

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Curiosity of the day:

Last Names

When God cast Adam and Eve out of the garden of Eden, he said to the man that the very ground would be cursed because of his sin. It would bring forth thorns and thistles. He would have to eat his bread by the sweat of his brow, tilling the earth, caring for the wheat, reaping the ears of ripe grain, threshing the kernels from the stalks, winnowing them from the dust and chaff and other parts that you cannot digest, and finally crushing the kernels under stone, crushing them to powder, so that they could be mixed with water and yeast and made into dough for bread.

So we might think that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, they would never have needed to work. They could sing all day long like the hobo in the American folk song:

*Oh the buzzing of the bees
In the sycamore trees,
And the soda-water fountain!
Where the lemonade springs
And the bluebird sings,
On that Big Rock Candy Mountain.*

But that isn't what God had planned for them in Eden. They were to tend the garden there. It wasn't that they had no work to do, but that their work would be fun for them. Everything they planted would come up healthy. They were to be like God in that way, for God Himself, though he is ever at rest, is ever at work: He spoke, and the light came into being, the heavens and the stars and the earth and all creatures in them. Even the angels

perform the work of God, as Jacob saw them ascending and descending between earth and heaven, while he lay one night dreaming upon the plains of Luz.

Your last name may in fact describe the work that one of your distant ancestors did. Sometimes these are easy to figure out. The *Baker* in a city makes bread for people in a city who do not have an oven, or the time to do it themselves. The *Weaver* works on a loom and turns strands of linen or wool into



cloth. The *Fisher* catches fish and sells them to people who don't fish. These are English words, but you can find their counterparts in other languages too. The Italian *Molinaro* is the English *Miller*, working at his mill to grind corn into flour. The German *Bauer* is just the English *Farmer*, working on his farm.

Sometimes they aren't easy to figure out, because our words have changed, or because nobody does that sort of thing anymore. If your last name is *Wainwright*, your ancestor was a *wright*, which

means that he *wrought* things with his hands, and what we *wrought* was a *wain* – a wagon. If he lived in Germany, he'd be called a *Wagner*, a maker of wagons. Everyone has seen the bright constellation in the northern sky that we call, in America, the *Big Dipper*, because we think that it has the shape of a dipper for water at a well. The ancient Romans called it *Ursa Major*, the *Big She-Bear*, right next to her cub, *Ursa Minor*, the *Little She-Bear*. That's what they thought it looked like. But our English ancestors called it *Charles' Wain*, meaning *Charles' Wagon*, and it certainly can look like a wagon, with a long crooked handle.

Wainwright is still easy though, compared with *Cooper* (a man who makes barrels), *Chandler* (a man who makes candles, and later on a dealer in other things that were waxed, like ropes), *Parker* (the man who oversees a rich man's *park*, or his private lands for hunting deer and game birds), and my favorite, *Fletcher*. Suppose you take a long stick, you put a point on it, and you try to shoot it from a bow. It will wiggle this way and that through the air, because there's nothing to keep it flying straight ahead. For that you'll need feathers at the end of your arrow, set in the wood just right. That will make your arrow *fledge*, the old word that describes a chick that has just gotten its feathers and is ready to fly: a *fledgling*. The man who gets your arrows ready to fly, who makes them fledge, is a *fletcher*.

Now the reason why you would have names like these was to avoid confusion.

"Hey, guess who I just saw chasing a pig that got loose from him at the fair! Jack!"

"Jack Butcher?"
"No."
"Jack Farmer?"
"No again!"
"Not Jack Fisher?"
"That's right, it was Jack Fisher!"
"What's Jack Fisher meaning to do with a pig?"
"He's going to hook it to a line for bait to catch whales with!"

The Jews in the time of Jesus didn't have names like that. Jesus would have been known as Yeshua ben-Jehosaph, meaning Jesus the son of Joseph. If your name is Michael and your father's name is William, you might have been called, in the old days, Michael Williams,

Michael Williamson, Michael Wills, Michael Wilson, Michael Wilkins, Michael Wilkinson – any of those. But if your father was a carpenter, people might call you what they called Jesus – the carpenter's son, and your name might end up being Michael Carpenter. If you were really good at making chests, tables, chairs, and stools, in the days when carpenters fitted wooden things together like pieces in a puzzle, you might be called Michael Joiner. If your specialty was to make round pieces of wood on a lathe, you might be Michael Turner.

The ancient Greeks and Romans looked down their noses – and in the Roman case, that could be a long way down – at men who had to work with their hands. Jesus changed all that by his example. Work that the Romans had their slaves do was now ennobled by the Son of God.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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