What’s in a Name? Memory Verse: Isaiah 43:1

May 4th, 2025 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-13

**[SLIDE 1]**

Recently my wife and I added a new child to our family. This is something we have done before as this baby is now our eighth child. We knew the drill, we knew mostly what to expect, and we knew what sort of preparations we needed to make: Get the crib assembled, get the car seat in order, get the diapers stocked…and oh yeah, we would also need to have a name.

Names are usually the least of our worries. We have a whole nine months to figure it out and come up with something we both like. In the past, we have had very little trouble naming our children. We have stuck with the classic biblical theme: Noah (everyone knows his story), Ezra (the great scribe), Silas (for a little New Testament), Phineas (the zealous priest). Our girls are named after biblical locations: Bethany (the hometown of Lazarus), Eden (the first garden) and Magdala (as in Mary Magdalene). So with another son on the way, finding another name from scripture should prove to be no problem.

But for some reason, my wife and I just could not settle on a name for this child. Our previous kids were named months before they were born, but this one kept us talking through it even while we were in the hospital. Our inability to come up with a name drove the rest of our family crazy. They hated that there was no resolution, and they of course all had their own opinions.

But a name is crucial…You carry it with you all your life. A name becomes your identity. It is the means by which we are called out; it’s how people get our attention, it is the way people yell at us or speak lovingly to us. It is the way in which we will be remembered after we are gone. Naming a child is not a throw-away decision…it is a great responsibility.

**[SLIDE 2]** Now, having said all that, it is not impossible to have your name changed. There have been some who have gone through the legal process of changing the way they are identified. And usually this is done to signify something new that had happened in their life. This could be the result of your parents simply giving you a bad name that you dislike enough to have changed. Most commonly we see this occur through the promise of marriage. A woman’s last name becomes her husband’s. She ties herself to him so completely that she is now identified with him. The old has gone, the new has come and by changing her name, my wife for example, embraces a new status, a new identity.

Name changes are not unknown in the bible either. **[SLIDE 3]** But when it comes to scripture, we are talking about first names. Surnames are actually kind of a new idea and really did not come about until the Middle Ages. The Bible refers to people by their first name and, if I want to get specific, I’ll list your father and maybe your grandfather. Andrew, son of Daivd, son of Donald…that’s me. But as we take a look at the names throughout the Bible, there are some instances in which some changes occur.

Now, every name has a meaning. **[SLIDE 4]** Do you all know what your name means? Sometimes people truly live into their names, sometimes not. My name, for example, is Andrew. It means “strong and manly”. I’ll let you decide how well that fits. Back when we were having a girl, I remember loving the name Mallory. I still like it and the double l’s fit so well with our last name: Mallory Bonsell. But what does it mean? Woman of ill fate. So we went with Eden, which, in Hebrew, means “delight”. It’s nice to have a name that has a pleasant meaning. And again, hopefully our daughter lives into the notion of being a delight according to her namesake.

Of course, as Christians, we consider Jesus **[SLIDE 5]** to be the name above all names. Jesus means “God saves” and if we want to know which God we are talking about, he too has a name: **[SLIDE 6]** Yahweh “I am”. God is the very ground of existence, the source of all things. And we can know all that just from God’s name.

But scripture uses names in a very powerful way. Often in the Old Testament, when a baby is named, some rational is attached to it. We are given a little explanation. For example; when Jacob **[SLIDE 7]** begins having children in Genesis 29, Leah, his wife, names her sons based on what is happening in her life. **[SLIDE 8]** We are told that Leah was unloved by her husband and this troubled Leah so she named her firstborn Reuben, meaning “sees my trouble.” Her second son **[SLIDE 9]** Simeon means “hear” because Leah felt that God had heard her pleas. She names one of her sons **[SLIDE 10]** Judah which means “praise” because she wanted to praise God for blessing her with yet another son.

((**[SLIDE 11]** People in the Bible, once they are named, tend to live into their names. There is a bit of a prophetic aspect to what people are called. For example, in Genesis, we are introduced to a man named Abram. **[SLIDE 12]** Abram means “father of nations.” That is a pretty ironic name for a man who is nearly one hundred years old and does not even have one child. But then God comes along in Genesis 17 and makes a special promise to this man. God says that he will have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. And to top off the deal, he changes Abram’s name to Abraham. **[SLIDE 13]** This new name means “father of many nations.” God has doubled down on this childless man, and the now named Abraham becomes identified with God’s impossible promises. We see here, the promise of God prompted a shift in identity.))

Let us go back to Jacob. **[SLIDE 14]** His name comes up in our memory verse for this week. Anyone know what his name means? Well Jacob was a twin and as the two babies were born, the second child was grasping onto the heel of his brother. So this child was named Jacob meaning **[SLIDE 15]**“heel grabber” or deceiver…one who will trip you up. Jacob lived into this name when, as an adult, he manipulated his slightly older brother into giving up his birthright. He also tricked his blind father into bestowing the blessing of the first born onto himself. Jacob was a trickster and later in life, after he had a large family and much livestock, Jacob had an encounter with a strange man, a messenger from God. As he lay down to sleep, the man came and wrestled with him until daybreak. The man asked to be let go, but Jacob refused unless the man would bless him first. The man says to Jacob in Genesis **[SLIDE 16]** 32:28 “Your name will no longer be Jacob. You have struggled with God and with men, and you have won; so your name will be Israel.” He goes from Jacob the deceiver, the heel grabber, to Israel meaning “one who wrestles with God.” This name comes to represent the entire nation of God’s people. And if you read the Old Testament, you will see this name plays out as God’s people continually wrestle with God and his ways. Here, in this case, God’s blessings prompt a shift in identity.

**[SLIDE 17]** In the book of Numbers, after God’s people have been freed from their captivity in Egypt, Moses puts together a team of explorers to venture into the promised land and scope out what might be found there. He picks 12 men, one from each of the twelve tribes and among them was a man named Hoshea which means “salvation”. I must admit, that is a pretty cool name, but in Numbers 13:16 we come across something very curious. It is almost a throwaway verse and it simply mentions that as Moses sends out these spies, he changes Hoshea’s name from “salvation” to “God saves”. Now if you are paying attention, you will know that that’s what Jesus means. And you would be correct. Hoshea became Joshua, or *Yeshua* in Hebrew, of which Jesus is the Greek version. Again, God’s promise to save prompts a shift in identity.

I want to mention two more name changes. These are both found in the New Testament. Matthew 16:13 finds Jesus speaking with his disciples and asking them the main question we all must answer: **[SLIDE 18]** Who do you say I am? There are many options available. At the time, some people thought Jesus was basically a return of the great prophet Elijah, some thought he was John the Baptist or some other prophetic figure. Today, people surmise that Jesus was a great wise man of history, he was an impeccable teacher of ethics and morals, he was a great example for us to follow regarding how to live life and conduct ourselves. But the fisherman Simon, which means “God hears” (It’s very similar to the previously discussed Simeon), clears away all the options and boldly declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In verse 17 Jesus replies, **[SLIDE 19]** “Good for you Simon son of John! For this truth did not come from any human being , but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven.” Simon is demonstrating knowledge beyond his ability – beyond human understanding. Jesus goes on, “And so I tell you, Peter; you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church and not even death will ever be able to over come it.” **[SLIDE 20]** So Simon becomes Peter, literally the rock. And, if you read through the book of Acts you will see how God builds his church upon the leadership of Peter. We can see, as God gives a new vocation, it prompts a shift in identity.

Probably the most dramatic and well-known name change belongs to an apostle named Paul. But before he was Paul, he went by Saul **[SLIDE 21]**, a pharisee of the highest order and a sworn enemy of this blasphemous and unclean cult known as The Way which was full of people who were eventually called Christians. Saul was faithful to his religion and in fact his name means “prayed for”. And, covered as he was in prayer, Saul kept busy doing his best to stamp out this newly formed church. Then God stepped in. Saul was heading to Damascus to hunt down some more Christians when a bright light knocked him off his horse and blinded his eyes. Jesus himself spoke to Saul asking him, by name mind you, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul had no answer, but he hobbles his way to town were a faithful Christian named Ananias (which means “God has been gracious” by the way) disciples Saul and, pun intended, helps him see the light. Ananias teaches Saul all about who Jesus is.

There is no official name change that we can read about in scripture, but later, in Acts 13:9 it says,**[SLIDE 22]** “Then Saul – also known as Paul – was filled with the Holy Spirit…” And from then on out he is always referred to as Paul which means “humble” or “small”. **[SLIDE 23]** When God steps in, our lives change. Saul, the haughty Pharisee, became Paul the humble servant because the presence of Jesus Christ prompts a shift in identity.

Now, of course, I want to hone in on your name. **[slide 24]** We each have one, we are each identified by a name or maybe a nickname. Your name might be interesting or it might be run of the mill. Your name might have a strong presence through your family history or maybe it is something unique. Maybe your name has important meaning to it, or maybe your parents just liked the way it sounds. As for our newborn, **[SLIDE 24]** my wife and I went back and forth, we sorted through many lists of names, we took suggestions, we even put our other kids up to a vote…in the end we landed on the name Joel; **[SLIDE 25]** Joel Kevin Lee. Kevin is my father-in-law and Lee comes from my wife’ who has two middle names as well, May Lee. However we do have a couple of fine Lee’s within our congregation that we don’t mind mentioning either. The name derives from the prophet Joel who has his own book in the bible and it means “Yahweh is God”. A short and simple declaration. And we hope and pray that Joel will live into his namesake, that we will speak God’s words faithfully like the prophet who went before him, that he will make Yahweh his God.

All of us were given a name at birth. We all have a handle to go by, but over and beyond the names we give each other, we need to acknowledge the name we have earned. It’s a common one, it pertains to us all. And that name is sinner. **[SLIDE 27]** It means “one who misses the mark, one who is far from God.” It’s probably not a preferred title, but there is no escaping it. That’s our name. This is the state in which each of us find ourselves. We might try to spruce it up with a clever nickname or some sort of alias…but there is no denying who we really are. Oh, but what a joy to find out what God has to say about it. His presence prompts a shift in our identity. His promises prompt a shift in our identity. His blessings prompt a shift in our identity. God steps in, he gives us a new vocation and it prompts a shift in our identity. God gives us a new name. Each one of us has the opportunity to introduce our selves as one formerly known as a sinner. We all have the opportunity to say, “You can call me **[SLIDE 28]** Christian.” And you can know what it means by looking at the way we live. We live into our namesake around here. We identify with the new name we have been given. We are Christians, and that name means “little Christ”. We follow Jesus! It’s a life of joy, a life of peace and even though there are hard times, we know that we do not walk through them alone. If you go by the name Christian than you know where you are going. You have direction and purpose all the days of your life and you have assurance that your life will extend even beyond the days you are given here on this earth.

If you don’t wear that name, if you don’t lay claim to the wonderful and magnificent promises of God…maybe it’s time for a change. God comes to us in our sin, he loves us even while we are in our sin and he extends to each of us a new name. We can be transformed from sinner to Christian, we can have a new identity. And then, as Christians, we get together on Sunday mornings and on Wednesday nights and we help one another and encourage one another to live into this new name that God has given us.

Let me re-read a few verses again from our scripture reading earlier. Isaiah 43:1 (READ) And what does it mean to be redeemed and belong to the Lord? What does it mean for our lives now that we belong to him? Now that our name has been changed? Jump to verse 12 (READ) You are my witnesses. You speak out what you know about me. You speak out and live your life according to your new identity. Hallelujah! Amen.