

What is in a name...?

Do our names... ("Jim"... "Bill"... "Deborah"... "Jane"... "Charles"... "Mortimer")... have any power to shape our destiny...? If anybody listening to me right now has the name "Mortimer"... they are probably standing up and shouting "You bet it does!"

You might remember the old Johnny Cash song:

*My daddy left home when I was three
And he didn't leave much to ma and me
Just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze.
Now, I don't blame him cause he run and hid
But the meanest thing that he ever did
Was before he left, he went and named me "Sue".*

*Well, he must o' thought that is quite a joke
And it got a lot of laughs from a' lots of folk,
It seems I had to fight my whole life through.
Some gal would giggle and I'd get red
And some guy'd laugh and I'd bust his head,
I tell ya, life ain't easy for a boy named "Sue".*

The song continues with it's clever lyrics... to make the point about how our name can shape our future. ... But what about a more normal sounding name...? Does the name "Tom"... when given to a male child... have any special influence... (that is directly related to that name)?

When I looked into this... this past week... I discovered that there is a scientific name prescribed to the way our name affects us... and many studies have been dedicated to studying this phenomenon. It is called: "nominative determinism," which literally means "name-driven outcome." ... Adam Alter (a professor at NYU, New York University) is a leading researcher. According to Alter: "*Researchers have shown that our names take root deep within our mental worlds, drawing us magnetically towards the concepts they embody.*"

So... this makes me wonder... Would the world's fastest runner... (Usain **Bolt**)... be just as fast... if his name was "Usain Plodder"... ? ... Would professional Israeli tennis star (Anna Smashnova)... be just as good of a tennis player if her name was different...? And then there is Layne Beachley... (a seven-time world champion surfer) ... and Derek Kickett (the Australian soccer star.) ... Did their names magnetically draw them toward their athletic successes...?

(Well... perhaps on a more serious note)... in October, 2011... the Associated Press ran a deeply moving story about a name-changing ceremony for girls in Mumbai, India. ... At birth the 285 girls had been named "Nakusa" or "Nakushi", which means "Unwanted" in the primary Indian language of Hindi. ... The name Unwanted is widely given to girls across India... where families often value sons much more than daughters.

But the renaming ceremony was an attempt to give the girls a new identity. The article reported, "*The 285 girls—wearing their best outfits with barrettes, braids and bows in their hair—lined up to receive certificates with their new names along with small flower bouquets.*" Some of the girls chose

new names that mean “prosperous”... “beautiful”... “good”... or even “very tough.” ... One girl who had been named “Nakusa” by her grandfather who was disappointed in her birth said, *“Now in school, my classmates and friends will be calling me by this new name, and that makes me very happy.”*

In a different article titled *“Leading by Naming”*... the author (Mark Labberton) wrote about the power names carry:

Every day our naming of the people around us **gives** life... and **takes it away**. ... And then he goes on to relate his own situation.

*I can still feel the impact of a highly musical friend who one day called **me** musical. No one had ever called me that. I didn't really play an instrument. I was no soloist.*

*Yet what made this comment so remarkable was that I instantly felt known and loved. Why? Because I was being named in the way that always matters most: **from the inside out**.*

*The musicality of my life, fundamental and invisible as it is, has to do with my **soul**, not with instruments. It's about my way of **being** in the world, not about notes being played. The sheer, unexpected grace of being named “musical” stunned me. It's not the most important thing about me, but he “got me” in a way that noticed, validated, and appreciated something deeply true about me even though it is usually missed.*

Being rightly named means being truly known. It changes our lives.

...

Well it does not take a University study... or a scientific-sounding name that is given to the phenomenon (like “nominative determinism”)... for me to believe that it is true. You see... the Bible treats “nominative determinism” as though it is a reality. That is why last week we saw God change

Abram's name to "Abraham"... and today we will see God change Sarai's name to Sarah. Names that properly reflect our character... **matter** to God. Later on... we will see God change Jacob's name to "Israel." ... Over in the New Testament... we see Jesus give Simon the name "Petros" (or Peter)... and Saul's name was changed to "Paul."

But then there are other times in the Bible... when we see God tell the parents what to name their child... (in the first place...before he is born). (Today we will see God name Abraham and Sarah's son for them. It is to be "Isaac." He also told Mary and Joseph that their baby was to be named "Jesus.") Our physical names really matter to God!

The instances where God renames an individual... shows the character that He is developing from the inside – out. ... Either God was in the process of changing their character... or... He was re-focusing them... on the mission He had for their life. Sometimes it was both. ... And this was the case for Sarai.

Genesis 17:15

Several different Bible scholars... who I read from... agree that Sarai means "strife"... "contention"... or "quarrelsome"... Her name comes from a verb meaning "to persist"... "to persevere"... and "to contend." So if this name (before it was changed) depicted the character of Abraham's wife... then Sarai was the type of woman... that once something got under her claw... she refused to let it go. She would persist in an unrelenting... unforgiving manner... at whatever contention crossed her path. She would not have been able to **let go** of her disagreements and disappointments.

Have we seen anything in Scripture that might indicate that this was the case...? ... Well... maybe.

After Sarai had offered her servant (Hagar) to Abram... to conceive a child to be his heir... (and remember she was the one who first suggested it)... we read this... after Hagar conceived...

Genesis 16:5

Now that does seem rather contentious to me. And then we see more contentious behavior from Sarai... in the very next verse...

Genesis 16:6

And then there is a segment of next week's passage that involves Sarah... and in it... she seems a bit contentious. ... Abraham... it seems has already been convinced about God's plan. But Sarah still refused to get onboard with it. She is rebuked for her unbelief... and then... she shows further contention by denying that she did the very thing that brought the rebuke.

Genesis 18:9-15

I think that Sarai very well may have been a contentious person.

Poor Abraham!

Proverbs 27:15 (ESV)

A continual dripping on a rainy day and a quarrelsome wife are alike;

However... God was about to use her... to forever affect the course... of world redemption. She would be the mother of the promised seed... the mother of the race that would bring forth the Messiah. But before God would do that... He gave her a new name... (a name that showed He was

in the process of changing her character.) ... She had to become something other than contentious... and then God would use her.

Now... part of the process of changing her... was that Abraham needed to see her differently. Notice that God was telling Abraham about her name change. (Sarah does not appear to be around. This message is very much for Abraham. ... Verse 15... again... “*And God said to Abraham...*”)

Did Abraham treat Sarai like he should...? Was his relationship with her as strong as it should have been...? Was he to honor her in a different way...? Does this new name indicate that he did not view her the way God wanted him to see her from now on...? Because of her character... and her appropriate name... did Abraham mistreat her... but now needed to honor her...?

We do know that Abram mistreated her on at least two occasions... because Scripture has recorded it. Once was back in chapter 12... when Abram lied about her being his wife... in order to save his own hide! He left her completely unprotected... abandoned her... and allowed her to go into the house of the Pharaoh to be his wife. (That is mistreating her!) God had to intervene.

And then... Abraham would do the same thing again... and this time... it comes out that Abraham always had this as his plan... Abraham imposed it on Sarah... in order to get himself out of trouble. It was perpetually in his heart to do whenever he felt threatened.

Genesis 20:9-13

God was not only developing Sarah. He was also in the process of developing Abraham. And it was to Abraham that God announced the name change for Sarai. She was to be called from here on – Sarah!

"Sarah" means **princess**. Abraham was hereafter to look upon Sarah as a princess... and he was to call and treat her like a princess. Abraham's wife was honored by God - greatly honored. ... Consequently... Abraham was to change his behavior... (and his relationship)... toward his wife. She was a woman worthy of honor from all the nations and kings of the earth. God said that she would be the mother of kings.

Genesis 17:16

OK... Ladies... close your ears for just a moment now. I want to speak only to the husbands and future husbands who are here. And guys... you may want to move out of elbow range of your wife... (just in case she is still listening.) ... Ladies... if you **are** still listening... keep your "AMENs!" and sharp elbows in tact...

Men... there may be a need to change **our** behavior and relationship... with our wives. God may have us consider how we might treat them with a renewed love and respect... to treat her as the princess of the home. ... No! Let me say it a little stronger than that. If you want your prayers to be answered by God... you **need** to honor your wife!

1 Peter 3:7 (ESV)

Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

Alright... Ladies... you can unstop your ears now. Wow! There was a lot packed into these two little verses – (primarily Genesis 17:15.) Women... don't be a contentious person... and Men... honor your wife! But let's move on now.

Genesis 17:17

Was Abraham disbelieving “El Shaddai” (God Almighty)? ... I read more than a dozen commentaries this week about this verse. About half say that Abraham's laughter showed a mocking disbelief... and the other half say that this was a laugh of joy and astonishment. The better case (I believe) that was made... is that Abraham did not show a mocking disbelief... because God voiced no disapproval of his laughter.

In contrast... we see in the very next chapter when Sarah laughed at the same promise... the Lord rebuked her—"Why did Sarah laugh?" (18:13). Her laughter reflected her ongoing struggle with contentiousness... as God was in the process of changing her. She still contended with Abraham and with God about the promise that she would bear a son. ... The absence of any correction for Abraham... implied that he did not lack faith... like Sarah did.

But here is the strongest argument for why Abraham did not laugh with a mocking disbelief. Scripture is always the best commentary of itself... and this is what the Apostle Paul wrote:

Romans 4:18-21 (ESV)

¹⁸ In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." ¹⁹ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body,

which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰ No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, ²¹ fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

So... Abraham was believing... but his faith was probably pushed to the limits of any practical trust. ... Nevertheless Abraham's faith held.

Abraham worshipped... He fell to his face again in astonishment and prayer. Laughing with joy... his heart was flooded with bewilderment. He has just heard from God... the news that he had waited his entire life to hear.

Any believer who has lived with a broken heart over a prolonged period of time... and then suddenly experiences a flooded heart of assurances from the Lord... knows exactly what Abraham was experiencing. Laughter is not uncommon.

But in the midst of all this elation... an unexpected arrow pierced Abraham's heart. And at that moment... his humanness once again took hold. ...

*"Oh No! **Ishmael** is my son... we have been together now for thirteen years... and Ishmael is just now entering adulthood. Is God going to waste all that I have invested in **Ishmael**? Is there to be no future for my boy? After all, it wasn't Ishmael's fault that he was born! I don't want to see him left out..."*

Genesis 17:18

In effect... Abraham was saying to God... *'Why are you making this hard? Ishmael is right here. ... Why not let things be as they are?'* ... God was asking Abraham to have faith for a miracle. ... Abraham was saying, *'It is*

hard to have faith for a miracle, why cannot I have faith in that which I can see and understand.'

Even though Abraham had shown great faith... (a faith beyond anyone's comprehension)... I think Abraham had become somewhat weary of having to bolster an enormous amount of faith once again.

Isn't that a lot like us...? We may have had our own spiritual victories that required a strong faith... and when God brings another challenge to our faith... we respond with "*Really... God...? Again...? Can't we have another alternative... (one where I don't have to muster all this faith one more time*"...?) - That has been me... this past week. But through Abraham... and every single one... of the other Bible characters... I have to acknowledge that this is normal Christianity.

Abraham makes a plea to God that Ishamel (the son born to Hagar) might be accepted as the child of promise. ... But God rejects Abraham's plea... and instead reaffirms the promise that Sarah shall have a son... who shall be the child of promise. ... In fact... God proceeds to name the child, '...and you shall call his name Isaac...'

Genesis 17:19

The flesh dies hard. ... Abraham wanted Ishmael to be included in the covenant. ... But God would not allow it. ... Abraham's desire for Ishmael was not according to God's plan.

(LISTEN!)... Often we want God to bless our "Ishmael plans"... when His "Isaac plans" are so much better. ... Wanting "Ishmael" is the amendment

program of the flesh... which wants to negotiate with God... rather than surrender completely to Him.

Let me ask you: *Do you have any Ishmael plans that you are trying to negotiate with God...? ... "Lord... I am not going to pick up my Bible again until next Sunday... but will You bless me and enrich me... keep the fire burning inside me...?" ... "God how about if I watch this movie and fill my mind with lurid images and concepts that shouldn't be there... and then You give me a satisfying marriage... OK?" ... "God it is just easier if I don't forgive that individual... or try to bless them... but I really need You to bless me right now..." ... "God... I'm just not going to honor my spouse the way I know I should... but oh that we would just get along better!"*

God may be asking you to be involved in a ministry. You know that it is His "Isaac plans" for you. But your "Ishmael plans" are to wait until you have a little more spiritual maturity. ... There may any number of spiritual challenges that require a stronger faith and God wants you to journey into it... but you have "Ishmael plans" that you are opting for instead.

Why not start each day by asking God... *"Do I have any "Ishmael plans" that I am trying to substitute for Your "Isaac plans" ...? ... Ishmael brought dissension into the home... but Isaac brought laughter. ... ("Isaac" means laughter.) If you have an "Ishmael" in your life... yield it up to God. ... God has a perfect plan... and what He plans is the best. ... It may pain you to give up your cherished dreams... but God's way is always the right way.*

Abram became Abraham, "father of a multitude." Sarai became Sarah... "the princess." Together they would birth a royal dynasty of kings. Their

yet-to-be-conceived son was named Isaac (which... again... means "laughter") — a sweet symbol of faith's struggle.

Not only did God make it clear who was to be the heir of the covenant... but He also made it clear who was **not** the heir. ... Ishmael was not the heir. ... But in excluding Ishmael from the covenant... God did give Ishmael some blessings... God proceeds to encourage Abraham's heart concerning Ishmael. *"Although... Ishmael will have no part in the 'great nation'... he is not going to be separated from blessing. ...I have heard you... Abraham!"*

Genesis 17:20-21

Abraham's dreams had been wrapped up in Ishmael. But they were misplaced and out of line with God's will. ... Abraham needed to see — clearly see — the will and purpose of God... and he needed to willingly accept and surrender to God's will. ... So... God reconfirmed His will and purpose. ... He drove His will into Abraham's heart. ... This is what you and I often are in need of... isn't it?

Genesis 17:22-27

The moment that God quit speaking... Abraham began doing his part of the covenant... (namely... circumcising all the males in his camp.)

(LISTEN!)... When the sermon is over... when our Bible reading time is finished... it is time to put into action... what the sermon said... and what the Scriptures exhort. *"Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only"* (James 1:22). Abraham was certainly a doer of the word which he heard from God.

The life of faith is a life... that in essence... is a life of obedience to the known will of God. (Even when it involves such pain.) ... Can you imagine the pain of being circumcised as an adult...? ... But what if God asks you and I to obey Him in a way that we ***know*** will involve pain of some kind...? ... Would you...? Could you...?

Be prepared. It is not out of the question. ... You may not (right now) have a faith as fully developed as we see in Abraham in these verses. ... But God ***does*** want every believer to grow in their faith. And if God has an “Isaac plan” for you that involves any kind of severe pain... He will enable you and perfect your faith... just as we see Him doing in the life of Abraham.

Hebrews 12:1-2 (ESV)

*¹ Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,
² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.*