

A New Name

Isaiah 62:1-5 (CSB)

¹ I will not keep silent because of Zion, and I will not keep still because of Jerusalem, until her righteousness shines like a bright light and her salvation, like a flaming torch. ² Nations will see your righteousness and all kings, your glory. You will be given a new name that the LORD's mouth will announce. ³ You will be a glorious crown in the LORD's hand, and a royal diadem in the palm of your God's hand. ⁴ You will no longer be called Deserted, and your land will not be called Desolate; instead, you will be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married. ⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so your sons will marry you; and as a groom rejoices over his bride, so your God will rejoice over you.

William Shakespeare penned the iconic line spoken by his character, Juliet: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Yet, that name, rose, has become so associated with that flower that you can't think of one without the other. Names are important and have meaning.

Every year, you can look up the most popular baby names. In 2021, the most popular girl name was Olive. Why would people name their daughters Olive? Maybe because olives are closely associated with olive branches, a sign of peace. Maybe because they have Greek heritage, as the name originates from the Greek language. Maybe they just think it's a cute name for a girl. The top boy name in 2021 was Liam, an Irish name shortened from Uilliam, or William in English. It means "strong willed warrior and protector." The names given children reflect the hopes, the expectations, the preferences of their parents.

But names can change. The most common time for someone to change their name is when a woman gets married to a man. A sizeable majority of women in the US still change their last name, although not all do. Maybe most still do this because it's tradition. However, most understand that getting married means a change in you, your relationships, your priorities, even your identity. This new name for a new identity harkens back to what God established in the Garden of Eden. Jesus reiterated it this way: "A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh." (Matt 19:5b-6a) Taking on this new last name represents the two becoming one, that they belong together, not just a superficial change of letters and signatures.

When we come to Isaiah chapter 62, it's fair to wonder if the Israelites were considering a name change. Their name came from one of their ancestors, Jacob, the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham. Jacob's birth name was not a flattering one. It meant heel-grabber and was given to him because he came into the world clutching his older brother Esau's heel. At the same time, though, a heel-grabber was someone who trips people up, deceives them. Jacob lived up to his name's meaning. (Apologies to our Jacob's here today.) But later in life, when Jacob literally wrestled with God and held him to his promise to bless him, protect him, and bring him back to his homeland, God changed his name to Israel, meaning "one who struggles with God." God explained why the new name saying, "Because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed." (Genesis 32:28)

Like their ancestor, the Israelites struggled with God. They struggled to keep God's commandments as soon as they were given, breaking them within days of their announcement from Mount Sinai back in the day of Moses. Generation after generation, they struggled to keep their vows to worship God only, to be committed to him as a wife is committed to being faithful her husband and vice versa. Time and time again they had affairs with other gods, cheated on God, Deserted God.

The Israelites also struggled with humans, enemies surrounding them, enemies that oppressed them and did battle with them in the Promised Land, evil kings who encouraged affairs with foreign gods. Because of their infidelity, the Lord brought judgment upon them. During Isaiah's time, the Assyrians came and conquered the 10 northern tribes of Israel and exiled them. The southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin came very close to suffering the same fate. Isaiah specifically prophesied that the Babylonians would come later to finish the job and destroy Jerusalem and the temple and exile the remaining Israelites, leaving them Desolate. Should the Israelites take on the new names of Deserted (Azubah in their language) and Desolate (Shemamah)? Is this who they were now?

Have we not had similar struggles as the Israelites? You've struggled with enemies, people who hate you, who constantly try to make your life miserable, who cut you down at seemingly every opportunity, who neglect you. Maybe these people that you struggle with are not just outsiders but they are people who share your name, who are family. Maybe the person you struggle with most is your spouse, a husband who does not love you as Christ loved the Church, a wife who does not follow your lead as the Church submits to Christ. You struggle to try to keep your marriage alive, to forgive the one who cheated on you, wounded you more deeply than anyone else could, abused you. You struggle to find healing and reconciliation for your marriage. Maybe it ended

and you still struggle with the person you were married to, that the pain continues and they still take shots at you. Maybe your struggle is with the painful breakup with your boyfriend or girlfriend and a heartache that seems impossible to heal. As you struggled with people, do you feel Deserted, that you should change your name to Azubah?

When you struggle with people, we often find that we struggle with God as well feeling as if he abandoned us. You tried so hard, prayed so much, read so many Bible passages over and over again, but the struggles, the hurt, the abuse, the infidelity continued. You feel all alone in these struggles, like your name should be Desolate (Shemamah).

In these depressing struggles in which we feel so alone, so Deserted, so Desolate, the Lord speaks: "I will not keep silent because of Zion, and I will not keep still because of Jerusalem, until her righteousness shines like a bright light and her salvation, like a flaming torch. Nations will see your righteousness and all kings, your glory. You will be given a new name that the LORD's mouth will announce." (verses 1-2) The Lord speaks up and gives you a new name, a new identity.

But what good is a name change? Echoing Juliet, does it really change who I am or is it just a superficial grouping of letters now associated to me? Is this new name like putting a fresh coat of paint over a rotting wall? When God speaks, though, things happen. He spoke all of creation into existence by saying, "Let there be." The wine at the wedding at Cana was not the most fine wine because the headwaiter said so, but because Jesus said to fill the jars and serve it. So when God gives us a new name, we take on a new identity, much like a bride on her wedding day. The Lord says, "You will be a glorious crown in the LORD's hand, and a royal diadem in the palm of your God's hand. You will no longer be called Deserted, and your land will not be called Desolate; instead, you will be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married." (verses 3-4)

God changed his people's name to My Delight Is in Her (Hephzibah). Because of his faithfulness as a husband, the Lord delights in his bride, in his people, his Church, us! He does not treat us as an afterthought; he puts us first! He did so by coming to us as God and Man, keeping the law perfectly for us, dying to remove all the times that we have been unfaithful to God, by paying the price for all our unfaithfulness to the people we struggle with. In his delight of us, he has wrapped us in his robes of righteousness, our wedding clothes. Our status has changed; we are right with God. God rejoices over us and proudly displays us as his bride, one made clean in the blood of the Lamb. Your name is now Hephzibah because God delights in you!

The Lord delights in you and me and has united us with him. This is why he also announces a second new name to us: Married (Beulah). He committed himself to us, and he doesn't ever break his commitments or his promises. He has and will always put you first, ahead of himself. He did not marry you to be away from you. No, he is with us always. We belong together. As our husband, he guards and protects us against all harm and danger and cares for us by leading us to green pastures and quiet waters.

Rejoice, my brothers and sisters! Today, you have a new name because you have a new identity. Your name is Hephzibah because the Lord delights in you as he has wrapped you in his robe of righteousness. You are Beulah, because God has vowed to be faithful to you always, always put you first, always provide and care for you. Amen.