

A NEW NAME

Genesis 17:1-8, 15-22

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet asked the question: "What's in a name?" Her assessment was that their respective family names should not be the determining factor of whom she loved and who loved her. We tend to think that the meanings of various names are not very important. However, how many families do you know who have the last name "Hitler?" Do you know anyone whose given name is Adolf? In our present culture certain names tend to be associated with famous or infamous behaviors of those who happened to have a particular name. We would tend to avoid names such as Hitler or Adolf because of the extremely negative implications that are associated with those names. This is a case of historical behavior giving meaning to a name.

In past times in many cultures, names were chosen for children that implied desirable characteristics which the parents hoped would be predictive of how the person would turn out as an adult. In our present day culture, we don't take such considerations very seriously and tend to pick names that are trendy or popular or one that is the name of some famous person.

In our study of Abram and God and how they interacted we see that names were important since the names communicated something of the character of the person.

God's Promise Renewed – 17:1-8

¹Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless." ²"I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." ³Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ⁴"As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you will be the father of a multitude of nations." ⁵"No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations." ⁶"I have made you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you." ⁷"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." ⁸"I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." Genesis 17:1-8 (NASB95)

The title of this study would say to most of us that the subject of the name change was Abram whose name would become Abraham. However, we find not only was there a new name (identity) for Abram but we find in the very first verse of this chapter that God revealed to Abram a new identity for Himself. In the beginning of the relationship between God and Abram, we see God identified as Jehovah (YHWH) or the Existing One. This identity is typically expressed in the English translations of the Bible as GOD or LORD (all caps).

We are not told just how much understanding Abram had of God beyond His being divine. Later on in their interaction, following the rescue of Lot and others who had been taken captive by lawless gangs, God revealed to Abram that He was the "shield" or protector for Abram and that He was Abram's "great reward." This would seem to be a slow progressive revelation of God to Abram as several years passed.

The new identity that God revealed to Abram was that the Existing One who had called him out of Ur and who was his shield and reward was "the all-powerful and all-sufficient God who can do anything and meet any need" or simply El Shaddai which is typically rendered as God Almighty in English. Is it possible that Abram had not realized that this Divine Being with Whom he had been interacting over the past few decades was omnipotent? If Abram and Sarai did not realize this, then that may explain why they were so intent on trying to help God do what God had promised that He would do and (as it turned out) that only He could do. They had not

gotten the message that Jehovah was also known as El Shaddai. They needed to know this at this point since what God was going to tell Abram about Sarai (see verse 16) would require a divine omnipotent intervention or miracle.

The additional revelation of this characteristic of God was accompanied by a stated reality and an expectation that would require Abram to do something that had not been told to him before. The reality was that as Abram was living out his life that everything about him was on display before God and nothing was hidden from Him. The expectation was that Abram was to live in such a way that everything he did would be consistent with the knowledge that the One in Whom he trusted was totally capable to provide for every need in his life. This was in essence a call for integrity or for his actions to be consistent with his beliefs.

We could make an argument that Abram was already walking “by faith” since he had taken steps to do what he understood God had instructed him to do. But was Abram living his life in a relationship of “actions consistent with beliefs?” The fact that he and Sarai used deception when they went to Egypt would be evidence that fear had caused them to be less than truthful about their marriage relationship. He did know that he was being deceptive and this lack of integrity had gotten them into trouble.

The fact that they even went to Egypt and he and his wife carried out their own plan of how Abram could have a son seems to be related to what he did not know about the character and ability of God. It seems obvious that both these actions were not part of what would be considered ideal behavior. The reality of the situation was that Abram apparently did not know that God was “almighty” and we know that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. This is why it is so important in our lives that we know what the word of God says to us. We may be walking by faith in all that we do; however, if our faith is hindered by “not knowing” what the word of God teaches us, then we may do things that have bad consequences even though we are walking by the faith that we have which is based on limited understanding.

Now Abram was approaching age one hundred and the son that was a result of Sarai’s attempt to implement God’s will by finding a logical (non-miracle) way for Abram to have an heir was thirteen years old. This timing is not coincidental in that age thirteen was when a male “child” would begin to be considered a “son” with the attendant privileges and responsibilities of his role as a son and he would be considered to be an heir. It was at this juncture, before anything formal was done to declare Ishmael as the presumptive heir, that God interjected Himself into what was happening in the family of Abram.

With this new understanding that Abram had of God, God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram and told him what the evidence would be that the covenant was established or given. That evidence was that Abram would be “multiplied exceedingly.” Abram’s response was to submit himself to God and to worship Him as he realized the awesomeness of what God had just revealed.

God continued to give Abram additional information regarding God’s involvement in the covenant. We see this in the words “as for me” in verse four. First of all we see that this was “God’s covenant” in that He owned it and took responsibility to implement the provisions of the promises that were for the benefit of Abram. While this was not a different covenant, we do see clarification of the provisions of the covenant. Previously, the statement to Abram was that he would be a great nation (Gen 12:2). We now see that this promise extended beyond the obvious physical nation of Israel but also included a large number of other nations. In the physical realm, there were other nations that came from the descendants of Abraham that included the progeny of Ishmael, the descendants of Esau, and six other sons who were born to Abraham by Keturah

whom Abraham married following the death of Sarah. We know that the fulfillment of the promises would be carried out through the descendant of Isaac and Jacob rather than these other groups.

There would be “other nations” that made up the multitude that would benefit from the promises and we can see clues as to how this would come about in some of the earlier times when God talked with Abram. For example, in 13:16 Abram was told that his descendant would be as the “dust of the earth” which is likely a reference to physical Israel. Later (in 15:5) we see that they would be as the “stars of the heavens” which some commentators see as a reference to the spiritual family of all those who “belong to Christ and are then Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:29).

Since Abram was to be the “father of a multitude of nations,” it was appropriate that his name be changed to reflect this change from being known as “exalted father” (Abram) to “father of a multitude” (Abraham). This name change involved the addition of the sound of a “breath” or the “ha” sound. Some have suggested that this name change (which was also given to Sarai in the change to the name Sarah) was to indicate the presence of the Spirit (breath) of God in their lives.

In verse seven, we see the affirmation of the covenant to specify that the provisions were to apply not only to Abraham but also to his descendants after him. The specific provision mentioned in conjunction with this extension was that He (God) would be the One that Abraham and those who were to be heirs according to promise would recognize as God. In addition to this, the land of Canaan would become the everlasting possession of Abraham’s descendants that would recognize the Lord as their God. It is difficult to get that meaning from verse eight; however, we can find clarification of what was meant in the teachings of Moses in Deuteronomy regarding the responsibility of the people in keeping God’s commandments (recognizing Him as God) as a condition for actually maintaining meaningful ownership (control) of the land.

God’s Plan and Abraham’s Concern – 17:15-18

¹⁵ Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ “I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of* nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” ¹⁷ Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?” ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” Genesis 17:15-18 (NASB95)

In a parallel set of promises, God revealed how Sarai would be impacted by the miraculous plan that God was implementing for the salvation of humanity. Her given worldly name meant princess and the name change to Sarah implied “mother of nations.” This part of the plan sounded like an impossibility.

The scripture does not state that Abraham did not believe but it does give us the impression that Abraham did not have a clue about how such a promise could be fulfilled. Given the requirements that the child would be born to a ninety-year-old woman, Abraham and Sarah would have been completely out of ideas of how to “help” God implement His promised outcome. In other words, they had reached the extent of their capabilities and only a miracle from God would be able to fulfill such a promise.

We have no way to know if Abraham’s laughter was from being delighted about what God was going to do or if it came from the seemingly impossible circumstances of what God had told him. Since this promise was the perfect fulfillment of what Abraham had considered as the perfect reward from God (Gen 15:2-3), I suspect that his laughter was that of delight.

In verse eighteen we see how difficult it is to give up or abandon what we think is the

solution to a problem or situation we may encounter in life. For thirteen years, the problem of having an heir was “solved” in the minds of Abraham and Sarah in the person of Ishmael. If someone had talked with them during this time about what God was doing in their lives, then they would have been adamant that they had it figured out. They loved Ishmael and Abraham was obviously concerned about his future. The request that we see here was for God to look after Ishmael and care for him and his descendants.

God’s Power Declared – 17:19-22

¹⁹But God said, “No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. ²⁰“As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹“But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.” ²²When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. Genesis 17:19-22 (NASB95)

If we read verse nineteen from various translations, we will find at least three different ideas regarding this exchange between God and Abraham. Some versions have (starting with the fourth word in this verse) as “Yes, but Sarah” and others will have “No, but Sarah” while some will simply have “Sarah.” Those translations that add “No, but” assume that Abraham was making an appeal that Ishmael be the heir of promise in verse eighteen. Those that add “Yes, but” assume that Abraham was making an appeal for the welfare of Ishmael since he was not the heir of promise. Translations that start with “Sarah” assume that God simply restated the promise of verse sixteen with additional information regarding the name of the son and that the covenant would be through the descendants of Isaac.

Ishmael was not to be cast aside, but God would bless him and his descendants apart from the covenant that God had established with Abraham. The blessings for Ishmael were related to his immediate descendants and the nation that they would become. There was no mention of such blessings being of an everlasting nature.

We know from the historical accounts of all that followed from this encounter that God’s promised Messiah did come from the descendants of Isaac through Jacob and Judah as God did continue to bless them and to discipline them until the fulfillment of the promises had come to pass in Jesus. We who put our trust in God’s provision for our salvation are still enjoying the blessings of God on Abraham and his descendants.