

Main Idea: As Christians, we should be reminded of the One whose name we carry and in that remembrance our discipleship is formed.

I read an entertaining book recently, entitled *Freakonomics*, where the authors explore a variety of data sets and make some conclusions on random topics that often go against conventional wisdom. The last chapter explores the issues of names and the impact that names may have regarding a child's future success. The chapter opens with the story of a girl named Temptress, who had found her way into family court because she had developed a habit of inviting men over to the house while her mother was at work. The judge excuses the young girl so he can have a talk with her mother. He ask about how the girl got her name and asked the mother if she thought that perhaps her daughter was living out her name.

It turns out that the mother had misspelled the name and had not discovered the mistake until it was too late. The judge pondered the idea of whether the mother's mistake had perhaps predetermined her daughter's behavior. The author's concluded that, no, it had not. Studying a huge data set of names from California they made three conclusions all of which are interesting and make for some good conversation. Here is what they concluded from their analysis:

- 1) The names given by black parents and white parents were extremely dissimilar
- 2) That names tend to cycle through the socio economic strata moving from higher to lower and eventually out of favor.
- 3) And the final one, which I found most intriguing and relevant for our discussion today, was that a child's name is not a determinant of success but rather a predictor because of what it conveys about the child's parent (and what that means for a child's likely economic success).

So does a child's name matter when it comes to their potential success? Their research findings would say no. The Talmud, a collection of Jewish wisdom, cautions parents to choose names carefully because it impacts the bearer of that name. But according to the research that is not true. But while a name has no determining factors, it can be predictive because it says something about the one who gives the name. They conclude, if a parent can't take the time to

choose a name, or determine whether the name was spelled right or not it probably says something the kind of parent they will be.

I bring that up this morning because following along with this idea of covenant that Mike introduced us to last week. During this season of Lent, we are discussing what Mike and I have called “re” formation theology. The idea is that Lent is a season where we should contemplate our discipleship and seek to form our lives in such a way that it meets the radical demands of Christ call on our lives. We discovered last week that God, in making a covenant with Noah and all of us, that he desired a relationship. We are formed spiritually when we contemplate that relationship for sure. This week we are discussing formation by being “renamed.”

So it was this renaming in our text that caught my attention. As we heard in our Old Testament reading, when God initiates this covenant with Abram and Sarai, He changes their name. While this renaming is not the only or even the most important thing happening in this text, I do find this renaming significant and potentially potent in our own spiritual formation. You see, to receive a new name in the bible usually meant a change in a person’s circumstances or status.¹ I want to suggest that perhaps we should consider more carefully the name we carry and it is my hope that amidst that consideration we embrace the called life of a Christ follower.

So let’s quickly go over some background. In Genesis, you have this universal type preface which covers the first 11 chapters. But in chapter 12, there is a noted shift to a person. God has chosen Abram and his family to work in history. In a dramatic scene, God calls Abram to leave everything behind and embark on a new journey. God calls Abram and tells him that if Abram will obey, God says, *“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people of the earth will be blessed through you.”*²

God has shone the spotlight of salvation history brightly onto to Abram and his family. The remainder of Genesis is an unpacking of this incredible call. Now Abram and Sarai have been told that God is going to turn them into a great nation, but here the deal, they have no children. And while Abram does follow God, the child thing is not remedied immediately.

¹ Ross, Allen, *Creation and Blessing*, p. 327.

² Genesis 12: 2-3 (NIV)

Abram follows God and in chapter 15 God speaks to Abram again and Abram remind him that he is childless. God again promises Abram that his offspring will be like the stars in the heaven and that he will take possession of the land. Abram asks how he can know he can take possession of it and God enters into a covenant with Abram. This is what Genesis 15:18 says, *"On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the rivers of Egypt to the great river Euphrates....'"*

So God and Abram had this covenant relationship. God had made some great promises of land and progeny and to his credit, Abram had exhibited tremendous faith, but as it often the case humans, things don't happen as quickly as we like. Abram and his wife Sarai enter into chapter 16 still childless and they decide they need to help God out a little and concoct a crazy scheme where they attempt to assist the covenant promise through a surrogate. To shorten the story a little, Abram sleeps with his wife's maidservant and has a child named Ishmael. And then for thirteen years all is quiet.

Our text this morning opens with a stunning statement. It begins by setting up a hopeless situation; Abram is now 99 years old. He and Sarai were supposed to be the progenitors of a multitude. A family tree whose branches would have been too numerous to count. But he is now 99 and this was before, you will remember, the advent of Cialis. He had not heard from God, at least to our knowledge for 13 years. 13 years of silence, raising a child with those strange dynamics, 13 more years without having a child with Sarai. Things were not on a high ebb for Abram.

Now I want to pause here for a minute and let you in a secret. This particular text, most scholars believe was written during the exile. Remember a while back when we discussed exile. The people of Israel were removed from the homes, they had no land. It was a desperate and difficult time. When you lose everything, we you have no home, it is hard to see how things can change. So they understood the helplessness of Abram age. When they read, Abram was 99, they too, knew what it was like to be in an impossible situation with no hope in sight and a feeling that they had somehow been shortchanged.

Now keep that in mind, when you finish the rest of this verse. After 13 years of silence, God appears to Abram again and notice the first thing he says to this hopeless, helpless, Abram. *"I am God Almighty..."* (17:1) God who? God Almighty! There may be some bad

spots in life, but there is no situation that is hopeless with God. He is God Almighty. You can imagine Abram or the exiles in the desperate situations hearing this word. Abram having given up on having a child, but then reappears God Almighty. Exiles believing their land was gone for good, but then who shows up? None other than God Almighty.

And just like that, after years of silence, after years of what seemed to be unfulfilled promises God comes and reminds Abram, what I am sure Abram had forgotten, that when God covenants, you can count on it. Listen to verse two again, "*I will confirm my covenant between you and will greatly increase your numbers.*" Wow!

And then it happens, this name change thing. God changes Abram's name to Abraham, which is a word play on the word that comes next in verse 5, that means 'father of many nations.' And to make sure that everyone knows that God's covenant promise includes Sarai and to probably make sure that Abraham is assured of God's intentions, he also changes Sarai's name to Sarah. Name changes, circumstances change, status changes. Changes are made possible only because God is Almighty.

God changes his name to Abraham and reiterates what he has already promised before, "*I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant (sounds familiar cf. Genesis 9) between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.*"³

An everlasting covenant, which I take to mean, well, ever- lasting. I use to sing a song at children's camp growing up. It went something like this, "Father Abraham, had many sons and many sons had Father Abraham, I am one of them and so are you, so let's just Praise the Lord."

I am one of them! One of those spiritual descendents of Abraham, one who is the beneficiary of God's covenant. When I accepted Christ as my savior and Lord, I became what we say, a Christian. Before I could have said, well, I grew up in a Christian home, or I was reared in a heavily Christian area, but only after I professed Christ as my Lord, could I say, that yes I am a Christian. You see in doing that I am changing names. I now bear the name of Christ. And it is that name that I want you to ponder today. Today, I ask you a couple of

³ Genesis 17:6-7

questions, first has your name been changed. Have you embraced the gospel of Christ so that it is your gospel? Second, if you have experienced a name change, how serious do you take that name?

You know there is another well known covenant in the Bible and in the covenant obligations, it warns against taking God's name in vain. Treating God's name lightly. For whatever reason, we have relegated that to some minor issue of profane speech, but what if it meant more? What if to take the name of Christ, say as in calling yourself a Christian, and not trying to be like Christ was to treat the name lightly.

I think God changed Abram's name so that he would remember. He would remember that God is a covenant keeping God, despite how many years have passed or how hopeless a situation seems. God changes his name, because names do mean something.

And the research in *Freakonomics* would agree. Remember that last finding that I found so intriguing. Names don't so much determine an outcome but they can often predict it because it says something about the one who gave the name. You can call yourself a Christian all you want; you can make claims of being a Christ follower until you are blue in the face. Names don't determine outcomes, but when you have been renamed by God Almighty. When you have bowed down in His presence. When the name change is written on your heart more than your birth certificate, well those outcomes are predictable, because we know the one who has given the name. God Almighty, the God of the everlasting covenant, the God who promises to be God to Abraham, and his descendants. I am one of them and so you are so let's just praise the Lord.