

Name him Jesus (Matthew 1:18-25)

It was an ordinary, everyday name, one that dozens of other boys in Nazareth shared.

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What's in a name? For today's expectant parents, the choice feels weighty, but help is on the way. Couples can consult books and websites that explore name meanings, cultural relevance, and popularity. They can ask for feedback from the 741,000 members of the /namenerds subreddit. If all else fails, they can hire a baby naming consultant: only \$500 for a personalized advice session via Zoom.

Mary and Joseph needed none of this; their name came straight from celestial instructions. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife," the angel tells Joseph. "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

If the couple had checked a baby name book later that day, they would have traced this name through languages (Greek "Jesus" to Aramaic "Yeshua" to Hebrew "Joshua") and through stories, all the way back to the book of Exodus. They would have remembered Joshua's leadership and wondered how their own child's story would unfold: perhaps he too could follow Moses' example; perhaps he too could lead the people into God's promise. They would have remembered God's pledge in Joshua 1:9—"Do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go"—and begun to trust that God would be with this child too, in ways they were only beginning to imagine. "Immanuel," God-with-us, would be a most appropriate nickname.

Mary and Joseph's baby name book would have delved into the name's rich meaning, too. As the angel said, "Jesus" means "God saves." This much the couple knew; this much the scriptures could already attest. Their faith was full of stories of God's miraculous deliverance: making a way through the Red Sea, offering manna in the wilderness, bringing the people home from exile. "God saves" was a name of praise, a promise that God works in the present tense, not merely in the past.

The angel had extended this message beyond the definition on the page. A saving God was expected; a God who saved "from their sins" was less so. This child would offer a different kind of salvation, from the internal and systemic as well as from the external and oppressive. He would offer his people a liberation deeper than they had yet known.

Mary and Joseph might also have checked the name's popularity, its ranking on the annual Bethlehem Social Security Administration list. Jesus appeared toward the top of the chart: it was a common name in biblical times, the equal of today's Liam or Olivia. The first-century historian Josephus mentions 20 different men named Jesus, and Paul sends greetings from a man named Jesus to the Colossian church.

Jesus' name would not be unique and dazzling, a name that nobody had heard before. He would have an ordinary, everyday name, one that dozens of other boys in Nazareth would share. When Mary called, "Jesus, come here!" in the marketplace, a dozen little boys would turn around. When he went to the temple to learn to read and write, there would be a couple other boys named Jesus in his class. This boy would live a life around ordinary, commonplace things—mustard seeds, tax collectors, fishing boats, and his own name—and set them a-shimmer with meaning and value.

After considering this name in etymology and scripture and cultural context, after finding in it a glimpse of the life their son would lead, it's no wonder that Mary and Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him ... and named him Jesus."