

What's In A Name?

Genesis 17

"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet." Juliet spoke these words as she talked to herself on her balcony, unaware that Romeo was listening below. She was lamenting the fact that she was from the Capulet family and he from the rival Montagues, and this accident of birth kept them apart. "What difference do two names make?" she wondered. No matter what his name was Romeo was still her love!

We can feel for Juliet's plight. But we also know that names can be important. We often name our children after family members that we love and honor. We sometimes name them after others who have had a profound impact on our lives or the world, and we want that name to have special meaning for the child as he grows. You don't find too many Americans who name their baby boy Benedict, or Christian parents who crown their bundle of joy with the moniker, Jezebel? Names can be much more than meaningless labels.

Shakespeare notwithstanding, if you had asked Abraham, or about any other Biblical character the question, "What's in a name?" they would have replied, "Everything!" For these ancient cultures a name was more than a label, but an identity. In the Scriptures names sometimes recorded something significant about one's birth. Names could reveal a special purpose or a divine calling. Names were changed later in life to mark a new purpose in life. Jacob was renamed to Israel after wrestling with God. Simon received the name Peter after meeting with Jesus.

In Genesis 17, we are given four new names. We get a new name for God, Abraham, Sarah, and the name of their promised son, Isaac. We're going to focus on the first two this morning. In this chapter, God renews his covenant with Abraham for the third time. He gives the greatest detail yet to his plan. The last time God sealed the covenant with a sign of His faithfulness, but this time, He gives Abraham a sign to indicate his faithfulness to the covenant. Abraham is finally ready to have God's purpose fulfilled in him. Think about this. Abraham doesn't fully realize his purpose in life until he's 99, but everything in his life has lead him to this point. So God reveals himself to Abraham more fully and this deeper relationship requires a change in Abraham.

Truly knowing God will change us at our very core. Our relationship with God

changes the very essence of our identity. Abraham is given a new name, because he is changed on the inside. In the same way, being a Christian is not about putting on a new label, or taking on the name of Christ. It is about a new identity. Christ gives us a new name, because he has given us a new heart.

I. God Almighty (vs. 1-2)

A. Revelation

When God speaks in verse 1 it is the first word from God Abraham has heard in 13 years. And God reveals Himself in a new way. He says, "I am God Almighty." This was a new name for God. No, God's name wasn't changed, nor did God change. God just hadn't revealed himself in this way before. God was relating to Abraham in a new way, and God wanted Abraham to experience him in this new way.

The Hebrew name used here is *El Shaddai* which most English Bibles translate as God Almighty. It's a compound word. *El* means God, but scholars quibble over the exact meaning of the word *Shaddai*. Some say it means mountain. Others say it means breast. Without getting into the nitty gritty of ancient Hebrew etymology, there are good arguments for both.

A mountain that rises up out of the earth is certainly a symbol of strength. Its snow feeds streams which water and feed the valley below. It provides refuge and food for thousands of creatures who make it their home. We certainly don't think of a breast as a symbol of strength, but for a newborn baby it is its entire source of strength. The breast supplies the infant with all it needs life and growth.

If we weave these ideas together, you get a picture of what *El Shaddai* means. He is the God who has all the power necessary. The God who is sufficient for all. The God who is capable. In Genesis, God has revealed himself as the Creator and as the Shield. He is Provider and Protector. But not only is He these things, Now Abraham knows, after years of trying it his own way, That God is his all-sufficient source of strength.

Abraham needed to know God at this level. We have seen Abraham try to do things his own way. He has relied on his own wisdom without seeking God's way. Abraham needed to know that God was Almighty, and that nothing is too hard for Him to do. Twelve times in this chapter God says "I will."

Our success and progress in our spiritual journeys depends upon what God does. Too often we worry and fret about what we can or cannot do, when we need to look to God and what He will do, and what He can enable us do to. He is our strength and supply. We cannot measure the possibilities by looking at the size of the obstacles in front of us, but by the size of the God who empowers us. That's why Paul writes in Php. 4:13, "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*"

B. Responsibility

So God reveals Himself in a new way, and revelation always brings responsibility. You cannot encounter God and go away unchanged. Your life will be either transformed by His presence into more of what He wants you to be, or you will walk away with your heart more calloused to the things of God. Either way, you will not be the same.

Who God is changes who we are. We must be careful not to think that since God is our all-sufficient source of strength that we have nothing to do. Just because God says, "I will," does not mean we do nothing. God supplies the strength, but He also chooses to work through us. We are partners in His divine purpose.

As God reveals himself more fully to Abraham here, he also gives Abraham added responsibility. Abraham is to walk before God and be blameless. Earlier in Genesis, Enoch and Noah walked *with* God, but here Abraham is called to walk *before* God, that is, he is to live each day and make every decision with the recognition that the eyes of God were always watching him.

Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Heb 4:13

"Blameless" or "perfect" here does not mean "sinless," for that is impossible. The root of the word simply means "entire" or "whole." His whole life is to be lived before God. Nothing held back, nothing reserved. It is all God's. He is to be single-hearted, and wholly devoted to God.

All believers are to live their lives the same way. We are to have the recognition that every part of our lives is within God's will and purpose. We must be singleheartedly devoted to God. Too many Christians divide their lives into compartments, and reserve some for themselves. God is in charge of these, they think, but I am in control of these. We pretend

that there are religious parts of life that God is concerned about, and that there other parts He is not. We understand that God is as concerned about 9:00 a.m. Tuesday, or 11:00 p.m. Friday, as He is with 10:00 a.m. Sunday.

C. Relationship

Of course the central subject here is God's relationship with Abraham. God's deepening revelation of Himself and Abraham's response and responsibility to their relationship. God says “my covenant” 9 times in this chapter. It is this covenant that defines God's relationship with Abraham.

We don't use the word covenant too much in everyday conversation these days, although it still gets lots of use in a legal context. Maybe you live in a neighborhood with a covenant. A covenant is coming together of two or more parties in which they form a bond of agreement. It's sort of combination of a treaty and a contract. It contains the promises, stipulations, and conditions that must be met each party.

This is not a new covenant, different from the one God has already established with Abraham. It is a confirmation of that covenant. But each time God affirms His covenant, He reveals it more fully. It is opening like a flower. When we first see it in chp. 12 it is only like a bud. God give only the most basic elements of the covenant. In chapter 15 we see the bud open into blossom. Here, though, we see the flower in full bloom. God didn't disclose everything to Abraham right off the bat. He wasn't being deceptive or manipulating Abraham. Abraham wasn't ready yet. He wasn't prepared. But as Abraham grows in his faith, God unveils more and more of his plan.

It is the same way with us. This is why I refer so much to the spiritual *journey*. Your relationship with God is not a one-time event. Too often in evangelical Christianity we talk about making a decision for Christ. We speak of being saved as a one-time event. However, a relationship with God isn't a singular decision. It is a process. It is an ongoing series of decisions and commitments. Every day we make decisions and commitments that either bring us closer in our relationship with God, or take us farther away from Him.

I look back on certain points in my life where certain things happened or I made certain decisions. If God had told me then how He would later use those things, or where those decisions would ultimately lead me, I would have balked. I would of said, “Wait a

minute, here! Back this truck up.” I wasn’t ready for that yet. And yet now, looking back, I am so thankful that God worked all of these things out the way He did. The old me wouldn’t want it that way. The new me is ever grateful that it is.

As we grow in faith, God reveals more of Himself to us. Things that did not concern us at all 5 years ago, now are the focal point of the Holy Spirits work in our lives. Insights we never could have grasped from God's word before, now become glaring truths that dramatically change our thinking. Experiences of fellowship far beyond us earlier in our spiritual journey, now are sweetly savored experiences.

II. Abraham

The second new name in this chapter is Abraham. Abraham's birth name and the name he's worn to this point is actually Abram. Ironically, Abram means “exalted father.” That has not been his identity to this point in his life, but a frustrating reminder of who he is not. Do you think that every time someone called Abram by his name, he felt a little twinge of pain? But now, God now gives him a new name, a new identity, Abraham, which means, “father of a multitude.”

Can you imagine the response he got when he told everyone at home his new name? You can see them biting their lip and holding back laughter and saying, “Father of a multitude! Excuse me Abraham, but you're 100 years old, and your wife is barren.”

But whenever someone called Abraham by his name, he was reminded of God's promise, and his special purpose. He knew that he was what God had made him, not what he made of himself. Let's look at the promises God gives Abraham with his new name.

A. The People

First, are the people. Abraham did indeed become the father of a multitude. It's not just the Jewish people, but all the Arab nations as well. Genesis 25 lists other peoples that descended from Abraham as well: Asshurites, Letushites, Leummites, and the Midianites. But it is the Jewish people that descended from the promised child. But Abraham has more than physical descendant's, He has spiritual children as well. Galatians 3:6-7 says, Consider Abraham: *"He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."* Understand then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

We are the spiritual children of Abraham. In fact, we know from the N.T. that this was the multitude God ultimately envisioned. Consider what Paul writes in Romans, “*A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit.*” (Rom. 2:28-29) It kind of makes you want to sing all kazillion verses of “Father Abraham.”

B. The Land

The next part of the promise given with Abraham's new name was the land. God gave to Abraham's promised offspring the land of Canaan. This land is a battleground today between the Jews and Arabs, and it will probably remain that way until the Lord returns.

The Jews' ownership of the land depends entirely on God's gracious covenant with Abraham: God gave them the land. However, their possession and enjoyment of the land is conditional upon their faithfulness to obey the Lord. This was the theme of the entire book of Deuteronomy. More than 60 times, Moses told the people they would inherit the land, if they walked in the ways of the Lord.

But the Jews were not faithful, and there have been many times that they lost the land or did not control it. Instead they were oppressed within the very land that God gave them as a gift. This was all because they were not faithful to God. Even though the Jews control much of the Promised Land today, they only do so under constant duress and threats of war and terrorism. This is because they have not observed their covenant with God.

C. The Sign

The third part of God's promise was a sign. A sign is a pointer. It identifies something. This is a very personal sign. God gave Abraham the sign of circumcision as a reminder of what God had promised Abraham, and to point him in the way that God should go. We might think, couldn't God have picked a simpler sign? I mean when you start whipping out the scissors in that area of the body, you are talking about something serious. How about a tattoo on the hand? Or couldn't he just wear a ring, carry a laminated card in his pocket, or how about a WWJD bracelet? But God wanted a sign that would address a man at his most personal and intimate level. Circumcision was not a superficial mark, but a sign at the very core of his identity as a man. It was also appropriate because the promise was for

Abraham and his seed. The very source of that seed carried the sign of God's covenant.

It was always to be a reminder to Abraham that he was a new man with a new name and new purpose. Do you realize this morning, if you are in Christ, you are a new person, with a new name, and a new purpose.

God can redefine your life. In Christ you can find your true identity and real reason for living. You don't have to be defined by your past. You don't have to be defined by your mistakes. You don't have to be defined by your fears or your failures.

We try to find our identities in so many things that ultimately don't deliver. We try to find our identity in money, but discover that full bank accounts, full portfolios, and full wallets don't create full heart. We try to find our identity in work, but even a job well done doesn't mean it is well with our soul. We try to find our identity in relationships only to find conflict, disappointment and broken hearts. We search for meaning in our hobbies but the pleasure is fleeting. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived spent years in foolish pursuits searching for identity in everything under the sun. At the end, he declared it is all meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Your true identity is to be found by knowing God through Christ. Knowing who God is will change who you are. A couple of years ago, I read about a district in central India held a renaming ceremony for 285 girls who had been named Nakusa or Nakushi – Hindi for "unwanted." In that district, there are currently only 883 girls for every 1,000 boys, due to gender-selective abortion, infanticide, and neglect. Obviously, life has not been a bed of roses for the "Nakusas" who survived. Imagine going through life being named "nobody wants me," or "unloved." But this renaming ceremony is giving them hope, and starting them down the path to a new future.

"Now in school, my classmates and friends will be calling me this new name, and that makes me very happy," said a 15-year-old girl who had been named Nakusa by a grandfather disappointed by her birth. She chose the new name "Ashmita," which means "very tough" or "rock hard" in Hindi.

It made me wonder: maybe some of us need official renaming ceremonies too, a time when we acknowledge the parts of our identities that are nakusa, shed them like a garment at the foot of the cross, and claim our new identity in Christ.

Cherished. Healed. Gifted. Whole. Clean. Approved. Beloved.

Christ wants to give you a new name. If you've accepted the gift of his forgiveness, given your life over to him, you've already received it. But are you willing to live in it, to answer only to the name grace bestows like a garland on your soul?