

SARAI - SARAH (GEN. 17:15,16)

CHANGED PEOPLE #2

One missed punctuation changed the whole procedure for Western Union. In our day when email whisks communication all over the world within seconds, it's easy for us to forget that not too long ago sending a cable through Western Union was the fastest way to get a message overseas. A lady travelling in Europe saw a bracelet in the store display case that she desperately wanted. So she cabled her husband back here in the States. *Found a bracelet. Price 75 thousand dollars. May I buy it?* Her husband gulped when he read the price and immediately cabled back. *No. Price too high.* But the operator failed to put in the period. His wife's eyes lit up when she received the cable and read, *No price too high.* She bought the bracelet. Her husband sued Western Union. And the directive was handed down from the front office for the procedure to change. From that day on, all punctuations in Western Union cables were spelled out.

Just as a little misplaced punctuation can make a big difference in the meaning of a sentence, so a seemingly minor decision can make a big difference in the direction of our lives and even the future of the world.

Last week we began a series looking at changed people in the Bible. These are people whose names were changed as adults. You will recall that we looked at Abram whose name was changed to Abraham by God. Abram means exalted father; Abraham means father of many nations. So the change of name for Abraham was significant because of the meaning. Indeed, Abraham has become the father of many nations.

This morning, we want to consider Abraham's wife. And her name change is unique in that it wasn't made in order to change any meaning. All of the other 6 examples that we plan to look at had changes to names with another significant meaning. But this is not the case with Sarah's change of name. Sarai and Sarah both mean princess. In the Hebrew language, there is just the change of a vowel pointing - both Sarai and Sarah have exactly the same 3 consonants. God didn't change Sarai's name in order to change the meaning of her name. Why then did God change Sarai's name? There must have been some reason. It certainly must have been done to indicate some change in her life.

Notice God's words to Abraham changing Sarai's name with me as recorded in Genesis 17:15,16: God also said to Abraham, *As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.*

Now, because there is no meaning change connected with her name change, we are lead to look at Sarah's life to see if there was a significant change in her behavior or character before and after this change of name. And it is here, I believe, that we find the true significance of her name change. For there appears to be a real change in Sarah's basic tendencies before and after her change of name - she indeed appears to have become a changed person.

I would invite you to look with me at the major event that is given of Sarah's life before her name change, the work of God in her life at the time of her name change, and a representative event of her life that is found after her name change as we consider the importance of Sarai being changed to Sarah.

1. There is only one major event that is initiated by Sarah that is found in the Bible before her change of name. Sarah is involved in other events, of course, but Abram was the main initiator. But notice with me Sarai's part in the plot to help God fulfill his promise in Genesis 16 for it is generally overlooked that Sarai was the main initiator of this plan.

READ GENESIS 16:1-4A: Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, *the Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.* Abram agreed to what Sarai said, So after Abram had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

Now Sarah's role in this attempt to help God fulfill his promise is often overlooked. But in reality, Sarah was the one who first thought up this plan, she was the one who convinced Abram that it was a worthy plan, and she was the one who gave Hagar to Abram. Now I am certainly not trying to relieve Abram from any responsibility here, but it is clear from the Scriptures that Sarai was the one who hatched this plot to help God fulfill his promise.

Now the reasons for this human attempt to help God out are so clear that I won't spend much time on them. Sarai had been 65 years old when God first told them that they were going to have a child. Undoubtedly, Sarai had been trying to become pregnant for many years - ever since they were first married. She probably had come to the place where she doubted whether she was going to be able to have a child. But God's revelation to her husband and her must have brought new hope. But the years passed, and there was still no child. Finally, a little more than a decade after God first gave them the promise, Sarai decides it's time to help God fulfill his promise and she hatched this plan. From her standpoint, it represented a natural, accepted way in their culture to have a child. From her standpoint, it probably didn't seem to be that big of a deal. It probably seemed to be a little decision. For it was a commonly accepted practice in their culture. I am

sure that Sarai had no idea of the impact that this little manipulative plot would make. Do you think that she ever envisioned all of the Arab nations that would come from this union of Abraham with Hagar? Do you think that she ever envisioned the heartache that this decision would cause the descendents of her eventual son of promise, Isaac? But even more than the natural consequences of this manipulative plot, God interpreted Sarai's attempts as not only manipulative, but as a lack of faith in his power. And God decided to deal with this doubt in Sarai's mind in the next event that we will look at which is connected with her change of name.

2. God revealed Sarai's change of name to Abraham in Genesis 17. Directly after this revelation, recorded in the first part of chapter 18, we have an interesting story that involves Sarah again.

The Lord and 2 angelic beings were on their way to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their wickedness. They stop off on their way to see Abraham who lived close enough to the city of Sodom that he could see it way off in the distance. The Lord was going to take this opportunity to reaffirm his covenant with Abraham and to reaffirm also his promise to Abraham of a child. In fact, the Lord was going to be more specific and let Abraham know that it would be in just about 1 year that Sarah and He would have their baby boy. Sarah overhears this reaffirmation and her reaction initiates a conversation with the Lord himself.

READ GENESIS 18:9-15: *Where is your wife, Sarah?* they asked him. *There, in the tent,* he said. Then the Lord said, *I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.* Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him. Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, *After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?* Then the Lord said to Abraham, *Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.* Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, *I did not laugh.* But he said, *Yes, you did laugh.*

Now the specifics of this brief scene show unmistakably that this whole episode was for the benefit of Sarah.

*The Lord first makes sure Sarah is within earshot - *where is your wife Sarah?* he asks before he gives his announcement.

*Sarah responds in what we might consider a typical manner. She smirks inside as she hears this same old story that she is going to have a child. Notice, she was not rude. She didn't laugh openly. She just laughed in her heart.

*But the Lord will not let it go, will he? He jumps all over Sarah for laughing in her heart. Even when she tries to deny it, he will not let her do so. Undoubtedly one reason for this is to prove to Sarah the

supernatural nature of their visit. Obviously, Sarah was the only one who could have known for sure that she laughed inside. When the Lord so dogmatically confirms that fact, Sarah knows that there is something supernatural going on here. But the main reason is that the Lord wants to teach Sarah a very important lesson - that lesson is found in the answer to that rhetorical question *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*

*You see, Sarai previously had been tempted to connive and to plot to help God out because she really thought that there was something that was too hard for God. That was giving her and Abraham a child. But now the Lord wants to deal with this lack of faith. He is going to deal with this doubt. And we must not forget that this scene follows Sarai's change of name.

3. Now we conclude with a final scene from Sarah's life found after her name change in Genesis 21.

READ GENESIS 21:1-7: Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was 8 days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, *God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.* And she added, *Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.*

*What a beautiful conclusion to Sarah's story. Sarah who at first doubted the power of the Lord, Sarah who felt it necessary to connive and manipulate in order to make God's plans happen in her own way and time, Sarai whose name was then changed to Sarah as she experienced the power of the Lord knowing her innermost thoughts and heard his challenge to her *Is anything too hard for the Lord?*, Sarah now experiences that mighty power of God in her life and learns to rest in the power and plans of God. Do you think that it was happenstance that the Lord cornered Sarah when she laughed inside at the promise of God, and then Abraham and Sarah turned around and called their son *laughter*. That is what Isaac means - *laughter*. That's a funny name for a son, isn't it? But it is clear that this point where Sarah was forced to face the promise of God and believe it despite her own doubts and tendencies towards manipulation was a turning point in her life. So much so that she named her son after it.

*You see Sarah had to learn a very important lesson in life. And I believe as I have studied her life that her learning this lesson is what is signified in her name change. Sarah's natural tendency was to manipulate situations by her own schemes. Her natural tendency was not to wait on the Lord and trust in Him, but to rather figure out a way to get it done by her own wisdom and plans. And in this, Sarah is not unlike most of us. Patience is not a natural virtue with most of us. When things don't happen quickly in our lives, many of us

have a natural tendency to manipulate a way to get it done. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with seeing a problem and coming up with a solution to it. We need to find creative ways to solve problems in our lives. But when God wants for us to wait on him for His solution, and we jump ahead to manipulate our own way to get the job done, we both miss a great blessing and, like Sarah, we often find that our manipulations cause much heartache in the long run. Just think of all the grief that has been suffered in the past 4,000 years because of Sarah's plan of how to help God fulfill his promise? Just think of how our lives would be changed for the better today if Sarah wouldn't have manipulated a way to help God out. We wouldn't be in a war over in Iraq right now. We wouldn't be paying more than \$4.00 a gallon for our gas. There would be peace in the Middle East. But thanks to Sarai (and Abraham's compliance with her plan) we have all of these issues to deal with 4,000 years later.

*We all need to realize that God not only has a perfect plan, but the end that He desires to accomplish has a perfect timetable as well. God desires for us to rest in his promises - and that resting includes trusting Him to perform His will in His time.

*Sarah eventually learned this lesson - and it changed her life as well as her name. Not only did she become less manipulative in life, but she also had greater inner peace and contentment. We do well to learn this positive lesson from her. For we only realize God's potential for inner peace as we learn to rest in the will of the Lord. And resting in God's will for our lives also involves waiting on God's perfect timing.

*The great artist Michelangelo once showed a friend an unfinished piece of sculpture in his studio. The man realized that this was going to be a great piece of art. So several weeks later when he was at the artist's home again, he asked to see the progress on that sculpture that he had previously seen. The friend was surprised when he saw the sculpture pretty much looking the same and said so to Michelangelo. *Ah*, the master replied, *there has been great progress made*. Then Michelangelo showed his friend a rounded limb here, some roughness smoothed over there, and a touch of expression somewhere else. *But these are such small things*, argued the friend. The great artist just smiled and answered, *Small things go into making perfection, and perfection is no small thing*.

*It took Michelangelo 2 years to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In 1505 Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to sculpt a magnificent tomb for him. The tomb included 40 separate marble statues. But by 1545, some 4 decades later, Michelangelo had only completed 3 of the statues. But what marvelous works of art those are.

*If it took a human artist like Michelangelo so long to complete his life-like works of art, how can we expect God to finish his work in us in just a few weeks or years? God is committed to molding us into the very image

of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a magnificent work of art when you think about it. Taking a sinful, depraved human being and sculpting him or her into the very image of the perfect, sinless Son of God himself. But that is God's plan for each of our lives. It takes time. But He will complete it. And we must be patient to allow him to do that work.

*It is sometimes painful - for sharp edges must be chiseled off and rough plans must be sanded smooth. But God will complete his work in us. He has promised to do it. We can be confident of this - that He who has begun a good work in us will complete it according to Phil. 1:6.

*We all need to learn the lesson that Sarah learned - the lesson that signified the change in her name. God needs our cooperation, but he doesn't need our manipulation. That's because there is nothing that is too hard for Him. He desires for us to rest in his promises to us and believe in Him.