

Thought for the week & basic material for Bible Study 2. 3 rd March
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This material forms both the ‘Thought for the week’ and the basic material for the Study Group on Wednesday. It might be easier to print it or have it available on a separate device if you intend to join the group via Zoom.
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O.T. Reading, (Lent 2, 28th Feb.)

Genesis 17.1-7,15-16

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. ²And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.’ ³Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ⁴‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ¹⁵God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.’

This week’s question is: “Why does God in Genesis 17:5 change Abram’s name to Abraham?” and then Sarai to Sarah? To answer this question a little context is first needed.

Preliminary question: What’s in a name? How important are names?

As Moses recounts in Genesis 12, Abram is called by God to leave his family’s land in the land Ur and travel to the land of Canaan, a land that God promises he will give to him and his offspring forever. But there is a problem.

Abram is childless and very old. This means he cannot fulfil the promise of God. If he does not have a child, his descendants will not be from his family line, but from another family line. In this anxiety and worry, Abram is met by God with another promises, a promise that rings through the rest of Scripture as the beginning of the faith — the beginning of the people of God.

God promises that despite Abram’s advanced age, he will sire a son to be his rightful heir — a miracle in itself. After God revealed this to Abram, Moses records this: “[God] took [Abram] outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ Then he believed in the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:5-6 NASB)

Now, fast forward two chapters. In chapter 17, God gives Abram the covenant of circumcision, to be an outward sign of this promise. But God does a strange thing here: he renames Abram to Abraham. Why? The answer is in the meaning of the name.

In the original Hebrew language of the Torah, (which is the first five books of our Old Testament), the name **Abram** literally means “**exalted father.**” The name **Abraham**, however, contains another unused root word, which roughly means “**multitude.**”

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Abraham translated literally, then, means “father of a multitude.” Most modern Bibles that contain footnotes will annotate this literal meaning of the Hebrew in the margin.

As for Sarai changing to Sarah, the difference is more subtle, being from "princess" to "princess of many". This we don't understand quite so well: it does not apparently refer to many nations per se, but to many people. This is significant, because Sarah was the mother of one nation, while Abraham was the father of many nations. Still, the name comes from God and is a sign of the promise God had made to her.

Note this: the changing of Abraham's name is a sign from God. By changing his name, the Lord not only confirmed that he would fully carry out the promise that he made to Abraham. He, as well, made Abraham the typological father of faith for all the saints (Jude 3). From the flesh of Abraham, a multitude did come, the Jewish people.

But Abraham is not only the father of a single ethnic nation, he is the spiritual “father of a multitude.” And this faithful multitude, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, is too large to number (Rev 7:9). Through him, all the nations of the world are blessed (Gen 22:18).

But this blessing could not be possible if it were not for the one who came from Abraham's line who would be the blessed one — the one who is called the Christ. And this chosen one has many names. The long prophesied one, the Lion of Judah and the spotless Lamb, who will crush the head of the serpent and will be a light to the nations. (Isa 42:6) He is the one who, though the builders rejected him, is called the Cornerstone. (Rom 9:30ff; Eph 2:20) He is the one who, though the Father has given him the name above all names, does not seek his own advantage but seeks and saves that which is lost. (Isa 9:6; Phil 2:6; Luke 19:10) His name is forever the Word of God. (John 1:1ff; Rev 19:13) And in the last, all will bend their knee and know him as the King of kings and Lord of lords. (Rev 19:16)

From Abraham's line came this one. He is the true offspring of Abraham's covenant. (Gal 3:16) He is the blessing that blesses the world. In Jesus, the land — paradise itself — is secured. And in Jesus, the multitude from every tribe, nation and tongue is made a family.

Questions:

- Back to Covenant again: What is the subtle but important transition in the Covenant promise here?
- Where do we fit in?
- What is our ‘Covenant?’ (The ‘Name thing’ is important!)