

## HOME AND FAMILY IN BIBLE TIMES

### Children in the Family

"Sons are a heritage from the LORD, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them. They will not be put to shame when they contend with their enemies in the gate" (Ps 127:3-5). With words like these, the Bible reminds us that children are precious gifts from our God. In this lesson we examine the customs surrounding the birth and early childhood of children in the Bible.

### The Desire for Children

In Bible times, most women had a deep longing to have children. If a woman had no children, it was a source of deep sorrow to her.

Gen 30:1 When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!"

1 Sam 1:6 (Hannah's womb was closed by the LORD and it made her very sad.)

Several times in the Bible, the LORD brought a child to a family when a woman was barren or well past her child-bearing years. These were times of special joy and gladness.

#### Scripture Study

How did Jesus use the illustration of a woman in labor to teach an important spiritual truth? See Jn 16:21-22

### Caring for Infant Children

Soon after birth, a newborn child would be washed. Then salt would be rubbed into the skin to harden it. After that, the baby would be wrapped in "swaddling cloths." These were linen or cotton bandages that

were four or five inches wide and 15-18 feet long. That wrap would cover the forehead and chin as well as the rest of the body (Eze 16:4; Lk 2:12).

### "New Birth"

The physical birth of a child is one kind of new birth that the Bible talks about, but Jesus said to Nicodemus, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again'" (Jn 3:3-7). At first Nicodemus was surprised, thinking that somehow he would have to come out of his mother's womb again in order to be "born again." But Jesus was talking about being born again *by the Spirit*. When the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Jesus—whether through infant baptism or later on as adults—we are *born again*. We have a new life, new hope, and new joys because of Christ.

1 Pet 1:3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead

1 Pet 1:23 For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.

### After the Birth of a Child

#### Circumcision

After a child was born, there were important things that needed to take place. In Old Testament times, if the child was a male, he would be circumcised eight days after his birth. Circumcision was done in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham (Gen 17:9-14). This act was symbolic of the fact that the Jews were separate from the other nations of the world. It was also symbolic of the fact that all uncleanness (sin) had been cut off. They were God's people who were to be holy unto Him. They were the people through whom He had chosen to send His own Son. Circumcision was a sign of the relationship the people had with God—similar in ways to the New Testament sacrament of baptism. Jesus Himself was circumcised (Lk

2:27) according to the Law of Moses.

Circumcision was a law that was in place until Christ came. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul says, "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Gal 6:15). What do you think Romans 2:29 means when it talks of "circumcision of the heart?"

Rom 2:29 No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

### Naming the Child

For male children, their names were officially given at the time of their circumcision. Names of boys and girls had generally more significance in Bible times than names that are chosen today. Names were chosen to emphasize a particular quality, character, or authority of the person being born. For example, the name *Jacob* means "deceiver" and the name *Isaac* means "laughter." See Gen 29-30 for other examples.



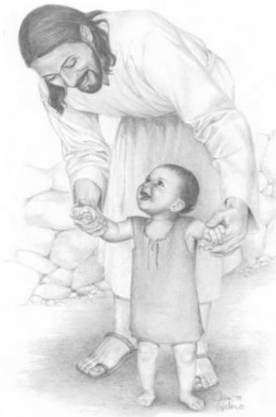
The name *Jesus* means "Jehovah saves." What the angel said to Joseph makes sense in Mt 1:21, "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

The names given to God in the Bible *describe exactly who God is and what He is like*.

- What are some of the names given to God?

### Offerings at Birth

When a child was born, the mother was considered ceremonially unclean. She would stay home for seven days if the child were a boy and fourteen days if the child were a girl. Thirty-three days after that



(sixty-six for a girl) it was time to make childbirth offerings at the temple. Ordinarily a lamb with a pigeon or dove were offered as a sin offering. In the case of a first-born child, redemption money was to be paid too according to Num 18:15-16. They were alternate offerings for those who were too poor to give the regular offering.

- What are the offerings of the *new birth*?

### Faith Like a Little Child

Jesus speaks at some length about children and faith (Mk 10:13-16). He says that we ought to receive the kingdom of God as little children. Little children simply listen and trust the words of their parents. This is how we can listen and trust the words of our loving Savior Jesus. There are a lot of ways in which it is desirable to "grow up," but we never want to grow up so much that we doubt the simple words and promises of the Lord.

### No Longer Milk, but Solid Food

Infants were fed with their mother's milk for the first two years or so of their lives. When they were weaned and began eating solid food, it was a time for celebration (Gen 21:8). In Heb 5:12-14 the writer speaks of the importance of spiritual "weaning." That as we grow in our faith, we want to move from an understand of the basics of Christianity to the more complex things.

May we all grow not only physically, but spiritually from infancy to mature adults with the help of our gracious God.

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### Resources

*Manners and Customs of Bible Lands* by Fred H. Wight  
*Bible Times and Customs* by Tim Gibson