

What is your Name?

Our name is so much a part of us that we seldom pause to give any thought to it. Except of course if our name is somewhat difficult for others to pronounce. Then we cringe whenever we have to tell another stranger our name. We may shorten it or alter it in some other way, or even replace it by something “simple” and “ordinary”. In some societies it seems as if any first name longer than one syllable has a one-syllable counterpart. For example, Patrick is Pat, Robert is Rob or Bob, Elizabeth is Beth, Susan is Sue or Su and so on.

Unless we have changed our name, the name that we carry has been given to us by someone. We had no choice in the matter. In almost all cases the name we have was given to us by a parent or parents. But whoever did give us our name gave some thought to that name and figured that “this is a good name for my child”.

My name is “Joel”. I do not recall asking my parents why they gave me that name. However, I think I have figured it out all by myself. My parents were Christian and Joel is a Bible name. The Prophet Joel, who wrote the book Joel in the Old Testament, is the most well-known Biblical person to carry that name. My parents not only liked the name but most certainly wished that I would follow Christ and let Him guide me along the “narrow way”. Similarly, whoever gave you your name felt that that name was consistent with the good thoughts and wishes that they had and probably still have for you.

We begin our lives stamped with a name we did not choose. In spite of the thoughts and wishes that drove our parent to give us that name, it is now up to us to establish a “name” for ourselves. That is, what do people think about us when they hear our name? What pictures do we paint in the minds of those who hear our name? Is it “good person”, “honest fellow”, “kind and compassionate individual”, “respectable citizen”? Or is it “thief”, “scamp”, “worthless fellow”, “an embarrassment to the community”?

That brings us to a guy in the Bible by the name of Zacchaeus (see Luke 19, all scripture references are from the New International Version, NIV). Zacchaeus was a Jew. Hence his parents would evidently choose a respectable Hebrew name for their son. A name that would reflect some good quality or qualities that the parents desired their son to cultivate and manifest. So what does Zacchaeus mean? It is reported to mean “clean, pure”. How noble! “I would like my son to be thought of as clean, pure, a man of integrity” was probably in the minds of his parents.

Now Zacchaeus, by his life, had to make a “name” for himself. How did this turn out? Zacchaeus lived in the time when Jesus walked on earth. Zacchaeus resided in the Israeli town of Jericho and he had an encounter with Jesus when Jesus was visiting Jericho. Luke 19:1-10 records that encounter:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through.

A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy.

He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.
(Luke 19: 1-4)

We are introduced to Zacchaeus as “a chief tax collector and wealthy”. Well “wealthy” sounds good, it indicates success in certain pursuits. But “tax collector” was not a good “name” among the Jews at that time. The tax collector was working for the Roman conquerors and oppressors. Furthermore, the tax collector could extract more tax than the Romans required and keep all the excess for himself. Therefore in the eyes of the Jews Zacchaeus could be classified as a swindling traitor. “Tax collector and wealthy” constituted a really bad “name”.

But there was a positive spark in Zacchaeus. He had heard about Jesus and he recognized that there was something extra special about Jesus. Therefore when he heard that Jesus was in town he determined that he had to see him. In spite of what the crowd may think or say about him, he identified a vantage point in a tree up ahead, and quickly ran on and perched himself in the tree.

Luke 19: 5-7 records: *When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”*

So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

Interestingly, Jesus knew his name! That should not surprise us. Jesus, the Son of God, a member of the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) knows all about us. “*And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered*”. (Matthew 10: 30). Zacchaeus was not “clean and pure”. Jesus knew that. The people knew that too. Jesus’ going to stay at Zacchaeus’s house was disturbing to them. We are not given any detail about Jesus’ visit to Zacchaeus’s house. But the outcome is recorded.

Luke 19: 8 says: *But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”*

Zacchaeus underwent a transformation. From despised, wealthy tax collector to benevolent, law-abiding citizen of integrity. Ready to make amends for all his misdeeds. In the same way whatever our current “name” may be, however despicable our reputation, Jesus is willing and ready to be our guest. Then if we let Him be our guest, the impact on us will be positively astounding.

At the end of His visit with Zacchaeus, Jesus made some closing remarks:

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Luke 19: 9-10.

Jesus associated Zacchaeus with another name – “a son of Abraham”. The name Abraham was given by God to a man called Abram. God called Abram out of a heathen culture. God told him: *“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”* (Genesis 12: 2-3)

Abram answered God’s call, he obeyed and trusted God. *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”*, Genesis 15: 6. God changed Abram’s name, which means “exalted father”, to Abraham, which means “father of many” (see Genesis 17: 5). The Jews were natural descendants of Abraham hence Zacchaeus was a son (descendant) of Abraham. But he was a lost son (a sinner) needing salvation.

Jesus sought him and saved him; *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”*. Therefore, Zacchaeus was now saved, he was brought into a right relationship with God. He could now carry the name “righteous”. His faith in God made this possible. Just as Abraham’s faith in God made him righteous. Therefore, Zacchaeus was now a spiritual son of Abraham because he had demonstrated faith in God. But what about us?

The Apostle Paul answers that question in Galatians 3:6-7:
So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham.

Whatever our name is, whatever our name means, whatever others think of us when our name is mentioned, Jesus is seeking us out, *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”*. When we respond in faith we can be called “saved”, “righteous”, “children of Abraham” and “children of God”. *“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God”*, (Romans 8: 14). It does not mean that we will always do the right thing. Our attitude towards God and others will undergo a continual transformation as we are led by God’s Holy Spirit.