

ABRAM - ABRAHAM (GEN. 17:5)

## CHANGED PEOPLE #1

Most of you know that my wife, Sandy, was raised in Japan as a missionary kid. Missionaries become like family when they are serving on a foreign field. One missionary family named the Shooks became especially close to Sandy – she even called them Uncle Paul and Aunt Veda. Paul and Veda Shook both came from small towns in Iowa – Manly and Fertile. After they became engaged, one of the local newspapers couldn't resist the temptation. The headline for the weekly edition read: Manly man to wed Fertile Woman.

Names are important to us. We are identified with the name of the town where we grew up. And each of us at birth is given a personal name. Our name gives us an identity – it both recognizes us as a unique individual and also connects us with an extended family unit. Our name gives us a measure of security - a name is something that is ours and ours alone. Although we often take it for granted, our name is very important to us.

Now our names are given to us for various reasons today. Some people choose names because of the pleasantness of their sound to the ears. Others choose names in honor of some famous person who has lived in the past. Still others choose names to pass on some family heritage. But we don't usually change our names today once we receive them. We might pick up a nickname that describes some characteristic that we have like Red or Lefty or Stretch, but our given name usually remains with us throughout our life.

In Biblical times a person's name was closely identified with his character and personality. So names were carefully chosen to correspond to some aspect of a person's life. Sometimes people were named in the Bible because of their function in life. Eve was given her name because she was the mother of all living people. Other times people were named because of their birth experiences. Isaac was named laughter because of the joy that he brought to Abraham and Sarah at birth. Still others were named because of the intended mission of their lives. The angel told Joseph that Mary's son would be named Jesus for he would save their people from their sins. And sometimes, a person's name was changed even as an adult if something dramatic happened or his life changed.

This morning, we are going to begin a series looking at 7 important people whose names were changed as adults in the Bible. 5 were men 2 were women. 5 are found in the O.T.; 2 come from the N.T. Not all of them were godly people so they didn't all change for the better - 1 was even the father of a pagan nation. But in each case, their change in life was significant enough to cause a change in their name.

The first person is found in the Scripture passage that we just read in GENESIS 17.

**(READ Genesis 17:1-9)**

\*Abram means *Exalted Father*.

\*Abraham means *Father of Many*

God changed Abram's name to Abraham because he was going to make him the father of a great nation of many people. In fact, Abraham would become the father of many nations. Both the Arab nations and the nation of Israel would start with this man Abraham. The number of descendants from this single individual would reach into the billions.

Now in each case, we are going to focus on the change in the person that corresponded to the name change. And I want you to notice with me this morning, 3 changes that took place in Abraham's life making his name change most appropriate.

1. Abraham learned not to be guided through life by his vacillating emotions. Now this is a most significant lesson for any person to learn - and frankly, it is a lesson that few people percentagewise in life do learn.

\*Most people follow their emotions through life. Their emotions dictate the direction of their lives for them.

\*The people that they like are people whom they are emotionally attracted to - people who don't appeal to their emotions they don't like and avoid. Very few people choose to love a person who is not attracted to them emotionally.

\*The activities in which they engage are pleasures that please their emotions. They are activities that bring them a sense of joy and satisfaction. Very few people choose activities in life that they don't like but are worthy activities anyway.

\*Even the mundane routines like eating and dressing are generally guided by the emotions in the lives of most people. Most people eat foods that they like and avoid foods that their taste buds don't desire. Nutrition for most people is secondary to taste. And most people wear clothes that appeal to them emotionally. They wear clothes that make them feel good about themselves.

\*Now our emotions are good. They are God-given; they have been given for our pleasure; they are to be enjoyed. But the wise person comes to a realization that God never gave us our emotions to be the guiding force in our life. Abraham learned this lesson. He came to the place in life where he did not live a life guided by his emotions.

\*Now this doesn't mean that he didn't have strong emotional feelings and he wasn't influenced by his emotions at times. I want you to notice with me the first response that Abraham had to God's revelation. It's found a few verses after the passage that we read together earlier.

READ GENESIS 17:17,18

GE 17:17 Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?"<sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

\*Now, frankly, we can understand Abraham's doubts here. After all, God had first come to him with the invitation to leave his homeland to a place that God wanted to give him with the promise of making a great nation out of him when he was 75 years old. Abraham is now 99 years old in Genesis 17. 24 years have passed. He still doesn't have any land. He still doesn't have a child of promise by Sarah. He still is no closer to the fulfillment of the goals God had promised him than he was 24 years ago. We can understand Abraham's emotions rising up in laughter at these promises that God had made. And frankly, I know that it is true in my own life and it is probably true in each of our lives, that our first response to any given situation is an emotional response. Our emotions rise up immediately - and they seek to take control of the direction of our lives. Our emotions love to lead our lives.

\*But Abraham learned a very important lesson in life. He learned that his life must be lead by his will not by his emotions. He must choose his direction in life not feel his direction through life. Listen to this telling insight into Abraham's life that the Apostle Paul gives in Romans 4:18 - *Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations.*

That is how Abraham lived up to his name. That is how Abraham became the father of many nations. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed.

\*Isn't that interesting? God had given him the name Abraham - father of many nations. But Abraham could only realize that name as he chose to believe against hope - as he learned to direct his life by his will not be his emotions.

2. And this brings us to a second observation which is so important. READ Genesis 17:23-25 with me. *On that very day, Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them as God told him. Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised, and his son Ishmael was 13.*

\*This was the same day that God had spoken to him. This was the same day that his emotions had risen up within him to laugh at the promise of God and doubt whether it could ever come true. In spite of how he was feeling at the time, Abraham chose to obey God even by performing this seemingly foolish and physically painful rite that God had instructed of him.

\*Now I have found it interesting to study Abraham's obedience of God's commands for there is a definite pattern that is set up. God gives Abraham a command to be obeyed. The command usually is very sketchy. It is clear enough in itself so that there is no doubt of what God wants, but it doesn't give nearly the details that Abraham probably wanted to have. But Abraham is left with the choice of whether to obey God or not. Abraham doesn't feel like obeying God is the best course of action. But to Abraham's credit, he consistently makes the choice to follow God's will - and very simply, this is what makes him a great model of faith in the Bible.

\*Let me illustrate this pattern with Abram's original call. The Bible simply says that God came to Abram when he was 75 years old and said, *Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. Then 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. Gen. 12:1-3.*

\*Now this is really an amazing command that God gives to Abraham. In a day when one's security was found in his family, in a day when there wasn't much mobility, in a day when people just didn't pack up and move away, in a day when only criminals were forced to leave their country by exile, God commands Abram to pack up all of his things and move. Did you notice the sketchy details that God gave to Abram? He didn't tell him where he was to move to. He didn't even give him a clue. He simply said *go to a land that I will show you.* I am sure that Abram had so many questions. What land is this? What will the land be like? Why should I have to move? I'm sure he didn't feel like packing up and moving. But to Abram's credit, Gen. 12:4 begins with the words, *So Abram left as the Lord had told him.*

So we find this same pattern in Genesis 17. God comes to Abram and changes his name to Abraham. And then God gives to him this seemingly strange rite of circumcision to practice for all the males in his family. God didn't give any rationale for it. God didn't produce any medical studies to explain why he wanted his people to be circumcised. God just commands it out of the blue. And again, to Abraham's credit, the very day that God commanded it, Abraham and Ishmael and his whole household were circumcised. I'm sure he didn't feel like doing it. He didn't enjoy the pain. But he did it simply because God had commanded it.

\*I know that one of my complaints when I sense God's direction in my life is that He doesn't give me enough details. I suspect that this is a complaint that many of us have. If only God would give more specifics about what he wants me to do. If only God would give the rationale so I could understand all of the reasons behind the command. But God usually doesn't give those at first - to me at least. And I have come to realize that God doesn't give more specifics for a very good reason. For my desire to know more specifics is often due

to the fact that I want more facts before I make my decision to follow God's will. Very often, I want to know all of the specifics so that I can weigh the facts and then decide whether I want to obey God or not. God doesn't want me to have this attitude. God just wants me to be obedient to him - period. So He gives me enough so that I can know what He wants for me to do, but not too much so that I might be tempted to judge the pros and cons of obeying Him before making my decision.

God didn't give Abraham a complete description of the promised land before asking him to leave Ur of the Chaldees. Frankly, if he would have done that, Abram might have been tempted to compare Ur with Palestine and decide which was the better place to live. And at the time when he was deciding, Ur would have been far more preferable to Israel. In fact, Israel was right in the middle of a famine. But God knew that Ur was at the peak of its history and ready to decline, while Israel had not even yet begun to be developed. So God simply asked Abram to be obedient to his commands. And God usually asks the same of us as well.

3. But in conclusion now, I want you to notice a 3rd change that Abraham experienced in his life as his name was changed from Abram and Abraham. Abraham became a more compassionate person as God worked in his life.

We don't have time to read the entire story that immediately follows God meeting with Abraham and the subsequent circumcising of his entire household in Genesis 17, but let me refer to it briefly for it illustrates a very important change that occurred in Abraham's life. Genesis 18 gives the account of the divine destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Now this story is quite familiar to many of us. Even non-believers have heard of Sodom and Gomorrah in the Bible because it is such a well known story. We all know that the people of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had given themselves over to sexual perversion. Homosexuality was rampant in these cities. It was so open and militant that when the 2 angels of God visited Lot in his house to warn him of the coming judgment of God, some of the men of Sodom pounded on Lot's door demanding to have sexual relations with these 2 new men in town. It was only by the miraculous intervention of the angels striking the men on the porch with blindness that they were spared. This story is one of the most sordid, embarrassing accounts in the Bible as it reveals the potential breakdown in law and order in a city. There is the sexual perversion, there is the total lack of respect for human rights and property, there is the chaotic breakdown of law and order - Sodom was a city in total societal anarchy.

Now we might have thought that Abraham would have been delighted with God's decision to just wipe Sodom and Gomorrah off of the face of the earth. I mean Abraham lived fairly close to Sodom. He was close enough that he could see the smoke of the city rising after God's destruction as recorded in Gen. 19:28. I'm sure that his proximity to Sodom and all of the wickedness that was going on there worried Abraham at times.

Nobody wants to live close to complete societal anarchy - where there is lawlessness and crime and sexual perversity. Most of us probably would have understood if Abraham would have nodded his head in agreement with God's decision to rain down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps we would even have understood if Abraham would have asked God what took him so long to make his decision to judge these godless cities.

But that was not Abraham's attitude was it. Amazingly, when Abraham hears of God's plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, he immediately steps forward as an intercessor pleading to have these cities spared. Of course, he was interceding on behalf of his nephew, Lot, and his family. But it is obvious that Abraham is interceding for more than just Lot. He is concerned for these cities. And he risks the anger of the Lord as he negotiates from 50 people down to just 10 righteous people. If there are just 10 righteous people in the city, would you spare it? Abraham was obviously thinking that there were 6 that he thought he knew of - Lot and his wife, their 2 daughters and their fiances. Certainly there must be 4 more righteous people in the whole city. But there weren't. In fact, half of those whom Abraham assumed to be righteous weren't. For only Lot and his 2 daughters would ultimately escape. And their righteousness could not be taken for granted.

But the main point that I think we need to see in the changed life of Abraham was his compassion for those who were even hardened in their godless lifestyle. Abraham showed a remarkable compassion for the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I needn't belabor the fact that we live in a society that is becoming more and more godless all of the time. Sexual perversion has become an acceptable way of life for many in our country today – in fact, if you speak against it most consider you to be intolerant, a homophobe. They argue that there have always been homosexuals and lesbians in human society. They were found in the O.T., they were found in the Greek and Roman societies, and there has always been a percentage of society that has been gay. That point cannot be disputed for it is true. But it is also true that when a gay lifestyle has become militant in any society that society is doomed to collapse soon. Sodom and Gomorrah had a militant gay society - these men were so bold as to bang on Lot's door with their demands. So what is most alarming in our society today is not the fact that gay people exist - for they always have existed. But it is the militant attitude that has developed in recent years which is most alarming. The demand to have gay marriages recognized with all benefits of legalized marriage, the demand to be treated as a special group with privileges above other groups, the demand to have even the smallest news published on the front pages of the newspaper, open and even militant parades down city streets - and on and on we could go. Gay rights have become very visible and demanding during this past generation.

Now what should be our response as Christians to this turn of events. Certainly we grieve as we experience the moral and spiritual decline of our country. But we must never allow our personal grief at sin and the consequences of sin to produce a hardness in our hearts. If Abraham could demonstrate a compassion for Sodom and Gomorrah, how much more should we be able to show a compassion for our own country which is no where near as extreme as they were. A Biblical compassion is necessary if God's love is to flow through us. A Biblical compassion is necessary if we are to be effective testimonies of God's grace. And a Biblical compassion is necessary if we are to realize the change in our lives that Abraham experienced, a change that can only happen as God works within us.

Just before Isaac was conceived in the womb of Sarah, God changed Abram's name to Abraham. No longer would he be just the exalted father - now he would be called the father of many. And this change of name reflected a change that had taken place in the life of Abraham as he had walked with God. It reflected his learning to allow his life to be directed by the stability of his will rather than by the uncertainty of his emotional life. It reflected his learning the importance of obeying God, and obeying him immediately. Abraham had learned that God's commands were not given as suggestions to be considered, but rather as directives to be obeyed. And it reflected a compassion that had been developed in Abraham's life, yes, even a compassion for those who were most unlovely and threatening to him.

\*So God desires to change each of our lives. Are we cooperating with His purposes?