

Genesis 32:22-31

**A New Name©
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Have you ever given much thought to how powerful a name can be? Do you know what your name means? Does it have special meaning to you? Does your name give you a feeling of pride or self-confidence? Does the meaning of your name describe who you are? Does it fit you? Here are a few of our names I looked up:

*Frederick – Peaceful ruler, Barbara – Foreign or Stranger
Randy – Son of Rand (from Randolph, meaning wise power or Randolph – wolf with a shield) Sara – Princess; Holden – Deep Valley; Walter – Ruler of the Army, Army General; Roberta – Bright fame, Brilliant; Jennifer – White Wave; Shaun – God is Gracious, God’s Gift; Abby – Joy of the Father; Michele – Who is like God; Dale – Dweller in the Valley;
Sharlyn – no definition – not much meaning either. After dad’s old girlfriend; Anne – Grace, or Gracious (mom called me grace sometimes but it was more sarcastic – like when I was clumsy); Sharlene – free man*

Today we read about Jacob and how he was given a new name. But we have to go back a ways to refresh our memory about Jacob and how this naming came about.

Jacob was the second born of twins. His brother, Esau was the first born and Jacob was right behind him, hanging on to Esau’s heel. Esau was big and wild and wooly. He was a hunter and he was his father’s favorite son.

Jacob, on the other hand, was small in stature, and was his mother’s favorite son.

Because Esau was the first born, even though he was a twin, Esau was the son who would inherit his father’s blessing. A blessing was a big deal in those days.

A blessing, according to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, is “the act or words of one that blesses,” or “a thing conducive to happiness or welfare.” A blessing (Barak, meaning to bless in Hebrew) means to praise, to salute or congratulate. To give a blessing was to bestow good things for the person and their life.

When God called Abram to go to the Promised Land (Genesis 12:1-3), He promised to bless him, make his name great, and through him, to bless all the families of the earth.

The blessings are a bestowing of happiness and welfare, both for Abram and others.

When Rebekah left her family to marry Isaac's (Genesis 24:60), her family blessed her by saying “may you increase to thousands upon thousands; may your offspring possess the gates of their enemies.”

And, when Jacob and Esau’s father, Isaac, was about to die, Jacob tricked him into believing he was his older brother and Isaac gave that coveted blessing to the wrong son, he said to Jacob: “May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness— an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may

the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed” (Genesis 27:28-29).

This blessing from the father was a big deal. And it could only be given to one person and only once. Jacob stole Esau’s blessing and Esau was furious and wanted to kill Jacob. So, Jacob ran away to another country.

Remember, it was on the way when he used a large rock for his pillow, that God gave him the dream of the stairs going to heaven. That was on the way to the new land. While he was in the new country he fell in love with Rachel but his uncle, who he was working for in Haran, who was as much of a trickster as Jacob was, fooled Jacob into marrying Leah, Rachel’s sister. He had worked for his uncle for seven years to be able to marry beautiful Rachel. But instead he got Leah, the older sister.

So then, Jacob worked another seven years and finally married the love of his life. Now, he was married to both sisters. Not the best arrangement if you want your two wives to get along.

Finally, Jacob and his wives, servants, many children and livestock, sneak away from his uncle to go back home to Beersheba. Jacob sent word ahead to Esau that he was coming, hoping for forgiveness and peace.

Then, Jacob gets word that Esau is coming to meet him with 400 soldiers. Yikes! Jacob is really afraid. So, he sends his company ahead of him with gifts, hoping Esau will be understanding and gracious. And Jacob stays behind for the night trying to sleep by the Jabbok river. And while he is lying there, suddenly someone who is strong and powerful begins to wrestle with him. Can’t you imagine the adrenaline racing through Jacobs veins as he wrestles with this man, not knowing who it is.

All night they wrestle and Jacob is very strong. The stranger is too but Jacob is just as strong. Finally, Jacob has the man pinned down and the man, who we now begin to understand is God, finally strikes Jacob on the hip and knocks the hip out of the socket. “Let me go,” he says, “because daylight is coming soon.” Who cares, right? Why would God care that it was getting light?

Could it be to protect Jacob? We know that there are other times in the Old Testament stories where God says to turn your head, do not look at his face. Because to see the face of God would be too much. A person would die if they saw God’s face.

So, Jacob, longing for a blessing from this powerful wrestler, says he won’t let go until he blesses him. My goodness, is one blessing not enough for him? Actually, he’s already had two – the one he stole from his brother and the one God gave him in the dream on his way to Haran. It was there God told him that all that land would be his and his descendants – the land that would become Israel.

And here is something that seems a little odd. Instead of immediately giving him the blessing, the man (the Lord) asks him his name. “What is your name,” he asks.

“Jacob,” he replies.

And now God tells him, “Your name will no longer be Jacob. From now on you will be called Israel, because you have striven with God and with humans and have prevailed.”

And the Scripture says: “Then Jacob asked him, ‘Please tell me your name.’ But he said, ‘Why is it that you ask my name?’ And there he blessed him. So, Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.’ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.”

So, Jacob receives God’s blessing but even more than that, he receives a new name. That, in itself is a blessing. Surely God already knew who Jacob was and what his name was. But see, by asking Jacob his name, it was kind of like asking for a confession. Jacob knew what his name meant and how he had lived according to his name.

The name “Jacob” means *supplanter* (to take the place of another through force or scheming or strategy); it means that he is a trickster, a cheat, a fraud. And Jacob knew deep in his soul that that is what he was. But here is God, giving him a new name. A name that indicates that he is persistent; that he is strong. He is limping when he leaves but he is victorious and his future will go down in history. He is the founder of Israel, the father of 12 sons who will spread out and they and their descendants will bear his new name forever. Talk about a blessing! It doesn’t get much richer than that.

This tells us a great deal about God, doesn’t it? Of course, God could have easily won that wrestling match. He could have knocked Jacob down with the very end of his godly little finger. He could have punished Jacob for his cheating deceiving ways. But, instead, he let him wrestle, let him have strength over even God for a while. Jacob didn’t go away without any mark to show the fight, but he prevailed. Because God let him.

And then, God changed his name. From the old one that had him stuck in that negative story to the new one that sent him into a new and positive future.

Jacob – Israel – limped to his brother Esau and they embraced one another and were at peace.

So, I want to ask you to think quietly about names you have been given. Maybe it’s your actual name – maybe it’s your last name, your family name. Or perhaps there are names you have been called, or that you call yourself, that have stuck with you and found you living into that negative feeling and thinking.

I want to invite you to close your eyes a minute and think about who you are. Are you called honest, beautiful, devoted, dedicated, faithful? Or is it the opposite? What is that name you can scarce speak for fear or shame? Scoundrel, cheat, or phony like Jacob? Unworthy, irresponsible, unfaithful? Discouraged or burnt-out? Divorced, deserted, or widowed? Coward or bully? Unloved or unloving? Disappointed or disappointing? Abused or abuser? Ugly or abnormal? Fat?

Think about the names we use for ourselves or have been called. I hope yours are positive and full of beauty but too many of us have the opposite experience and have wrestled with those names all our lives.

But, I want to remind you of the good news – that we belong to God. That we are called by a new name when we are baptized into Christ. We have his name as we are called Christians – Christ people. We are new creations; we are transformed from the ugly caterpillar, to wrestling in the chrysalis, and then breaking out into the beautiful butterfly. We are new people. Christ people. We bear the name of the Son of God. We have an inheritance – a blessing – that is from God, with God.

So often we forget that we already have a new name, a new identity. We are beloved children of God. We bear the name of the one who paid a costly sacrifice for us so that we would have this redemption – Christ Jesus.

This week, I encourage you to be aware of the names that don't serve you or God. Names that don't really belong to you; that perhaps have been hurting you all your life. They aren't yours. I promise. Your name is Christian. Christ -follower. Brother/Sister to Christ. Child of the covenant; child of God.

Embrace your God-given name, my friends. Rejoice. Perhaps all that wrestling has caused you to limp or have some kind of mark as a consequence of your life experiences. Wear it well. It tells a story of strength, persistence, grace and transformation. God is with you. You are his.

Amazing grace has been offered to you.

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