

Exodus 20:7
Name above all names

Worthily and delightedly bear the Name

I don't know how many **court-room dramas** I must have seen on TV over the years. From time to time I've wondered how I would fare if it was *me* in the **witness box**, and first asked to **swear on the Bible**, and then cross-examined by some sly **barrister** trying to trip me up in my answers.

I would like to think that I would keep my calm. I hope that if I were pressed by that sneaky line, *Come now, Mr Ham, it's a simple question, **Yes or No*** ... only my take on the matter is that it's a more complex issue, and that either Yes or No would misrepresent the situation ...

... I would *like* to think that I might have sufficient confidence and presence of mind to address the judge, and say that I have only with substantial reluctance taken an oath in the name of Almighty God, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth ...

... that I take the responsibility of that oath very seriously indeed, and ...

... that *neither* a Yes answer *nor* a No answer gives "the whole truth" here, and, respectfully, on those grounds, decline to answer in either of those terms.

So I would risk a charge of "contempt of court", rather than risk contempt of that Third Word of Exodus 20, the Third Commandment:

"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."

(Exodus 20:7)

The chances of my being cross-examined in such circumstances, though, I have to think are pretty small. I am probably being ridiculously over-dramatic in even thinking through the scenario so many times. And yet, is it ridiculous to think carefully what our speech involving God ... *Almighty God* ... might imply, about what people might infer, rightly or wrongly, about our Lord Jesus Christ on the basis of how we speak about him... how we use his name?

Many years ago, when our kids were really small, I once took them to a local **soft-play** location in Harlow. Of course there was an area for the parents to sit and watch the kids, but I was the only Dad, and I didn't know any of the Mums present. But they obviously knew one another.

I was really saddened to be unable to not overhear a group of those Mums slagging off their partners. They might not have named names, but how they spoke about those guys was hugely lacking in respect. Even if they were as bad as they were being made out to be, how did it help to just diss them like that? And if they *weren't* as bad as was being said ... how horrible that they were so misrepresented in that way, a kind of inverse bragging about them.

Folks, I think this is the kind of stuff we're looking at here with this Third Word. The first two deal with our hearts and thoughts: who and what we worship

“You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image,”

(Exodus 20:3-4)

But this is “the LORD” we're referring to here. This is the God of power and grace, who keeps his promises ... who *kept* his promises:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

(Exodus 20:2)

So, folks, how are we going to *talk* about this God? When his name is on our lips, or written in some way above our lives ... do we honour or dishonour that name?

“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.”

(Exodus 20:7)

And we have to push it further than just speech, even if that is important. Over in the NT, we're told that the *name* has repercussions on the whole of our lives.

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

(Colossians 3:17)

Folks, if the first two Words are about how we order our lives - our thinking, our attitudes, our heart: who comes first - this third Word is about how we live those lives out. This is about how we publicly honour this one and only God whom we have decided to follow. **In every aspect of our lives, we are to consider and live for the honour of the one true God.**

There's a huge amount of stuff we could look at this morning, and we're going to have to be hugely selective.

Three words to understand rightly
What might this look like in our lives?
Am I bothered by what God says?

- **Three words to understand rightly**

I just need to mention this first one, because the nuances we have in English do translate fairly well: the word “**name**” itself.

“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.”

(Exodus 20:7)

So for some purposes, someone's name is just a **label**. There are some names with a meaning, but it would be a mistake nowadays to assume that the meaning behind a name is really anything much to do with the person. They might have chosen it for themselves, or it might just have been chosen for them, and the reason for that choice could be all sorts of things.

So, for example, I'm just guessing that I got called Peter because my parents liked the name, not because they hoped that I would specially have a **solid-as-a-rock** character - the Greek words *petros* and *petra* meaning something along those lines.

But I have a cousin Erik, specifically written with a K, after a Scandinavian friend of his father, whom he met and greatly admired during the Second World War.

But if a name is just a label, "taking it in vain" doesn't really make much sense. That only really computes if the "name" relates in some way to the name-holder's **character**. Clearly that's the case with some of the names you get in the Bible. Classic example, Abigail pleading with David for the life of her husband Nabal - though you wonder what the parents were up to here

"Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him."

(1 Samuel 25:25)

Why, I have to ask, would any parent name their child "arrogant fool"? Though there are plenty of better examples. Check out almost any of the Hebrew names in the OT, and you will come up with some significant meaning:

Zechariah - God remembers

Elijah - the LORD is God

And you presume that parents in those cases were hoping and praying that their children would reflect something of those statements in their lives. If they did, you've perhaps got a stronger meaning of the word name, just as we do in English: **reputation**.

And so we've got "shop's own brands" in contrast with **named brands**. And some of those names are - so we are told - worth having. Not just any old food, but **M&S** ... because they have a *name* for quality. Top range cars: **Rolls-Royce** would have a *name* for the ultimate in luxury and reliability.

From there, take a further step, and you have someone acting on behalf of those brands, or those names, would claim **representative authority**. "In the name of" lays claim to the very phrase I automatically used, "on behalf of". You're claiming that if so-and-so were here in person, they would do and say the same as you. You understand them sufficiently well that you can reasonably claim to speak for them.

Right away, can you see how this should apply in our praying and just general

living? When we read in the NT things like ...

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.”

(John 16:23)

... do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, ...

(Colossians 3:17)

Any time we hear of “the name of the Lord” in a verse or passage, we can substitute “the character of the Lord” in its place. God’s name represents the sum total of his character. He is holy, loving, just, compassionate, omnipresent, omnipotent, sovereign, gracious, merciful, patient, infinite, and good. To pray “in the name of the Lord” is to pray according to his character. To call upon the name of the Lord is to ask God to act according to his character. To take shelter in the name of the Lord is to place our trust in who he is. To be baptised in the name of the Lord is to identify with his character as our salvation, our strength, and our new identity.

Huge significance here, which is worth taking time to reflect on and savouring. And there’s a final nuance that I hadn’t picked up on until working this through this last week, and that is that “the name” is involved - I’m still not entirely sure how, or what this fully signifies - in our final **destiny**. Look at this - and take this one home to ponder!

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

(Revelation 22:3-4)

So, a very brief introduction to that deceptively simple word “name”. But now what about “**in vain**”?

“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.”

(Exodus 20:7)

If we’re getting some idea of the weightiness of that word “name” now, then “in vain” starts to fall into place quite naturally. In fact, one meaning of the word that is used there in Hebrew means “lightly”. Instead of significance, there is useless emptiness. It is, we might say - though perhaps confusingly - “in name *only*”.

Oh, grant us help against the foe, for vain is the salvation of man!

(Psalms 60:11, 108:12)

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.

(Psalms 127:1)

But there is another, darker nuance, too. Not just emptiness, but deception.

“You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a

wicked man to be a malicious witness.”

(Exodus 23:1)

So what would be “in vain”, back in Exodus 20:7? “Taking the name” frivolously or irreverently, yes. But I think we have to think through the way it might also be possible to use God’s name *deceptively*, too.

Come back to that in a moment, though. One more word - that you might think is the simplest of the bunch: **take**.

“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.”

(Exodus 20:7)

Now most times you read something on this particular verse, it will zoom in on our speech. But one of the books that I read this week mentioned that that particular word, anywhere else it’s used in the OT, does *not* refer to speech. It’s a routine word for lift up or bear or carry something. What if we substituted the words “carry around with you”? How does that sound?

“You shall not *carry around with you* the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who *carries around with them* his name in vain.”

As if that “name” is always on display wherever we go, almost hovering over our heads to be seen at all times. So it’s not just what we say that this is talking about here. It’s the whole of our lives on show, pointing either positively or negatively to “the LORD your God”. And we are warned against that display bringing any *dishonour* or *disrepute* to that name.

That is the name that you take upon yourself when you are baptised, remember?

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ...”

(Matthew 28:19)

And that’s not just *in*, teaching that the process of baptism must be done in a way which befits the “name”. Literally, it’s *into*: we are baptised *into* that threefold name. It is our new location - which we must praise like a good Cornishman does this wonderful **county**. It is our new identity, a **citizenship** that we must cherish and not tarnish, the way British so-called football fans have sometimes done when attending away games on the Continent. It is our new **uniform**, which we are to wear proudly, and which we must not disgrace.

So ...

- **What might this look like in our lives?**

How we pray

Although I've just said it's broader than just speaking - and just general speaking is broader than praying - I'm sure it *does* apply in this specific area, because we're specifically *told* to pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you."

(John 16:23)

But perhaps we're in a better position to understand this, now. What does "praying in the name of Jesus" mean? It *can't* be just finishing a prayer with the words - I could say "formula" - I couldn't even say "mantra", if I wanted to be provocative - "in the name of Jesus". That is so easily said so thoughtlessly - which, wouldn't we say, is therefore likely to risk being "in vain".

Folks, I do think that sometimes we have a problem with starting and stopping our prayers, particularly in public. Starting is not so difficult, because we're usually starting when everyone else is silent. And I don't think there's anything wrong with people having favourite opening lines to their prayers.

But it seems to be that we need to flag up when we have *stopped* praying, so that other people won't think we are just pausing, wondering what to say next, but will know it's OK for them to start praying now. And that, if we're not careful, can mean that "in the name of Jesus" is reduced to a sort of extended punctuation mark. It becomes the sign for everyone else to come out with an automatic *Amen* - irrespective of whether *that* is really meant, too, as a sign of agreement with what you have prayed for.

It has *got* to be more than just a punctuation mark, surely? If that is all that that Name above all names has become in our prayer times, then that *has* to be an "in vain", something immensely weighty and honourable used as something almost trivial - like a bar of **gold bullion** being used as a **doorstop**.

When we say those words, we're thinking back over the words that we've just said - and it would apply in private prayer as much as in public - and honestly assessing them as words that we think Jesus would sign his name to. If we were to write a speech on his behalf, he would be happy to read out the words we have put together for him.

Folks, that is a big claim. And so it means, too, that we should be careful with what we pray for. First of all, we need to ask ourselves if the things we are speaking to God about are the things that are already on his favoured agenda. It's not meant to be about twisting God's arm to give *us* what *we* want, but one way that *we* are meant to become more conversant with the kind of stuff that *he* wants - or that we have some encouragement to think he might be inclined to respond to favourably, based on what we know of his person, his character, his disposition ... his *Name*, actually.

Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your

words be few. For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.

(Ecclesiastes 5:2-3)

How we speak

So here's the classic stuff about "not taking the name in vain". The way that "God" or "Jesus" or "Christ" gets dropped into everyday speech as just exclamations, intensifications. And you've probably heard people say about how we always ought to speak up and challenge anyone who does it: "That's my Lord you're talking about there!!" - that kind of thing.

And that leads us to that situation where people around us are supposed to moderate their language because we're present. And *religious*.

And it's not as if there is no value in this. Personally, the "OMG" expression quite grates on me, and I wonder if that's because the contraction to just initials almost mocks and further trivialises the full works "Oh my God" expression to become just another emoji. And I don't think it's particularly healthy to live in a society where there are some people who only hear the name of Jesus as some kind of swear word.

But I don't think this Word, this Commandment, is particularly here in order for us to religiously domesticate our society. Remember how this section starts off:

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

(Exodus 20:2)

Those people out there regularly and thoughtlessly blaspheming, he's not *their* God. He hasn't brought *them* out of spiritual slavery. The next word in these Commandments doesn't refer to *them* ... *They shall not*. Folks, it's addressed to *us*. The next word is ...

"You shall ..."

(Exodus 20:3)

So this isn't about us training *them* not to mishandle the name, even if it is a high and worthy name. First of all it has to be about *us* bearing that name in a way that shows we truly revere and honour the Lord Jesus Christ, if his name is on our lips, and that we honestly seek to live as his ambassadors even when we do not make specific verbal reference to him.

So, folks, how do we speak of him? Even in our off-guard moments, do we speak warmly of him - or slyly slag him off like those Mums at the toddler play area? Do people know that we are just overjoyed and delighted by his gracious association with us? Do they know we feel rich and privileged to have Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Saviour, and Almighty God as our Heavenly Father? Just look at what privilege the apostles thought it was! "Dishonour" here, by the way, means beaten up by the authorities!

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name.

(Acts 5:41)

Folks, do we treasure the name Jesus so much that if we are *beaten up* for our association with it, we will rejoice?

So what about if we were instead to complain about State Oppression, in such circumstances, and argue for our Rights? Would that count as “taking the name *in vain*” - losing sight of the immense privilege we are accorded?

But finally in this section, and quickly, let’s broaden this from how we speak to

How we live

If the name of Jesus is supposed to be something like a **beacon** flashing over our heads, do our lives fit? Is this the kind of thing that we might pray for one another?

To this end we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and may fulfil every resolve for good and every work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(2 Thessalonians 1:11-12)

There is the very opposite of that, a clear “taking the name” *deceitfully*, that also gets a mention in the Scriptures: exploiting religion - taking the name of Jesus Christ - for self-advantage

... people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

(1 Timothy 6:5)

Whether it’s a comfortably paid position in the church, or it’s a position of respect in society, it’s all about me instead of all about Him.

... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power.

(2 Timothy 3:4-5)

Saying one thing in public, but another thing in private - even if that’s only the privacy of your own heart. “Taking the name” *deceitfully*. But certainly not limited to the pulpit, with that letter addressed to Pastor Timothy. Here’s one that the apostle Peter wrote for everybody!

Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

(1 Peter 2:16)

Don't "take that name" as a disguise, a cover, a smoke-screen. Don't let mere religion blind you to the truth of Christ that applies to *you too*.

And maybe even think of those Pharisees that Jesus so often tore into, claiming reverence for God, *insisting* on *not* using that special name of God in their prayers, reading *ha-shem*, Hebrew for "the name", instead of that special name that gets into our modern Bible with small capital letters ...

... so conspicuously *not* "taking the Name", deliberately drawing attention to themselves by their shouted silence, that they do precisely what they claimed to be not doing, manipulating their handling of "the Name" for their own self-advantage.

Folks, isn't this so really weird and odd, that we can so twist what God says in knots that we can end up proudly and self-congratulatingly doing the very opposite of what we think and claim we are doing? We can so deceive ourselves, if we are not careful to read and ponder on God's Word, asking the Holy Spirit to

*Open my eyes, Lord
I want to see Jesus*

Jesus, Name above all names

Or - two final questions ...

- **Am I bothered by what God says?**

First, *are we bothered about the honour of God's name?*

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, ..."
(Exodus 20:7)

Is that name precious to you? Is it like when you're in a crowd, but you can suddenly pick up from amidst the hubbub the mention of your name - or the name of someone dear to you?

If his is that Name above all names, is he more important to you than your own name or reputation? What will you forgo for our Lord Jesus Christ to be held in repute, even if it costs you? Your convenience? Your rights?

Will you give up that grudge that you've been holding, trying to persuade yourself for years that it's about the honour of God's name ... but it's actually *you* who have been "taking the Name in vain", deceitfully, waiting for the satisfaction of an apology ... and letting your soul corrode in the process?

Because, bottom line now: *Are we bothered about whether God holds us guilty or guiltless?*

Remember the second line of that Third Word, with its profound warning:

"... for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain."

(Exodus 20:7)

I'm going to suggest that we have all most likely tripped up on something here.

Perhaps dishonourable words have slipped from our lips, perhaps even with no huge provocation.

Perhaps we have been just a bit too jokey and flippant about things that actually warrant greater reverence. Would you really speak that mockingly or demeaningly about someone you really loved?

Or perhaps we just have to admit that our lives this week have been no great advert for that High and Holy Name. We have taken - *borne* - his name above our lives, and it has come back tarnished on our watch.

Folks, if this is the case, let me point you to one final verse about the Name. The name Jesus, what it meant, and what it still means.

“... you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

(Matthew 1:21)

Remember that the bearer of the Name above all names is the *Saviour*. Even as we mangle his name on our lips, it still speaks salvation. The guilty can be pardoned.

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

(Titus 3:4-7)

“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

(Isaiah 55:6-7)

Worthily and delightedly bear the Name