

Welcome! Today, we're kicking off a brand new series, our second series in this year of Garden to City, and it's called "The Family of God." As we've said each week so far, the point of this yearlong journey is to better understand the 'story of God' and as a result, better understand our own stories. When we're able to see the themes throughout all of Scripture, we can realize that the Bible is not a series of random books thrown together, but rather a sweeping, nuanced, comprehensive portrait of who God is, and who we are to be in response.

SO! A core question we'll be investigating in this new series, Family of God, is this: "What does it mean to be a part of the Family of God?" What role do we play? Do we actually believe that we're part of the family? How do we live as brothers and sisters? How do we understand the story of our ancestors? The legacy of faith we're adopted into... How can WE be known as men and women of faith by our children and their children?

ILLUSTRATION: Last Sunday I was in the car on the way home from church listening to NPR and I heard a piece about a boy named David Paladino who grew up in an Italian neighborhood, west of Chicago. His family was Italian-American, caucasian, living in an upper-middle class neighborhood, but Dave grew up realizing that his skin was different than his sisters. His was darker. His hair was different. Kids in Sunday School would tease him. He didn't look like he fit into his family portraits. But his parents swore that he was theirs. Well, come to find out, after this child grew up to be a young man in his mid-20s, he found out that his birth father was an African American man his mother dated in high-school. David said it was like a 'symphony surged through his brain. It was a breakthrough and a relief.' And contrary to his mom's fears, David wasn't angry with her at all.

This young man didn't truly know who he was for the first quarter of his life. And this missing puzzle piece gave him what he needed to make sense of his experience. He eventually tracked his biological father down in Memphis, Tennessee and went and met him, and their family is stronger now than ever before.

I believe that we can only truly understand our own stories when we understand the chapters that led up to our birth. How did we get here? Why are we here?

For most of us, we don't trace our roots to the Ancient Middle-East, so why are we talking about Abraham today? He's likely not our blood relative... But the unique thing about Christianity is the concept of adoption into the Family of God. Because God isn't in the business of Divine Pregnancies anymore, none of us can claim that God is our biological father, and yet... Here we are. Brothers and sisters in the same family. Fully, whole-heartedly adopted into the same family. The gracious, loving, adoptive family of God. People of all races, all languages, every tribe, every tongue.

So what does it mean to be a part of this family? That's what this series is about. We'll be looking at the Patriarchs and Matriarchs and learning from them what it means to walk this path of faith.

The beautiful thing about the "Family of God," is that everyone has a place at the table and everyone has a name.

And that's a little bit about what I want to talk about here today: Names. This is a big part of Abram's story (and quite a few stories in the Bible). We see names and name changes all throughout the Bible. Abram to Abraham. Jacob to Israel. Simon to Peter. Saul to Paul.

We all have our birth names, our "given" names. Mine is John. It's a very common name with

Hebrew roots, meaning “YHWH is gracious” or “God has shown us grace.” It was popularized by the two New Testament figures: John the Baptist and the Apostle John. It was the #1 name for men in America for decades in the early 1900s. Now it’s somewhere around #26.

My parents named me John for no particular reason. I texted my mom to ask “Why John?” and she texted back, “Only because we liked the name. Dad didn't like the name Wesley.” I'll take John over Wesley. “YHWH is gracious” over “Western meadow.” (Sorry if there are any Wesleys here!)

We’ve all been given a name. Either by our birth parents, foster parents, family members... Somehow, we ended up with a “given name.”

What’s in a name? There are some REALLY interesting studies when it comes to names.

ILLUSTRATION:

- Scholars have found that names with positive connotations like “Joy” and “Grace” perform better than names with negative connotations.
- Names that start with letter closer to the beginning of the alphabet perform better in school than Z names. So, broadly speaking, Alisons and Andrews perform better in school than Vanessas or Wesleys! Some attribute it to schools doing everything in alphabetical order, so that students early in the alphabet get more attention.

- In 2006, American economists looked at the link between [names] and academic prominence, finding that those with initials early in the alphabet were markedly more likely to work in prestigious university departments and win a Nobel Prize.

- To test this theory, Professor Richard Wiseman invited participants to rate how successful they thought they were in assorted aspects of their life – including career, finances, health and ‘life in general’. The scores were then combined into an overall measure of success. The 15,000 people who responded also provided their age, sex and surname. “We saw that the further down the alphabet your [name] came, the less likely you were to be successful,” says Wiseman.

- People throughout history have changed names to change their identities, and therefore (HOPEFULLY!) improve their likelihood of success.

- Whoopi Goldberg = Caryn Elaine Johnson
- Ludacris = Christopher Brian Bridges
- Lady Gaga = Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta
- 50 Cent = Curtis James Jackson III
- Elton John = Reginald Kenneth Dwight
- Snoop Dogg = Calvin Cordozar Broadus
- Marilyn Manson = Brian Hugh Warner
- Names carry incredible weight. Think about some of these names...

- You’re most likely not going to name your next child Adolf, Lucifer, or Vlad the Impaler (that’s the guy that inspired the Dracula legend.) Some Biblical names carry positive connotations, like Adam, Matthew, Peter, David, Paul... Some don’t. Like Judas, Cain, Job, Herod. You just don’t see parents wanting to wish that on their children.

So here we are 5 weeks into the Bible, and we come to the story of Abram and Sarai. Who we now know as Abraham and Sarah.

Abraham: Began as Abram, meaning "Father." Terah, his father, named him Abram in a sort of prophetic way, but Abram wasn't able to see it, especially with his lack of children, and his nomadic lifestyle. Spent the first 75 years of his life with his name as an embarrassment, we'd have to assume. Like having an unemployed friend "Rich McMillions" or something. Or being named "Joy" but battling with clinical depression for your whole life. Seems like a cruel joke. This was the reality that Abram lived in for almost his entire life.

We see this frustration come to a head in a conversation between Abram and God in Genesis 15, which we'll talk about in a moment, but let's dig into some of the backstory first.

How did Abram and Sarai, a childless, nomadic couple from 3,800 years ago turn into some of the most celebrated and revered spiritual parents in all of history? Abraham, the Father of three of today's major religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. 54% of the world's population look to Abraham as their spiritual ancestor. 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims and 14 million Jews.

Who was this person, Abram?

It's believed that Abram was born around the year 1800 BC. So he was about the same distance from Jesus' time period as we are, just 2000 years before. He is the first of three Biblical patriarchs, the others being Isaac and Jacob, who we'll look at in the coming weeks.

In Abram's life, there are a few major moments that I want to look at together.

- The first is his obedience to follow God's call, within the first moments we see Abram appear in Scripture...

- Genesis 12:1,4a *"The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father's family, and go to the land that I will show you. 4 So Abram departed as the Lord had instructed, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran."*

- "Yay Abram! Good job!" Looks like very little hesitation on Abram's part. God says "GO!" and he goes. He's demonstrating faith from the get-go. (Well... I guess he's 75 years old at this point, so he's a little late to the game, but NONETHELESS! Good job.)

- Over the next few verses... Abram travels, builds an altar, travels some more, builds another altar to the Lord... Then famine strikes. And our hero of the story makes his first, really dumb decision. "Let's go to Egypt!" That's never a good idea. Especially in Biblical times.

- Now we can't rag on him too hard, we don't know how terrible the famine was, but he felt as though he had to go to Egypt, where at least there was food and water available. Here's the problem: Sarai was beautiful. Very beautiful. And Abram was worried that Egyptians would notice her beauty, want to marry her, and kill him to get to her. So, what does he do? To all the married men here, here's a GREAT WAY to get your wife angry.

- Genesis 12:13 *"So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you." 14 And sure enough, when Abram arrived in Egypt, everyone noticed Sarai's beauty. 15 When the palace officials saw her, they sang her praises to Pharaoh, their king, and Sarai was taken into his palace. 16 Then Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts because of her—sheep, goats, cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels."*

- K, we're all adults here, we know what that means... Abram dodged a bullet there, but sort of threw his wife under the bus. Pharaoh eventually figures it out: *"17 But the Lord sent terrible plagues upon Pharaoh and his household because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram and accused him sharply. "What have you done to me?" he demanded. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' and allow me to take her as my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and get out of here!" 20 Pharaoh ordered some of his men to escort them, and he sent Abram out of the country, along with his wife and all his possessions."*

- SO, a few verses in, our faithful, noble Abram is a bit of a coward. Things are a bit rocky with the Mrs. But hey! They've got wealth now. They were able to keep all the possessions Pharaoh gave them in Egypt. And an armed guard too!

- Genesis 15, the Lord speaks to Abram again. They have this back and forth... And this is where some of Abram's lifelong frustration comes to a head. The lifelong disconnect between his given name and his actual reality...

- "1 The Lord spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great." 2 But Abram replied, "O Sovereign Lord, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. 3 You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir." (Abram is saying, "GREAT! Thanks for the blessings, God, but I'd rather actually be a father, what's the deal?!") 4 Then the Lord said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." 5 Then the Lord took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

- All right, now we're talking! God seems to have forgiven the blunder in Egypt with Pharaoh, he's talking with Abram again, another promise to make Abram into someone great, a father with more descendants than the stars in the sky... Abram could ACTUALLY live into his name! His destiny could be very close to being realized.

- So that leads us to Genesis 16. God gives this big promise but Abram and Sarai don't see it happening. We don't know how much time has passed between this conversation between God and Abram... They're obviously at the point where they're getting discouraged, trying to get pregnant with no luck. Sarai, probably in a moment of hopelessness, suggests that Abram sleep with her servant Hagar. (Household practices at the time would mean that the child would still belong to Abram and Sarai, even if Hagar was the birth mother. So yes... This was a WAY that this promise could come to fruition, but...) Hagar was a servant from EGYPT, from that whole escapade, and I don't think that's an insignificant detail. Back to Egypt? Mistake coming? Maybe...

- As any of you married women might have seen coming, as soon as Hagar becomes pregnant, things get a little tense between Sarai and Hagar. Sarai and Hagar, not besties anymore. (Sister Wives on TLC, not a great model for family health.) They fight back and forth, Ishmael is born, they run away, then come back, but eventually in Genesis 21, they send Hagar and Ishmael out to the wilderness, where God does provide for them, and eventually, through Ishmael's lineage, Muhammad is born, and there is the birth of Islam. (Out of Isaac comes Judaism and eventually Christianity, Islam through Ishmael's line.)

- 13 years pass... We don't know what those years were like, but it likely didn't have a whole lot happening in it, at least the authors of Scripture didn't think so. God shows up again to Abram, but this time... With a bold statement. One that would speak to Abram so intimately, so perfectly, that it would change Abram's life forever.

- GENESIS 17: *"1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, "I am El-Shaddai—'God Almighty.' ... 2 I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to give you countless descendants." 3 At this, Abram fell face down on the ground. Then God said to him, 4 "This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of a multitude of nations! 5 What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram. Instead, you will be called Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. 6 I will make you extremely fruitful. Your descendants will become many nations, and kings will be among them!"*

- God takes Abram's birth name, which meant "Father" and changed it to Abraham, which meant "Father of Many Nations." God takes a source of Abram's greatest hurt and feeling of failure and presses into it even further, turning it into a place of greatest strength and true destiny. He affirms his birth identity and exceeds his wildest expectations to become his spiritual identity.

- ILLUSTRATION: A friend of mine grew up in a very religious household. His parents were strict, very traditional, Christian fundamentalist values and expectations of their children... And my friend grew up with the phrase "Unworthy son" clanging around inside him. He always felt that he couldn't live up to his parent's expectations. He wasn't worthy of their love. And this phrase stuck with him into his adulthood. So much so that when he started to have kids, it really started to mess with him. Here he was this dad, but still felt like an 'unworthy son.' Until God did something miraculous in his life. During a moment of prayer, he felt as though God said, "You are not an 'unworthy son', I call you a 'worthy father.'"

- That's how God works. He takes the lies we believe about ourselves, goes one step further and flips them on their heads. Our greatest weaknesses, in Christ, become our greatest strengths. No longer was he an 'unworthy son'... He was now a 'worthy father.' God is so beautiful in how He works in our lives sometimes.

- It's not only Abram's name that is changed... God also changes Sarai's name...

- *"15 Then God said to Abraham, "Regarding Sarai, your wife—her name will no longer be Sarai. From now on her name will be Sarah. 16 And I will bless her and give you a son from her! Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations..."*

- God takes Sarai, which meant 'princess' to Sarah, which meant "Mother of Many Nations." She goes from "princess" which is a nice name, it reflects her beauty, but it also insinuates adolescence, or immaturity... To "Mother of Many Nations", all before she has ever given birth to one child.

- Here's the beautiful thing. As soon as Abram is changed to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, the very next verses where their names show up, it's Abraham and Sarah. No hesitation. No season of time where they're debating or asking friends for wisdom or going to their pastor to see if what God said was true... They immediately accept and walk in their new identities. In complete faith... Because Sarah wasn't pregnant at that time! This is just the same as Noah building the Ark before the first rain-drop fell. Complete faith.

- 4 chapters later, Genesis 21: The Birth of Isaac, they named him Isaac which means "Laughter" ... You can see the joy in Abraham and Sarah in the naming of their son. Fulfillment. A covenant confirmed. Against all odds, against a lifetime of doubt and frustration. A son.

This story has always resonated with me. So much so that 3 months ago we named our firstborn son Avraham (the original Hebrew version of Abraham). My father-in-law who passed away recently, his Hebrew name was Avraham. And I pray that maybe, someday, my son sees the hope and optimism his father had for him in naming him. And who knows... maybe God will change his name. Maybe God will give him a different spiritual identity; a different path than we had hoped for,

which would be wonderful, because God knows so much better than we do.

Here's where I want to end. A quick Hebrew lesson... In honor of my late father-in-law.

In Hebrew, especially in their ancient texts, numbers and letters had INCREDIBLE significance, and I want to share some Rabbinic tradition with you... Something that really opened my eyes to the beauty of Abraham and Sarah's story.

The name we see in scripture for God is Yahweh, which was actually written YHVH. **Yod-Hay-Vav-Hay**. Four characters. Each of them with incredible significance. This is heady stuff, but stick with me for a minute, this is beautiful stuff.

Yod - 10th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Represents completion. You is also the smallest of the Hebrew letters. It's considered the "atomic particle" of the whole alphabet, meaning all other letters begin and are built off of a Yod. It's like the dot your pen makes when it first is set down on the paper. Since it's used to form all the other letters, for Hebrew people the Yod represents God's omnipresence in all of Creation. The first letter of God's name, Yod, speaks to His 'being in everything.' (Also, Jesus' name in its original language, Yeshua, begins with the same letter. Not a coincidence.)

Hay - This is the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet and is believed to represent Spirit. This shows up twice in YHVH. So Hay being the fifth letter, being a combination of 1st and 4th letters of the Hebrew alphabet, representing the Spirit of God on earth (or with humanity). And this is represented twice in YHVH. The number 5 is very important. It's showing that "Immanuel" - "God with us" in Hebrew tradition.

Vav - The sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet, this traditionally represents MAN.

- Man was created on the 6th day.

- Man works for 6 days and then rests.

- There are a number of significant instances where 6 and man are connected in Scripture.

- SO... **YHVH**, the name God wants us to know Him by, the name He says is His "eternal name" in Exodus 3, simply means Y(God) H(Spirit) V(Man) H(Spirit).

- Here's why this is so incredible. In taking Abram and Sarai and renaming them Abraham and Sarah, God took the "hays" from His name, and placed them into the 5th slot of their names. Abraham. Sarah. The number 5 representing the Spirit of God with humanity, on earth, intimately



connected.

- We now see the "Spirit" of God in the mother and father of God's people. Each of them have the "hay" placed in the fifth character of their name, given by God Himself.

So what do we do with this? This is incredible information that brings Scripture to life for us, but come Monday morning, what does this mean for us?

I'll leave you with this.

- The world is constantly trying to tell you who you are. Just as Abram's birth name was hanging over him. The world is telling you that you're defined by what you own, how much power you have at work, how well-behaved your children are, how many degrees you have from prestigious schools, how many tropical vacations you can go on... We need to resist being NAMED by the world. The world doesn't know us.

- We need to go to the Father and ask Him... "Who do you call me? Now that I've been adopted into the Family of God... What is the name You've given me?"

- It's easy to listen to the world. It's easy to listen to the words that the Enemy whispers again and again to us, hoping that the repetition will allow it to take root. If we gave you a few minutes of quiet here, I bet you could write down dozens of lies that you've likely been believing for most of your life.

- Liar, cheater, fat, lazy, cheap, unworthy, broken... I did this exercise once. Not super fun, but shocking how quickly the words come out.

- But what's hard, and takes some real work, is to listen to God, and to trust that what He says is true.

Because the world also had a lot to say about Jesus. But Jesus devoted Himself to living in His true identity. It was something that came up time and time again in His life.

- People tried to define him by his family, saying "Isn't he just the carpenter's son?"

- The Enemy tried to get Him to question His identity, saying "Are you REALLY the son of God? Did God really say that?"

- Pharisees would say, "Who do you think you are?! Making claims like that?!"

- All the way to His last moments on the Cross, where a sarcastic sign hung above his head saying "King of the Jews."

Everyone trying to control and label and 'put in a box' someone that God wouldn't allow. And just as Abram's struggles with identity didn't end up having the last word, Jesus wants us to walk in the freedom and joy of our true identities as well.

Let's go to Him in prayer and ask for exactly that..