

# Great Question Series

## Jacob – Genesis 32:27-28

### *“What’s your name?”*

This morning I want to talk about the importance of names. You were all given a specific name at birth, whether you like or not, which helps distinguish you from others. As far as I know, I’m the only **Brian** in this room right now. And if you’re a “Brian” the distinguishing characteristic goes even farther, because if run across another “Brian” you’re often asked, ‘Is that with an “I” or a “Y”’. (And of course the correct way to spell “Brian” is with an “I”. Names are typically one of the first things we learn about someone upon meeting them. Instead of calling someone, “**Hey you**” or “**Hey watch-a-macallit**” we try to learn and remember their name. And often it makes a statement to someone if you can remember their name the next time you meet.

Similarly in the Bible names were important.

When God was trying to recruit Moses to go to Egypt and deliver His people, one of Moses’ many questions was: “*If I were to go – who should I say sent me?*” In other words, “*which God are you?*” And God said to tell them: “*I am that I am has sent you.*”

And God held His name in high regard and required that others do as well. In **Exodus 20:7** He specifically says that you cannot misuse My name.

In the **Lord’s prayer** Jesus taught us to pray that God’s name would not be treated as common. And **Peter** proclaimed that *there is no other name under heaven*, except Jesus’ by which we can be saved (**Acts 4:12**)

Often names are given to someone because of certain circumstances surrounding their birth or life.

- **Moses** means “**drawn out of the water**” referring to his miraculous rescue early in life.
- **Isaac** means “**laughter**” because his mother laughed when she was told at 90 she’d be a mother.
- **Naomi** (which means “**pleasant**”) changed her name to **Mara** (which means “**bitter**”) when she returned to Bethlehem without her husband and sons.
- In the book of Acts we read about a man named “**Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus**” but the author notes that the apostles called him instead, “**Barnabas**” which means “**son of encouragement**” and if you read through the book of Acts you’ll quickly discover why they called him that.
- Often when armies conquered another nation and then deported many of the citizens, they would intentionally change their names in order to break with their old culture and hopefully connect them to their new culture. That was the case when **Babylon conquered Judah** and deported it’s citizens. The three men we’ve come to know as **Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego** where not their original names but were their given **Babylonian names**. These new names also identified them with the various gods the Babylonians worshipped. The same was true of **Daniel** whose name was changed to **Belteshazzar** (which means “**Bel protect his life**”).

We also have examples of God intentionally changing people’s names to reflect their **new destiny** and **purpose** in life.

- **Abram** (“**exalted father**”) to **Abraham** (“**father of many**”) when he promised to Abraham that he would have many many generations of descendants. (Genesis 17:1-6)
- **Sarai** (“**my princess**”) to **Sarah** (“**mother of nations**”) (Genesis 17:15)
- **Jacob** (“**he grasps the heel**” or figuratively “**he deceives**”) to **Israel** (“**he struggles with God**”) (Gen. 32:38-30; 35:9-10)
- In the New Testament, Jesus changed **Simon son of John** (*to hear*) to **Peter** (which means “**Rock**”) although Peter often didn’t act much like a rock . But once he received the Holy Spirit he was a rock solid leader of the church in Jerusalem.

This morning I want to spend some additional time on the name change of **Jacob to Israel** and then talk about the **name change each of us will receive** in the future and the significance of that event.

As I mentioned earlier, **Jacob**, means “**he grasps the heel**” or figuratively “**he deceives**” and Jacob certainly did an excellent job living up to his given name. Deceit was a huge part of his life story early on.

You may remember that one of the highlights of Jacob’s early life was when he **acquired his brother’s birthright** by making him agree to give it to him in exchange for a **bowl of stew**. Then later, through the conniving of his own mother, **he stole his father’s blessing**, intended for his brother, by putting animals skins over his own skin to simulate his hairy brother. The trick worked on his nearly blind father and he ended up with both the birthright and dad’s blessing. After his brother found out what he had done, he was plotting to kill him, so Jacob quickly fled to his mother’s brothers house in a distant land. While living there Jacob had deceit pulled on him when his father-in-law switched sisters on the wedding night thus forcing Jacob to work many more years in order to marry the sister he actually loved. As Jacob’s story goes on there is deceit by him and many of those around him. He’s doing a good job living up to his name.

Then one day, God appears to Jacob and tells him to return back home and make amends with his brother, Esau. So, Jacob takes his rather large family and herds and servants and heads back home. He’s clearly still afraid that his brother might actually kill him. And his fear greatly increased when he heard a report that his brother was coming to him with **400 men**. He immediately jumped to the conclusion that his brother was still mad at him and was coming to kill him. So, he sent 4 separate groups of his servants, livestock and family that were designed to arrive in stages to Esau. And they were each bearing a very generous gift to Esau to hopefully soften his heart towards his own brother. He sends them ahead and then he stays behind for the night. And that’s where I want to pick our reading this morning and read **Genesis 32:22-32**.

Fascinating passage of Scripture. People love to discuss who this individual was that Jacob wrestled basically to a draw with. Some believe it’s an angel, others believe it’s an early appearance of Jesus because he’s referred to as God. Whoever it is, he’s got tremendous power because after wrestling to a draw during the night he merely touches Jacob’s hip and puts it out of joint.

Notice that Jacob wouldn’t let go of the man until he received a blessing from him. And at this point the person asks Jacob, “**What is your name?**”

Let’s assume that the person here is some form or manifestation of God. **Why would God ask that?** Does he not know that the person he’s been wrestling with is named Jacob? Of course he does. God asks this question – not for his knowledge but for **Jacob’s self-reflection**. What do you think went through Jacob’s mind at that moment? Do you think he was proud of his given name? Not likely. And maybe even over the years he’s reflected back on how well he’s lived up to his given name, although in his case it’s not exactly something you’d go around boasting about, that you’ve really lived up to your name as a deceiver. In that culture your name was intended to be a reflection of your character. Parents are obviously taking a chance when they pick out the name, as to how they’d turn out.

Let me ask you, what thoughts or images come into your friends’ mind when they hear your name mentioned? Does it conjure up feelings of encouragement and miss being with you or does a certain amount of dismay and discouragement enter their hearts and minds when they think of you?

The fascinating and empowering thing about God is that while He might encourage us to reflect on where we've come from – He never intends to leave us there. Reflecting on the past is only helpful if it helps us understand and better appreciate where God's taking us. Remember, God knows how He created you and what His plans are for your life. And He's always excited for you to understand and pursue His plans. Because as we're reminded of in Jeremiah 29:11-13:

**Jeremiah 29:11-13 (NIV)** *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.*

Many people live their lives with a constant **sense of regret**. "If only I'd done this or not done that – then my life would be so much better." Or sometimes we play the blame game and blame others for the way our life has turned out. **God is not about blame and shame**. That's not in His nature. He's all about meeting you where you are right now, however messed up that might be, and empowering you to head in a direction that He's planned out for you. His plan is for you to reflect His glory to the world as He shines in and through you.

After Jacob tells God his name God says, "*Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.*" (Genesis 32:28).

When God gives someone a new name it's usually to establish a new identity. Jacob will no longer be the *deceiver* or *liar*. He will now be known as the one "**who struggled with God.**" He could tell everyone that he wrestled God to a draw. He will no longer be perceived as weak and dependent upon others but as one who has been blessed by God with power and strength.

Oh, and by the way, if you think you're too old for God to give you a new direction in your life – it might help to remember that Jacob was approximately **97 years old** when this change occurred.

In that culture, and even so today – if you name something **you're declaring ownership of it**. God is declaring ownership of Jacob. He's the one in charge of his life from this point forward and Jacob needs to continue to remember through the rest of his life. Likewise we need to remember the words of Paul who said, "*You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.*" **(1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (NIV))**

As a result of the name change did Jacob immediately change? No, in fact as soon as he meets his brother, Esau, he goes right back to his deceiving ways. But shortly after that God appears to him once again and tells him to go back to Bethel and build an altar. And God reminds him that it was at Bethel that God appeared to him when he was fleeing from his brother the first time. Jacob does that and for one of the first times ever, we see real leadership rising up out of Jacob. He demands that everyone bring any form of gods that they have with them and change their clothes before appearing before God at Bethel and offer sacrifices. Jacob takes all of these pagan images and buries them under a tree, and builds an altar to God. Shortly after that, God reappears to Jacob and reminds him of his name change **(Genesis 35:9-10)**. Jacob, or should I now say, **Israel**, is beginning to live up to his name and God's call upon his life.

### **Take A Ways:**

1. **God doesn't allow your past to discredit you from His service.**
2. **God sees you through His eyes of possibilities not your eyes of disappointment.**
3. **God will often use our past experiences for His glory in the future.**
4. **You have a new name awaiting you.** (I want to end with this amazing promise)

**Revelation 2:17 (NIV)** *Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.*

In that culture, jurors at a trial would vote with stones: black for guilty, white for innocent. Jesus says that at our trial before God we will be declared innocent. Not because we *are* innocent through our own deeds but because we've accepted God's grace and forgiveness offered through Jesus' death on the cross. When we accept Jesus Christ our old selves are nailed to that very same cross and that old sinful self dies. Then we are raised to life a brand new creation of God. We have a new nature and of God places His very presence inside of us to empower us to live this new victorious life. You are a new creature and for the rest of your life spent on this planet, God will be teaching you what it's like to live with this new nature. And then in heaven you'll receive a new body for that new nature to live in. And when you arrive God will rename you and this new name will be engraved on a white stone for you to carry around as reminder of your new nature in Jesus Christ.

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5. Belteshazzar = \_\_\_\_\_

**God intentionally changed people’s names:**

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4. Simon to hear to Peter \_\_\_\_\_

Why did God ask Jacob what his name was?

God can cause us to reflect on our past but never leaves us there.

Reflecting on our past is only helpful if it helps us understand where God is taking us? What are God’s plans for your life (see Jer. 29:11-13)

God is not about \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_.  
How old was Jacob when God renamed him \_\_\_\_\_

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