses the task of returning to Egypt and confronting the Pharaoh himself to demand the release of the Israelite slaves.

Moses was scared. He tried to make excuses to God. He said, *"Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?"* (verse 13). Here was the supreme test of God's intentions. If God really meant business with Moses, He would reveal His name. Otherwise, Moses

Moses wanted to know God's name because the name would tell him something about the very nature of God.

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would know the relationship with God was only casual. He would only be able to know God “at a distance,” and perhaps God would leave him when the going got tough.

But God gave Moses a name for Himself. He said, “*Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you*” (Exodus 3:14). The Hebrew word (*yhwh*) that God gave him is a puzzle, even to Bible scholars today. It has no clear-cut, simple translation. The closest it has been translated is “I am who I am.” In the next chapter, we’ll explore what these words conveyed to the Israelites when Moses carried the message to them. But notice how eager Moses was to identify God. He wanted to know God’s name because the name would tell him something about the very nature of God.

A NAME, NOT A “HANDLE”

Several major highways converge in South Bend. We get a large amount of heavy truck traffic through our city, some going right past the Christian Center where I pastor. The truckers have developed their own special jargon for us on the citizens’ band radio, and I overhear them using some of that CB lingo at local restaurants.

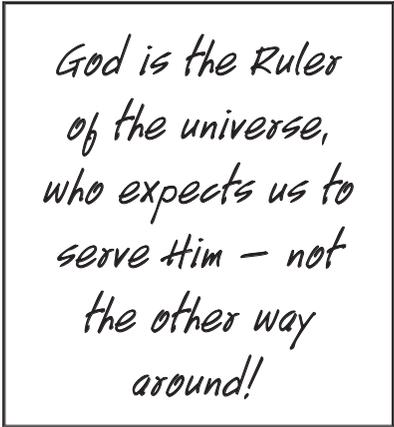
A very common CB term is “handle.” Truckers use that word when they want to get the name another trucker goes by. They say, “What’s your handle?”

I suppose they use “handle” because that’s what a name does for them; it lets them get hold of someone they

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know. To use that old cliché, a name lets them “get a handle” on their friends.

If you ever visit the Philippines and hear the jungle tribesmen call upon their gods for help, you’ll discover that the names of the gods are supposed to have magic power. These people believe that when they invoke the name of a certain god, he must come and do their bidding—whether or not he wants to! Like many pagans, they believe a god is a kind of supernatural serving boy who will jump to help them the moment they snap their fingers.



*God is the Ruler
of the universe,
who expects us to
serve Him — not
the other way
around!*

But the true God is not like that. He is the sovereign Ruler of the universe, who expects us to serve Him—not the other way around! So when we call upon the name of God, we are using a “handle” to bring Him to us. He will help us only if we have followed His commandments; He will put His promises into effect only if we have met the conditions of those promises.

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, “Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). Three thousand people did. When the apostles Peter and John met a lame man at the gate of the temple, Peter said,

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“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk” (Acts 3:6), and the man did. Peter’s testimony was that *“through faith in his name [Jesus] hath made this man strong”* (Acts 3:16). Later the apostles asked God *“that signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy child Jesus”* (Acts 4:30), and an earthquake shook the place where they were assembled (verse 31).

This was no magic. These men were not ordering God around by using His “handle.” Not by any means! They received God’s blessing only because they were obedient to God in every way, including the manner in which they prayed. God instructed them to pray in His name; that’s what we are expected to do as followers of Jesus Christ. But that in itself would not force God to do something against His will, nor would it force Him to bless someone unworthy of a blessing.

When the Israelites fled to the shore of the Red Sea, Moses commanded them to stand still and called upon the Lord to fight back the pursuing Egyptian army. God did not do what Moses asked, however, because He had a better plan in mind. *“And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward”* (Exodus 14:15). So Moses urged his people to run toward the sea itself, and God divided the waters so they could pass through on dry ground.

When the pagan armies of Ai defeated the Israelites, Joshua threw himself on the ground and said,

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Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? would to God we had been content, and dwelt on the other side Jordan! O Lord, what shall I say, when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies! (Joshua 7:7–8)

But God saw the situation differently.

And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel hath sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed from among you. (verses 10–12)

God refuses to bless people who are clinging to their sins. As a pastor, I talk with many people who expect God to treat them kindly, even though they often disobey Him. They seem to think that God is a kind of “Daddy Warbucks” who will give them everything they desire, no matter what they do. But they are wrong. God is not a “soft touch.” He is not deceived by the glib tongues of people who promise Him the moon but fail to deliver. He is not a foolish God.

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He blesses people if they meet His conditions, not just because they call upon Him. As Billy Graham says:

There is one thing God's love cannot do. It cannot forgive the unrepentant sinner...God will not force Himself on any man against his will. A person can hear a message about the love of God and say, "No, I won't have it," and God will let him go on in his sin to slavery and judgment.⁵

So it is with the prayer of a disobedient person. That person may plead with God and try to claim the promises of God. As long as he or she disobeys God, however, that individual can expect no help, God will not be ordered around by the whims of man. He will not put aside His own will to do our will.

A BLESSING, NOT A CURSE

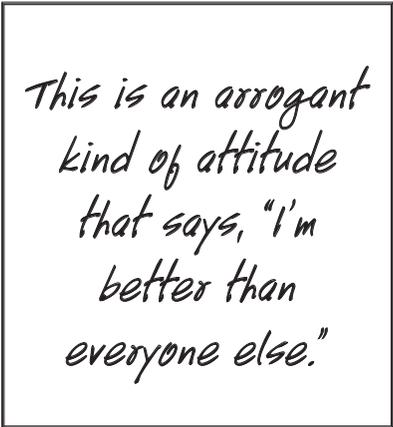
While some people use God's name in prayer, others use His name in cursing. They seem to think that God's name adds weight to their temper tantrums. It doesn't; in fact, it shows how little they know of God.

If those who curse in God's name really knew Him, they would know that He said, "*Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain*" (Exodus 20:7). This is one of the most commonly violated of the Ten Commandments because people do not know what it means.

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The word *vain* normally means “selfish pride” or “conceit.” When we say that a person is vain, we mean this person is puffed up with pride. This is an arrogant kind of attitude that says, “I’m better than everyone else.”

To “take the Lord’s name in vain,” means to use His name for your own selfish purposes. Some people swear oaths casually in God’s name, as if God lent His authority to their word. They say, “God knows that I’ve done thus-and-so.” What vanity! Others exclaim, “Oh God!” at the slightest provocation, as if they were on chummy terms with Him. What conceit! Still others angrily tell God to damn someone or something that irritates them at the moment, as if God were taking orders from them. What blasphemous pride!



*This is an arrogant
kind of attitude
that says, “I’m
better than
everyone else.”*

But there is another, more subtle kind of “taking God’s name in vain”—a kind many Christians practice. That is the vain habit of pronouncing God’s condemnation against something that God does not condemn. Some Christians—including some preachers—denounce in God’s name things they don’t happen to like.

For example, I remember a time when many preachers denounced the cutting of a woman’s hair; they said it

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was a worldly, sinful practice. Some preachers harangued their people about the “sin” of drinking coffee or tea. Others railed about women who wore lipstick; they said it was a “*superfluity of naughtiness*” (James 1:21).

Now there’s nothing wrong with denouncing sin, as long as God’s Word really says it is sin. But when you try to distort God’s Word to make *everything that you don’t like* a sin, you are using God’s name in vain, just as much as the infidel who swears the most vile oaths in God’s name. Bible commentator Bo Reicke summed it up well:

Unhappily the tongue of many pretended Christians (James 3:9–10) has assumed a double function. With the same tongue believers bless God and curse men, who are created in the image of God...In their eagerness to appear as prophets of doom they believe that it is part of the Christian message to pronounce curses upon degraded mankind...There is an absolute difference in kind between the true Christian message and the expression of the poisonous tongue. Bitter dissatisfaction has nothing to do with the gospel, and it is impossible to oscillate between the one and the other.⁶

God’s name is a word of blessing not a curse. We should never invoke God’s name to accomplish our own selfish ends, even if we can think of some “good” reason to justify it. God’s name is holy. It should be spoken reverently. It should be invoked only for the most godly purposes. God’s

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name should not be a part of someone's "gutter talk." It also should not be the high-caliber "shell" that explodes in some preacher's barrage against his personal peeves. God's name is meant to bring hope, healing, and happiness to all people. Let's be sure we use His name to that end.

"TELL ME THAT NAME AGAIN"

This book discusses some of the Hebrew names for God, names used in the Old Testament. But we should also take a brief look at the names of God's Son, Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, God in the flesh. The names of Jesus tell us a great deal about His character as He ministered on this earth. We can draw a great deal of comfort from meditating upon the names of Jesus because they remind us again of His deep love for us. Bill and Gloria Gaither penned these beautiful lines:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!

There's just something about that name!

Master, Savior, Jesus!

Like the fragrance after the rain.*

And that should be the testimony of every Christian, should it not? There's no earthly name to compare with the name of our precious Jesus, who died to save us from our sins. What then are some of the names that the New Testament uses to refer to Him?

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Jesus. The Greek name *Jesus* comes from the Hebrew name *Yeshua*, which means “God the Savior” or “God is salvation.” In our English Old Testament, it is the name *Joshua*. This is the name most commonly used in the New Testament to refer to Him. It’s the name His mother Mary gave to Him because the angel of God revealed to her that

*Kings and prophets
were anointed
with holy oil to
show that God had
chosen them for a
special purpose.*

He would “*save his people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21).

Christ. This Greek name means “the anointed One,” and that is also what the Hebrew name *Messiah* means. So when the Bible speaks of “Jesus Christ,” it literally means “Jesus the Messiah” or “Our Savior,

the Anointed One.” In Old Testament times, new kings and prophets were anointed with holy oil to show that God had chosen them for a special purpose. Although Jesus was not (as far as we know) anointed with oil at the beginning of His ministry, He was anointed with God’s Holy Spirit. (See Luke 3:21–22.)

Immanuel. In Hebrew, this name means “God (is) with us.” The prophet Isaiah announced that the promised Messiah of God would be called by this name (see Isaiah 7:14), indicating that He would be God in the flesh.

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Matthew says that Jesus fulfilled this prophecy (see Matthew 1:23), although He was not commonly called by this name. Perhaps this was because the average Jew of Jesus' day was not able to grasp the miracle of the Incarnation.

Master. The New Testament records that Jesus' disciples called Him by several Greek names that the King James Version translates as "Master." The most common of these was *didaskalos*, meaning "Teacher." Another was *kurios*, meaning "lord" or "overseer." The gospel of Matthew tells us that a certain scribe once came to Jesus and said, "*Master [didaskalos], I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest*" (Matthew 8:19). Jesus replied, "*The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head*" (verse 20). Jesus knew that if this man thought He was merely a great teacher about to form a prestigious corps of Jewish scholars, the man would be greatly disappointed. Jesus and His followers were destined to suffer and even die for the truth He came to proclaim.

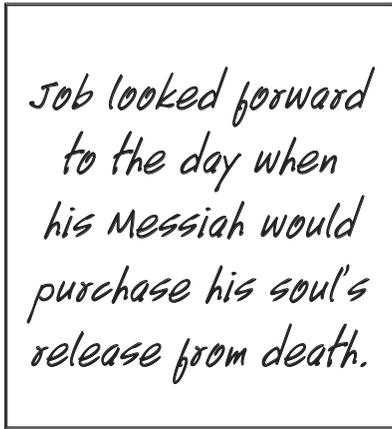
Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, said, "*Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a Master [kurios] in heaven*" (Colossians 4:1). He portrayed Jesus as a just and compassionate Master who provides the most basic needs of His servants.

Son of God. When the angel appeared to Mary and predicted Jesus' birth, he said, "*That Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God*" (Luke 1:35 NKJV).

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Jesus' followers often addressed Him as "the Son of God" (compare Matthew 16:16; John 11:27). So did unbelievers (see Mark 14:61), and even demons. (See Luke 4:41.)

Son of Man. Jesus most often used this name to refer to Himself. He was keenly aware of being both God and man, and perhaps wanted to stress the reality of His in-



*Job looked forward
to the day when
his Messiah would
purchase his soul's
release from death.*

car-
nation to all who heard Him. Even though He called Himself the "Son of man," Jesus did not hide the fact of His divine nature and power. For example, as Jesus foretold the end times, He said, "*Then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory*" (Matthew 24:30). Surely He was no ordinary man! He was and is, at once, both God and Man.

Redeemer. We often use this name to refer to Jesus, but did you know it is not used in the New Testament? It is only found in the Old. The Hebrew word *gaal* ("redeemer") literally means "one who redeems someone from jail." Job looked forward to the day when his Messiah would purchase his soul's release from death. He said, "*For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the*

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latter day upon the earth” (Job 19:25). He was referring, of course, to Jesus Christ.

The Bible has many other names for Jesus, each one revealing a bit more of His unique character and ministry. We don't have space to examine all of them, but I thought you might like this brief background on some of the more familiar names for Jesus. He is, after all, the eternal Son of God in human flesh. So the names of Jesus are names of the Son of God. They tell us something about the One who came to reveal God the Father.

UNLOCKING THE TREASURE

Bible students have long been fascinated by the unique role of names in the Scriptures. Perhaps names have little importance to today's man on the street, but they had great importance to the people living at the time the Bible was written. In the introduction to Robert Young's well-known *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, we find this interesting comment:

In Scripture, a name is much more than an identifying tag. It denotes the essence and character of a person or thing. Jesus told His disciples, “And he shall be hated of all men for my Name's sake...” Surely Christians were persecuted for more than the literal name of Jesus. Similarly, the psalmist often refers to those who love “the name of the Lord” (e.g.,

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Psalm 5:11), but it would be ridiculous to think that someone could love the name of the Lord without loving the Lord Himself.⁷

In over sixty years of evangelistic work, I have done considerable Bible study. Again and again, I am surprised to find new insights as I examine the names of God. Each name is like a golden key, ready to unlock a treasure of truth to the inquiring mind.

Thus, in the following pages I want to share some of the discoveries I have made in my studies. My goal is not to make you a biblical “egghead,” spouting off Hebrew phrases to impress your friends. Vanity is not my purpose, and it should not be yours. But I trust you will draw closer to the Lord Himself as you learn more about Him through this study. And if you have not yet become a newborn child of God through the saving blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, I pray this volume will inspire you to take that step.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

NOTES

1. The Bible does not specifically say that Adam and Eve offered sacrifices to God. The Bible first records sacrifices made by their sons, Cain and Abel. (See Genesis 4.) But we must assume that the parents taught their sons about God and showed them how to worship Him.
2. God gave Abram a new name, Abraham, literally meaning “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:5). Obviously, God saw great significance in a name!
3. When Jacob woke up from his dream of the ladder, he set up a stone pillar and worshipped the Lord there, calling it *Beth-el* (literally, “house of God”).
4. In chapter 5, we will see that this phrase “God Almighty” actually became a Hebrew name for God.
5. Billy Graham, *Till Armageddon: A Perspective on Suffering* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1981), pp. 46–47.
6. Bo Reicke, “The Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude,” *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 37 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1964), pp. 39–40.
7. Robert Young, *Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, Revelation by William B. Stevenson and David Wimbish (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), p. vii.