

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

July 29, 2018, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Achieving or Receiving Your Name

Genesis 11:1-9; 12:1-5

Introduction:

A. Jeff's soccer story shows the pull to achieve your name

It's so great worshipping God through song and hearing about the friendships we're forming with people from all over the world through our English as a Second Language ministry. It's a blessing to see God working through our church family in these kinds of ways, to His glory! And now let's ask God to work as we look together to His Word...

So in case you hadn't already heard, your Pastor of Family Ministries had quite the basketball career growing up in Dallas. I made it all the way to warming the bench on the 9th grade team. See the coach in the middle of the picture. Move two over to the right, and you'll see me, the one with the really serious face and shredded arms.

And did I mention yet that we won the championship? Well, we did, and I like to think those "garbage time" minutes I played in a few games whose outcome was long decided were key to our championship success.

Then after our championship glory, I didn't rest of my laurels. That summer I kept honing my craft, playing in an AAU basketball league. I was improving and was playing with all the guys from the junior highs feeding into my high school, and that summer became confident I would make the high school basketball team. Still probably warming the bench, on the junior varsity, but good enough to make the team, because ball don't lie.

But then, athletic tragedy struck. Late in the summer I badly sprained my ankle and went in a walking boot for six weeks. So when basketball tryouts came around, I sat out the first few days because my ankle was still hurt, and when I joined in the middle of things, I was out of shape and rusty and didn't play that well. Long story short, I did not make the team.

Basketball back then was a big part of my life, so I was bummed. But I also noticed something beyond a normal sadness. Having just entered high school, I became anxious. Now that I wasn't on the basketball team, who was I to my peers? My incoming grade alone had over 600 students, so it was easy to get lost in the shuffle if you didn't make a name for yourself.

I had friends, but I was no longer an athlete, and I wasn't in the band, and I didn't really care about academics. I wasn't interested in theater or student government, and I didn't have a

girlfriend. Back then my faith wasn't important to me, so I didn't fit with the church kids, but I also wasn't a wild partier, so I didn't fit there either.

Anxious about making a name for myself as I started high school, I tried out for the soccer team. Growing up I played soccer, and was a pretty decent goalie, but I'd lost interest along the way. Yet I still tried out for the soccer team, to play a sport I didn't even want to play, all because of this pressure to be something, to matter.

B. Trying to make a name for ourselves has pitfalls

And I bet I'm not the only one here who has made a silly decision trying to make a name. We all, whatever our beliefs, are prone to really focus on trying to make a name for ourselves. And sometimes it leads to an anxiety that drives you to try out for a team playing a sport that you don't even want to. But sometimes this desire to make a name leads somewhere darker.

This week I went to a coffee shop to work on this message. As I'm working I look out the window and see a young woman take a picture of two of her friends posed together. They come over and look at the phone and decide they need to take another picture. So they pose in the same way again and take another pic. Five minutes later, I look up, and the same process is still happening. And it's just a picture at a coffee shop, it's not like they're posing in front of the Eiffel Tower or something. And these young women were very beautiful, striking. So I'm guessing all their pics looked great, yet they kept taking another, and another, and another in the same pose.

Now I don't know what was going on in their hearts, but as I was thinking about this message, I wondered if they were trying to make their name through their beauty. If they were going to post the best of the pics on social media and then keep checking it to see how many likes, comments, and hearts rolled in. I wondered if this led to a restlessness in their spirits, the affirmation they receive never quite enough. And then I thought about the person who also posts their pictures and thoughts and activities online but doesn't get affirmed. The one whose posts gets crickets, or even criticism. The person who feels like everyone else has more followers and likes and better lives, and how that person might conclude they're an ugly loser, and what dark places that thinking might lead. A 2017 government public health study of 1,500 young people found that 7 in 10 felt worse about their body image after using Instagram.¹

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-42705881>. Accessed online 7/27/18.

C. God's Word guides us to a name that matters

And it's not that everyone is too focused on their appearance, but we all want to feel we're valuable, important in some meaningful way, to have a good name. Yet this desire can make us vulnerable to destructive decisions as we try to achieve a name, whether that name is based on our looks, athletic ability, smarts, popularity, career success, productivity, homemaking, parenting, other things.

And pastors are vulnerable too. No one wants to be the pastor who's not that well liked, or who's known as a boring preacher, or who is there when the church closes its doors for good. So I need what God's Word has to say this morning, we all do.

So let's check out what the Bible has to say about a name that matters. If you've got a Bible, turn to its very first book, Genesis. To Genesis chapter 11. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers you see are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers. Genesis is the Bible's book of beginnings, so the event we're looking at here in chapter 11 happened early in human history.

I. Babylonians pursue achieving their name

A. Proud ambition in achieving a name (11:1-4)

We'll start in verse 1 of Genesis chapter 11, where God's Word says, "11 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. ² As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there."

So at this early point in human history there's a common language that everyone knows, and people decide to settle in the area that later came to be known as Babylon. In the Bible, Babylon often symbolizes a godless society, one where people try to make their name apart from God. And these ancient people follow this pattern, starting in verse 3, which says:

³ They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens,..."

So these early people have ingenuity, lacking stone, they figure out how to make quality bricks and then prepare to build a city and tower. Later in Babylon's history their cities were built with a step tower called a ziggurat. The ziggurats served as a temple for a false god and as a prideful demonstration of Babylonian might. Here's a picture of a drawing of a ziggurat. The tower they plan to build here in Genesis 11 might look like this. But whatever it looked like,

their city and tower plans were displeasing to God because of the motivations behind them.

Look back again at verse 4, which says:

⁴Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

In verse 4 we see the people’s proud ambition. They’re building this city for themselves and describe its tower in grandiose terms, “our tower reaching all the way to the heavens.” And why are they building? The first reason given in verse 4 is to make a name for themselves.

And when your goal is to achieve a name apart from God, this is about the best one can hope for. That we pull off doing an amazing thing, like building a tower that reaches to the heavens, and maybe that accomplishment leads to more fame and career opportunities and wealth. And maybe the tower even lasts for some years after we’re dead, our name remembered because of our great tower.

In the short term, things are sometimes better if you work super hard to achieve a name. But where is it ultimately headed? In the long run we still die, eventually the tower we built falls, the attempts to achieve a name becoming fruitless. Kind of like trying to achieve a name on the high school sports team, or by getting a lot of attention on social media, or by living in a certain neighborhood.

B. Insecurity in achieving a name (11:4)

These things are temporary, fading and you’re not even guaranteed to achieve them. Perhaps that’s why these ancient people, while discussing their grand plans to achieve a name also appear insecure. We see it at the end of verse 4, where they say that they need to build because, “otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

That’s their second reason for building. In their insecurity, they want to huddle together, attempting to make a name and have some control and avoid spreading out over the earth. In the book of Genesis, God’s repeated command to the early people was to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. So trying to make their own name as they build a grand city and tower and stay in one place forever was in direct opposition to God’s command.

Now it’s not surprising that these ancient people’s actions appear insecure. For when one moves away from God and tries to achieve their own name, whatever they’re trying to achieve is uncertain, unstable, and temporary, which can lead to insecurity. For a secure name can only be

given by Someone Who never changes and will always be around and has power over death. Someone Who will always love you perfectly and forgive every single one of your failings and Who can renew your heart in such a complete way that one day you'll like everything about yourself. That kind of name is not coming from a tower, I don't care how fancy it is, and it's not coming from huddling with any group of people, no matter how impressive they seem.

C. Futility of achieving a name (11:5-9)

Yet sadly, these ancient people chose this path away from God, and starting in verse 5 we see the tragic consequences. It says: “⁵ But the LORD came down to see the city and the tower the people were building.”

The people sought to build a tower reaching to the heavens, but no matter how high their tower rose, metaphorically speaking, God still had to come down to see their work. Though relative to God, their efforts were nothing, God still took seriously mankind's potential for collective evil when united in rebellion. So starting in verse 6, God acts to discipline and to graciously limit their ability to sin together in the future. Verse 6 says:

⁶The LORD said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” ⁸So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. ⁹That is why it was called Babel—because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

The people thought they could make a name for themselves and disobey God's command to fill the earth by uniting in one place. But God thwarts their efforts in verses 6-9. Rather than making a great name, the only name they have is one of infamy, known as the people whose rebellion messed things up for everyone, like me, who has ever struggled in a language class. Known as the people who never finished their grand city or tower, reduced in the end to just babbling nonsense to each other. Despite their best efforts to huddle together, spread out in accordance with God's will. Their desire to make a name for themselves apart from God leading nowhere to nothing. And Genesis chapter 11 ends with no note of hope after the people's failures to achieve their name. There's just discipline, confusion, and scattering, followed by a list of generations.

II. Abram receives his name

A. God initiates the blessing (12:1-3)

But then, Genesis 12 sounds a note of hope. Perhaps there is a way to a name that lasts. Please follow along as I read, starting in verse 1 of chapter 12, which says:

12 The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. ²“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. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

Unlike in chapter 11, where the people act on their own, here in chapter 12, God initiates. God calls a man named Abram to leave his country, people, and household to go to a land God will show him.

And then God makes incredible promises. Look back at the five “I wills” that God says to Abram in verses 2 and 3. Abram and his numerous descendants are going to be so abundantly blessed that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed through them. The words “bless” and “blessing” here five times in just these two verses, with one of the blessings being a promise to make Abram’s name great.

Overall what God offers here is way, way greater than what Abram can bring to the table, but that doesn’t mean things are easy for Abram. For Abram comes from a family that serves false gods² and he’s called to leave those behind. And also to leave his homeland without even knowing where God will direct him. And Abram is 75, and he and his wife Sarai are childless and past normal childbearing age. So it’d be hard to believe for one child, let alone that one day a great nation would descend from you that would somehow bless the entire world and make your name great.

B. Abram initially responds with faith (12:4-5)

Yet Abram still responds with faith in God’s Word, trusting that God would do all He promised. Starting in verse 4, Abram’s faith is expressed in obedience. God’s Word says:

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

² Joshua 24:2

A great step of faith here in these verses by Abram. His story continues through Genesis chapter 25, so we can't cover it all. But Abram does have other great moments that express trust in God's promises.

And later in the story, God changes Abram's name to "Abraham", which in the Hebrew language sounds similar to the word for "father of a multitude".³ And Abraham is that, for he is the father of the Jewish people, along with other nations. And through Abraham's descendent, Jesus, countless people have been literally blessed for all eternity.

And today, we're still talking about Abraham. And get this, Jews, Christians, and Muslims all esteem Abraham as a man of great faith in God. That's literally billions of people, with different worldviews, honoring Abraham's name 4,000 years after he lived. I'd say God kept His promises to Abraham, faithful even when Abraham himself was faithless.

C. It's hard to keep receiving our name

For there were also times when Abraham lacked faith. There were points where Abraham sinned greatly, especially against his wife, causing huge harm. Points where Abraham doubted God as the years went on and some promises were not yet fulfilled. Points where Abraham tried to take matters into his own hands and achieve things on his own instead of receiving his name.

And Christians today still struggle in these sorts of ways. In Jesus we have received even more than Abraham, yet it's hard to keep receiving our name. It takes faith to find our significance in God, especially since, unlike Abraham, we're not guaranteed specific earthly blessings like descendants or renown or protection from enemies.

So it's tempting to try to achieve our name on our own. For if we succeed, benefits can come quickly, and they are things we can see, like attention or influence or money. While, in contrast, receiving your name from God is largely about things we can't see, and some of the blessings won't be experienced until eternity.

D. Inner ring illustration shows the name Jesus-followers received

Yet it's so important to receive our name from God. I once heard an illustration from another pastor named Tim Keller that has helped me with this. He starts by talking about C.S. Lewis, because what pastor doesn't like a good C.S. Lewis quote. Lewis once gave an address

³ *Bible Knowledge Commentary* on Genesis 17 – "But in Hebrew the name **Abraham** (*'abrāhām*) sounds similar to "father of a multitude" (*'ab hāmôn*) of **nations** (17:4-5)"

called “The Inner Ring” where he observes that a driving motivation of the human heart is the desire to be part of some group we admire. And if we’re not in that inner ring, we have trouble living with ourselves.

It’s why some people work super hard, not for the money itself, but because it allows them to get in the club. Or why some scholars work really hard to get inside the ring of the academic elite. Or why a young gang member is willing to do horrible things, desperate to know they’re in the inner ring.

If you’re outside the ring, you might feel insecure or depressed or envious, you might make foolish compromises to try to get in the ring. If you’re in the ring, you may think you’re better than people outside your ring, you might make destructive choices to stay in the ring, you might discover the ring wasn’t as great as you thought it was. In either case, inside or outside the ring, all your relationships are about you.

Unless you receive, by faith in Jesus, that you’ve been admitted into the ultimate inner ring, with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴ That in Jesus, as the Bible book of Ephesians chapter 1 says, we have received every spiritual blessing, chosen before creation, adopted in love, freely given glorious grace, redemption, and forgiveness, sealed by the Spirit into the Son’s beloved relationship with the Father. Jesus literally dying to love us, to forgive all our sins, to bring us home to the ultimate inner ring, forever. That’s who you are Christian, that’s your name, one way better than any you can achieve.

Conclusion:

A. We’re tempted to achieve a name

So let’s keep receiving our name, knowing we are great because we share in Christ’s greatness. Receive your name in Jesus, that’s our application today. Babylon says, “Come, let’s make our name great.” And when we respond to that temptation to achieve our name, all kinds of negative impacts can result in our walks with God, our mental health, our relationships.

The damage begins as soon as we decide that we only matter if we look a certain way, or have the right date to the dance, or get the promotion, or live up to certain moral standards, or have visible success in our ministry efforts, or have kids who are turning out well.

Every day we get to choose. Will we restlessly try to achieve a name in things we can see? Or will we learn to trust God as we receive our name in Jesus?

⁴ Tim Keller sermon entitled *Hope for the Church*.

B. Let's keep receiving our name in Jesus

May we keep receiving our name and helping each other. I need reminders and encouragement in this, and I bet you do too. I know we don't do this kind of thing much around here, but to get us started in that encouragement, would you turn now to the person next to you and say to each other, "Let's receive our name in Jesus." "Let's receive our name in Jesus."

Amen. And if you don't yet know Jesus, I'm not here to criticize the ways you've tried to make a name for yourself. We all do it in various ways and long for our name to matter. Our heart here at Northwest is for you to join us in receiving the secure name of Jesus. That God's Son came and lived a perfect life in your place, on your behalf, and then on the cross took the penalty for all your sins. Jesus took the punishment, shame, and aloneness that you deserve for your rebellion against God: for every way you've ever hurt people, for every good thing you've failed to do, for every wicked thought you've ever had. Jesus was forsaken for you.

And now He invites you to come to Him, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead, so that you can receive His forgiveness and love and grace and purpose and people, and the greatest name, the name of Jesus. You really are loved like that. So I pray that you receive the name of Jesus, and I'd love to hear about it if you take that step in faith.

For all of us, no more attempts at achieving a name that ultimately lead nowhere; no more being defined by our failures and inability to measure up. Receiving, with gratitude, the greatness of the Son of God Himself, that's our name. Let's keep receiving it. For is there any mission in life greater than learning how to receive such overwhelming grace? Let's pray...

Dismissal - Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.