

The God Who Changes Names

By Evangelist Dea Warford

"Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee." (Gen. 17:5) was the first time God changed a person's name, but certainly wasn't the last. Why would God change Abram's name? What difference does a name make, anyway? Is there any true significance in what a person is called? Can we learn anything about the ways of God from people's names in the Bible? You bet! And, that is the subject of this "sermon of the Month". Get your coffee, sit down, and get ready to shout!

Abram's name already meant "exalted father". It was as though his earthly father knew intuitively his son had high destiny. But, his expectations apparently fell far short of God's expectations. Ephesians 3:20 says God "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us". God is always trying to challenge us to go further and to reach higher. Changing our name is one way he does that

Peter was impulsive and even cowardly at times (fleeing naked at Jesus' arrest and following court proceedings from "afar" for example). Jesus, knowing Peter's weakness, changed his original name (Simon) to Cephas (which is Aramaic, but the Greek word was Peter) which means "Stone" (John 1:42). Jesus was prophesying that Peter would one day be a foundational stone of His church. After His baptism in the Holy Spirit, he became just that (in Acts 2-5 and Acts 10-12)!

God chose John the Baptist's name before he was born: "thou shalt call his name John" (Luke 1:13). Then, said of him, "there was a man sent from God whose name was John" (John 1:6). Think of it! God felt it was not only important what he had called him to do (Luke 1:15-17), but even what people called him. We would be hard pressed to suggest it isn't important what people are called by studying such scriptures!

I feel sorry for some young people's names. It seems like many parents are making up names just to try to be original and different, some of them almost ridiculous! What's wrong with tried and true names like Bob or Mary? Children have to live with a name all their life.

A couple once tried to name their child "Satan", but a judge wouldn't allow it. Thank God, he had enough sense to know a child's name can affect his or her sense of self-worth. Believe me, I know! My name, Dea is extremely unusual for a man. I have spent a lifetime spelling it for people, helping them pronounce it right, or explaining its derivation (I was named after a friend of the family). Because of my "unique" and even "nutty" personality, I guess my unusual name has filled the bill. It was prophesied over me when I was a young man that I would have a "strange" ministry: I guess a man with a strange name and a strange personality helped for a strange ministry.

Having a tenor's voice and a name usually given to women has also resulted in a lifetime of people calling me Mrs. over the phone. And, having a personality that irks a lot of people and from time to time overhearing conversations where "Dea" was referred to in the negative, must have had an affect on my sense of self worth (not that I didn't deserve a lot of negative response to my actions!). There were times in my life, I didn't like my name. And, for many years, I didn't like what I had become either. Could there possibly have been any psychological connection? I once met a man named "Alvin Looney" (Alvin is the name of a previously well known daffy cartoon character (squirrel) and for many years the "Looney" Tunes were popular T-V cartoons.) And, not surprisingly, Alvin Looney had a kind of daffy personality. Did the man make the name, or the name make the man?

When Jabez was born, it was apparently a very difficult delivery for his mother, because she named him a name which meant "sorrow" or "pain". She certainly didn't have his best interests in mind when she gave him a name he had to "live down" the rest of his life. Doubtless kids made fun of it.

In I Chronicles 4:10, Jabez prayed he wouldn't bring pain to himself (or "others": translations vary in this interpretation). Surely such a prayer reveals how his name had given him a personal complex that he apparently struggled with throughout his lifetime. On the other hand, as a result it had apparently given him genuine empathy for others and a great motivation to not have to experience the pain he had caused his mother, or not to cause anybody else on earth any further pain. C.S. Lewis said, "pain is God's hearing aid".

Proverbs 21:30 explains, "The blueness of a wound cleanseth away evil: so do stripes the inward parts of the belly". Kathy and I went through the deepest trial of our 33 years of marriage when she fell and had to have surgery, lost her wonderful job, and went through long-term pain and suffering. It was a horrible time in our lives. But, we listened to what God was saying. Kathy changed. And, I changed! I became a much better husband. And, we both learned much about prayer. In fact, her injury proved to be instrumental in so transforming my prayer life, and making prayer such a priority in my life, that all over America I am now holding "prayer conferences" to train God's people in prayer. I receive many reports of other transformed prayer lives because of these conferences and prayer revivals.

This paradigm shift in my ministry might never have happened without "pain" coming to my family. I was previously never known as a teacher on prayer. Presently "prayer teacher" has become a lasting part of my personal identity. When many people think of "Dea Warford" now, they think of me from the standpoint of how I helped them in their personal prayer life. This "new name" and identity resulted only because of a painful experience. You too have probably had much pain come to you and your family.

Maybe you have a family name you are ashamed of because of a black sheep relative or some perceived stereotype you have had to live with. Or, perhaps, you had a very painful childhood, or maybe a painful divorce and you wonder which last name to call yourself. Or, possibly you are even now struggling with a painful disease (that, coincidentally, has a horrible sounding name to it, like "Cancer"). Speaking of names, names of diseases are sure important, aren't they! And, aren't we glad, that Jesus has been given "a name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). Hallelujah! Jesus' name is greater than cancer, or the name of any other named disease!

There is probably not one person reading this newsletter who isn't personally experiencing some kind of physical or emotional pain. Pain will make you either bitter or better. The difference is the "I". How will you choose to respond to the negative influences in your life; to the identity you have because of your family name; some family curse; and all that is involved in your personal identity as a fallen human being?

A name can become synonymous with a easily identifiable traits: Jezebel, Manson, Hitler, Elvis, Rockefeller, etc. Some people choose to change their name as they get older. I knew a teenager in high school whose last name was "Klinkenbeard". When I met him many years later, he had changed his name to something less laughable. Some Jews changed their names to hide their nationality during past times of persecution. Criminals often change their names to hide their past crimes. Hollywood stars frequently change their common names to something more "marketable".

One interesting name change is seen in the book of Acts. Saul was a great persecutor of the church. He was perhaps named after the great backslider, King Saul. Living up to his "name's

sake", he became a great persecutor of those following after righteousness. But, later he was called Paul (Acts 13:9), a name which is now identified as the name of arguably the greatest Christian of all time. Many of you reading this letter know someone named Paul, even 2000 years later. (My dad's name was Paul). Women marry a man and take his last name, symbolizing her oneness with him (Gen. 2:24), and her willingness to cook for, entertain, and put up with her husband's relatives for the rest of her life! (Ha, ha!). Oh, what power there is in a name!

During the reign of Alexander the great, a soldier was brought before him because of insubordination. Alexander asked him, "son, what is your name?" He looked up sheepishly and replied, "Alexander, sir". Alexander was taken aback for a moment, then sternly warned him. "Son, change your name, or change your ways". When we come to Christ, we change our ways and our name. We receive a new identity. II Cor 5:17 says, "if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away. Behold, all things are new." This is because of Jesus, of course. Jesus is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Joshua" and it means "savior".

No one is saved without calling on that precious name (Romans 10:13). Jesus' name was prophetic of what his life would accomplish: "thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). But Jesus also received a name by inheritance: "He hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son" (Heb. 1:4, 5). Jesus inherited the name "Son of God". To be called "Son" can be a glorious privilege or it can be a terrible curse. The "Kennedy" curse is proverbial. Iniquities passed down by the fathers to the 4th generation is scripturally clear (Exodus 20:5). I was once ashamed to be called "Warford".

I was in the fifth grade, and my father had loaned his truck to a friend, who used it to rob a supermarket and was killed by police fleeing from the crime scene. My dad was arrested as a possible accomplice after finding his truck parked nearby. (His case was dismissed for lack of evidence). But, though in only the fifth grade, one day when I went with my sister to get groceries at that same supermarket that had been robbed (it was the only one in the area), the owner's wife apparently recognized me as the son of Paul Warford, for I had been with him visiting the store before in the past. Using guile, (unsuccessfully), she smiled at me and said "what is your name son?" I quickly said, "Dea Johnson".

My proud older sister refused to compromise our family name and disgustingly told her, "It is not. It's Warford!" Just an anecdotal example of how some people suffer shame because of their name or because of being someone's son. But on the other side of the coin, imagine being a "son" to a George Bush, or a Bill Gates? Or, what about Sam Walton's 4 children? They became billionaires at their father's death. I have often wondered where I would be if some rich person had been my father instead of a farm laborer? I have many iniquities from my father and mother's bloodline that I have had to break through the years (Exodus 20:5). But, on the other hand, I have obtained a wonderful inheritance. Last night, the pastor's wife at the church in De Soto told everyone how she "appreciated what an interesting speaker I was". I know I owe much of my humor and story telling ability to my father. He had a terrific personality and was a real story-teller.

Furthermore, if a rich man had been my father, I might have inherited his penchant for money and have been some workaholic businessman motivated by the "love of money" which is the "root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:10). Instead, I obtained an inheritance as the son of a man who was called to preach the gospel. Though he was backslidden and wrestled with alcoholism much of his life, my father also had the call which he never escaped, and before retiring at about 75, had finally pastored nearly 15 years.

Look at history! Preachers usually run in families. My dad was a preacher. I'm a preacher. My

daughter is in Bible College. My son feels he will one day be in ministry. This is an inheritance. To be a "Son" of a preacher, instead of a rich man, can be a great blessing indeed. On the other hand, if you are the child of a rich man and have obtained an inheritance, that can become a great blessing too, if you use your resources for the kingdom of God by giving generously of your God-given resources! (see 11 Tim. 6:17-19). And, while you're at it, how about sending over some of that big moola to your favorite evangelist (and I don't mean Benny Hinn! Ha, ha!).

My dad lived in excellent health most of his life, and would have lived to be far older than 86, I believe, had it not been for his earlier drinking. My mother is 87, and sometimes travels with me. She is in excellent health. I have an inheritance of good genes. What a blessing! And, it had to be that way. To preach four or five times a week, traveling all over America, at the age of 55, would be virtually impossible, if I had anything but outstanding health.

My name "Warford" meant energy, strength, and good health to me. I am grateful for that inheritance. But, my inheritance also meant I inherited my family's weaknesses too. I have had to struggle many years to overcome those iniquities deeply embedded for four generations. Yet, having to learn to overcome these weaknesses has taught me to lean on God's strengths (II Cor. 12:7-10) and has given me a ministry which helps people struggling with some of the things I have struggled with through the years: insecurities, fear, depression, sin. I had to experience great deliverance and empowerment to live victoriously in Christ and to have something to impart to other hurting people. (You can't give something you don't have to another!) "Such as I have given I unto thee" (Acts 3:6) is something we do to others daily, whether intentional or not! Also, I had to experience great trials to really learn how to pray. But, in turn, I then had a ministry releasing His Church also to a deeper prayer life.

Maybe you have inherited bad health, or poverty, or great mental or emotional weaknesses. You can complain, and fret, and ask God "why didn't you give me better parents, or have me born on the right side of the tracks, etc?" Or, you can simply believe that God put you right where He wanted you to be: in your family-tree, in your city, and in your time period. Now, it is your personal privilege to "inherit" your right as a "new creation" and through Christ to learn to be an overcomer over all your Adamic inherited weaknesses, represented by your last (or even your first) name, or any other nick names, titles, or by-words you may have been called by in the past.

Acts 17:26, 27 evidences this idea: God "hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord ... and find him". Yes, you are in the family where God wants you to be. You have the genes he expected you to have. And, you were born geographically right where he wanted you to be born. Now, He challenges you to "seek the Lord" and to "find him". You have a destiny. That destiny is, like David, to "serve" your "own generation by the will of God." (Acts 13:36).

You have a ministry...a service to mankind and to the Lord...and a work to do; and by doing it, you bring Him glory: "we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:11, 12). Like Jesus, you have an inheritance as a son of God. In fact, you are a joint heir with Christ (Rom 8:17, 18). No matter what negatives or weaknesses you inherited from your earthly name, you have a much higher destiny, predestinated to "be conformed to the image of his son" (Rom. 8:29).

Jesus overcame all the sins & weaknesses resulting from Adam's fall. We have a right to share that new "birthright". You might feel unloved and such an underdog because your weaknesses, sins, and problems seem so much greater than others have. But, when by the power of Christ, you

are enabled to at last overcome, think what glory you will bring to Christ! Think what power your testimony, counsel, and prayers will bring to others when you at last experience your inheritance as an overcomer and your "name" becomes reputed as representing a person of great value.

Jacob's name meant supplanter (one who takes by scheming or force something that isn't his). He was named Jacob because at his birth, he was the second of twins and was observed literally hanging on to his brother Esau's heel. He earned that name too, as he tricked Esau out of his birthright (Gen. 25:29-34) and his blessing (Gen. 27). Years later, an angel appeared to Jacob (many believe this was a "Christophany", a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ himself).

Jacob wrestled with the Lord all night long. When the Lord asked him to let him go, He replied, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me" (Gen. 32:26). As reward for his faith and diligence, the Lord changed his name to "Israel" which means "prince of God", saying "for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." (v. 28). Here is perhaps the finest example in scripture of a man who overcame his inheritance at birth as a "supplanter" and fulfilled the Acts 17:27 exhortation to "seek after" God until we "find him", and having "found him", received a higher inheritance and name change.

Hosea 12:3, 4 gives more detail of how Jacob did this: "by his strength he had power with God: Yea, he had power over the angel, and prevailed: he wept, and made supplication unto him: he found him in Bethel and there he spake with us (or him)". The night Jacob wrestled with God was less like an Olympic wrestling match for a gold medal and more like an all night prayer meeting. "He wept, and made supplication to him". Isn't it time you stopped complaining, and grabbed hold of Jesus' garments and started weeping and praying (seeking till you find Matt. 7:7-11)? You see the promises in the Word. You have received your dreams, visions, prophecies, and personal rhema's and assurances. Stop waiting idly around until Jesus by some act of mercy finally troubles the water where you can get in before others and get healed. Don't watch things happen. Don't wait for things to happen. Make them happen!!!

God has given us all the necessary tools: prayer along with "exceeding great and precious promises that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world" (II Peter 1:3, 4). Yes, we have all inherited corruptible things from our parents. We all have corruptible names, perhaps. But, we all have been given the privilege and challenge to, like Jacob, wrestle in prayer with God (which is really more wrestling with the devil and his lies and past work in our lives, than with some hesitant God who has to have his arm twisted to get him to hear us: Eph. 6:12).

Let Epaphras' example of "always laboring fervently in prayer" in Col. 4:12 inspire you. Or follow the example of Jesus, "being in agony" and praying more "earnestly" as he wrestled in prayer in the garden before his crucifixion (Luke 22:44). Or be like Daniel who fasted and prayed against invisible powers in the heavenlies hindering the answer to his prayers (Dan. 10:1-12). Through prayer, you can "overcome" your past limitations. And, to such an overcomer, there are glorious promises in Revelation 2 and 3. You and every man born of Adam through 6 millennia have had personal difficulties to have to learn to overcome. For the Christians at Pergamos, overcoming meant overcoming the severe problems of living in a town where "Satan's seat (throne)" was (2:13). Talk about spiritual warfare! You think you came from a bad town or family!!! The very center of the works of Hell were established over that city!

Have any of us ever had to wrestle with the devil harder than they surely had to? Yet, to those who nevertheless fought on unto victory, there was this Word: "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written,

which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (Rev. 2:17). Overcoming their past and their present hardships resulted in three things: "hidden manna, a white stone, and a new name".

Hidden manna: Isn't eating one of life's greatest pleasures? What kind of meal is the Lord personally going to serve up to those who faithfully learn to deal with their own problems? Exciting thought, isn't it? A white stone: We don't know for sure what this represents, but any personal "Valentine gift" from Jesus has to be fabulous! A new name: (that only Jesus knows).

I have personal, intimate names that I only use for my wife. They represent 33 years of intimacy and devotion to one woman. Nobody else shares these names. A pastor's wife once told me a story. She only had one child, a daughter. Her daughter heard others call her mother by her first name, and said that she wanted to call her by her first name too. Her mother wisely explained, "Honey, anybody can call me by my first name, but you are the only person in the world who can call me "Mother". Personal intimacy with a best friend, a close family member, or a wife is one of life's deepest and most profoundly fulfilling experiences. To throughout eternity pull your white stone out of your pocket and be reminded once again of your "pet" name that you share intimately with only your Lord and savior, must truly be something well worth accepting our life obstacles and willingly learning to overcome them.

David Yongi Cho, pastor of the World's largest church in Seoul, Korea tells the story of a man who came to him once and told him the Lord had revealed to him that the woman he had married was the wrong choice for him, explaining the Lord had showed him that she was the wrong "rib" taken from his body, and he had met the woman who was the right "rib" for him.

David sternly warned him this was not of God... and was a mistake. But, the man refused to heed his counsel. He divorced his wife, and married the other. David laughably reported it wasn't long until this man realized he had made a very bad mistake and "the 2nd rib was worse than his first rib". "Let every man abide in his calling wherein he was called" is telling us to not strive to be something God didn't intend us to be.

You came from the people, place, and time the Lord intended for you. Accept that, once and for all, and learn to "boom where you are planted." And, now count it a privilege and the challenge of a lifetime to earn a new name and a new inheritance. You may not be a Walton down here, but you can be a Walton in heaven!