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WHAT NAME DOES GOD CALL YOU?

- a) **“And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padanaram, and blessed him. And God said unto him, thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name, and He called his name Israel” [Gen. 35: 9-10]**
- b) **“The angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife; for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call His name Jesus: for He shall save His people from their sins” [Matt. 1: 20-21]**

*Every human being that comes into the world bears a name. The population of the world today is estimated at six billion. That means that each of those six billion persons has a name! Even where there are namesakes [people bearing the same names], each individual can still be identified. For example, in China where almost a third of the world’s population lives, there must be millions of persons who are called “Chin Lee.” In Trinidad & Tobago [with a population of 1.3 million], the name, “Maharaj,” fills seven pages of the **2001/2002 Telephone Directory**. So, what is the big deal about names apart from being an identity mark?*

When Abigail’s husband, Nabal, sent an insulting reply to David who had asked him for provisions, she ran ahead to placate David who was coming to kill her husband and destroy his wealth. She pleaded with David thus: “Let not my lord, I pray thee, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him” [1 Sam. 25:25]. Speaking about Jacob whose name God changed to Israel, the Lord said, “O Israel, I have called thee by thy name, thou art mine” [Is. 43:1]. Therefore, there is much more to a name than we may think. For God to change some people’s names suggests that some names are not appropriate or pleasing to Him. Some names may be associated with idols, satanic forces or unpleasant things. For example, to underline the state of the relationship of the people of Israel to Him, God asked Hosea to name his son “Loammi” which means “not my people” [Hosea 1:9].

When we go on our knees to pray to God, do we know the extent to which the name we bear may be hindering our prayers? Is it worthwhile to know what names are acceptable to God? Do we know what names He prefers to call us? Let us find out in today’s lesson.

1. How were you named?

Naming a new child is exciting; no matter how it is done. In general, the following practices should be noted:

a) *On the day of birth*

These days, expectant parents can go to the hospital to determine the sex of their babies before they are born. Therefore, they may already have agreed in advance what names to call their children as soon as they are born. Even where they have not done pre-birth scanning, they may get two names ready, a boy's and a girl's names. Once the sex of the child is announced at birth, the name is already waiting!

The name, Adam [Red Earth], was given by God on the day He created him: "Male and female created He them; and blessed them, and called their name Adam, in the day when they were created" [Gen. 5:2]. In like manner, it was Adam who named his wife "Eve" [Woman] soon after she was formed from his rib [Gen. 2: 23]. Rachel died soon after she had had her second son and she named him "Benoni" ["son of my sorrow"], but her husband, Israel, quickly changed the name to "Benjamin" ["the son of the right hand"] [Gen. 35: 16-18].

b) *At a naming ceremony*

In some cultures, a specific date is fixed on which the naming ceremony is performed, sometimes with elaborate rituals. Among the children of Israel, a newborn male child was circumcised on the eighth day [Lev. 12: 2-4], the day on which he was also named [Lk 1: 59; 2: 21].

Eight days after the birth of Jesus, He was circumcised and given the name, JESUS [Saviour], "which was so named of the angel before He was conceived in the womb" [Lk 2: 21]. Then, He was presented to God in the temple where two prophets in spirit, Simeon and Anna, prophesied about His earthly ministry and its impact on His mother, Mary [Lk 2: 22-38]. The naming of John the Baptist also occurred on the eighth day. Interestingly, because his father was unable to speak at the time of his birth [having been struck dumb by Angel Gabriel for doubting his message], his relations named him "Zacharias Jr." However, his mother refused that name and insisted on the name given by God before his birth, "John" [Lk 1:57-60], which means "Yahweh is gracious." Her husband who began to speak as soon as he had written the name on a writing table confirmed this. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zacharias also prophesied about John's ministry: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways" [Lk 1:63-79].

This tradition is followed in some spiritual churches [e.g., the Celestial Church of Christ] and the names given during the naming ceremony [eighth day after the birth of the child] are divinely descended through prophets [for male children] or prophetesses [for female children] who hold the children during the naming ceremony service. Parents are usually very careful to record the prophetic messages descended because what they are told will influence how they are going to raise the children in the fear of the Lord.

c) *At baptism*

In some denominations where children are baptized in infancy [e.g., the Roman Catholic Church], the names given may be chosen by their parents, sometimes influenced by the name of the “patron saint” of the day of baptism. These days, especially in Africa, parents are allowed to use local language names, provided there is no reference to idols. In general, especially in the West, believers give their children what they consider to be appropriate names from the Bible.

Those baptized as adults may already have given names, which they may use as their baptismal names or take on new names. For example, I was named “Imonitie” [“firstborn”] at birth. I was baptized at the age of eleven and took the name, “Christopher” [“carrier of Christ”]. Apart from being encouraged by the priest to use the name of a “saint” [defined as dead Christians who had been so designated by the church], I loved the name on account of a popular local medical doctor [Dr. Christopher Okojie]! A good example from the Bible is Paul. He was born Saul [“asked of God”] [Acts 9: 11], but his name was changed to Paul [“little”] after he became a Christian [Acts 13:9].

2. What is significant about names?

Names have great significance and here are some examples:

a) *For identity purposes*

God gave Adam the privilege to name “every living creature” that He had made, “and Adam gave names to *all cattle*, and to *the fowl of the air*, and to *every beast of the field*” [Gen. 2:19-20]. What he did was to give names to species and varieties. Thus, we could differentiate the lions from the elephants. However, he did not give names to each lion, such as Andrew, Linda, etc.! It was only when it came to human beings that he called his wife Eve, to differentiate her from Adam, her husband [Gen. 2:23]. Therefore, the name each of us bears makes us unique. Each of us has a

specific number and column in the Lamb's books of life and death [Rev. 20:12].

b) *As a historical record*

The names we bear may serve to remind us of events at the time we were born. For example, many children who were born in Africa during the Second World War were named "Hitler" [after Adolph Hitler, the then German Chancellor] or "Churchill" [after Winston Churchill, the then British Prime Minister], depending on which side victory was swinging! In some Moslem communities, "Osama Bin Laden" suddenly became a favourite name for new-born sons soon after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001. In Ghana [West Africa], children are named after the day of the week on which they are born [see below]. For example, the current Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Anan, was born on a Friday!

Day of the week	Name given to a boy (male)	Name given to a girl (female)
Sunday	Kwasi	Kwasiba
Monday	Kodyo (Kodjo)	Adyuba
Tuesday	Kwamina	Abeniba
Wednesday	Kwaku (Kwakoe)	Akuba
Thursday	Yaw	Yaba
Friday	Kofi	Afiba
Saturday	Kwami	Amba

[Source: © 2001 Peter A.J. Troon, "The Names of the Weekdays," <http://www.troon.org/suriname/daynames.html>]

Moses was picked out of water by Pharaoh's daughter, and Moses means "drawn out of water" [Ex. 2:10]. Isaac was born when his parents were very old [his mother, Sarah, was 90 years old!], and Isaac means "laughter" [Gen. 21:5-6].

There are also instances where God gave names to reflect the state of His relationship with the children of Israel. For example, the longest name in the Bible is Mahershalalhashbaz ['prey speeds'], the name that God asked Isaiah to give to his son, as a mark of His planned punishment for their disobedience [Is. 8:1-4]. Hosea's children by Gomer, the prostitute, were named Jezreel ['God sows'], Lonihamah ['not pitied'] and Loammi ['not my people'] [Hos. 1:4, 6,9].

c) *To glorify/honour a deity*

From the names that people bear, you can have an idea of the deity that they fear or worship. For example, before the advent of Christianity in my part of Nigeria [Edo State], you heard such names as "Igbinokun" ["I'm protected by the god of the river"], "Igbinovia" ["I'm protected by the god of River Ovia], or "Igbinoba" ["I'm under the king's protection"].

These days, however, the more popular names are “*Igbinosa*” [“I’m under the banner of the Almighty God”] and “*Igbinijesu*” [“I’m protected by Jesus Christ”].

The Bible is full of examples. For example, “Samuel” means, “asked of God” [1 Sam. 1:20], while “Ishmael” means “God hears” [Gen. 16:11].

3. Your name means so much to God!

One of the Ten Commandments states: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain” [Ex. 20:7]. He also told Solomon, “If My people, which are called by My name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land” [2 Chron. 7:14]. How are we called by His name? When we are born again, having accepted Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as Lord and Saviour, we become sons of God [Jn 1:12] and joint-heirs with Christ [Rom. 8:17]. Therefore, our family name becomes the name of God Himself, just as the first Adam was called “son of God” [Lk 3:38]. If we then answer a name that offends God, we are actually taking His name in vain!

To illustrate the significance of our names to God, let us study the following cases:

a) *Persons named by God Himself*

- God named the first man Adam [‘red earth’] [Gen, 5:2]
- God gave the name, John [‘Yahweh is gracious’] before he was conceived [Lk 1:13]
- Jesus [‘Saviour’] was given before He was conceived [Lk 1:13]

b) *Persons that God changed their original names*

- Abram became Abraham [‘father of many nations’] [Gen. 17:5]
- Sarai was changed to Sarah [‘princess’] [Gen. 17:15]
- Jacob became Israel [‘prince of God’] [Gen. 35:9-10]
- God never called him Ezekiel but ‘son of man’ [Ezek. 2:1]
- Jesus changed his name from Simon to Cephas or Peter [‘rock’] [Jn 1:42]

c) *Persons that God addressed with their man-given names*

- Moses [Ex. 3:4], Aaron [Ex. 4:14], Samuel [1 Sam. 3:4], David [2 Sam. 7:5], Job [Job 1:8], Jeremiah [Jer. 1:11] and Daniel [Dan. 9:22], among others, were called by their given names.

- The risen Christ called her [Magdalene] Mary by the empty tomb [**Jn 20:16**], and addressed Paul both as Saul [**Acts 9:4**] and Paul [**Acts 23:11**]

d) *People with acceptable names*

Unless otherwise indicated as we have shown above, the names of the good people in the Bible are acceptable to God. However, although Paul shares the name, Saul, with the first king of Israel, they are at opposite ends of the spiritual pole. *That suggests that your name is supposed to reflect what you are on the inside.*

4. Conclusion

Jacob started out as a trickster. He cheated his elder brother out of his birthright. He and his father-in-law, Laban, outsmarted each other to become materially wealthy [study **Gen. 29-31**]. By the time he wrestled with the Angel of God who put the hollow of his thigh out of joint, he had run out of tricks! He proclaimed, “I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” [**Gen. 32: 24-30**]. That was when God changed his name to Israel, a prince of God. He became a new creature. From that point on, his life became a source of pride to God to the extent that God could introduce Himself to Moses four hundred years later this way: “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and *the God of Jacob*” [**Ex. 3:6**]. God of Jacob, not of Israel?

That is the message of hope that comes out of our study today. Can God call Himself your God, irrespective of the name you were given by your parents at birth? Can you rise up to the challenge? Can He say to you, “I have called thee by thy name, thou art mine” [**Is. 43:1**]?

I leave you to answer Him!