

5. Abraham's Dinner Guests

Abraham's Growing Faith

Genesis 18

Warm-up Question: Who would you most like to have dinner with and why? It could be any person from the past or present.

¹The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. ²Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. ³He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "do as you say." ⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread." ⁷Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree (Genesis 18:1-8).

The Lord Came to Dinner

Once a year, sometimes twice, I lead a group of people on tour to Israel. We go to most of the significant Christian holy places, but we try to do one or two things different from the majority of tourists. One of the things we like to do is to visit a place east of Jerusalem, on the way to the Dead Sea, where it is likely the Patriarchs lived, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The site we visit is called *Genesis Land*.¹ When we arrive by bus, we are greeted by Abraham's servant, Eliezer, who loans us clothes to protect us from the 500 yard trip by camel down to visit with Abraham at his large tent. There we are served a traditional meal similar to Abraham's day sitting cross-legged around low tables, eating the food of the land. The meal includes lamb and chicken, pita bread and hummus, a creamy paste made of chickpeas and tahini. We also have various salads, rice, and vegetables while we listen to our host, Abraham, and look over the Dead Sea Valley.

Abraham is very courteous and describes what it would have been like to live at that time. One can see the northern edge of the Dead Sea from here. It is down in the valley somewhere below us that Lot and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were situated. It is a spectacular scene and helps us in the 21st century to think of what it would be like to live in the time of the Book of Genesis. Of course, we don't know precisely where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were, but it helps to look down into the valley and picture the scene. You realize, when you look over this expanse of desert, how vital hospitality would be to a traveler. After all, there are long stretches of land with no water, and no convenience stores, no roadside rest stops, and desert as far as the eye can see. In this type of environment, hospitality is a matter of necessity, not just a mere courtesy. □ □

¹ <http://genesisland.co.il>

It was a typical day for Abraham. The sun was getting high in the sky, and it was hot (v. 1). Abraham was sitting in the shade of his tent under or near the great trees of Mamre, with the view below him just as we have described in the passage above. The goats, sheep, and animals were nearby with the sound of the occasional dull gong of a sheep's bell. This day was Abraham and Sarah's annunciation that they were going to finally have the baby of their dreams. The good news would come from the Lord YHWH Himself. Of course, Abraham did not realize that it was the Lord until later on in the afternoon. As soon as he saw the three men, Abraham sprang into action and hurried from where he was sitting to meet them. He bowed low to the three strangers.

What do you see in your mind's eye when you think of angels? How do you think these visitors looked? Two of the men were angels who went down to Sodom to bring out Abraham's nephew Lot and his family. How did the two angels seem to the men of Sodom in Genesis 19:4-5?

¹The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. ²“My lords,” he said, “please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning.” “No,” they answered, “we will spend the night in the square.” ³But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. ⁴Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. ⁵They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them” (Genesis 19:1-5).

The two angels looked to the inhabitants of Sodom as ordinary men—they didn't have wings, stand twelve feet high, or have blond hair and blue eyes—they looked like ordinary good-looking men with whom the Sodomites wanted to have sex. Abraham and Lot, as with many people in the Middle East today, valued hospitality highly. Visitors to one's home is a big deal. When the three men came to the camp, Abraham did not know the purpose of the visitor. To Abraham, these men were just strangers. The writer to the Hebrews in the New Testament has something to say about the proper treatment of visitors:

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2).

It is highly likely that the writer of the book of Hebrews was thinking of the visit of the Lord and His angels in this passage we are studying. □

Abraham insists that they sit down and rest under the shade of the trees and that he will bring water to wash their dusty sandaled feet and also food, and then they can carry on their way (v. 5). He still didn't realize it was the Lord who had come to visit him before sending his two angels down to Sodom. The visitors were pleased to stay awhile. It is a beautiful thought that the Lord of heaven and earth would come and eat and be refreshed by His people. Of course, these visitors did not need the provisions Abraham was to bring them, but they stopped and ate for Abraham's sake. It was Abraham who received what he needed that day.

Abraham's service to these strangers was all at a hurried pace (vv. 2 and 6). He was careful not to waste their time. But the Lord was pleased to wait for Abraham to be fulfilled in his service to the Lord. Think about the time it took Abraham to get this meal together. He hurried into the tent and got Sarah busy at kneading three seahs (about six gallons) of fine flour together. Then he ran (v. 7) to the herd and got a choice, tender calf, and a servant hurrying along to kill it, before preparing the fire and roasting it. How much time would it take to cook the calf and knead and bake the bread? At least two hours, I would think. The Lord and His two angels waited patiently while Abraham and Sarah served them. The Lord then said:

⁹“Where is your wife Sarah?” they asked him. “There, in the tent,” he said. ¹⁰Then one of them 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. ¹¹Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹²So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?” ¹³Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁵Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.” But he said, “Yes, you did laugh” (Genesis 18:9-15).

It was finally about three or four in the afternoon as Abraham stood under the shade of the tree (v. 8) while his guests ate. (We know this because verse 1 tells us that Abraham first noticed these men as he sat by the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, which would be around noon.) It is as the conversation continued, that the divinity of one of the men became clear. The first clue was that the leader of the three men asked where Sarah was. How did this stranger know that Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, meaning *Mother of Princes*, during a visit by the Lord some time previously? (Genesis 17:15). God had spoken to them before concerning their name change:

¹When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ²Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.” ³Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations: ⁵**No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.** ⁶I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸The whole land of Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give as **an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you;** and I will be their God” (Genesis 17:1-8)

¹⁵God also said to Abraham, **“As for Sarai, your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah.** ¹⁶I 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.” ¹⁷Abraham fell facedown; **he laughed** and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a

man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" ¹⁸And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" ¹⁹Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him (Genesis 17:15-19).

Imagine what it was like for Abraham and Sarah to tell their neighbors and friends that their names were now changed to mother of princes and father of many? Do you think they were ridiculed? Sometimes the people of God, to follow Him wholeheartedly, must endure ridicule in their walk of faith. □

The God Over All Impossibilities

Moses, the person who wrote the Book of Genesis, made it clear to us that the person who led the team of three was YHVH. Whenever the name LORD is capitalized, as it is in verses one, thirteen and fourteen, the Hebrew word is YHVH. We have added vowels to the name to help us pronounce the name more clearly, making it JeHoVaH, or YaHVeH. YaHVeH says that He will return to them about the same time next year and when He does, Sarah will be a mother to a son (v. 10).

Inside the tent, Sarah was listening to the conversation outside. When she heard the LORD say that she would be a mother at ninety years old, Sarah laughed within herself (v. 12). She thought of the impossibility of it all, a woman of ninety worn out with age and long past childbearing ability, and Abraham being even ten years older than her, how could this be possible? Not a sound issued from her lips, but the Lord knew her thought. He said to Abraham:

"Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?' ¹⁴Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁵Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, "I did not laugh." But he said, "Yes, you did laugh" (Genesis 18:13-15).

Could it be possible that God knows every thought of every person on planet earth? Would you consider that to be a troubling thought, a comforting thought, or both? Explain.

God is omniscient, which is a word that means that He is all-knowing. He knows all things in the universe and in all creatures at all time, whether it is something in the past, present or future. God knows them all perfectly. God's knowledge is absolute. He never had to learn anything. This is what we mean by saying God is omniscient. □ □

²⁹Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29-31).

The writer, A.W. Tozer, has spoken of God's omniscience in this way:

“God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creature hood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feelings, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell.”²

This appearance is YaHVeH in human form visiting with Abraham along with two of His angels. Most scholars believe this divine being talking with Abraham is the Lord Jesus before His birth by Mary. The Lord Jesus is revealed as the divine YaHVeH (John 1:1-3), who hears every thought, and knows all things:

³⁰Now **we can see that you know all things** and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God” (John 16:30).

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, **“Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you”** (John 21:17).

Do you think Abraham told Sarah about the promise she would have a son (Genesis 17:16, 19), or do you think she was unconvinced and unbelieving? What can you imagine her thoughts and emotions were like when she laughed at this news?

There was a gentle rebuke about her laugh of unbelief. The Lord would not gently rebuke her if this were the first time she had heard about her having a child in her old age. It was highly unlikely that Abraham had not told her. Try and put yourself in Sarah's shoes. She had never heard the Lord speak personally to her, as far as we know. Each time God spoke, it had only been to Abraham. Sarah hadn't even come out of the tent yet. The Lord had asked where she was (v. 9), and Sarah had been listening to the conversation in the tent behind the Lord (v. 10).

How would you feel about hearing from a total stranger that you were going to have a baby next year when you had been waiting for a baby all your married life? Oh yes, and to top it off, now it was physically impossible, and you hear it is now going to happen at the age of ninety! When Hagar, Sarah's handmaid heard from the Lord and realized that God was watching her, it had been a beautiful thing for Sarah to hear about, but now it is Sarah who understands that God is speaking about her future and the dream she had waited for all this time! To realize that God knew her every thought is also to understand that this same God can do anything. The messenger said, **“Is anything too hard for the Lord?”** (v. 14). Whatever you are dealing with, know this; God understands your frustration, unbelief, and your struggles, and is aware of your thoughts. It does not stop Him from being able to provide the answer.

Personal Testimony of Overcoming Impossibilities

I had a situation in the year 2000 that seemed utterly impossible. As a British citizen, after I married my wife Sandy in 1980, a US citizen, I applied for Residency to live in the USA. It took about a year, but I found out that because of two minor marijuana convictions that I was honest

² A.W. Tozer, The Knowledge of the Holy (New York, Harper and Row, 1961) p.63.

about with US Immigration, (committed in England when I was seventeen and twenty-one), I was not eligible for a Resident Visa. These convictions occurred before I had given my life to Christ. If it had been only one conviction against me, it would have barred me, but I had two against me. This inadmissibility hung over my head for twenty years and was a source of great pain for us as a family. It was hard to understand how something I did so long ago when I was very young, could keep my wife and two kids from their family in the United States. It was tough for us to bear. I always felt inside my spirit that God would do something for me to be able to take them home sometime, but whenever I tried to overcome the visa problem; I was confronted with the impossibility of what we were asking. We received hope in 1999 when I found out that it might be possible for us to have time in the USA by getting a five-year work visa. All I needed was a job with a church in America similar to the one I was working at in England. □

We spent all of our savings on a flight and visited the USA to attend a conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. God provided me with a Groups Pastor job at the Cincinnati Vineyard. With letter and job proposals in hand, I went back to England and up to the London Embassy of the USA and asked for my work visa. They turned me down for no reason. We were brokenhearted. For twenty years I had longed to take my family home. I needed to speak to someone higher at the Embassy and was able to get the appointment. Again I was turned down flat. Try to imagine how hard it was on our emotions. We had our hopes dashed time after time. After being turned down for this visa multiple times over the years, my wife Sandy wrote a letter to the State Department in Washington DC complaining about the situation. When I read the letter, it was full of anger, pain, and disappointment. Our dream of returning home seemed further away than ever.

One morning, nine months later, Sandy and I got into an emotional time where I was trying to build her faith and to continue to believe that God would do something. She left for work that morning crying and telling me that she had to give up ever hoping to go home and that she just had to forget about this because it was causing too much pain to fight it and keep hoping for something that was not going to happen. She asked me not to talk about it again. I had been broken many times on this issue, but that particular morning the impossibility of the situation came over me. I fell to my knees in brokenness. I cried out to the Lord in prayer, telling Him that I could no longer go on believing and hoping and trying different things to overcome the situation. I had come to the bottom and was sobbing at my inability to do anything to alleviate and overcome our problem.

I was still on my knees with tears streaming down my face when the phone rang right beside me. I picked up the phone and heard an American accent on the other end. It was the American Embassy telling me they were awarding me a five-year work visa and that all I had to do was come and pick it up! I was not expecting a call, and we thought that the final decision had been made.

When everything was impossible to me, God stepped in showing me that with God all things are possible! Is anything too hard for the Lord? The impossibility of it all was precisely what the Lord was showing Sarah and Abraham. Now that they saw they could not accomplish their dream by natural means, God could step in and show them that nothing was too hard for Him!

What things have you given up on that seem impossible? Perhaps it is the promise of a child, or you may have a child that is wandering in his or her desert place. Is anything too hard for the Lord? Share and pray together.

Both Abraham and Sarah both laughed at the thought that they would have a son in their old age, no wonder the Lord gave the baby the name of Isaac, which means *laughter*. Their laughter, which at first was a laugh of unbelief by Sarah, becomes a laugh of joy for both of them. Believe God for impossible things! Is anything too hard for the Lord?

Prayer: Father, I ask you for all those who have come to a place where their situation seems impossible. Would you step in for them? Would you visit them? Would you speak tenderly to them and lift their hearts to hold on to you in whatever the situation they find themselves. Amen! □ □

Keith Thomas

Email: keiththomas@groupbiblestudy.com

Website: www.groupbiblestudy.com