



# Taking God's Name in Vain is More Than Cursing

This study spotlights some aspects of God's truth that rest just below the surface of Bible reading. Our subject is taking the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7). Our study of Exodus 20:7, one of the Ten Commandments, begins by reviewing the usual understanding of this commandment followed by the translation challenge of this verse's key word. *The text of Exodus 20:7 is identical to Deuteronomy 5:11.*

**Exodus 20:7** (ESV), 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.

This verse prohibits speech that defames the sanctity of the Lord's Name. The most obvious sin in this regard involves the use of "Jesus" or "God" in cursing. However, a more comprehensive meaning of this commandment surfaces when *take*, the keyword of this commandment, is examined. When the wider scope of this commandment is recognized, believers will realize that people all over the world, including many in the Body of Christ, violate this commandment with regularity.

## WORD STUDIES

The Hebrew word translated *take* in Exodus 20:7 is transliterated *nasa* and is pronounced *naw-saw'*. The word is number 5375 in Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible.

In the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, this word is used 654 times, according to Brown-Driver-Briggs' Hebrew Definitions. Strong's Hebrew Dictionary says that *nasa* means "to lift" in a great variety of applications, used both literally and figuratively as well as absolutely and relatively. Some of the various meanings ascribed to *nasa* are:

lift (*lift up, be lifted up, lift oneself up, rise up*), bear (*bear up, cause one to bear*), carry (*carry off, be carried*), take (*take away*), exalt (*be exalted, exalt oneself*), be borne (*bear continuously*), aid, assist, desire, support, bring, sustain, endure, forgive, swept away

In evaluating the hundreds of appearances of *nasa* in the Old Testament, translators chose "take" as the meaning of *nasa* less than 10% of the time. On the other hand, *nasa* is translated as lift up or bear up more than 30% of the time. Probably, in an effort to emphasize the more comprehensive meaning of *nasa*, the New International Version of the Bible (1984), Young's Literal Translation, and the 1889 Darby Bible translate Exodus 20:7 in the following ways:

**Exodus 20:7** (NIV), You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name. (*underlining added for emphasis*)

**Exodus 20:7** (YLT), Thou dost not take up the name of Jehovah thy God for a vain thing, for Jehovah acquitteth not him who taketh up His name for a vain thing. (*underlining added for emphasis*)

**Exodus 20:7** (Darby), Thou shalt not idly utter the name of Jehovah thy God; for Jehovah will not hold him guiltless that idly uttereth his name. (*underlining added for emphasis*)

Before arriving at a more comprehensive meaning of this commandment than is usually contemplated, there is one other word to examine in Exodus 20:7. The word is typically translated as *in vain*. This word is transliterated as *shav* and is word number 7723 in Strong's Concordance. According to Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Definitions, *shav* is translated as:

Emptiness, nothingness, vanity, emptiness of speech, lying, and when used of conduct, it means worthlessness

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) most frequently translates *shav* as "vain" or "vanity" and, when not using those words, then "false" or "falsehood" is the next most common translation.

The primary point of this commandment is not difficult to understand. Obviously, it is sinful to "lift up" or "take" the Lord's Name to accentuate or promote anything that is inherently unworthy, vain, or false.

## INSIGHTS OF BIBLE EXPOSITORS

In his *Commentaries on the Bible*, David Guzik said people take the name of the Lord in vain through: *profanity* (using the name of God in blasphemy and cursing), *frivolity* (using the name of God in a superficial, stupid way), and *hypocrisy* (claiming the name of God but acting in a way that disgraces Him).<sup>1</sup>

In his *Commentary on the Bible*, Adam Clarke noted:

This precept not only forbids all false oaths, but all common swearing where the name of God is used, or where he is appealed to as a witness of the truth. It also necessarily forbids all light and irreverent mention of God, or any of his attributes . . . we may safely add to all these, that every prayer, [spontaneous praise], etc., that is not accompanied with deep reverence and the genuine spirit of piety, is here condemned also. In how many thousands of instances is this commandment broken in the prayers, whether read or extempore, of inconsiderate, bold, and presumptuous worshippers! And how few are there who do not break it, both in their public and private devotions!... Is it necessary to say to any truly spiritual mind, that all such interjections as O God! my God! good God! good Heavens! etc., etc., are formal positive breaches of this law? How many who pass for Christians are highly criminal here!”<sup>2</sup>

John Gill, in his *Exposition of the Entire Bible*, said that taking the Lord’s name in vain means to:

Make use of the name Lord or God, or any other name and epithet of the divine Being, in a light and trifling way, without any show of reverence of him, and affection to him; whereas the name of God ought never to be mentioned but in a grave and serious manner, and with an awe of the greatness of his majesty upon the mind.<sup>3</sup>

In his *Notes on the Bible*, Albert Barnes said:

The caution that a breach of this commandment incurs guilt in the eyes of Yahweh is especially appropriate, in consequence of the ease with which the temptation to take God’s name ‘in vain’ besets people in their common conversation with each other.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Burton Coffman Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Dr. Coffman stated:

The name of God is holy beyond any comparison. The prayer which Jesus taught his apostles began with the words “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name!” (Matthew 6:9). Salvation itself is accomplished in the power of this glorious name. “Neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

There are many ways of violating this commandment. At the head of the list, because of its prevalence, is common, profane, vulgar swearing. This has been called “the sin without temptation.” It satisfies no appetite, achieves no benefit for the swearer, does not commend itself to any person whomsoever, and is as foolish and ridiculous a sin as any ever committed. It is invariably a sign of a weak and ineffectual vocabulary, a mark of vulgarity, an evidence of disrespect, resentment, or frustration, and a sign of irreligion and unbelief.<sup>5</sup>

## APPLICATION

When the meanings of *nasa* and *shav* are known and the Name of the Lord is contemplated, it should be apparent that any of the awesome, majestic names used to designate Jehovah God or our Lord Jesus Christ are not to be “lifted up” to merely emphasize a response to situations in life. In addition to what has already been mentioned, there are, surprisingly, a number of ways that some believers routinely *take the name of the Lord in vain*.

For example, the phrase, “O My God” is known so well and used so frequently that a 3-letter shortcut (OMG) is routinely used in emails and text messages as a response to almost anything considered out of the ordinary. If you are interested in confirming this verbal epidemic of defaming God, listen specifically for people saying “O My God” in routine communication throughout the day. Also notice how often and casually that phrase is used in the communication media (television, radio), entertainment (movies, plays, concerts), school classrooms and campuses, scientific endeavors, political discourse, and sporting events. As you notice “O My God” spoken or written on a regular basis, do you think God Almighty is being worshiped or do you think that this phrase is actually worthless (“in vain”), incurring justifiable guilt on those using this phrase?

Obviously, the phrase “O My God” can be used in a manner that denotes authentic, God-honoring praise, worship, or prayer. When that occurs, the object of the phrase is our Divine Creator and Savior instead of simply being relegated to a fleshly inspired, emotional response to any number of life situations.

Other specific violations of this commandment occur in the Body of Christ far too often. Professing believers *lift up the Lord's Name in vain* by trying to link God's approval to clear contradictions of Scripture. For example, many professing believers have tried to validate the dissolution of their marriage by stating something to the effect of "God wants me happy and I'm not happy in my marriage; so I'm filing for a divorce." Forgetting or avoiding the fact that God's goal for one's life is holiness, not emotionally based happiness, those making such a statement concerning their potential divorce are actually linking God's Name to a falsehood . . . and, thus, they *take the name of the Lord in vain*.

Believers also violate this commandment in other ways. For example, in an effort to confirm a personal decision to fellow believers, a Christian will sometimes say, "The Lord is leading me to . . ." or "God wants me to . . ." and this viewpoint is confidently stated even though there has been little or no prayer, little or no counsel from other believers, little or no Bible study concerning the situation, and little or no thought of the impact this decision will have on current responsibilities or relationships. If believers overlook or purposefully disobey Scripture in decision-making and then use God's Name to buttress their personal, self-oriented decisions, they *have taken (lifted up) the Lord's Name in vain*.

One of the most blatant violations of this commandment involves the propagation of false doctrine concerning health and wealth. You may have heard a statement similar to "God promises continual good health to you." Those who make this claim often use 3 John, verse 2 to try to prove the point, viewing this verse as God's promise to all believers instead of a personal prayer request of the Apostle John regarding Gaius, a specific individual in the first century. Similarly, you may have heard a statement such as "God has promised abundant wealth to you," which is typically linked to verses taken out of context coupled with your giving financially to a particular ministry or person. Whenever believers link God's name to supposed divine promises based on verses taken out of context, they *take the Lord's Name in vain*.

Another violation of this commandment concerns the supposed ability to "bind Satan." When anyone proclaims, "In the Name of Jesus, I bind Satan," as a supposed solution for a difficult circumstance, then *the Lord's Name has been lifted up in vain*. There are biblical examples of Jesus and His disciples casting out demons, but there is no biblical foundation or precedent for any human today to be able to "bind Satan." In fact, Satan will not be bound until the millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth (Revelation 20:1-2).

People also sin whenever they flippantly, casually, or even determinedly *take (lift up) the Lord's Name in an unworthy manner* for personal advancement. For example, many believers know of Christian leaders who are guilty of sins that disqualify them for church leadership (see 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9). Not all of these scripturally unqualified leaders step down from a position in order to deal with sin and renew demonstrable obedience to God's Word. Rather than spending the time necessary to reestablish a Christ-honoring reputation (which typically takes many years), some take a brief "leave of absence" and then quickly return to their positions of leadership claiming they have "God's direction, approval, or leading." The problem with this explanation is that God does not "give directions" that contradict His Word regarding scriptural qualifications for Christian leaders. As a result, those claiming "leadership" in such a situation are guilty of *lifting up the Lord's Name in vain*.

In their *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Keil and Delitzsch remind us:

Although there is no God beside Jehovah, the absolute One, and His divine essence cannot be seen or conceived of under any form, He had made known the glory of His nature in His name (Exodus 3:14, 6:2), and this was not to be abused by His people.<sup>6</sup>

**Exodus 3:14** (ESV), God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

**Exodus 6:2** (ESV), God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD."

The glory of God's Name was rightfully assumed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when He ministered on earth.

**John 8:57-58** (NKJV), Then the Jews said to Him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM."

Keil and Delitzsch conclude that God's Word:

Prohibits all employment of the name of God for vain and unworthy objects. (This) includes not only false swearing . . . but trivial swearing in the ordinary intercourse of life, and every use of the name of God in the service of untruth and lying, for imprecation, witchcraft, or conjuring; whereas the true employment of the name of God is confined to "invocation, prayer, praise, and thanksgiving," which proceeds from a pure, believing heart. The natural

heart is very liable to transgress this command, and therefore it is solemnly enforced by the threat, “for Jehovah will not hold him guiltless.”<sup>7</sup>

As disciples of Christ, may we honor our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by using their awesome, majestic Names in a manner that testifies to their glory!

**Psalm 8:9** (ESV), O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

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Bible versions used in this study (listed in order of first appearance):

**English Standard Version** (ESV)—The Holy Bible, English Standard Version © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers

**New International Bible** (NIV)—The Holy Bible, New International Version © 1984, by Biblica, Inc.

**Young’s Literal Translation** (YLT)—Public Domain

**Darby Translation** (Darby)—Public Domain

**New King James Version** (NKJV)—© 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

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Footnotes

1. [Guzik’s Commentaries on the Bible](#)
2. [Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible](#)
3. [Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible](#)
4. [Barnes’ Notes on the Bible](#),
5. [Burton Coffman Commentary on the Whole Bible](#)
6. [Keil and Delitzch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament](#)
7. [Ibid](#)