

When God Gives You a New Name

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In the Bible, names matter. They carry a weight and meaning that we as moderns do not appreciate. There were also times when God changed people's names. So, what's in a name anyway and what does it mean for us as followers of Jesus?

What's in a Name?

In Biblical times, names were never given merely by chance. Names were linked to a person's character or often to a specific circumstance at their birth. This is true, for example, in the story of Esau and Jacob: *'The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out with his hand holding Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.'* (Genesis 25:25-26). The root of Jacob's name literally means 'heel' and 'grasping the heel', which implies trying to take over someone else's authority or position.

Ancients also held that names gave insight into a person's identity and were believed to be intertwined with a person's destiny. In a negative sense, Jacob lived up to his name! He grasped for Esau's birthright and took the blessing away from him.

The father carried authority to redefine his identity and his future from a place of tragedy to purpose.

It was also understood that the act of naming people or things was a sign of exercising authority. In the ancient world, when a king conquered another country, the ruler he put on the throne or captured subjects were given a new name (for example Daniel 1:6-7). The bitter-sweet story of the boy born to Rachel, Jacob's wife, illustrates this. Genesis 35:18 says, *'And as her soul was departing (for she was dying), she called his name Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin.'* The little boy is named after a heart-wrenching birth (Ben-oni meant 'son of my suffering'). Imagine carrying that name for life – what a burden to bear! Mercifully, Jacob renames him 'Son of the right hand'. The father carried authority to redefine his identity and his future from a place of tragedy to purpose.

Why God Changes Names

Now if a name was linked to a person's character or destiny, we can understand that when they encountered the living God, He at times changed their names. In other words, it symbolises God redefining their identity and destiny, and of His authority over their lives.

When we are born again, we are also renamed.

Let's revisit our friend Jacob again. Genesis 32:22-28 describes the strange account of Jacob wrestling with the Lord at the river Jabbok. In the process of wrestling, Jacob has his hip dislocated and his name changed to Israel. Israel can mean 'the one who struggles with God' or possibly 'God prevails'. The point is that Jacob had deceived and struggled and fought to get his own way in life, but God had been working patiently and relentlessly. The Lord brought him to the end of himself and now prevailed over him. His new name reflected a change of heart and a transformation of character. No longer would he be defined by his past or his temperament or his family name. He would now be defined by God's work and word over him: Israel.

A New Name in Christ

The life of Jacob is a prophetic picture of what happens when we come to Christ. When we are born again, we are also renamed. Our identity changes. In Christ we are no longer defined by our old lives, or by what our family, friends or even our own thoughts say. We are '*a new creation*' (2 Corinthians 5:16-17) and the New Covenant promise prophesied by Isaiah is now true for us, '*... you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.*' (Isaiah 62:2b). As a Christian, I must believe what God says about me - I have a new nature, a new family and a new identity as someone loved by God.

It..symbolises a radical change of life and demonstrates that God has authority over us.

Jesus also makes future promises that will apply when He returns. For those who overcome, like the believers in Pergamum and Philadelphia, He will give us a new name (Revelation 2:17) and give us God's name - the name of the city of God, and Christ's new name! (Revelation 3:12, Revelation 22:4). There is a mystery to this we don't yet understand, but it does point to the now/not yet tension of how the kingdom of God works. Jesus' rule has already broken into our lives, but when He returns it will all be made complete. Perhaps, like Jacob, God will give you an actual brand-new name when He returns - a name that will reflect the work He has done in you.

What God Says About You

You might, like me, struggle to believe what God says about you. Jesus is my Lord and Saviour, but sometimes I feel the whisper of the old life saying 'unworthy' or 'rejected'. Often, I have to remind myself of the gospel truths or else I can slip back into listening to the carnal voices and begin working in my own wisdom and strength, like old Jacob. God has given us a new name: '*loved*', '*accepted*' and '*righteous*'. The story of Jacob renaming his son is a beautiful picture of God, in Christ, at work. We are born into spiritual pain and sin, but now the Father declares us 'son of the right hand'!

Why, then, does God choose new names for people? It is because it symbolises a radical change of

life and demonstrates that God has authority over us. In Christ, God calls us each by a new name and one day it'll be made clear for us all. An actual new name perhaps?