

WHEN GOD COMES TO DINNER

by Ray C. Stedman

In our study through the life of Abraham, the pattern man of faith, we last saw him entering into the circumcised life. This is the picture of the heart that is wholly Christ's. Paul describes it this way in Philippians 3:3 {RSV}: "We are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh." That is the circumcised life. Abraham, led of the Spirit of God through many difficulties and trials and after years of wandering in a state of alternating victory and defeat, has come into the fullness of the circumcised life.

In Chapter 18, we shall see the results of this in terms of practical experience. Here is a very homey scene, what we might call kitchen-sink religion. It is faith-in-overalls, a combination of grace and groceries. These few verses center around three persons. We first see God in disguise, then Abraham in haste, and finally, Sarah in doubt.

In the first five verses we see God appearing in disguise:

And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I fetch a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on -- since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." (Gen. 18:1-5 {RSV})

We are told clearly in Verse 1 who this is that appears to Abraham. "The Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre." It is Jehovah himself coming to see Abraham, and with him come two angels who appear later on in connection with the destruction of Sodom. These are the same two who visit Lot to warn him of the impending judgment upon the cities of the plain. Because there are three men here, some have taken this to be a representation of the trinity -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit appearing together, but a careful look at the context indicates that this is what we might regard as a pre-incarnate appearance of the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is one of those mysterious appearances of Christ before he came to take upon himself human life. He appears as a man, accompanied by two angels in human disguise.

Abraham does not recognize him. All he sees is three travelers, weary and thirsty as they come in off the desert where the temperature often reaches 120-125 -- in the shade -- and there is no shade. Abraham is seated under the oaks of Mamre in the doorway of his tent in the heat of the day looking out on the blazing countryside and suddenly he sees three men coming toward him. The salutation, "my lord," with which Abraham addresses the central figure is simply the common language of courtesy and does not mean that he had any thoughts that this was indeed the Lord. You will notice in the Revised Standard Version that "lord" is not capitalized. This is correct. Further, Abraham's offer of food, rest, and water shows he had no idea whom he was entertaining.

This is obviously a test of Abraham's heart -- whether he is really a circumcised believer -- in which God appears in such a commonplace way that Abraham is not aware of his identity. I've long wished for some kind of a test which could be used in Bible schools and seminaries to determine the degree of spiritual maturity the students have attained. All the tests that are commonly used reveal only the amount of information that has been amassed. There is little which reveals the real spiritual achievement of the life. It is quite possible, and in fact demonstratively possible, to graduate from seminary with a Doctor of Divinity degree or a doctorate in theology and not possess true spirituality or true maturity in Christ.

Nevertheless, although man has not been able to devise any such test, God is always testing us, and his testing

does not come when we are warned and ready. Anyone can pass a test then. If I tell you that I am going to test you to see if you exhibit love under pressure, whether you can keep your temper when you are being irritated, and if you can be sweet when things are going wrong, you are likely to pass with flying colors.

But God never tests that way. His tests catch us unprepared, off-guard. It is when we are confronted with some simple situation that no one will know about that the tests of life really come:

- When you are relaxing at home and the phone rings and suddenly you are confronted with a call for help, or a demand for a response -- and you had planned to relax and enjoy yourself all afternoon -- what happens then? That's the test.
- When you are busy around the house with your hands immersed in dishwater and something is burning on the stove and the refrigerator has just quit and the sink is stopped up and you've got sixteen different problems on your mind, and your child comes up and asks you a question which is obviously of little importance, what do you do then? That's the test.
- When your neighbor or friend gets sick and somebody has to take care of the children -- what do you do?

What is your reaction? These are the tests of God. This is the way God tested Abraham.

Is this not the meaning of Paul's words in Romans 12? "I appeal to you therefore, brethren ... to present your bodies as a living sacrifice," {Rom 12:1a RSV}. It is one thing to be present in a great meeting where the Spirit is moving in evident power and an appeal goes out to rededicate the heart, and we hear the words, "Present your bodies as living sacrifices unto the Lord." Under the stress or pull of that meeting we may well come up to the front and say, "Here am I Lord, I give my life to you." But this is never the test. The test comes when some situation occurs in daily life that forces you to face the question:

- Is my body really available for him to do what he wants?
- Am I ready to respond to the need of the human heart right there in front of me, right there at that moment?
- Am I ready to give of myself without stint and without limitation to meet a demand that comes suddenly in the course of my busy life?

These are the tests. This is what God is doing to Abraham when he appears without warning in the heat of the day.

Now let us see how Abraham fared in his examination.

And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes." And Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds, and milk, and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate. (Gen 18:6-8 {RSV})

How beautifully Abraham met his test! Look at the words of action here:

He hastened into the tent and he said to her, "Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal." (By the way, these three measures of meal are the key to the parable of the leaven in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. In his little story about a woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal, the Lord is depicting something of the character of the church. These three measures of meal are a picture of the fellowship of God with his own, and this is the key to that parable.)

Then, Abraham ran to the herd and picked out a calf and gave it to the servant who hastened to prepare it.

These words all indicate his prompt and ready response to the evident need before him.

He did it all personally too. We know Abraham had more than 318 men in his household who were his servants, but here he himself becomes personally involved. He does not "pass the buck" -- he hastens to do this himself.

Sarah too is involved, personally making bread, although she also had servants. Hagar was there and others, but she herself makes this bread and kneads it and makes it into loaves.

When I read of Abraham's personal selection of the calf -- tender and good -- I remember something that occurred when I was with Dr. Ironside. At the close of a message he had given one time, a dear old man came up to him at the close of the meeting, and said: "Oh, Doctor, that was a wonderful message. It was just like Abraham's calf, tender and good." Dr. Ironside always thought that was one of the finest compliments he had ever received.

Abraham soon had a wonderful meal ready. He had cottage cheese salad, (curds, it says) with figs cut up all nicely in it; a tall glass of cool milk; hot veal cutlets, breaded and chicken-fried just the way they are the most tender; and fresh hot bread right out of the oven, running over with melted country butter; a nice dish of Sarah's preserves; and, to top off the meal, there was the gracious hospitality with which the guests were served. As they ate, Abraham visited with them.

All this is a beautiful picture for us of the fellowship of a circumcised heart with Christ in becoming his instrument to meet the cry of human need all around. The Lord said in Revelation 3:20 {RSV}: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." That is, we will fellowship together, we will have dinner together. This is not simply private enjoyment, not just a social hour for our own pleasure. This is a picture of the Lord using us as an instrument to meet the need of those around, and, in so doing, we enter into fellowship with the heart of Christ. When Christ comes in to us, he doesn't come in merely to give us a good time, to bless us, and make it an enjoyable experience. He comes in to fulfill his long-standing desire to be what he came into the world to be -- a Savior to seek and to save that which was lost, to give and show compassion to others, to minister to human needs whatever they may be, through us.

Isn't this the test which he Himself said he would apply to our lives? In Matthew 25 the Lord presents a scene of judgment (Verses 31-43). He will divide the nations into two groups. They all claim to be his but, as he sees the human heart, there are two divisions. He says to the one group, Verse 41: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire." And they are amazed and say, "Why do you say that to us, Lord?" And he says, "for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me," {cf, Matt 25:41-43 RSV}. Then to the others, he will say, Verse 34, "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world," {Matt 25:34b RSV}. And they are surprised too, and say, "Lord, what do you mean?" And he says,

"for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." (Matt 25:35-36 {RSV})

And they said, Verse 39: "And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" You remember his words: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me," (Matt 25:40 {RSV}).

This is the test of our faith. James says:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1:27 {RSV})

As he so practically reminds us, faith that does not issue in this kind of a ministry is not real, saving faith; it

does not work. The true test of our life is how much our hearts are yielded and wholly dedicated to Christ to respond in fellowship with him in the meeting of human need about us.

This test reveals that Abraham really has a circumcised heart. He is not doing this because he wants to gain something for himself. He is not trying to impress anybody. He is not seeking credit or recognition. He is not trying to display his piety. For all he knows these three men are nothing but poverty-stricken, penniless nomads of the desert. He will perhaps never see them again. But he treats them as royally as though they were kings come to visit. Even if he had known who they were, he could not have treated them better. This prompt and full response is simply the manifestation of a heart which is filled with grace and love and responds immediately to human need without thought of self or praise from others.

What made him do this? It was the fact that he had a circumcised heart: He really was Christ's. The man who really is Jesus Christ's does not need to be talked into doing good deeds; rather, he looks for opportunities. He is always ready to respond. Someone has well said, "Your reputation is what you do when everyone is looking, while your character is what you do when no one sees."

These tests come to us every day. When the need for help arises, what do you do about it? Do you run and hide, or run to meet it, as Abraham did here?

I heard of a Christian who was speaking at a men's meeting some time ago about the growing spirit of callous indifference in the world today, and he illustrated it by telling how he and a friend just a few days before had been walking through the busy streets of one of our cities and they saw a drunk lying in the street, half on the sidewalk. They noted how everybody was stepping over him and going on their way, paying no attention to the prostrate form. He said he was appalled at the indifference of people as they walked by. "And you know," he said, "when we came back from lunch he was still there!"

How have you been doing this week with the sick, the hungry, the thirsty, and the dying and the strangers and those who need help physically or spiritually? What is the response of your heart? This is the question the Spirit thrusts upon us from this story.

The last picture applies to the feminine side of the household. Here we see Sarah in doubt:

They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent." The Lord said, "I will surely return to you in the spring, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, in the spring, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." (Gen. 18:9-15 {RSV})

Here the first hint is given to Abraham as to who these guests are. They ask him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" Only the Lord could know of her recent name-change, but here is a man who asks, "Where is Sarah?" Abraham begins to realize then who this is, and when the question is followed with the repeated promise of a son, he is sure of the identity of his guest.

Do you remember those two men on the Emmaus road, after the resurrection of our Lord, who did not recognize Jesus when he joined them? It was not until they saw him in the familiar act of breaking bread that they knew who he was. So when Abraham hears these familiar words about the promise of the son, then he knows who it is that speaks.

Beyond the dividing curtain in the tent, Sarah has been listening to everything. She is doing the dishes just beyond the tent curtain, but she hears it all. She hears the question and the promise, and she realizes it is God who is saying that she will have a son. She looks at her 90-year-old body, long since almost dead. She looks

in the mirror and sees the whiteness of her hair, the wrinkles in her face. She feels the arthritis in her bones. And when she hears this, she laughs cynically to herself.

She made no sound at all, but laughed to herself, we are told. But beyond the curtains, the Lord read her thoughts and said to Abraham, "Why does Sarah laugh in her heart? Is anything too hard for the Lord? I'll set a date for this: I'll be back next spring and she shall have a son." And we read that Sarah was afraid. She saw that her heart was open and known to God. She saw that there was one who reads hearts as we read books and she reacted just like we do. She denied that she had laughed. But God knows that to justify or excuse our sin or to protect it and rationalize it and build a wall about it is to drive us into further misery and heartache. We cut ourselves off from divine help. And so the stern word comes to her. "No, but you did laugh. Admit it, face it: you did laugh, Sarah."

Remarkably enough, the account ends right here. Suddenly the subject is dropped, and another situation is introduced in the next paragraph. We are left to wonder what this means. Back in Chapter 17, when God announced to Abraham for perhaps the fifth time that he was to have a son, we are told that Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah who is ninety years old bear a son?" {cf, Gen 17:17}. This is a different kind of a laugh than that of Sarah's. This is the laugh of exulting joy over what God had promised. It is a laughter of faith delighting in what God would do in spite of the ravages of time and sin in his body. This is what Paul refers to in Romans: "He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead ..." (Rom 4:19a {RSV}). Further, "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised," (Rom 4:20-21 {RSV}).

In contrast, Sarah's laughter is cynical, unbelieving. If this were all of the story, we would be tempted to say that this woman is no example to follow. But over in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, we get the rest of the story. There, in that wonderful eleventh chapter, the hall of fame of the heroes of faith, Sarah's name appears:

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. (Heb 11:11 {RSV})

Now we begin to see what must have happened. After the guests left, Sarah was still thinking about what she had heard, and the words of the Lord came home to her heart in peculiar power -- especially the question God had asked, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord?" As Sarah thought about it, she had to face that question. Is there? Is anything too hard for the Lord? She began to think of it -- the Creator, the one who called out of nothing the vast world in which we live and beyond that the worlds which circle us in the limitless reaches of space, the one who sustains from day to day all the mighty, complex forces of earth, brings the sun up on time, guides the planets in their whirling courses, predicts human events, and centuries later brings them to pass exactly as he promised. Even the demons obey his word and tremble when they hear it. As Sarah began to think of the one who had said these words, she felt the full force of that question, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And she looked beyond the contrary facts of her own life and beyond the contrary feelings of her own heart and said, "Of course not. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. If he has promised, then it shall be done." Through faith she received power to conceive when she was past age because she counted him faithful who had promised.

What a beautiful lesson this is on the nature of faith. Faith looks beyond all the contrary circumstances to rest upon the character of the one who promised. Do not be misled by the popular delusion that faith stands by itself, that it is simply believing -- anything! Faith must have a promise to rest upon. Anything else is presumption, gullibility, folly. But when God has given a word, it is the Word of God, and it can be trusted despite circumstance, feelings, or anything else. For is anything too hard for the Lord? Sarah rested upon that and believed God.

Does it seem hard to you to be what God wants you to be? Is it hard to keep your evil nature in the place of death? Hard to cast down evil imaginings and bring every thought into captivity to Christ? It is not too hard for the Lord!

Does it seem hard to you to be made sweet and gracious and forgiving and loving when down inside you know how nasty and devious and unpleasant and perverse you can be? It is hard for you, but it is not too hard for the Lord!

Does it seem hard that the friend for whom you are praying should ever be converted or the one that is now rebelling against grace can ever be changed? Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Does some task which God is now asking of you seem impossible to perform? Some situation in which you are living -- is it too hard and demanding for you? Well, it may be hard for you, but it is not too hard for the Lord.

As faith learns to rest, not on its own resources which are never adequate, but upon the unfailing resources of God in response to a definite promise he gives, nothing is impossible.

Faith, mighty faith the promise sees,
And looks to God alone.
Laughs at impossibilities and cries,
"It shall be done."

When I was out in Formosa waiting to begin my ministry there of speaking at pastors' conferences, I confess I had a time of real fear and trembling. The night before the first conference, we met at Tunghai University overlooking the city of Taichung. I was scheduled to begin my ministry in the morning. I attended the evening service and there were 300 or more pastors from up and down the length of the island, all speaking a different language from mine -- all with a different cultural background. I knew that in the morning I would have to speak through two interpreters (anyone else would have needed only one, but I needed two), and that this would be a difficult barrier. I knew, too, that a whole summer's ministry of this kind stretched out before me. Here were three hundred men whom I'd never met before, to whom I was expected to minister. Beyond that, in my mind's eye, I could see the conferences that were coming up in Viet Nam, in Hong Kong, in Singapore, and in the Philippines. I was trembling and very uncertain. I felt the darkness and the oppressiveness of the pagan atmosphere in the land. I had already seen visible evidence of the power of darkness, the mark of the serpent throughout that island. So I went to the Lord in fear and trembling. I was reading through the Psalms at that time and that night I came upon this word in Psalm 18. What a blessing it was!

**Yea, thou dost light my lamp;
the Lord my God lightens my darkness.
Yea by thee I can crush a troop;
and by my God I can leap over a wall. (Psa 18:28-29 {RSV})**

I thought of the darkness of the land and of that group of 300 pastors, and that language barrier that stood between me and them. I laid hold of the promise of God that night and my heart was greatly lightened. The next morning God met us in a wonderful way, and I look back on that whole summer's ministry as one of the highlights of my life, seeing God at work throughout the difficulties, in spite of them, overcoming them.

If you want a wonderful experience, take your New Testament and using a concordance, look up the two little-words, *but God*. See how many times human resources have been brought to an utter end; despair has gripped the heart and pessimism and gloom has settled upon a people and there is nothing that can be done. Then see how the Spirit of God writes in luminous letters, "But God," and the whole situation changes into victory.

This is what God is offering to be and do in us, and through us, in our human life today. God responds in the same way to us as he did to Abraham, so when we are oppressed and confronted with circumstances beyond our handling, we find the promise of God that covers the situation. In prayer we can sense some prompting of the Spirit that gives us a word of faith to rest upon.

Then, like Sarah, we may ask ourselves this question: "Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

No, he is able to perform all that he says he will.

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