

In Jesus' Name, Amen

We pray it, but what does it mean?

By Paul Borthwick



Photograph by Steve Starr

I speak little Spanish, so I felt totally lost in my first Spanish-speaking worship service—at least until the pastor prayed. Several times I recognized references to Jesus, and when he closed his prayer in the “nombre” of “Jesu Cristo, Amen,” I understood completely.

Christians around the world conclude their prayers this way. But what does this phrase really mean? Is it just the spiritual equivalent of a ham radio operator signing off with “over and out,” a “10-4” wrap-up to let God know we’re finished praying?

What’s in a name?

In biblical times, a name was more than just a personal “handle.” Names conveyed authority, character, promise, and even destiny. Human names carried great meaning, but God’s name was even greater. God’s name encompassed His identity, His power, and His relationship to His people. When someone referred to God’s name, that person appealed to His authority and character. Consider these examples.

- When David confronted the giant Goliath, he relied upon the authority of God’s name: “I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied” (1 Samuel 17:45).
- When Asaph asked God for deliverance “for the glory of your name” and “for your name’s sake” (Psalm 79:9), he appealed to God’s concern for the reputation of His name among the pagan nations.
- Solomon wrote, “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe” (Proverbs 18:10), referring to the protection God’s name affords believers.

- Jesus commanded us to pray, “Hallowed be your name” (Matthew 6:9), calling us to worship and venerate God’s holy name.
- In the book of Acts, Peter commanded people to “repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). He also explained a healing as a result of “faith in the name of Jesus” (Acts 3:16). Paul stated that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13). When the New Testament writers use “the name” in this way, they refer to the redemptive work of Christ through His death and resurrection.
- Paul ascribed to Jesus “the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9), acknowledging Jesus Christ as the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Similarly, when we pray in Jesus’ name, we affirm three great realities made possible by His sacrifice for us.

Authority

When we pray in Jesus’ name, we acknowledge His authority. By the authority of Jesus’ sacrificial life and death, we can come with confidence before God’s throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). Jesus’ name also gives us authority over the devil and his angels (Luke 10:17). We declare, “I come against this evil in Jesus’ name” not only to remind us that Jesus is greater than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4), but also to declare Jesus’ authority over evil.

Some time ago, I had an experience that illustrates how someone’s name could give me authority and access where I would otherwise have been denied. I was traveling from Boston to Denver, and the departure area for my flight was buzzing with stern-looking men in dark suits talking into their lapels. I asked a flight attendant what was happening. She replied, “Just wait. You’ll see.”

After we settled into our economy-class seats, two of the dark-suited men arrived in first class, followed by former president Gerald Ford and two more dark-suited men. I sat in row 10, thinking about how a former president of the United States sat just a few rows away! I thought to myself, *I’m 20 feet away from a former president. I’ve never met a president before. I’ll go introduce myself.*

But then I wondered, *Why would he want to meet me?* I didn’t even vote for him! President Ford had absolutely no reason to talk to me, an unknown traveler from the economy class.

Then I remembered that during my years in seminary, I had met President Ford’s son, Mike. So I got out of my seat and marched toward first class. Before the Secret Service men could stop me, I spoke boldly: “President Ford, I just wanted to meet you. I know your son, Mike.”

We talked briefly, mostly about Mike. Then I went back to my seat. I don’t think I ever actually introduced myself or used my own name. I was able to meet the former commander in chief because I came in the name of his son. Mike’s name gave me “authority” to approach the president.

Acceptance

On our own, we have no merit that earns God’s acceptance. Only because we know His Son, Jesus Christ, are we able to come boldly before God. When we pray “in Jesus’ name,” it reminds us of why our relationship with God is even possible. We cannot enter because of any righteous works we have done. Jesus alone is the author of our salvation and the one who forgives our sins. His authority grants us access into God’s presence.

The Apostle Paul commanded people to be “baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:5). To the church at Corinth, Paul wrote, “God made him who had no sin to become sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). When we combine the ideas of these two passages, it’s as if Jesus traded nametags with us. He took our nametags, stained with our sins and the resulting punishment we deserve, and wore them Himself. And He gave us His nametag, which represents His perfect character and holiness. God accepts us because we come before Him wearing Jesus’ perfect nametag.

In downtown Chicago, I once accompanied a minister as we drove to a Christian radio station. As we neared the parking lot, I saw that an 18-foot barbed-wire fence surrounded the facility. To enter, we stopped at a security checkpoint and spoke into an intercom. The minister identified himself, and the gate slowly slid to the side so that we could pass.

Now preachers like my friend look constantly for good illustrations, and our entrance into the parking lot reminded him of the heavenly gates we’ll eventually pass through. “Do you think heaven will be like that?” he asked. “Do you think we’ll get to heaven’s gates and St. Peter will say, ‘Who goes there?’ and we’ll identify ourselves and the gates will open?”

I replied, “I don’t know about the specifics of the heavenly gates, but if a voice comes out of an intercom and says ‘Who goes there?’ I’m not going to give my name. I’m going to say ‘Jesus!’ My name is recorded in the Book of Life, but when I enter God’s presence, Jesus is the only name that will get me in!”

Abiding

When we pray in Jesus’ name, we also affirm our ongoing relationship with Him. Jesus promised that whatever we ask the Father in His name will be granted (John 14:13; John 15:16). But He gave us this promise in the context of abiding in Him (John 15:1–8). Abiding means obedience to His commands (John 15:10) and maintaining our friendship with Him (John 15:13–15).

Thus, praying in Jesus’ name should compel us to take a spiritual inventory and evaluate our relationship with Him. Are we abiding in Christ? Does obedience characterize our lives? Do we need to acknowledge sin so that we can be once again washed clean and our sins covered in Jesus’ name? Are we entering each day with an ongoing friendship with Jesus?

Praying in Jesus’ name reflects an all-encompassing relationship. It’s as if we’re saying, “I’m no longer living for my name, but for Jesus’ name.” In the book of Acts, living for “the name” meant total devotion to Jesus. It often led to beatings, imprisonment, and death. When the apostles were flogged by the religious leaders, they went on their way rejoicing that they were considered “worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41).

The disciples “risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26). Their devotion and commitment were a reflection of their love and relationship with Jesus. In Acts 9:16, Jesus tells Ananias that He would show Paul “how much he must suffer for my name.” Paul’s relationship with Christ would eventually cost him his life.

Paul later wrote, “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Col. 3:17). Thus, “in Jesus’ name” affirms a whole-life commitment to the one who gave Himself for us.


No Other Name

I sat down to pray the other day, spiritually exhausted. My mind was racing in a hundred different directions, and I couldn’t think of what to say. I was so distracted that I decided to give

up. I began to close my prayer with the phrase I always use, “I pray these things in Jesus’ name . . .”

But instead of ending my prayer time, I paused at that phrase. My mind stopped racing as I thought about what “in Jesus’ name” means. I reflected on everything that Jesus has done for me: opening heaven’s gates, forgiving my sins, and establishing our relationship. I reveled in the relationship the Lord Jesus has made possible, and I closed the day in thanksgiving, saying, “Almighty God, Jesus is the one and only way I come into Your presence, and I’m grateful!”

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: What In “Jesus’ Name” Does Not Mean*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PAUL BORTHWICK is a senior consultant for Development Associates International. He is the author of *Six Dangerous Questions (IVP)*. Paul wrote this article “to explore the origin and meaning of an often-used but poorly understood phrase.” On his days off, Paul enjoys bird-watching.