

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. Think of Bethel (**Genesis 28:19**). People too were given names that related to something that happened in child-birth, (**see Jabez in 1Chronicles 4:9; or Moses Exodus 2:10**), or as a prophesy over the child's life (**as in Jesus, Matt 1:21;**).

Names were also changeable, as in the case of Jacob (Israel) **Gen 32:28**, Simon (Peter) **John 1:42**, and Saul (Paul) **Acts 13:9**. In these instances, a change of character brought a change of name. And at least in the first two instances, 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 declares who 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 let's start with YOUR names. In our society we (fairly) randomly choose a name for our children, because we like the way it sounds, or in honour of one of our forebears. 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 my name 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.

Those around us can look at us through their preconceived ideas about our family name, 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 (especially artistically) put pressure on me from some teachers as I reached high school. We cannot escape the legacy of those in our family that come before us – well, not if you are born and bred in a small town like Loxton; for better or worse.

But we also bear another name; the one given to us according to our relationship to the person. These labels are often the most important to us, 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, rejection and disappointment. Yet we will all wear at least some of these labels at some time, 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.

Solomon wrote:

“a good name is better than fine perfume.” **(Eccl. 7:1)**

Ever had anyone walk past you with a good perfume/aftershave on? What about the smell of food on a BBQ? It makes you breathe deeply and want to follow your nose. You will immediately think favourably of the person, or be attracted to the smell. Compare this to being in close quarters with someone with bad body odour, or breath. Usually we are repulsed, or at the very least want to get to a safe distance from the person.

So it is with those with a good name, or a bad name. If my name has come to be known as a cheating, lying thief, who is only friendly with those that he can use, the name will stink in the nostrils of everyone, and they will keep their distance. But if my name is trustworthy, honest, reliable, generous and helpful, then people will want to be around me. Such is the attraction of a good name. And like perfume in biblical times, it is something precious, to be cared for!

This brings me to the next part of our study. The name or label we all adopt once we accept Jesus as Lord, '*Christian*'. In life, we are all given labels that identify what we do. It might be student, football player, (fruit) doctor, chef, worship leader, cleaner, or printer. These names tell more about what activities we undertake than who we are. They may allude to our level of schooling or gifts given to us by God, but they are general terms, more interested in how we spend our time, as opposed to revealing our deepest selves.

'Christian' on the other hand should not be treated in the same way. This is far more than a general title describing what we do. It is a declaration of who we are, whose we are and what we hope to become. The name was first used at Antioch **(Acts 11:26)**, and comes from a common Latin origin. Often, the troops who represented or fought for a certain leader were called by that leader's name, with the addition of *iani* at the end. Eg. Herod's troops were called *Herodiani*. Therefore, Christian (from Christiani) suggests that we are not mere followers, but are bound to Christ and His cause, as a soldier might be to his leader, and we are in a battle in Christ's name. Bound to Jesus Christ, our leader we are ambassadors.

In fact Paul takes this a step further when he writes that we are "...Christ's ambassadors, as if God were making His appeal through us." **(2Cor 5:20)** He also calls himself an ambassador in chains (for Christ **see Eph 6:20**). In first century politics, an ambassador was far more than just a spokesperson or mere representative. An ambassador spoke with the authority of the one in whose name he came. He was to be treated in the same manner as if one was speaking to the king or dignitary himself and his decrees were to be taken as if coming from the lips of whom he served. However, the ambassador had no authority to negotiate or make proclamations on his own. He was to deliver the message of his master and fulfil all that was asked of him. No more, no less.

Furthermore, God views us as his sons & daughters and wants us to see Him as our Father. This is also relevant from the perspective of us as ambassadors. You see, when a message was of utmost importance, the king would usually send his highest official and this most often was his own flesh and blood, his sons and daughters! What more important message can there be than to tell of God's only son, coming to die in our place? The message of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life! Therefore God adopts us into His family and sets us the task as His sons and daughters AND ambassadors into the world, in his name.

Jesus came as God's only son and was a perfect ambassador. He only did what He saw his Father doing, and said what he heard His Father saying **(see John 5:19-30)**. So too, our own role as Christians (or ambassadors) compels us to only say what Jesus says and do what Jesus does. It is the basis of the "WWJD (what would Jesus do)" slogan.

As Christ's ambassadors we are to deliver the message and fulfil the task set for us – no more, no less. Too often however, the 'Christiani' wear the name like a badge of honour, without the realisation that it is not a name badge, it is a declaration of whom it is that we represent, and hope one day to be like! Rather than coming in His good name, declaring His Good News, we instead give Christ a

bad name and confuse the message we are called to deliver by our words and actions.

When we declare our allegiance to Christ (call ourselves Christians), especially to the unsaved, we are saying that we are representatives of Jesus on earth, and as such speak and act for Him, in His name. We are most people's first contact with Christ. Most are at least curious to hear what it is He has to say through us. Yet sometimes we are less than 'Christlike' in our words and deed. One example that always makes me cringe, are those that place Christian stickers prominently on their cars. How often I have seen and heard of these same people cutting off drivers, yelling abuse at other motorists, not obeying road rules or making obscene gestures at other road users.

Are we ambassadors for Jesus, or pawns in someone else's army? Of course, none of us are the perfect ambassadors for God as Jesus was, but we should be aware of the battle we enter into when we put on the mantle of Christian. And we should realise that 'Christian' is not a badge we display lightly. We come in the name of the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords! We represent this high and exalted one's name.

This is the name "...by which we must be saved." (**Acts 4:12**) Upon which, "Everyone who calls...will be saved." (**Rom. 10:13**) Which "...is above every name." And at which "...every knee should bow." (**Phil. 2:9 & 10**) As for those of us who endure 'to the end', God has a new name prepared for us. In the book of Revelation, God will give to us a stone with a new name written on it, which will be known only to Him and us. (**See Rev 2:17**) This name He will never "blot out...from the book of life." (**Rev 3:5**)

Names are important! Not so much the name given at birth, but the names people come to associate with us. It is these thoughts about us that are then reflected upon the name of Jesus when we announce to the world we call ourselves Christian. No wonder a good name for God's people is, as Solomon wrote elsewhere, "... more desirable than great riches." (**Prov. 22:1**) But of the utmost importance is what God calls *you*. The name He calls you by now, and the name He will give us on a stone. We can only hope it reads, "good and faithful servant!"

Next time we will focus on doing things "In Jesus Name".

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?

- 2.
3. 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? In Hindsight, what relevance does this name's meaning have to the nation that would take this name?

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

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

5. What names do you think those people around you use for you? Think about nicknames, 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? Do they even matter now?

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

7. 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?

8. Read **Acts 2:42-47** & **11:25-26**. What characteristics do you think people at this time thought about when they heard the word Christians?

9. Read **1Chronicles 4:9** & **10**. What characteristic did Jabez have that assisted him despite his name? What does this say about our ability to change our name?

10. Read **Isaiah 56:3-7**. About whom do you think this Old Testament prophet is speaking? What name could be better than sons & daughters?

11. Read **Acts 1:8**. A witness is someone who tells the truth, of what they have seen and heard. How does this relate to Jesus' words in **John 5:19-30**? Putting the two Scriptures together, what responsibility does this now place on us as witnesses?

12. Read **Revelation 2:17**. What name(s) do you hope will be written on your stone?

*9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every
name,*

*10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ
is Lord,*

to the glory of God the Father.

(Phillipians 2:9-11)