

**Jesus Fulfills the Meaning of His Names**  
**by the Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell, James A. Kelso Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament**



The name Jesus (Greek *Iesous*; Aramaic *Yeshua*) is a form of the name “Joshua,” derived like that name from the Semitic word for “salvation,” *yeshuah*. God’s Son is to be given this name because of his life’s work: “he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21).

A second name is also given to the child, however—not by his earthly father, Joseph, but by the writer of the Gospel of Matthew for the eyes and ears of its readers and hearers (Matt 1:22-23):

*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.*

*Emmanuel* means “God with us.” One characteristic feature of Matthew’s gospel is the quotation of scriptures that foreshadow Jesus’ life and ministry. Here Matthew is quoting from Isaiah 7:10-16.

In Matthew’s Gospel, then, two names are applied to the Christ before he is even born: Jesus and Emmanuel. Both names figure prominently in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension.

In Matthew, as in Mark, Jesus eats a Passover meal with his disciples. Matthew’s version follows Mark’s, with one important addition. In Matthew as in Mark, Jesus blesses the bread and, breaking it, shares it with his disciples saying, “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matt 26:26). He then takes the cup, gives thanks, and shares it with them: “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant [just what Mark says], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:27-28). That last phrase, “for the forgiveness of sins,” only Matthew has. Remember that before Jesus’ birth, the angel had said to Joseph, “you are to name him Jesus [that is, *Yeshua*, or ‘Savior’], for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). But how? Only now do we begin to see. Somehow, in his death, Jesus takes upon himself the ugliness and horror of human life, human evil, human sin.

Now we come to the cross. In Matthew, the death of Jesus is described in more detail than in Mark. In particular, Matthew has a sequence of three groups of people who mock Jesus as he is hanging on the cross. Their words are important (look particularly at the words in italics). First there were the passers-by (Matt 27:39-40), who said, “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, *save yourself!*” (Remember the name *Yeshua*, “the Savior.”) “If you are the *Son of God*, come down from the cross.” (Remember the name *Emmanuel*, “God with us.”)

Next the religious leaders, the chief priests, scribes, and elders, mock him, too: “He *saved* others, he cannot *save* himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am *God’s Son*’” (Matt 27:42-43).

Finally, the bandits crucified on either side of Jesus “taunted him in the same way” (Matt 27:44). Of course, the powerful irony is that he is on the cross because he is *Yeshua*. He will not save himself because he is the Savior, enduring in full the ugliness of human evil and sin. “Come down from the cross if you are the Son of God”? It is because he is the Son of God that he remains *on* the cross! That is why

he, *Emmanuel*, is here. He is God with us—God with us even here, even at death’s door, even in the depths of human ugliness and depravity.

As in Mark, so in Matthew Jesus cries out, “*Eli, Eli lema sabachthani?*” (Matt 27:46)—combined Hebrew and Aramaic for “My God! My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1). But the mocking crowd misunderstands him (Matt 27:47-49). Someone says, “This man is calling Elijah”; someone else says, “Let us see whether Elijah will come to *save* him.” But no one will save him, because he is determined to save everyone. It is by his death that he brings salvation.

Matthew has one more scene to set before us. After rising from the dead, Jesus addresses the disciples one last time:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Matt 28:18-20).

From the very beginning of his life, Jesus is the son of God, born of a virgin, and given the name *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” Jesus is the obedient son of his Father in all things. In Matthew’s Gospel, the cross is the ultimate act of Christ’s obedience. At the cross, Jesus is still *Emmanuel*, God with us, the obedient son of God. Yet in Matthew, the cross is also the means of our salvation; at the cross, he is *Yeshua*, Jesus, Savior. Somehow, his death and resurrection take up our death and our disobedience and do away with them.

The apostle Paul puts it this way:

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation* (Rom 5:6-11).

In Christ’s death, the gap between humanity and divinity is bridged: we are reconciled (Greek *katalasso*) to God. In Christ’s resurrection, we are given the hope and the promise of our own deliverance from death. By entering into our life, and even into our death, Jesus draws God near to us, and us near to God. He brings God’s divinity down to where we are and lifts our humanity up to where God is.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus expressed this idea quite well: “That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved” (*to gar aproslepton, atherapeuton ho de henotai totheu, touto kai sozetai*). By his life, Christ as *Emmanuel* brings God to us and us to God. By his death, Christ as *Yeshua* enters our death and evil and abolishes its power forever.

By his resurrection and ascension, Jesus the Christ completes the meaning of both of his names. He is *Yeshua*, our Savior, who destroys our death. He is *Emmanuel*, God with us, who makes us fully “at one” with God. He is our atonement.