

Children's Sermon

Scripture: Genesis 17: 1-10, 15-22

Solo

"My Redeemer is Faithful and True"

Sermon: What's in a name?

What's In A Name? Genesis 17:1-10, 15-22

Introduction adapted from "What's in a name, by Gordon Curly @ SermonCentral.com

Remember the story of how Romeo and Juliet fell in love before learning that they bore the names of rival families? He was a Montague, she a Capulet. Thinking that this might forever separate them, both lovers ponder the sacrifice they are willing to make – of leaving their names behind – in order to be together. Juliet asks, what's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would still smell as sweet...

What is in a name? When we name a child today, we often choose a name we like, one that's unique, or one that connects them back to family. We don't often think of what the actual name might signify about the person wearing it.

My father was named after his father, thus becoming Jerome George Salley Jr. When my older brother was born he became the "3rd" when our son was born he got both grandfathers' names, "Joseph Jerome" and I then added another, "Forrester," which messed up all the application forms he's filled out thereafter (most don't have room for a third given name ☐).

But in the Bible, names were carefully given as having some prophetic or deep significance for the name bearer. Last week we learned that Ishmael was named "God hears" to remind both him and his mother through their very difficult lives that God would be with them. God will next tell Abraham to name his future son Isaac which means "laughter" in response to both Abe and Sarah's initial chuckles of disbelief which will be transformed into joyful laughter with his miraculous birth.

Since all Biblical names had such significance, a changed name then was a very clear signal that something about the person had also dramatically changed, they have essentially become a new person and we need to know them in a new and different way.

That is why we need to pay attention to the three name changes recorded in our morning's text. And by the end of this message, you will also learn how coming to faith in Jesus has changed your name and what this signifies both about you and your new relationship with God.

With the opening of chapter 17, thirteen long years have passed since the events of chapter 16 when God last repeated His promise to Abraham concerning a multitude of future descendants. After which, Abe and Sarah had tried to hurry God's promise along by siring a son through Hagar, the slave girl, which only resulted in the next 13 long years of family discord. Ishmael is now a teenager and Abraham is ninety-nine years old when the LORD next speaks to him.

Why the 13 years of silence?

Was it 13 years of living with fruit of their mutual sin to see if Abraham and Sarah had learned their lesson? God does that sometimes. You make a mistake, God says, "OK, we will use this to better teach you."

Was it 13 more years of testing, seeing if Abraham would continue believing during a lengthy period of silence? God also does this sometimes. Many great people of faith have recorded their own walk through a lengthy spiritual desert wondering, "has God forgotten me?"

Was it 13 more years of needed growth? God had made a formal covenant with Abram. Saying that He would bring about the descendants, all Abraham had to do was continue living in faith. When God reveals truth, sometimes He gives us time to learn it and start living it. Slowly, daily beginning to do what God has already taught us. Sometimes it takes a while.

I think it was a bit of all three of these needs which now caused God to wait another 13 years. You see, as indicated by God's need to repeat His promises in all their conversations, apparently with his increasing age Abraham kept returning to this obsession that he was now too old for what God had in mind. God needed to work this particular faithless flaw out, before going forward with him.

When God first spoke to him, Abraham was 75; by his own cultural standards already "an old person" and yet childless. So desperately accepting God's promise of an heir, he went as directed to live as a stranger in a foreign land.

When God next speaks, Abraham was now 85, financially prospering and having just returned from a successful campaign; leading his own private army to rout four invading nations from his adopted land. But again thinking he was soon to die without an heir and in the process of settling his estate; Abe repeats his complaint so God must repeat His promise.

In response, this time God foretold not only the next 400 years Israel's future history also that Abraham himself could expect to die peacefully after having lived to an exceptional old age (obviously much older than he is now). God then unilaterally binds Himself alone to fulfill these promises by a covenant which he makes with Abraham. It is recorded that at the time, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (15:6).

Now at the start of chapter 17, Abraham is 99 years old and once again believing that he and Sarah are past the time when God could do anything with their effectively old and dead yet still moving bodies. But at least he has Ishmael as his future heir. So God must speak again. First informing him that Ishmael will not be his future heir but that another is still to be birthed from Abraham and Sarah together; a declaration which at first causes both of them to laugh in disbelief. And this time, God also has name changes for all three of them along with new requirements for Abe to follow.

So here in chapter 17, God first gives Himself a new name – **EI Shaddai** – which has new assurances for Abraham to carry into the second half of what God has already promised will be his own unexpectedly exceptionally long 175 years of life.

*“I am [EI Shadai] **God Almighty**,” walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.”*

Up until now Abe had only been given two names for the God he was following. One was **EI Elyon**, “**God most High**,” which both he and King Melchizedek agreed was the title for the supreme God of the universe. The other was God’s personal name meaning “**I AM**,” which we usually transliterate as either **Yaweh** or **Jehovah**.

God says, “**I am**” and I am also “**God Almighty**,” thus capable of enabling you to do whatever I ask of you in your lifetime, so “**walk before me, and be blameless**.” In other words, “now Abraham do what you have learned to do.” To me this confirms that Abraham may have always been a man of some faith, but he still needed another 25 years of training before he was really willing to trust God with EVERYTHING.

Up until this point God has only asked Abraham to respond in faith while God bound Himself alone to making Abe the father of a great multitude of descendants who would return to this land 400 years from now. But now God asks Abraham to sign what becomes a national contract which will need to be continually ratified in order for his descendants to forever keep the land. Circumcision would be the signature to be given both by Abraham and all of his male descendants thereafter that they had covenanted to forever walk with God and be blameless. **From this point forward, as proven by the future history of Israel, breaking this covenant of obedience to God would also free Him from his obligation to keep them in the land.**

Here, it is very important for us to clearly understand the distinction between **God’s first individual covenant** – which Abraham only had to accept **by faith** to be declared righteous – and now this **second national covenant** which will require continued obedience by all Abraham’s future heirs in order for them to stay in the land.

So when Jesus comes along, it will be a brand new version of that first covenant – which he will offer and we once again can only accept by our faith – by which we can be declared righteous. But first let us deal with the other two name changes of chapter 17.

Throughout this series I have always called them “Abraham and Sarah” not to be dishonest, but rather to spare your confusion until you could now learn that previously their names had been Abram and Sarai.

Abram means “exalted father,” which certainly gave him 86 years of grief up until the birth of Ishmael and only less grief thereafter as he dealt with the family turmoil that this single son brought into their tents. The change to now being called **Abraham**, “**Father of a multitude**” was therefore quite a dramatic name change both for helping Abe keep his own faith in God’s promises, but also in proving a joke upon all his acquaintances who had perhaps privately

laughed all the way up until this “exalted father” who had so far only sired one son, then sired another at the age of 100. While two is still not quite a multitude, if God could do this for him at such an advanced age, then perhaps God could actually make Abraham the father of a multitude. Of course only Abe knew that this promise of a multitude of heirs was based on generations to follow and not necessarily his own procreative abilities.

What is also important for us to learn is that by adding the Hebrew “breath sound” of “ha” into Abram’s original name, the Lord God Almighty has now given Abe a portion of His own name signifying that it would only be by God’s Spirit, God’s breath, by God’s empowerment, that this promised son which 99 year-old Abraham will soon conceive would one day not only grow into a great nation but would also -- in the fullness of time – bring to pass that one special long-promised heir who would bless the whole world by undoing Adam & Eve’s curse.

Sarai’s name change was a lot more subtle, shifting its meaning from simply “princess” to “My Princess;” perhaps signaling that now at the age of 90 she is also ready to assume her exalted queenly stature among the future Promised People.

Chapter 17 thus closes with a newly reassured, 99 year old Abraham signing this covenant with God by having both himself, Ishmael, and every other male in his camp circumcised. He still has one more year and three more Bible chapters to wait, while dealing with a lot of strange looks, until Isaac will be born. But first God must deal with the sins of Sodom, which is also of grave importance to Abraham because his nephew Lot still lives there. That is a story for next week.

So now let us consider what lesson we can learn from the distinction between the two covenants which Abraham entered into with God: one based simply on faith and another on works.

The night before he would die, sitting with his disciples at the supper table, Jesus took bread, broke it and shared it, then he took a cup of wine and also shared it, saying “***this is my body broken for you ... [and] this is my blood of the NEW COVENANT which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins ... do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me***” (Mt. 26:28, Mark 14:24, Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25).

Which of the old covenants was this **NEW COVENANT** now replacing?

Since the first covenant was made by God alone which Abraham need only to accept by faith, it was this second national covenant - based on works - requiring a continual ratification by all Abraham’s descendants that Jesus had come to replace.

Why did it need replacing? Because the second covenant had nothing to do with being declared individually righteous before God but was intended as a national contract for being allowed to stay in the land. Unfortunately, through the next 2000 years of blessing, discipline, exile and restoration the Jews of Jesus’ day would come to confuse this second covenant with the first; now believing that their obedience to circumcision and the Mosaic law was necessary for being declared righteous. They had forgotten that Abraham had already been declared righteous by his

simple faith some 13 years before being given circumcision and some 400 years before being given the Law.

So in the fullness of time, Jesus came to remind both His own people and us that those who would be righteous have always and only could live by faith that God would do for what He has promised to do: for Abraham it was heirs and now for us it is salvation.

Jesus' "new" covenant like God's first covenant with Abraham was again only signed by himself; by him giving his own life **for many for the forgiveness of sins**. This NEW covenant was thus both a reaffirmation of God's first covenant with Abraham and by Jesus' fulfillment of it, an annulment of the second. That is why the New Testament's Jewish authors would tell Jew and Gentile alike that we are no longer under the law but under grace (Romans 4:13-16)

And it is this symbolic meal, first instituted by Jesus, to which we return today as our constant reminder of how we have been saved.

Jesus said that when we come to Him in faith, we spiritually die with the death that He died to be reborn with His resurrection to a brand new life. The life we now live, we live through and for Him. The Apostle Paul explained our changed life this way...

We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.... So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, (2nd Corinthians 5:14-18, extracts).

But what about our changed name and what symbols have we been given for our changed life?

As I said at the start, a changed name is a clear signal that something about the person has also dramatically changed, they have essentially become a new person and we need to know them in a new and different way.

As **Abram** was then given the new name **Abraham** thus signifying God's empowerment for him to live this life he had been called to live, so we have been given the new name "CHRISTIAN" signifying God's indwelling Spirit now empowering us to live the new life we have been given to live.

At birth I was named John Turner Salley. "John" because my five-year-old sister declared that she liked that name. "Turner" to honor an uncle who had no sons to carry on his name. "Salley" to signify that my ancestors probably had come from a salt-mining region of Switzerland. But now I can proudly also name myself "Christian."

As Abraham and his followers were also given circumcision as their symbolic entrance into a new life to be lived under the law, so we were given baptism as our symbolic rebirth to a new life now to be lived by faith.

As Jesus instructed us, let us remember all this as we return to His table today.