

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2010

Sunday, June 13, 2010: Life Changing - Life Giving

Life Changing / Life Giving
Genesis 17: 1 – 22.

I. Introduction.

The U.S. Social Security Administration keeps records of the most popular baby names each year. That makes sense to me, because they ought to know how many people are applying for Social Security Numbers, and they ought to know the names of those new babies.

In May, the Social Security Administration announced the top 1,000 names for the year 2009. The number one name for boys in 2009 was Jacob. The number one name for girls was Isabella.[1] (The SSA.gov website can be searched by states as well. In 2009, the most popular name for girls in Texas was Isabella. The most popular name for boys was Jose. Jose has been the most popular name for boys in Texas since 1996!)[2]

There are several things about this that are interesting to me. First, the top ten baby names in 2009 are completely different from the top ten names of 50 years ago. In 1960, the most popular names were David and Mary. In 2009, David and Mary were not even in the top ten. Second, I find it interesting that Jacob and Isabella are two of the three main characters in the *Twilight* book series. Interesting... (By the way, Edward is number 137 on the SSA list of popular names.)

According to a CNN.com news article, parents are trying to give their children unique names today in hopes that their children will stand out from the crowd. Parents are hoping to develop individuality by selecting new and different names. We can see this by comparing the number of girls named Mary in 1960 and the number of girls named Isabella in 2009. Even though Isabella was the most popular name in 2009, there were twice as many girls named Mary in 1960.[3]

So, what do you think? Do you think naming a child is the key to developing individuality?

I suppose there are two views on this. We will call the first view the “Juliet view.” Do you remember Juliet’s famous words from Shakespeare’s play “Romeo and Juliet?” She said, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet...” Juliet wishes her Romeo had been born to another family, because his name was her enemy. Oh if he just had a different name, they could be together. His name was the problem, and his name had nothing to do with his character. A rose by any other name would still be a sweet-smelling flower.

On the other hand, we have the biblical view of names. In the Bible, a person’s name was an important part of who they are. A person’s name reveals their character and their destiny. This is the reason why we have several biblical examples of characters who underwent a name change. When God changed their character, God changed their name. When God changed their destiny,

God changed their name.

In Genesis 17, we read the story of Abram and Sarai on the day God changed their character, changed their destiny and changed their names...

Read Genesis 17: 1 – 22.

This is the second time God has made a covenant with Abraham. The first was the strange story of Genesis 15. In that story, God promised to be Abram's "shield" and "great reward." He promised that Abram would have a son from his own body to serve as his future security and his everlasting heir. God instructed Abram to select five animals and cut them into halves. Abram arranged the halves and stayed awake all night to keep the birds from carrying off the dead carcasses. At dawn, a smoking firepot—symbolizing the presence of God himself—walked in between the animal halves.

More than likely this is an ancient practice of making a covenant between two parties. The person who walks in between the animal halves is making a statement, "If I do not keep my promise to you, then you can treat me like these animals." Or, "If I do not keep my promise to you, may God do to me what you did to these animals."

The covenant in Genesis 17 is different. It seems more straightforward. There are no visions, and it lacks symbolism. God speaks, and Abraham listens. God gives Abraham instructions, Abraham obeys God. In fact, Genesis 15 is all about God and his responsibility to keep his promises. Genesis 17 introduces the idea that Abraham and his descendants must practice circumcision as a sign that they are God's covenant people.

There are so many differences between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17, that some people are tempted to interpret this as a second covenant. Some people think God made a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 and then replaced that covenant with a new covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17.

I see it differently. I see this as an example of the way God reveals himself to us. God knew how much Abraham could handle. God knew how difficult it would have been for Abraham to understand everything about faith when he first called Abraham in Genesis 12. Therefore, each time God spoke to Abraham, Abraham understood more and more of God and God's will.

I take this as a sign that God wants us to grow in our faith. God loves you just the way you are. But God loves you too much to leave you the way you are. God will change you...Just like God changed Abraham.

II. Changed Character.

We know that God changed Abraham, because God changed his name from Abram to Abraham. This is not the only time this happened in the Bible. We encounter stories about name changes in both the Old Testament as well as the New Testament.

Later in the book of Genesis, we meet one of Abraham's grandsons named Jacob. The name Jacob literally means "one who grasps at the heel." Figuratively it means, "the one who trips" or "the deceiver." And Jacob lived up to his name. He was the second of twins and was born holding onto the heel of his brother Esau. He later deceived his brother and stole both his birthright and his father's blessing. Eventually, Jacob had an encounter with God in which he stayed up all night long wrestling with God. At the end of the night, God changed his name to Israel, "one who wrestles

with God.”

In the New Testament, Jesus had a disciple named Simon. It is possible this name is derived from the Hebrew name Shimon, which means “listen” or “hear.” But, I prefer to think of this as a Greek name. In Greek, the name Simon means “flat nose.” I think that is an appropriate name for Simon. Either he was born with a flat nose, or he ran his mouth so much that someone gave him a flat nose. However, the Gospel of Matthew tells us that Simon made his profession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. When Simon acknowledged who Jesus is, Jesus changed his name to Peter, which means “the rock.” And Jesus said, “On this rock, I will build my church.”

Also in the New Testament, we read about a Pharisee named Saul. In the Old Testament, the name Saul is associated with the first King of Israel. Saul was the king the people asked for, and that is what Saul means—“asked for.” In the New Testament, Saul was the number one persecutor of Christians...Until he finally met Jesus. When Saul met Jesus, Saul’s life was changed. Jesus gave him the name Paul. On one hand, Paul could simply be the Greek form of the Hebrew name Saul. And that would make a lot of sense, because Paul’s ministry became the work of evangelism and church planting among the Greek people. On the other hand, Paul could be a shortened form of the Latin name Paulus, which means “little one.” Saul thought he was important before he met Jesus. But when Jesus changed his life, he knew he was the “least of God’s people.”

In Genesis 17, we read about how God changed BOTH Abram and Sarai’s names. Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Abraham means “father of nations.” Sarah means “princess.” Both Abraham and Sarah became the ancestors of the greatest kings of God’s people: King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and eventually, King Jesus. When God changed their status, God also changed their names. Abraham and Sarah were no longer the childless couple in their sunset years. Now, they will be the father and mother of God’s people.

Notice how this change of character came about. It begins in verse one when God reveals HIS NAME to Abraham. Keep in mind that the biblical understanding of name is that a person’s name is that person’s character. God reveals his character as El Shaddai, God Almighty.

Ancient people thought that humans could not know the names of the gods. They thought the only way to know the name of a god was to trick the god into revealing it to them. That is not the way Abraham’s God is. God tells us who he is. God reveals himself to us. God WANTS us to know him. This is why God sent his Son, Jesus to live a human life. God has shown us who he is. God is almighty, and God loves us so much that he has provided a way for us to know him and to be one of his children.

The story of Abraham shows us that we will never know who we are until we first know who God is. And, once we know who God is...God changes our character.

III. Changed Actions.

We need to be very careful here, because faith is not the same thing as understanding. Yes, God has revealed himself to us perfectly through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. Yes, it is possible to know God and to understand that he loves us and provides the only way for us to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation. But, faith is not something that takes place in the mind.

Biblical faith might begin in the mind, but it is always expressed through our actions. Belief in God

is proven by the things we do.

This is why God makes demands of Abraham. In Genesis 12, God called Abraham to be in relationship with himself. God would be his God, and Abraham would be God's man. But, Abraham had to demonstrate his faith by beginning a 400 mile journey to a new land. In Genesis 17, God changed Abraham's life and made him the father of many nations. But, Abraham had to demonstrate his new life by adopting the practice of circumcision.

Genesis 17: 11 tells us that circumcision is simply the sign of what God already done in Abraham's life. Circumcision was not the covenant itself. It is the SIGN of the covenant. Compare this to what we read in **Genesis 15: 6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."**

Circumcision was not what made Abraham righteous. God made Abraham righteous. Righteousness was a gift from God to Abraham. It was not the result of anything Abraham had done.

The same thing is true for you and me. Righteousness—or salvation—is a gift from God to anyone who will receive it. We cannot earn God's forgiveness. We cannot earn a right relationship with God. We simply receive it.

However, once we receive God's gift of salvation, God changes the way we live our lives. God expects from us the same he expects from Abraham. No, I do not mean circumcision...**Genesis 17: 1 says, "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless."**

God wants us to live with him and to live a "blameless" life. This is what it means to grow as a Christian. Everyone who believes is "credited as righteous." Then, God begins to work in our lives, convicting us of sin and convincing us of the kind of life we ought to live. It doesn't happen overnight. And, no one will ever become completely "blameless" until the day we are reunited with God in heaven. But, every Christian goes through a process of growing and becoming more like God.

IV. Changed Community.

Notice that God's promises were not just for Abraham. God promised to change Abraham's character and to change Abraham's actions. Then, God promised to form a community of changed people—Abraham's descendants.

In several places God used both the singular and plural when addressing Abraham. Genesis 17: 9 says, "Then God said to Abraham, "As for you, you must keep my covenant, you (singular) and your descendants (plural) after you for the generations to come."

The Christian life involves BOTH an individual side and a corporate side. God has not called us to be rugged individuals. God has called us to be changed individuals, living out our faith in a changed community. This is the church. This has been God's plan from the very beginning.

God did not call Abraham to be a lone herdsman, wandering around the foreign land of Canaan. God called Abraham to be the first individual in a community of changed men and women. Men and women who have been changed by God, and as a result change the world.

V. Conclusion.

God changed my life when I was nine years old. I was in Vacation Bible School at West Jackson Street Baptist Church in Tupelo, Mississippi. That is when I received God's gift of salvation. But that was not the end of my spiritual life.

No, I did not stop growing physically when I was nine years old. I did not stop growing mentally and emotionally when I was nine years old. And, I did not stop growing spiritually when I was nine years old.

Imagine what the world would look like if everyone stopped growing physically, mentally and emotionally at nine years old. Now, imagine what the church would look like if all Christians stopped growing spiritually at nine years old.

That is not God's plan. God's plan is to change the world with individuals who are growing spiritually to become "blameless" and more like Jesus. God's plan is to change the world with a church that is becoming "blameless" and more like Jesus.

[1] <http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/>

[2] <http://www.ssa.gov/cgi-bin/namesbystate.cgi>

[3] <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/05/26/naming.names.importance/index.html?hpt=C2>
