

## WHAT'S IN A NAME? (part 1)

Shakespeare wrote in Romeo & Juliet that:

“a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

What Shakespeare was saying was, that you can change the name, or label given something, but it does not change that which it is.

- We call the long green vegetable Zucchini – the French call them Courgettes.

- Or the round purple vegetable Eggplant – they call them Aubergines

But ultimately, they are vegetables (or more specifically a fruit) with the same cooking qualities, same vitamins and minerals, and the same taste regardless of the language. Likewise the rose has the same perfume, same flowers, same thorns, whether called rose or stinkweed! It is as it is!

So it is with God. Though given many names in the bible, He is still God. He is the same yesterday, today and forever, and despite the many names that people gave Him, He is the same, unchangeable, reliable God. However, unlike many of the names *we* give different things, or indeed the names *we* ourselves are often given at birth, names in biblical times related to something. It might be an event, emotion, or most often the character of the person. The bible is full of place names, given after an event. People too were given names that related to something that happened in child-birth, or the state of the nation, or as a prophesy over the child's life. These names were changeable, as in the case of Jacob (Israel), Simon (Peter), and Saul (Paul). A change of character brought a change of name. In these examples, it was God who changed the names of these heroes of the bible and when all is said and done, it is what God calls us that is most important. He calls us as we truly are!

Likewise, the personality/ characteristics of God and Jesus are revealed through the names given to Him by the people in the bible. God is called Creator, Almighty, Lord, Healer, Provider, Redeemer, Holy, Shepherd, Banner, Lover (of my soul), My Salvation, Righteousness, Rock, Shield, as well as a God of wrath, vengeance, and jealous! Some of these names will form part of the studies in the coming weeks.

But in our first study, I want to focus on YOUR names. In our society we (fairly) randomly choose a name for our children, because we like the way it sounds. It is a simple label, like 'the rose'. It rarely describes us as we are. In fact, the meaning of the name, (or the thoughts it conjures in others when our name is mentioned), is developed over time. What I mean by this is that when a person's

name is used, an image or *meaning* is conjured up in the minds of the person hearing the name according to their experience of the person. For example, people who knew me before I was a Christian, upon hearing my name, might immediately think of a 'competitive, sarcastic, rude, idiot'. That's what Gary came to mean to them. Others might have described me as a 'funny, loyal, friend'. Our 'name' becomes a matter of perspective.

Fortunately for us, no matter what our name has come to mean to those around us, we can change it (with God's help). Other's perception, though often slow to change, can be altered by a renewing of our own thoughts and ultimately, actions. In my example above, the first group of people (hopefully), might now describe me as a 'compassionate, helpful, encourager'. (At least that is how I would like them to see me now).

The other name we are given, relates to our lineage. It is our surname, usually describing our father's line. It is a label that assists those around us to identify us with our family group. For most women in our society, they change this name upon getting married. They are now identified with the family group they are marrying into. It is an open declaration to the world of a change in her most important earthly relationship, ie from her father to her husband. It is this new family group in which she will now raise her own children, passing on this name to them.

This name can be a huge advantage, or a terrible burden, depending on what earlier generations have done with that name. For a contemporary example, think about Paris Hilton. The Hilton name has been an advantage to her. Previous generations have worked hard, invested well and established their name to mean 5 star hotels, the pinnacle of poise, trust and quality accommodation. Paris has clearly benefited from this, with easy money and doors open to her far beyond her talent. Unfortunately, she has not contributed to this name positively, and I think the name might be a burden on the next generation of Hiltons.

Similarly, and especially in a small town like Loxton, a surname can have a big impact on how people see us. Those around us can look at us through their preconceived ideas about our family, for better or worse. Previous generations or older siblings have a big impact on how you will be received. In my own experience, having had 2 older brothers who were high achievers put pressure on me from some teachers as I reached high school. I know that certain names in our town are looked on more favourably than others. At the other end, certain family groups are labelled 'no-hopers' without a fair and rational look at the individuals. Like it or not, our actions not only affect our name, but can affect those we are related to, even

to the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generations. This can be a blessing or a curse, depending on how we have used our name.

The last name I want to look at this week is given to us according to our relationship to the person. These labels are often the most important, next to the name given us by God. They are Father, Mother, Wife, Husband, Girlfriend, Boyfriend, Son, Daughter, Brother, Sister, Friend, Team-mate, Colleague, Pastor... They identify our basic relationship to each other. Looking at these names, they can conjure the deepest of emotions in us. Depending on our experience, the thoughts that these people in our circle evoke can range from an overwhelming sense of love or admiration, to deep seated anger and disappointment. Yet we will all wear at least some of these labels, and I'm sure cause similar feelings in those that give us these names.

Indeed it is obvious to me, that the name given to me at birth bares little or no significance to who I am as a person. It may have come to mean something to those I interact with, but it does not mean anything in itself. Of far more importance are the names I have come to be given, especially by those I love and by my God.

### **Study 1 – questions**

1. What does your name(s) mean? Do you think it has any relevance to who you are? What do you think your name makes people think when they hear it?

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2. Read **Genesis 25:24-26 & 32:22-28**. What does Jacob's name mean? From what you know about his story, how did this name describe Jacob's early life? What did his name change to and what does this name mean? What relevance does this name's meaning have to the nation that would take this name?

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3. Read **John 1:42**. What does Peter mean? What significance do you think this change of name has for Simon, in Jesus' plan?

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4. God changed Saul to Paul. Paul means Humble. What is the significance of this name change?

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5. What names do you think those people around you use for you? Think about nick-names, or words used in school reports or references, or names you have been called. Make a quick list of the good & bad ones. Are any unfair?

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6. Think about your surname. What dis/advantages are there to that name? How do you think people see you through that name? What sort of legacy are you leaving for your (future) children or siblings by your actions?

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7. Think about the list at the end of the study (ie wife, son, father). What emotions do the labels in the list evoke in you? What emotions do you think those that call you by those names have when they think of you?

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8. Choose another name in the bible. How did the name come about? What was the significance of the name to the circumstances/character of the one named?

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9. Read Hebrews **12:5-7 & 1John 3:1**. What does God call us? What does this reveal about God's nature and how He wants us to view Him?

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10. What has God revealed to you through this study?