

St. Paul: On The Same page

*Devotions on the upcoming
lessons, 03.01.15 Lent 2b*

Day One: Gen 17:1-7, 15-16

“You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham... As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah...”

When I was a kid, most people called me “Donny.” Of course, there were some people who called me Dorf (or Dork), or Dwarf, or Nooby, or even Frod. Then there was Donny Osmond, and Don Juan, and for one summer I was Sonny because someone thought I looked like Sonny Bono.

Most of the time these names didn’t mean anything, or change anything. But once in a while someone would call me a name that hurt, and sometimes I was called things that were flattering. A name change can be life changing.

When I was ordained in 1985 people suddenly started calling me “pastor.” I was the same person that I had been the week before, but suddenly my role was changed, what

people expected of me was changed. Even God asked new things of me! And by a miracle, God himself made it work, so that the person who had been known by many other names could now sometimes represent the Good Shepherd.

Abraham’s and Sarah’s names were not changed by very much, but with God’s covenant their names were changed to show that they were beginning new lives. With God’s help, they would now be new people with a new purpose.

How has God changed your name? Since you are not just an employee, not just a classmate, not just a person filling an office, but now you are a child of God, how are you a new person?

If you believe in Jesus, you now bear his name. It is a name for which many of your siblings have been tortured or killed. Even today the name of Jesus can attract persecution. But you are called to carry it in compassion, showing that he is the King of Love.

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, you changed more than Abraham’s name. Please change me too. Amen.*

Day Two: Romans 5:1-11

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith... we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings...”

Last week the letter from James said we should “consider it pure joy” when we face trials. Now Paul says about the believers that we “rejoice in our sufferings.”

In our meditation on James, we reflected on how the trials that we endure make us stronger. In fact, all of us voluntarily go through various kinds of “suffering” in order to strengthen our bodies or our golf game or some other thing that we enjoy.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he says that suffering produces something even greater than strength, something better than a sharpened skill. He says that suffering produces endurance.

The word for endurance here is sometimes translated “to bear up under.” It doesn’t just mean to tolerate, or to wait for awhile. It means to stick with something, to remain, to be in there struggling. And logically we know that we can never

experience endurance, we can never stick with a difficult task unless we first have the hard task. Without a challenge in our life, we never know what it means to stick with it.

But it is endurance that shapes our character. It is learning to stick with something that helps us define what is worth staying with in our lives. And that changes who we are and how we see our world.

And when our character has been shaped in this way, Paul says, this produces hope in us. Why? Because now we see what has value and what does not. Suffering, testing, challenges, these strip away the trivial and the temporary and they leave that which is worth staying for.

So “we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.” That is the hope we discover. We see the glory of God because God is present with us in trial, and Jesus is the end and goal of our striving.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, fill me with rejoicing in all circumstances so that others may see the power of hope.*

Amen.

You may find this song of suffering encouraging...

<https://vimeo.com/71765067>

Day Three: Mark 8:27-38

On the way [Jesus] asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ... "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Jesus asks his disciples what other people are saying about him. Was Jesus having an "identity crisis?"

We sometimes ask similar questions. "Does this dress make me look fat?" "Do I look dumb with this haircut?" We ask those questions because we tend to get our identity, or our validation from the opinion of others.

During our adolescence we often wrestle with the question of our own identity. Nothing seems as important as discovering who we are. But we find out that most of our self-understanding is in relation to others. We're taller than some, but shorter than others. We have more musical skill than this person, but less athletic skill than this other person. We judge whether we are good looking or fun or successful by comparing ourselves to others. And we too often seem to fall short.

But as we get older, we find out that those others are also struggling. They also see

mostly their faults and failings. They too are looking for to stand next to someone who is weaker in order to feel better about themselves.

Jesus is doing the opposite. He asks who others say he is because he wants to teach others, especially his disciples, who he really is. He does not need to "discover" himself. He wants to reveal himself – the Savior – the Son of God who was promised.

Jesus is in a different category from us. He is so much greater, and yet he immediately explains that he is soon going to suffer and die for our sins.

Compared to Jesus, we are nothing. And yet he reveals who we really are, and what our real value is. We are worth his very life. We are worth the sacrifice of the Son of God.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, who am I? Because of you I know that I am a sinner. Because of you I know that I am saved. Because of you I know that I am dearly loved. Amen.*

Day Four: Psalm 22:1

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

Are you ever depressed? The World Health Organization estimates that 350 million people are generally depressed. In some states, almost 15% of adults suffer from depression. In others it is as low as 5%. But I would guess that nearly everyone has gone through times of deep sadness, or severe depression.

God gave a child to Sarah and Abraham in their old age. They were so overjoyed, they named him Isaac, which means laughter. But that does not mean that they were never sad again. They knew that they would not live to see much of Isaac's life.

Paul tells the persecuted believers in Rome, "we also rejoice in our sufferings," but that didn't take away the suffering itself. They knew joy and suffering at the same time because they could see the world's brokenness and Jesus' victory at the same time.

In the same way, Jesus knew what it means to be sad. He was greatly glorified at the

Transfiguration, and yet the conversation he had there with Moses and Elijah was about his coming sacrifice. And his first words to his friends was about his coming suffering.

The psalm which is most quoted in the New Testament is not Psalm 23, a comforting song about our Lord's presence and protection. It is Psalm 22, a song about those days when it feels like God is far away. It seems to us as if God is not listening, as if he does not care.

These are the words of Jesus on the cross, and the psalm describes his physical suffering. But then it says, "the afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord!"

Yes, we are sometimes depressed. We are sometimes afflicted. But we are always, always victorious, because we continuously share the love of Jesus, who overcame death.

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, let today be a rejoicing day for me. My body and mind may know sadness, but let my spirit be filled with victory. Let me triumph over the evil around me, and lay hold of new life. Amen.*