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YOUR NAME MAY ENCODE GOD'S PURPOSE!

Today's Text: Lk 1: 56-80; 2:21-39

Extracts:

1. **But the angel said to [Zacharias] ... "Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you shall call his name John." ... Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. ... So it was, on the eighth day, that they came to circumcise the child; and they would have called him by the name of his father, Zacharias. His mother answered and said, "No; he shall be called John" [Lk 1: 13, 57-62]**
2. **And when eight days were completed for the circumcision of the Child, His name was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb [Lk 2: 21]**

In 1998, a 41-year-old zoologist entered into Nigerian politics, following the demise of the long and discredited military regime. On December 9, 2005, he was sworn in as the Deputy-Governor of Bayelsa State in the oil-rich Niger Delta region. Soon after, as a result of the impeachment of the then Governor of that state for corruption, he took over as the Governor.¹ The victory of his party in the 2007 Presidential Elections catapulted him to become the Vice-President of Nigeria. Then, on May 5, 2010, the President, Umaru Yar'Adua, died after a prolonged illness. The following day, the Vice-President was sworn in as the President. Who is this lucky man that rose in a few short years from relative obscurity to become the leader of the most populous nation in Africa? His name is Dr. GOODLUCK EBELE Jonathan. Ebele in his native Ijaw language means, "a tiny fish, hardly visible."² In other words, swimming like a tiny hardly visible fish through Nigeria's shark-dominated political waters and with good luck, he has won the ultimate prize! His name encoded God's plan and purpose for his life.

How about you? Have you ever examined the name you bear and how it relates to God's purpose for you? Do you know that God is interested in the name that you answer? In this week's study, we shall examine the cases of John the Baptist and Jesus whose names were given by God before they were conceived. We can learn a few lessons there from to enable us to discover God's purpose for our lives on earth.

¹ Based on "Goodluck Jonathan," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goodluck_Jonathan

² The Ijaw Dictionary Online, <http://www.ijawdictionary.com/menu/index.php?show=E>

1. Background: God names John and Jesus

There must be something important about names. After the creation of the first man, Adam, God brought to him every beast of the field and every bird of the air that He had earlier made to see what Adam would call them, “and whatever Adam called each living creature, that was its name” [Gen. 2: 19-20]. Even after the woman had been taken out of the ribs of Adam, it was he that gave her the name, Eve, which means “taken out of Man” [vv. 21-23]. Presumably, the difference between naming humans and other species began from that time. In other words, while animals and trees, for example, are named according to species, humans are named *individually*. Every one of the over six billion people currently on earth has a unique name! That is why God said to Israel, the descendants of Jacob, “I have called you by your name; you are Mine” [Is. 43: 1].

Although God has given us the authority to name our descendants, we also know many people in Scriptures that He named by Himself, as in the two cases covered in this week’s Bible text, John and Jesus. They both give us a glimpse of how God performs ‘naming ceremonies’ and what we can learn from them. From the two stories, we know the following:

a) *The names were given before conception*

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, the old priest, he said to him (among other things), “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John, and you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth” [Lk 1: 13-14]. Six months later, the same angel came to Mary, a virgin girl betrothed to Joseph, and said to her, “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus” [v. 31].

There are other examples where God gave names of children before their birth, such as Ishmael [Gen. 16: 11] and Isaac [Gen. 17: 19]. There are also examples of names that God gave after the children had been born, such as Jedidah, God’s name for Solomon [2 Sam. 12: 24-25].

b) *The names were given for God’s purposes*

John means, “Yahweh is gracious.” In deed, God was gracious to Zacharias and Elizabeth by giving them a son in their old age. However, the name was more applicable to God’s graciousness to Israel. John’s mission was well spelt out by the angel that brought the news of his conception. He would be great in the sight of God and should neither drink wine nor strong drink because he would be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb. His work for God would be to “turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” [Lk 1: 15-17]. Thus, John’s coming was in

fulfillment of prophecy, that before the coming of the Messiah, God would send a messenger to prepare His way [**Is. 40: 3-5; Mal. 5: 5-6**].

About Jesus, angel Gabriel told Mary, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” [**Lk 1: 32-33**]. When an angel of the Lord appeared later to Joseph in a dream, he told him of Mary’s conception of a Son “and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” [**Matt. 1: 20-21**]. So, Jesus encodes God’s purpose for Him as the Messiah, Saviour and King, whose coming had been prophesied in all of the Old Testament.

c) *The naming was on the eighth day*

John and Jesus were named on the eighth day, the day on which they were circumcised [**Lk 1: 59; 2: 21**]. There is no Biblical record of how females were named. However, we can assume that it could have been on the eighth day but they were not circumcised. Circumcision of male children was derived from God’s covenant with Abraham that every male child who was eight days old should be circumcised [**Gen. 17:10-12**].

The number, 8, has both spiritual and medical significance. Spiritually, it marks a new beginning, a new ‘first.’ For example, Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday, the eight day of the old week and the first day of a new week. Thereafter, He appeared to His disciples every eighth day [**Jn 20: 26**]. The resurrection of Jesus marks the effective date of the New Testament.

Medically, the safest day to perform circumcision is the eighth.³ Vitamin K is responsible for the production (by the liver) of the element known as prothrombin which helps to prevent hemorrhaging in infants. On the eighth day of a child’s life, the amount of prothrombin present is elevated above 100% of normal and it is the only day in the male’s life in which such will be the case. Therefore, if surgery is performed on that day that Vitamin K and prothrombin are at their peak, bleeding is minimized. God knows best!

d) *A prophetic word was given concerning the child’s future*

Clearly, the naming ceremony represents the beginning of the new child’s life in God. Therefore, it is a unique opportunity for the parents of the

³ Bert Thompson, Ph.D., “Biblical Accuracy and Circumcision on the 8th Day,” www.apologeticspress.org/articles/2204 ; originally published in *Reason and Revelation*, July 1993, 13[7]: 55

new baby to hear in the presence of witnesses God's plan or purpose in the life of the newborn.

Soon after John was named and his father who had been made mute since his conception opened his mouth and began to speak, their family and well-wishers asked, "*What kind of child will this be?*" [Lk 1: 66]. We are told, "His father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied." After praising God for His mercies toward him, his family and Israel, Zacharias turned to the new baby and said, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you *will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways*, to give knowledge of salvation to His people by the remission of their sins [and] to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace" [vv. 68-79]. That was the blueprint with which John was raised and "he grew and became strong in spirit" [v. 80].

In the case of Jesus, He was circumcised and named on the eighth day. According to what God had commanded Moses, a woman who had given birth was expected to "continue in the blood of her purification thirty-three days. She [should] not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification [were] fulfilled" [Lev. 12: 4]. So when Mary's "days of her purification according to the Law of Moses were completed, [she and her husband] brought [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord" [Lk 2: 22]. Two prophets were in the temple at the time, Simeon and Anna. Led by the Spirit of God, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and blessed God. Then he prophesied God's purpose for His earthly ministry. Jesus would afford salvation for all peoples, "a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of [His] people Israel" [vv. 25-32]. He turned to Mary and told her, "A sword will pierce through your own soul also, that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." In the same vein, Anna gave thanks to God and pointed to Jesus as the one all should look up to for salvation [vv. 36-38]. Again, it was on such spiritual guidance that Mary and Joseph raised Jesus back home in Nazareth and "the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him" [vv. 39-40].

2. Lessons for today's parents

Some of us who go to churches where the Biblical approach to child naming outlined above is practised will attest to how much easier it helps them to raise their children in the fear of the Lord. Most parents video the whole event so that they can continue to play back the spiritual messages delivered by prophets during the naming ceremony service. However, many of us do not have that privilege, especially where child baptism is unscripturally equated with the naming ceremony. Jesus was named on the eighth day but baptized at the age of 30 years

[Lk 3: 23]. No matter the practice (or lack of it) in your place of worship, the following guidelines may be quite helpful:

- a) *“We already bear names given to us by our parents at birth”*

Such names may be acceptable to God, provided they are not names glorifying idols. The word of God says, “If My people who are called by *My name...*” [2 Chron. 7: 14]. In another place, God warned the children of Israel to fear His Angel that would lead them on the way “for *My name is in Him*” [Ex. 23: 21]. To prove that point, Michael [Micha-El] is the leader of the warring angels [Dan. 10:10-21; Dan. 12:1; Rev. 12:7], Gabriel [Gabri-El] is the head of the messengers [Dan. 9:21; Lk 1: 11-38], Raphael [Rapha-El] is the head of the helpers [Tobit 3:17], and Uriel [Uri-El] is the head of the angels that God uses to minister understanding to believers [2 Esdras 4:1].⁴ God’s name, *El*, is in the names of all those angels who are merely the voice of God [1 cor. 4: 16].

We have examples of man-given names that God accepted and used, such as Moses [Ex. 3: 4], David [2 Sam. 7: 5] and Jeremiah [Jer. 1: 11]. Jesus addressed Paul both as Saul [Acts 9: 4] and by his baptismal name, Paul [Acts 23: 11]. God introduced Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, *Isaac* and *Jacob* [Ex. 3: 6]. If those names honoured idols, God would not so acknowledge them.

In some cases, God changed people’s given names to new ones. For example, Abram became Abraham [father of many nations] [Gen. 17: 5] and his wife, Sarai, became Sarah [princess] [v. 15]. Jacob [the trickster] became Israel [prince of God] Gen. 35: 9-10]. Jesus changed Simon’s name [a reed] to Cephas or Peter [a stone or rock] [Jn 1: 42]. In some cases, God may choose to call you the way He chooses rather than by your real name. For example, He never called Ezekiel by his name but by “Son of man” [Ezek. 2: 1; 4: 1; 13:2; etc].

It appears that God looks more on the inside than outward. For example, Paul the apostle shared the same name, Saul, with the disobedient king Saul. The former pleased God but the latter offended Him. However, know the meaning of your name because it may encode what God wants you to do for Him. For example, Samuel means ‘asked of God’ [1 Sam. 1: 20] and he served God all his life as his mother, Hannah, had requested before he was conceived [v. 11].

Finally, avoid names that may not glorify God. For example, Jacob’s favourite wife, Rachel died soon after she had had her second son. She

⁴ **Tobit** and **Esdras** are among the Apocrypha books included in the Roman Catholic Bible.

had named him “Benoni” [son of my sorrow], but her husband, Israel, quickly changed the name to “Benjamin” [son of my right hand], whose descendant, Saul, became the first king of Israel [1 Sam. 9: 1, 22].

b) *‘I’m expecting a baby!’*

The popular approach is to name the coming baby after his/her parents [the ‘Junior’ syndrome!] [Lk 1: 59], or the patron saint of the day of birth, or by any popular name. In traditional societies, especially in Africa, the coming child may be named to reflect how the child’s parents coped with the social and economic situations they had faced at the time of his/her conception. However, to reflect God’s purpose in the life of the coming baby, it may be advisable to try the following:

- You could pray and ask God to reveal to you (or anybody close to you) the name that He has for your coming baby. Has He not promised that when you ask you shall receive [Matt. 7: 7-8]?
- Or, if you attend a church where they do the naming ceremony on the eighth day, as in the cases of John and Jesus (such as the Celestial Church of Christ⁵), you can wait until then, given that you are legally allowed a much longer time than a week to register the birth of your child. During the service, God’s name for your child will be descended by the Holy Spirit through the prophet (for male babies) or prophetess (for female babies). In addition, God’s purpose for that child and how s(he) should be raised in the fear of the Lord will be revealed to you.

3. Conclusion: Let God call you by your name!

Your name is important to God. Apart from serving as your identity number among the billions of humans on earth, it may encode His purpose for your life. So, find out *right now* the meaning of the name that you answer. Does it glorify God or idols? If not, could it be what is hindering your prayers? What name does God actually call you? If you know what God calls you, you will also know how to serve Him. He wants to be able to say to you, “I have called you by your name, you are Mine” [Is. 43: 1].

Your name does encode God’s plan and purpose for your life!

⁵ http://www.celestialchurch.com/aboutus/reference/ccc_hist.htm