



ENTERTAINING ANGELS

SERIES: *THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS*

Catalog No. 1411
 Genesis 18:1-15
 Eleventh Message
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 April 8th, 2001

Our text introduces one of the most delightful moments in the Abraham story, an incident that takes place within the idyllic setting of hospitality in the ancient world, as God joins Abraham and Sarah in the intimate setting of a meal. The story portrays God's deep longing to come into our world and yet not overwhelm us. This is what I love most about being a follower of the God of Abraham. God is not an abstract, distant heavenly being, an impersonal power who deprives us of our personality. God is supremely personal. He longs for a closeness with us as intimate as the sexual union in marriage. All of us long for such intimacy.

Growing up in a predominantly female house I had a deep longing for a man to take an interest in my life. At the age of eleven, the opportunity presented itself. Bob Munson was everything a boy dreams about in a man. Standing 6'3" tall, Bob was a cabinetmaker, a truck driver, an ex-football player. My mother had hired him to do some carpentry work around our home, and I became his privileged helper. Every day I would wait by the window for his 1956 yellow pickup truck to arrive. When I saw that truck, I knew that Bob Munson was coming into my world. Working alongside him was like a dream. Seeing my sadness when his work was finished, he promised that our relationship would not end. "At this time next year I'm going to take you deer hunting," he said. I was lost in that dream, anticipating the great day. Now that yellow pickup truck symbolized that I was going to be carried into Bob's world, a world much bigger than my own. We hunted together for four years. I never shot a deer, but I didn't care. I was walking in Bob Munson's world. My relationship with him prepared me to meet the God of Abraham.

Today we come to a surprise visit by God to Abraham's tent. This encounter is a paradigm for how we receive spiritual life. It is significant that God comes to Abraham just after the patriarch has displayed his obedience by ratifying the covenant through the rite of circumcision. After we have obeyed what God has told us to do, it is then that we are primed for a fellowship meal. The story has three movements: First, Abraham's warm invitation (18:1-5); second, the preparation and presentation of the meal (18:6-8); and third, the record of the after-dinner conversation, an exchange that is filled with laughter (18:9-15).

Abraham is a model host for these three visitors who come to him "by the oaks of Mamre." He begins by offering them a warm welcome.

I. The Invitation and Menu (Gen 18:1-5)

Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. And when he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and

when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, please do not pass your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do, as you have said." (Gen 18:1-5, NASB)

The narrator opens the scene by revealing the identity of these divine dinner guests . . . "but when Abraham peers out through the shimmering heat waves of the desert noon, what he sees from a human perspective is three 'men.'" The LORD disguises himself in human form so that he might engage Abraham without overwhelming him, and that Abraham's true colors might be seen. If the President were coming for dinner, we would probably hide our real selves, but when a humble stranger appears, our true character rises to the surface. Here we find Abraham at his best.

The oaks of Mamre is the site of the encounter. This location was last mentioned just after Abraham and Lot had separated (13:18). Abraham had given his nephew the first choice of the land and, as Lot lifted up his eyes to gaze upon the horizon, the well-watered region of the valley of Sodom captivated him. He chose solely by what he could "see," unaware of how wicked the men of Sodom were (13:13). Following the separation, Abraham moved his tent by the oaks of Mamre, in Hebron, and there he worshipped the LORD (13:18). Significantly, this is the place where Sarah will receive the promise of a son, and Abraham will come to "see" the truth about Sodom.

The three men appear during the hottest time of the day, after Abraham has finished his morning tasks and is ready for his midday nap. Their sudden appearance startles him. Was he already napping, or did they appear out of nowhere? From his swift apology for failing to notice them, it seems he thought he had been daydreaming. Immediately he shifts into high gear and becomes a model of true hospitality. He runs to them as if they are long-lost relatives and greets them like royalty. His addresses them as "my lord" (meaning, he is addressing the leader; some versions have the plural "lords"), a title he also uses to address his God. The verb "to bow down" is the appropriate posture for worship of God (24:26). Abraham follows this display of warmth and respect by extending an invitation to dinner, saying that it would be his privilege to serve. If they will accept, his day will be made.

Lest they think they are putting him to trouble, the menu is modest, and the accommodations humble: just a little water to wash; the tree will serve as a canopy for shade and rest. Abraham will fetch a morsel of bread. It

will only take a minute. Then they can go on their way after they have refreshed their hearts. He suggests that this encounter may perchance be a divine appointment, “for you have, after all, passed your servant’s way.”² His words are wiser than he knows! How can they refuse such simple kindness?

Following his vigorous invitation, Abraham awaits their answer. Will they allow him the supreme honor of serving? Will they stay? Their answer is as brief (a mere four words in Hebrew) as it is detached: “So do, as you have spoken.” Permission granted, Abraham, all business now, hurries back to his tent.

II. The Preparations and Presentation (Gen 18:6-8)

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it, and make bread cakes.” Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf, and gave it to the servant; and he hurried to prepare it. And he took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate. (18:6-8)

We can’t help but sense Abraham’s urgency. He hurries everywhere and tells everyone else to hurry. First, Sarah is drawn into the action, and then a young servant joins the flurry of preparations. The verb “take” appears four times in rapid succession, giving the feeling that things are being prepared at a feverish pace. We can almost see the sweat dripping from his Abraham’s brow as he barks out the orders. If we are taken by surprise by his sense of urgency, his generosity also appears overwhelming by our standards. This is no popcorn and tuna fish lunch. It is a banquet fit for a king. Sarah is to take “three measures (*seah*) of fine flour.” Wenham explains: “If a seah is about two gallons (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 202), ‘three seahs of best wheat flour’ would make a great quantity of bread, while to kill ‘a bull’ for just three visitors shows royal generosity: a lamb or a goat would have been more than adequate (cf. 2 Sam 12:4; Lk 15:27-30).”³ Abraham: the first Jewish mother! When his guests eat, he feels God’s pleasure.

With the preparations completed, Abraham returns like a proud waiter, eager to display his chef’s finest produce before his hungry guests. The elaborate preparations are now presented while “Abraham, as the good host, waits discreetly in the background, allowing his guests to enjoy their lavish banquet.”⁴

Abraham models true hospitality. Notice that this event was neither planned nor convenient. The guests arrive unannounced, at the worst possible time of day, when the kitchen is shut down and nothing is readily available. And note how Abraham serves with humility. He is secure in who he is. Having been blessed by God he is free to serve others as if they were divine. He treats these men as if for this one moment they are the center of his universe. He draws his whole family in and sets his household into operation. And finally, notice his generosity. He handpicks the best of what he has and gives meticulous care to its preparation and presentation. This is not the fast food lane. This is the kind of fare served at the wedding of a prized daughter.

What is even more important is the very thing that

Abraham doesn’t realize. In treating strangers like God, he is, in fact, entertaining angels, and God. In return, God will turn the tables on him and serve him. This is why Christians are exhorted to be hospitable to strangers (Heb 13:2). Such hospitality could welcome God right to the very center of our lives. Many of us who have traveled to countries with far less resources than ours have experienced a form of hospitality not unlike Abraham’s. Such an occasion brings God right to the center of one’s soul. It is an unforgettable occasion. The early Christians used this kind of hospitality as a primary method of evangelism.

Now that the meal is over, it is time for the after-dinner conversation, which will reveal the purpose of this mysterious visit.

III. After-Dinner Conversation: Laughter (Gen 18:9-15)

Then they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “Behold, in the tent.” And he said, “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing. And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” And the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?’ “Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” Sarah denied it however, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh.” (18:9-15)

Following the feast, the men turn to their host and ask, “Where is Sarah, your wife?” The fact that these strangers know Sarah’s name may suggest to Abraham that they might be more than ordinary men. Responding, Abraham points to the tent. As was the custom of the day for married women, Sarah “stayed inside the tent out of sight of the visitors.”⁵ In his speech to Abraham, the LORD will now speak about the promise of her pregnancy. He begins by assuring Abraham that he will pay them another visit about this time next year, and at that time Sarah will have a son. Driven by curiosity, Sarah is eavesdropping all the while. Because the guests have their backs to the doorway she is able to get into the opening of the tent undiscovered. For the first time in the story she hears firsthand the promise of God concerning her fertility.

Before we hear her response to this astonishing news, the narrator suspends our emotions with yet another statement of how old this couple is, and that Sarah is well past menopause. Hearing the news, Sarah is just as incredulous as her husband. But she is better at concealing her emotions. He fell on his face and laughed out loud, but she suppresses her laughter and makes not a sound. Her laughter, like Abraham’s, expresses her unbelief. Her body is worn out, used up. “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure?” (“The term pleasure ‘*ednah*’ is cognate with Eden and probably suggests sexual pleasure.”)⁶ Age has taken its toll. Though we may hunger for the fountain of youth, our sensibilities tell us that we can never be young again. Or can we?

The LORD speaks directly to Sarah’s silent laughter. It’s a

dangerous thing to carry on a secret conversation within your soul in the presence of the LORD. He exposes her hidden thoughts with the penetrating question, "Why did Sarah laugh?" But notice that when he repeats her internal reasoning, he graciously edits out the description of her withered body, and politely removes the reference to her "old man." When God speaks about us, he places us in the best possible light.

Then God asks the rhetorical question, "*Is anything too difficult for the LORD?*" The word "difficult" (cf. Jer 32:17, 27) is often used to describe God's omnipotent power that is able to achieve what is unimaginable from a human standpoint, provoking wonder and awe in response (Zech 8:6). In Biblical narrative it is rare for theology to be stated as explicitly as it is here. The way it is stated, with such simplicity, indicates that God expects us to grasp this as the most basic truth about him. Thus, his "Why?" question to Sarah is one of amazement. God is actually amazed at our unbelief and inability to comprehend what appears to be standard operating procedure to him (comp. Mk 6:6; 16:14). Lest we forget, this same truth is repeated by the angel to Mary concerning Elizabeth, who conceived in her old age, and to Mary herself, who will conceive as a virgin. When Mary asks the angel, "*How can this be?*" the angel responds, "*Nothing will be impossible for God*" (Luke 1:37). This indicates that Isaac's birth sets the paradigm for the coming Messiah and all who would subsequently believe in him (Eph 2:4-6).

Once God speaks about his most basic nature he repeats his promise that she shall indeed bear a son, adding that he will return at the "*the appointed time.*" This term is later used for Israel's sacred times and seasons that become commemorative celebrations in her history. The birth of this son will be remembered as a holy event.

Sarah can barely take it all in. She is still trying to recover from being exposed in her unbelief. Her only reply to all she has heard is, "*I didn't laugh.*" Her fear keeps her from taking in the full joy of what is about to happen to her, so God transforms her fear into the truth with yet another laugh, "*No, but you did laugh.*" God has the last word: "Sarah, you did laugh." Though she is unaware of it, she actually names her unborn son (Isaac: "*he laughs*"), and when he is born she will laugh again. God will superimpose his smile on her unbelief, and laughter will be born. So Sarah, who thought she was too old to experience Eden-like pleasures, will be young again. She will once more feel pleasure, an unspeakable pleasure, not only in conception but also in the birth of this boy and in every subsequent mention of his name. God laughs last and laughs best!

The literary outline of the text reveals how the whole scene turns on laughter and ends in laughter. It's all God's doing.

Laughter in her midst

Genesis 18:9-15

A **Three men** seek Sarah's whereabouts; Abraham speaks the **truth**.

B God's **promise** to Abraham that Sarah will have a son at this time next year.

C Sarah's **laughter** at the possibility of having a son in their old age, since she sees both herself and Abraham as **impotent**.

C' The LORD's inquiry of Sarah's **laughter**, giving hope in the **omnipotence** of God.

B' The **promise** of Sarah's conception and its timing is repeated to Sarah.

A' Sarah fears telling the truth, and the LORD rebukes her **denial**, and transforms her fear into laughter.

III. Why the Return Visit?

Why the return visit? This is the question that must be asked. Why was it not sufficient for God to speak his promise to Abraham and for the patriarch to be the mediator of the promise to his wife? Why does God return to speak directly to Sarah? And what lessons can we learn from that?

A. Sarah is an equal heir to the grace of life

First, it is obvious that if Abraham is to bear a son, both he and his wife must be made fertile. It is not enough for the man to be made fertile. Unless he has a fertile wife, he is still impotent. In order to bear life, both need a miracle of divine grace. Thus, it was not enough that Abraham alone be given the promise; it had to be given to Sarah as well.

Second, notice that Sarah receives the gift of life directly from God, not through Abraham as mediator. The word of God has the power to create life, not Abraham. Therefore, Sarah must respond directly to the word from the voice of God. And she must personally receive it into her innermost being, and then respond by faith. Sarah cannot receive life second-hand, based on the faith of her husband. Her faith must be as genuine as Abraham's, just as the life she receives must come from God directly. In this way her dignity as a woman is elevated so that both the man and his wife are "*equal heirs of the grace of life*" (1 Pet 3:6). This again establishes that God does not found his kingdom on earth by compromising marriage or lowering the status of wives. In the New Testament, if a man compromised his marriage for the sake of ministry, he was disqualified to serve in the leadership of the church (1 Tim 3:2, 4).

B. Sarah's fertility is a paradigm of our spiritual life

The gift of Sarah's fertility also becomes a paradigm for how we receive life in the soul. The context of our story shouts out to us concerning what God longs for. In a word, it is intimacy. The whole scene takes place within the idyllic setting of Eden-like hospitality. We find ourselves in the midst of a sumptuous banquet, surrounded by the choicest, most expensive foods. The meal is prepared in haste, but eaten in leisure. We are in a world where strangers are honored like royalty, and hosts become humble servants who elevate strangers as if they were the center of their universe. Then, to our surprise, these strangers turn the tables on us. In the most intimate moments of the after-dinner conversation, the guest of honor makes us the center of his universe. We thought we were here to serve him, but he says he is here to serve us.

God has made a very personal visit to this woman. Like a surgeon on a house call, he wants to perform a miracle deep within her. Perhaps this is why the narrator twice alludes to the "*opening*" (doorway) of the tent (18:1,10). Abraham begins the scene at the opening of the tent, while

Sarah remains hidden inside. But after Abraham draws her into the service of meal making, he leaves the tent to serve his guests, and Sarah moves from the inside to the opening of the tent so that she can hear what is being said. Perhaps that “*opening*” is symbolic that her heart is “open” to God to enter the deepest recesses of her being. We can imagine how she reacts when she hears her name mentioned. She wants to hear God’s word personally and directly, and she is open to it, but when she hears it, it is too marvelous to believe, so she laughs. Her laughter comes from that deep place “*within herself*” (“*in her midst*”) a phrase which is later used of Rebecca’s twins *within* her womb (Gen 25:22).

It is there that God performs his surgery. He penetrates deeply into the inner recesses of Sarah’s soul and draws her unbelief out into the open. There it is transformed into the laughter of belief, making her fertile. As the author of Hebrews writes, “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised” (Heb 11:11). The door was open that day, and as a result, God was able to enter in by his word, transforming unbelief into faith and faith into joyous laughter.

Our story elevates not only marriage, but also the doctrine of the resurrection. It teaches that spiritual life comes as the gift of God, and it is, by its very nature, life out of death. It is nothing short of miracle. Even our faith to believe is a miracle of God:

But God...even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus... For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph 2:4-6, 8).

Sarah is thus our mother, and her fertility a paradigm of our spiritual life.

Third, this return visit prepares Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

C. It prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah

With this story as the foundation for the birth of Israel, no Jew should be surprised that God would become flesh and disguise himself as a man. God has been doing that very thing throughout Israel’s history. And it shouldn’t surprise us that when God came in the person of Jesus, he was always seeking out the most intimate settings to reveal himself to his people. While many of these occasions took place around meals, it is a sad irony that Abraham’s children showed little hospitality to Jesus. In some homes he was ignored or treated with disdain; in others, like his hometown, he was thrown out. When an eager follower asked to become his disciple, he described his lowly estate in these poignant words, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt 8:20). And yet, he turned the tables and became everyone else’s host, to the point of feeding the five thousand. In the face of his impending death, he even served as the host of his final Passover meal, making all the arrangements for the celebration. As the disciples arrived for the meal they had no idea they were about to become the center of his universe. Later that evening, at dinner, he offered them the costliest banquet of all, “*This is my body, eat...this is my blood, drink.*” That is why I am a follower of Jesus: he is the God of Abraham made flesh.

1. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1996), 77.

2. Everett Fox, *The Schocken Bible: Volume 1: The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 76.

3. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50, Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1994), 47.

4. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 47.

5. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 47.

6. Alter, *Genesis*, 79.

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