

“You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What’s in a name?

That, you may remember, was the question asked by Juliet in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. (2.2.38-49) In one of the more romantic scenes in classic theatre, Juliet bemoans the fact that the man with whom she has fallen in love is a member of the Montague family—who were feuding with the Capulet’s, Juliet’s family. She wishes that Romeo would deny his name, and be able to pledge his love to her. As she says, “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

But is it that simple? Names can be very powerful. A name brings to mind all sorts of thoughts and images, both positive and negative. What do you think or feel or remember when you hear the name, “Adolf Hitler”, “Martin Luther”, “Justin Trudeau”, “Andrew Scheer”, “Kim Kardashian”, “Genghis Khan”, “Bianca Andreescu”, “David Bode”. Each one of those names evokes something in us. It may be ridicule and scorn. It may be admiration. It could be hatred. It could be thankfulness. What’s in a name? In many ways, a name is everything about a person. It is everything we associate with that person. More than a title, a name becomes part of the person themselves. Isn’t that why new parents seem to stress and worry about the name they are going to give a newborn son or daughter?

God’s name is everything that we can say about Him, too! When God sent Moses to Egypt to lead His people out of their bondage, Moses was sure the people wouldn’t listen to him. He asks: ***“If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?”*** ***God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’*** ***And he said, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’*** ***God also said to Moses, ‘Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.***” (Exodus 3:13-15, ESV) That name, “I AM” is the personal name that God has made known to us. It is the name that is used in Hebrew when God gives the Commandment: *“you shall not take the name of Yahweh, your God in vain”* In almost all our English Bibles, you will see this name typically in small caps—each letter is capitalized, although the first letter is larger. This is a way of reminding us that this is not just any lord or not just any god who is speaking and acting. It is the God who is what His name says. He is above every name in heaven and earth. He is the Living God; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, even as He is the God of you and me. He is the God who created heaven and earth. He alone is Yahweh—the God who was, who is and who ever will be.

While the name Yahweh isn’t used in the New Testament, Jesus identified Himself by that name. Think of all those “I Am” promises: ***“I am the good shepherd.”*** (John 10:11, ESV) ***“I am the door.”*** (John 10:9, ESV) ***“I am the true vine”*** (John 15:1, ESV). ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.”*** (John 14:6, ESV) In all of these declarations Jesus was claiming to be Yahweh. Joseph was told to name the Christ-Child ‘Jesus’, a name that literally means, “Yahweh saves”. We confess that “Jesus is Lord”. When we do that, we are confirming that Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh.

When Jesus teaches us to pray and gives us the model of the Lord’s prayer, the first thing He teaches us to pray is: ***“Hallowed by Thy name”***. In other words, He teaches us to pray that we may keep this commandment! In His High-Priestly prayer before His crucifixion, Jesus Himself prays to His dear Father: ***“I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”***” (John 17:26, ESV) He didn’t just teach us to honour God’s name and keep it holy. He practised what He preached!

Sadly, since the fall into sin, we do not honour the name of God. I’m afraid, dear people loved by God, that the misuse of God’s name is so rampant around us that it hardly even bothers us anymore. We used to be disturbed by it. We used to react strongly to the whole idea of cursing and swearing. God does tell us in His Word: ***“Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.”*** (Ephesians 5:4, ESV) I remember years ago when we sat

down to watch a movie that was promoted as a great comedy film. I don't remember the movie because we never finished watching it. The language was so horrible that I couldn't bear to hear it. Yet I admit, to my shame, that I've become hardened to that. Let's face it, we wouldn't be able to watch virtually anything anymore if we wouldn't put up with some cursing and swearing. We're not surprised or moved by it anymore. We would be surprised if there were no cursing.

This commandment has to do with the words that we say—and especially the way we use the holy name of God. The holy, glorious name of God is blasphemed, misused and even cursed by the people of our world. God's name is taken in vain when we use it in our conversation more as a curse word than in prayer. God's name is taken in vain when we use it to justify the things that we are saying. How easily do words like, "I swear to God", or "oh, my God" come out of our mouths? If I understand it correctly, there is an emoji—those silly little symbols people use in texts and emails—that expresses the thought of OMG, which is short for "oh, my God!" Or think of the little boy in Sunday School when the teacher asked, "does anyone know where God lives?" The little boy piped up and said, "He lives in our bathroom". The teacher was puzzled, and asked why he thought God lived in the bathroom. The boy answered, "I thought my sister was in the bathroom getting ready for school, but my dad came upstairs and pounded on the bathroom door. He said, 'Good Lord, are you in there again?' So I guess God must live in our bathroom".

Of course, we don't mean to dishonour God's name. We tell ourselves we don't mean anything by it when we say, "I swear". We many not even think that we are really saying, "I swear to God". We've found easy ways around it. We just say, "gosh darn it!". We can use a word like 'heck', and it doesn't seem that bad. But you do know what heck is, don't you? Heck is where you go if you don't believe in Gosh.

Every chapter of Holy Scripture is written to show us how to make good use of God's name. When we know and appreciate all that God has done for us in spite of and because of our sins, we are too busy praising his name and too busy calling on his name for help—too much filled with his name—to have the time or desire to misuse it. We take it seriously, because the name of God stands for all that he is, all that he does, and all that he has promised to do for us.

God gave us His name so that we might know that He is the One who created and redeemed us. He gave us His name so that we can call upon Him as children do a loving father. He gave us His name so that we may proclaim it among all peoples.

He does not want us to use His name in vain by the thoughtless swearing we often do. It is not to be a curse word. Oh, that we had more people with the courage of Maria! Maria was a small, unassuming woman who worked in the distribution department at Schneider's meat processing plant. She had to deal with the many truck drivers who would pick up the products for shipment. We have cliches about the language of truckers, and in this case it was often true. There was one man in particular who took the Lord's name as his favourite curse word. But one day he said it when talking with Maria. That's when this little woman, who makes Deaconess Miriam look tall, grabbed him by the lapels, pulled him down to her face and said, "that's my Saviour you are talking about, and I don't want to hear you using His name like that again!" The burly trucker apologized, and as far as I know, he was always respectful around Maria.

Luther reminds us that we are not to *curse, swear, use satanic arts, lie, or deceive by His name, but call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise, and give thanks.* (SC, 2nd Commandment) Using God's name in vain means to make it empty or meaningless. Using it to lie by His name falsely, saying things like, "the Lord told me" is to use it in vain. Using it frivolously leads us to forget the importance and promise that we have in that name. And there is power in that name! God tells us: "***call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.***" (Psalm 50:15, ESV) That name can be used to curse the devil, and it has power over the devil. The disciples were sent out by the Lord and came back all excited: "***Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!***" (Luke 10:17, ESV) But our greatest joy is that there is salvation in the name of Yahweh / God: in the One who is "Yahweh Saves". Peter points to Jesus and reminds us: "***And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.***" (Acts 4:12, ESV) Paul declares: "***God has highly exalted [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,***" (Philippians 2:9–10, ESV)

God has given to us His name—His holy name!—so that we can acknowledge with joy and thanksgiving, "***The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.***" (Exodus 15:2, ESV) That salvation is accomplished for us when the Saviour gives His life for us on the cross. It is sealed in the promises that come through His resurrection from the dead. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds! It is our joy and salvation. It is our hope and life. It is not a name to be used to curse, but to bless.

How blessed we are to come together in His name, to call on His name as we gather to be fed by Him and to praise His goodness. We can make the sign of the cross and remember that we are baptized into the name of God—the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We depart as our worship ends with a benediction—with the good word that our God is with us. When we think of all that name means for us—and it really doesn't matter if we are talking about the Father, the Son or the Holy Spirit, for they are all God—when we remember the blessings we have in that name, we will not use it carelessly, but with the psalmist we will say: ***Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*** (Psalm 103:1 - ESV) Amen.