

The Lord Comes Near: Using *the Name of the Lord* in Counseling



by KRISTIN SILVA

Years ago I stood in a Christmas Eve service singing at the top of my lungs, “There is power in the name of Jesus...to break every chain.” We had already sung the traditional songs, and the service ended with this one. It is not a traditional song for a Christmas service, but it is an apt one, pointing to Christ’s incarnation as a display of power, as a new era of the name of the Lord. Emotionally I knew this fit. Celebrating the coming of Christ into the world was a tremendous reminder of power and victory. Indeed, it tells us that the evils in this world will be vanquished. It was a meaningful service for me, one that I still remember vividly years later. But it wasn’t until I began to ponder the meaning of the phrase—*the name of the Lord*—that I began to understand how truly appropriate it was to sing that song on Christmas Eve.

It is one of those phrases we know is significant. After all, it made its way into the Ten Commandments, where God instructed us to not take the name of the Lord in vain. In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus calls us to hallow our Father’s name. And the Jews took it so seriously, they would not utter it. And we instinctively know it’s wrong when we hear someone flippantly use Jesus’ name as a swear word—it’s jarring. The Lord’s name is holy and powerful! But as I pondered the phrase, I began to

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wonder if there was more to it than alluding to his power. Historically I've thought about it in a couple different ways. First, as a synonym for God himself—"No house had yet been built for *the name of the LORD*" (1 Kings 3:2). Or, as another way to talk about his reputation and his fame—"From a very distant country your servants have come, because of *the name of the LORD* your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt" (Josh 9:9). But more study revealed how much bigger it is than that. One theologian described this phrase as holding God's honor, fame, excellence, revelation, and all the different relationships he has with his people.¹ The significance of the name of the Lord is indeed broad and marvelous, and the task before us is to

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be curious about what unique emphasis it brings when Scripture employs it.

My goal here isn't to present a comprehensive theology for the name of the Lord. Not only is it too big of a task in an article such as this one, but for counselors to apply a rich truth like this effectively we must break it into bite-size pieces. We have to focus on *one* aspect of it in order to be able to meaningfully weave it into the details of someone's life. As I think of Scripture, I see it as a well-crafted meal with a wonderful combination of ingredients and flavors. My goal in counseling is to find that bite, that morsel, that will nourish the person in need. As I studied the name of the Lord, I began narrowing in on a single "flavor" that might fill the lives of those I walk with: how the name of the Lord is about him drawing near. And that is what the rest of the article is about—the flavor that filled my own heart and some ideas for how to bring it meaningfully into the lives of other people.

The Name of the Lord Means God Draws Near

Like many themes in Scripture, the name of the Lord moves along with redemptive history. It builds and expands as it points us forward to the day when we will dwell fully with our Lord. The phrase first appears at the beginning of Genesis and there it simply means that people began

1. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 99.

to worship God: “At that time people began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen 4:26). Interestingly, though they call on the name of the Lord, Scripture doesn’t contain a record of God revealing his actual name to his people until the time of Moses. In fact, God intentionally withholds his name in certain situations. He did so when he was wrestling with Jacob, for example (Gen 32:29). For God to reveal his name to his people means more than just giving them a moniker to call him.

In the broader culture of the time, names were believed to carry the essence of a being, so we can begin to understand why God might refrain

from giving his name until he deemed it the right time. He is the infinite God. Beyond comprehension. Beyond containing. Nothing can hold his essence. Nothing determines his existence except himself. And so, he waits to reveal his name until a moment in history when his people are particularly vulnerable and in need of a powerful rescuer. It’s in this moment that he tells Moses—“I AM WHO I AM.”...Say

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this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Ex 3:14). As we consider this development, we begin to grasp aspects of God’s character. We’re watching him descend from the heavens to make himself known to us using categories we can understand. These are categories he far transcends, that can’t contain him, but that he chooses to use out of his great love for his people. Where ancient cultures thought names held being, God tells his people that *his very name* is being. He—I AM—is the one who exists. And by giving them his name, he is inviting them to engage with him.² He continues to draw near in power.

This choice to come down and be held in a human category—this movement toward his people—is the aspect of the name of the Lord that we will continue to explore. You can already hear how this theme fits so well in a Christmas Eve service where we celebrate his drawing near in a new way through the incarnation. Jesus is God with us! But

2. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Volume 2*, 95–118. My thoughts about the condescension of the Lord into human language are largely formed by Herman Bavinck in his discussion on the biblical names of God.

there's more to explore before we get to Jesus. As Israel's history unfolds, the name of the Lord becomes a vibrant part of their life with God. The ark that was carried by the priests from Sinai to the Promised Land was called by the name of the Lord (1 Chron 13:6). Later, as David begins the plans to build the temple, he says to Solomon, "I had it in my heart to build a house for the name of the LORD my God" (1 Chron 22:7). To the Israelites, God's name and his presence become essentially synonymous.

And when we finally get to Christ, we see a shift in the language Scripture uses. The focus moves from the name of the Lord to *the name of Jesus*. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He is the exact representation of God's being. He is the Word become flesh who came to dwell among us. His name is now the one to be worshipped; it is at *his* name that every knee shall bow.³ What the act of the Father giving us his name began, Jesus' incarnation made fuller. *The name of the Lord* and *the name of Jesus*—both are about the Lord drawing near to his people.

Bringing *the Name of the Lord* into a Conversation

I grew up in a Mexican household where salsa was revered. Its richness and complexity make it the showcase of the meal. When my grandma, who was an excellent cook, would make food, we would joke that the meat and tortillas were the means to get the salsa into our mouths. When I think about the richness held in the phrase the name of the Lord, it reminds me of her salsa. But as wonderful as it is, my grandma would never serve you a lone bowl of salsa. She would not expect you to enjoy it in that form, or even know what to do with this deliciousness by itself. Like a good chef, she used other foods to serve it. So it is with the name of the Lord. We need a mode to serve it up. Something that will complement it, allowing its richness to unfold and the person tasting it to savor and enjoy its complexities.

Here is what I look for when I'm trying to find a verse or an image that might serve as a "mode" for a theme I want to open up with someone. First, I look for a verse that needs as little explanation as possible—this isn't the time to go into teaching mode. You probably have

3. Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; John 1:14; Philippians 2:10.

thirty seconds before you'll lose someone's attention, so pick a verse that doesn't need much contextual explanation. In this case, it means you might stay away from references to the name of the Lord in long Old Testament narratives or passages where the New Testament is quoting the Old. Second, I look for a single, bite-size phrase that sticks out or an image that we can hold on to. Third, I look for a metaphor that fits the flavor I want to accent in a creative way.

For this theme, one of my favorite verses to use is Proverbs 18:10:

The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe.

Let's see how it fits the three criteria from above. The verse itself is bite-size and, because it's a proverb, it doesn't have a large context to unpack. There's a prominent image we can expand on and consider together (strong tower). And the image implies the Lord is close enough to run to, so this gives me a fresh entrance into a well-known promise about the nearness of God and his power to protect his people—"Do not fear, for I am with you" (Isa 41:10).

To use the verse well, I want to understand how it functions in its own context. I then want to think about how the broader theme works within it. As we look at this verse in its context, we see that the author of Proverbs presents a contrast in the next verse:

A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination. (18:11)

When comparing the two proverbs, four different aspects emerge to sink your teeth into—ones you might use in a counseling conversation to connect the verse with the details of life.

1. *Real, not imaginary.* In contrast to the righteous man, who finds his safety in the strong tower of God, the rich man finds refuge in his wealth and sees it as a high wall of protection, even if it is only in his own imagination (v.11). The protection of this wall isn't real. But the strength and protection of the strong tower of the name of the Lord is real. I especially like highlighting this because it so beautifully challenges the "it doesn't do me any good" reaction that often comes when we think about the promises of the Lord in the face of real circumstances. That is the challenge in front of us, to follow the path Proverbs 18:10 sets for us and figure out what the reality is.

One of the most striking features about Christianity is that it is rooted in historical events. Often when we've begun to feel like the promises of Scripture are disconnected from our lives, it means we've lost sight of the actual events that have preceded us. As we consider the name of the Lord and what it means in history, we're remembering the ways the Lord has actually come near and made himself known. We step into the flow of history and watch how, at each turn, the Lord reveals

The name of the Lord is both a comfort to his people and a terror to his enemies.

more and more of himself. His promises to Abraham continue to be fulfilled to each generation that passes. Stop and consider the significance of the Lord revealing himself to his people through his name, marvel at the expansion of that action in the work and person of Jesus Christ, and consider together that this revelation

continues to grow and build. This means that the Spirit with me now is better than Jesus walking around on earth with us. And this is what Jesus himself said: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you" (John 16:7). He is real and nearer to me now than if he was standing beside me because he dwells within me.

2. *Outside of myself.* Again, we turn to the contrasting verse (18:11) to accent where our strength comes from. The rich man finds his strength in his wealth, which he accumulates himself. But the righteous man runs into something outside of himself. He doesn't conjure something up in his own heart to rely upon; he knows his true need.

Think back to the progression of the name of the Lord in the ancient world, where names were thought to hold essence or being. In other cultures, they created the names of their gods and summoned them to do what they needed. But our God, in his kindness, used the same system but bent it to suit his own purposes. He revealed his name to his people and, by doing so, graciously gave them an idea of what he was like using their own categories. We don't summon him to do our bidding. But he, in an extravagant act of grace, allows us to call upon him by name, and to share it with others. And we, his followers, are even identified with it; we are *Christians*.

3. *It's a tower.* What image comes to mind with the word tower? There are different directions you can go here. I let the person I am helping proceed in whatever way feels natural, but I listen for four categories to highlight: immovable, imposing, higher, and enveloping.

- **Immovable.** The nature of a strong tower is that it is fixed in one place. Part of what makes it safe is its stability. It can't be moved. It can't be knocked down. Our security lies not in an unchanging world but in the God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8). A God, who in the midst of a tumultuous world, steadies us in himself (Ps 46). We see the outworking of his steadfast and unshakable love in the revelation of his name to us.
- **Imposing.** I like to think about the perspective of the enemy who stands intimidated in front of my strong tower. It is formidable, perhaps jagged and unscalable. Impenetrable. Unbreachable. The name of the Lord—God's powerful movement toward his people—is both a comfort to his people and a terror to his enemies. Consider the words of Isaiah. When the Lord comes to his people, he puts on righteousness as a breastplate and the helmet of salvation on his head. These are words of redemption for his people. But the very same action strikes terror in his enemies. He brings his vengeance and zeal against them: "So they shall fear the name of the LORD" (Isa 59:19). What brings us comfort also brings justice to our enemies. Your strong tower, the One that is terrifying to your enemies, is the mighty King of heaven moving against his foes—against your foes—to protect you with his justice, righteousness, and salvation.
- **Higher.** Height doesn't usually come into the conversation naturally, but it is an important feature of our tower and one that the text implies. The rich man imagines his wealth as a high wall. If his wall is high in his own imagination, our tower is soaring in real life. I confess it took time to figure out the significance of this. My first thought for a high tower was that it would be impressive and imposing. But that didn't feel much more comforting than telling me that it was strong. Then I considered what it would be like if I am *in* that high tower. It affects how I see

my surroundings. My view of the land isn't eye level. Rather, in that tower, I get a glimpse of my surroundings from God's perspective. My view of the battles, past and present, are shaped by his revelation to me in his Word. They are shaped by the history of him drawing close and remaining faithful for thousands of generations. This is the reputation he carries in his name.

As he lifts me into his tower, he gives me special sight beyond this land. A picture of things to come, though veiled and incomplete: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8). It's an expansion on the name he gave to Moses. Not just "I AM," but I AM, I was, and I always will be. We don't necessarily know the landscape of the future, but we do see the end from the high tower of his protection for us.

- Enveloping. Again, use verse 11 to fill out the image. Consider the nature of the rich man's wall as a mode of protection. It might be high, but a wall brings to mind the image of a structure with a beginning and an end, whereas a tower is more like a circle around you. It reminds me of the language from Psalm 139:5: "You hem me in, behind and before." And the language of Psalm 23: He leads me, he is with me, he follows me. Our front, our back, our sides. The tower protects all of me.

The name of the Lord envelops us. If we tap into the movement of God toward his people, how he makes himself known to us, comes near, and makes his dwelling among us, this is where our understanding of the safety he provides will grow. He existed before us. And he exists ahead of us. He is on our left and he is on our right because his very name tells us that he is everywhere. Whatever evil befalls us, he has gone before us in it and demonstrated with his great power that it cannot ultimately harm us.

You can see how Proverbs 18:10 offers different options to accent as you bring this verse into someone's life. When I use it, I pick one or two of the images above and expand upon them. We imagine them together. We think about how they might look in real life. And then we'll move to the second half of the verse to figure out how to practice. Proverbs gives

us an example to follow: “the righteous man runs into it.” Running connotes an urgency and a drive. The verse is a directive to throw ourselves wholeheartedly into the safety the Lord offers.

The Name of the Lord in Real Life

We’ve picked out one flavor in the richness of the name of the Lord. And we’ve looked at one passage that gives this theme some things to sink our teeth into. Now let’s go one step further into several situations and see how these tastes expand into the lives of our counselees.

The name of the Lord in the presence of tangible enemies. Often our fears are predictions or worries of what *might* happen to us, but there are times in life when danger is palpable and present—a reality that has come near. Perhaps you are speaking with a woman whose ex-husband started to stalk her. Or an employee whose boss misuses his position to oppress and threaten. Or a person whose body is actively being attacked by cancer. All of these are real dangers. Sometimes it is difficult to use a passage like Proverbs 18:10 in situations like these because you can’t promise that the ex-husband won’t hurt her, or that the employee will keep his job, or that the person with cancer will be healed. The easiest definitions of safety (physical, emotional, medical) aren’t promised this side of heaven. It’s challenging in the face of palpable danger to reach for promises that have their fulfillment in the future. But this is what we must do.

The name of the Lord draws near in the face of enemies. Isaiah 30 says it well. The people of God faced a real and present enemy in Assyria. Danger was near. They were oppressed. Those in the Northern Kingdom were overrun and some were exiled. Now Assyria was coming for Jerusalem. In that situation, God tells his people, first, that he hears their cry and promises that one day they will dwell in Zion where there will be no more tears. And second, that he will bring his wrath against their enemies:

Behold, the name of the LORD comes from afar, burning with his anger, and in thick rising smoke...The Assyrians will be terror-stricken at the voice of the LORD, when he strikes with his rod...Battling with brandished arm, he will fight with them. (Isa 30:27, 31–32)

When facing real enemies, we run into the tower and climb to the top so we might get a view of the lay of the land. We remember together: God has fought our enemies for generations past and has fought our greatest enemy on the cross. The battle is the Lord's, and he will give our enemies into our hand (1 Sam 17:47). We turn and look forward to his final victory standing in his ultimate protection over us.

The name of the Lord in everyday life. In the face of daily tasks and everyday decisions, it's easy to get overwhelmed. Often my strategy in these moments is to work hard, make lists, and keep everything going. If I just find a moment to take a deep breath, that will help me keep pressing on. But all of those strategies have at their core something that I must do. They leave God out of it.

The power that is on display as he teaches us how to engage his name is the same power that equips us with his indwelling Spirit.

But as I studied the name of the Lord, it struck me that a relationship comes with it. God doesn't just reveal his name to us and say, "all right, there you go. Use it as you will." With that revelation, he draws near to us and establishes a covenant relationship. He reveals himself to us and then teaches us how to engage with him. We're not to bear the Lord's name in

vain (Ex 20:7). He allows us to wield his name. Priests minister in the name of the Lord (Deut 18:5). Prophets speak in the name of the Lord (Deut 18:22). We bless in the name of the Lord (Ps 129:8). We see in the story of Samson's father, Manoah, that the name of the Lord isn't a trifle to be taken lightly (Judg 13:17–18). There's a relational interplay that happens surrounding the name of the Lord.

So what does this have to do with being overwhelmed? It means that this relationship needs to be active. It means that bearing the name of the Lord as a Christian requires me to live in accordance with who he is. The name of the Lord is my strong tower. When I am overwhelmed, am I taking refuge in him or seeking refuge elsewhere? Am I hiding behind my high wall or do I rely on the strong tower of the God who comes near in my everyday tasks? Am I operating from the vantage point at the top of the tower—one that tells me that Christ has the victory and every circumstance is under his reign? Or am I living like I'm down on

the ground trying to fight my way through the haze? We don't need to wait until we're trembling to run wholeheartedly into our strong tower. Dwelling there is part of our everyday relationship with the King of heaven.

The name of the Lord for the counselor. As I walk alongside people who share stories of unspeakable evil, my heart needs reassurance that the Lord's protection is real and not imaginary. Time and again, I need the reminder that what protects my counselee is not the wisdom of my counsel but God. He is their tower of refuge. Not only is he a refuge of protection for them, but he is also a refuge for me. When I feel my own weaknesses and frailties, I remember that he is the one who draws near to me and has graciously given me the gift of bearing his name. What an encouragement to my heart—when I see the end of myself and the limits of my own skills and gifts—to know that the King of heaven has seen fit to allow me to bear his name. He will be faithful to his promises to cover my failures and grow me to be more like him. When I look out at the lay of the land for the counselee before me and all I can see is fog, I get to run into my high tower and remember the history of the name of the Lord coming near. I hear his call to run in wholehearted trust to him, and know that I can only do this because he has first drawn near to me.

The Power of *the Name of the Lord Lives in Me*

I love how God's revelation expands and deepens as it moves from beginning to end. I find it encouraging to know that what he has done in the past is only a foretaste of what he will do in the future. I think that's why studying the name of the Lord and being taken aback at the Lord's magnificence in it excites me. If revealing his name to us was such an extraordinary act of kindness, and if revealing himself in Jesus Christ was an even more extravagant act, then how much more glorious is it that he's now made his dwelling within me and you? The power that is on display as he teaches us how to engage his name is the same power that equips us with his indwelling Spirit. It makes me think of the language of Psalm 46:2–5: "Though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea... There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God... God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved."

The name of the Lord resides in you. You shall not be moved.

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