

Maintaining Good Health (Part 3)

Food and Banquets

John W. Ritenbaugh

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In the first sermon of this series my hope was to show us that we have a very clear responsibility to God to maintain good health. It is an integral part of Christian living, and should be considered in that way. We saw in that sermon that the word *temple* actually has a triple-edged application. It refers to a building, it symbolizes the church, and we individually are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we must maintain that temple.

Maintaining good health falls within the general principle of *dressing and keeping*. We must always remember Jesus' admonition that "he that is faithful in that which is least, is faithful also in much." Unfortunately some do not perceive maintaining good health as being a faith issue, but we shall continue to see as we go on here that it indeed is a faith issue—the Christian cannot pass off maintaining and building good health as being inconsequential to salvation. Despite an almost overwhelming amount of information available to the public, some make little or no effort to see that this is done consistently.

We saw in that sermon an example through Daniel that even in regard to food, we are to come out of Babylon. In the second sermon the theme was to begin to introduce biblical parallels more directly into this picture so that we might learn even more that the Bible is an excellent source of wisdom—a guide to concepts important to good health.

While the overall theme was a spiritual and physical cleanliness, the underlying purpose was to motivate us to look to God's Word for important keys to abundant living and glorifying Him. Good health is a very clear stewardship responsibility. "Cleanliness is next to godliness" is not in the Bible, but it does seem to be a true principle.

We saw in that sermon that all flesh is not exactly the same, that each one of us is different to some degree. That particular truth is very apparent even when we look on the outside of each one of us. We are all human, but we all have unique characteristics, so that each person looks different. At one and the same time we are all generally alike, and yet specifically different.

This very real circumstance carries right on through into many of the internal workings of the body as well. In practical application in regard to health, it means that each person must study into his own body's requirements for more specific answers to what he must do. This requires a great deal of searching experimentation and the studying of one's own body to find out what one must avoid or emphasize in one's diet, but we must begin

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where we are and use what is made available to us, and go forward from there.

I understand that this can be a tedious and sometimes very confusing research. It requires patience and close observation. And when we do find out what works, and what does not, it requires a great deal of self control. The answers are available, because God is in heaven, but these difficulties must not deter us to always follow God's overall directive to "dress and to keep." That means to embellish and to preserve.

There are times when we are going to find that God wants us to bear with a problem. Now maintaining good health requires many choices be made, and this is a wonderful area for developing self-control in order that we might have the best.

I want to begin this sermon, at least the scriptural part of it, in Deuteronomy 28. We used this scripture the last time that I spoke, but I want to touch base with it again.

Deuteronomy 28:58-59 If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LOORD YOUR GOOD, then the LOORD will bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues—great and prolonged plagues—and serious and prolonged sicknesses.

One of the reasons that I want to touch base with this warning is to once again remind us that spiritual sin is a source of physical illness, and that it is not necessarily *your* sin which brings you the physical illness. As in warfare, those innocent of direct causes sometimes get caught in the line of fire.

In addition to the physical aspects of this prophecy, there is a fairly clear indication that considering the state of the church of God today, that this warning here in Deuteronomy 28 is being fulfilled, at least in type, on the church at this time. In addition to that, there are certainly psychological ramifications impacting on health in those who are concerned.

In verse 59, the word "extraordinary" means *unusual, remarkable, out of the usual course*. Now cleanliness and diet always have to be a consideration, but because we are in the end-time and these warnings are coming to pass, it has never been more critical that we take care of ourselves personally and be extraordinarily careful.

Deuteronomy 28:60-65 Moreover He will bring back on you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were afraid, and they shall cling to you. Also every

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sickness and every plague, which is not written in this Book of the Law, will the LORD bring upon you until you are destroyed. You shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven in multitude, because you would not obey the voice of the LORD your God. And it shall be, that just as the LORD rejoiced over you to do you good and multiply you, so the LORD will rejoice over you to destroy you and to bring you to nothing; and you shall be plucked from off the land which you go to possess. Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known—wood and stone. And among those nations you shall you find no rest [Notice the psychological things], nor shall the sole of your foot have a resting place; but the LORD will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul.

You might recall Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 12, that at the end time "many shall run to and fro, and knowledge be increased." All of this travelling is exposing us to disease possibilities that we would have otherwise never faced.

Recently, in preparation for Evelyn's surgery, Diane and I went to the Red Cross to donate blood that then would be set aside specifically for Evelyn should she need it. We had to fill out a 40-question form. It did not require hard difficult answers, but it did have to be gone through. Because I had been in South Africa and Namibia and possibly been infected by a certain mosquito, my donation hung in the balance. It took one-half hour and several telephone calls, one of which was to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, to finally establish that I had not gone into the forbidden area. But what did it really prove?

Have you been listening to the news? African mosquitoes showed up in New York City, and last year killed seven people. How many people have been infected by hepatitis and AIDS and other things from receiving transfusions, even though they might have been examined like Diane and I were?

A particularly gruesome story showed up in this morning's *Charlotte Observer* newspaper about a certain school that is about twenty miles outside the county of which Charlotte is placed. They knew for quite a long period of time that this school was inhabited by bats. But how many bats they did not know until they began to look into it in trying to get the bats out of there. This is a fairly large school, a campus-type school, made up of several buildings. It is a place of education for children from kindergarten up through eighth grade.

They have only begun cleaning out one building, the building that contained those children from kindergarten age up to those of age seven in the second grade. They have already removed six thousand pounds of bat dung from that school. They put a counter in one place where the bats had ingress and egress, and the counter stopped counting at 51,000 bats. Now how much disease has been spread to those children? It had gotten so bad in that school before any steps were taken, that bat dung was falling down on the children's desks while they were in school, and bat urine was running down the walls and staining them.

You may recall that I used the example in the course of that sermon that E. coli bacteria did not even show up in the United States until the 1970s. AIDS was also unheard of until the mid eighties. And so be warned to be exceedingly careful, especially in public restrooms. Wash your hands. Teach your children to do so. Maybe it would be good that you never even touched the handle of the restroom doors as you go in and out. Use your shoulder to go in, and when you leave, take a napkin or something with you, and get out that way, and do not forget to pray.

Be careful in the handling of meat in your own home on counter spaces and things of that nature. I would advise you that you stop eating rare meat. At least have your steaks and so forth cooked to a medium where it is pink, but hot in the middle.

We are not living in normal times. I think we all know that, but sometimes we just do not take the precautions that are necessary during this time. You hate to be considered a fanatic, but it is your health, and it is your children's health. It is a time to be exceedingly careful, more than we would have fifteen or twenty years ago by far.

Ephesians 5:25-29 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh; but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.

This sermon is going to concentrate on biblical parallels. Parallels between the physical and the spiritual are remarkably close in the Bible, because the Bible's writers used the physical as the illustration for the spiritual. They used the familiar, and that which is seen to instruct us on the spiritual, which is unseen, but it is as every bit as real as the

physical.

Now this particular parallel here in Ephesians 5 is probably one of the best known parallels in all of the Bible. By analogy, Paul compares the sacrificial responsibility of a man and wife in marriage to Christ's sacrificial love for the church. But the reverse is also shown. In turn, you see, the church's responsibility is to reciprocate that love back to Him.

The overall purpose is given here *that she can be holy*. Now hang onto that thought because this series of sermons has to do with that principle of being holy, reciprocating love back to Jesus Christ by maintaining, building, strengthening our health. It is an act of holiness. It is a matter of faith and salvation.

An additional teaching in this series of verses is that the giver of the sacrifice, (that is, sacrificial love) also benefits from the sacrifices that he makes for the other. Does it not say, "that He might present her to Himself. . . holy and without blemish"? That is why He sacrificed Himself, and it is showing the benefit that comes back from the person who makes the sacrifices to be holy, to be loving toward Christ. We are going to benefit from that. So two things are accomplished by following the advice in this parallel that Paul gives.

I bring this up because maintaining good health often requires a great deal of sacrifice of not eating or doing things that one enjoys but are not good for the person, or for oneself, especially in the long run. One of these things might be becoming overweight, which according to health officials is America's number one health problem. So these verses are reminding us that as we sacrifice ourselves to Christ in submission in an act of love toward Him as His intended Bride, even as He sacrificed Himself for us, we too are going to receive a benefit from that.

Even though the spiritual is exceedingly more important than the care of the physical body, the care of the physical body is not to be neglected or we will not be faithful in that which is another's—Christ's. He owns us, and we have a responsibility to Him, that by faith we will maintain good health.

Today we are going to continue to lay the groundwork through other biblical parallels that will eventually lead us to what we permit ourselves to ingest into our bodies. Like the parallels involving cleanliness, these too appear in both Testaments, but the spiritual intent is shown more forcefully in the New Testament.

Eventually I am going to be giving you quite a number of scriptures. I am not going to be

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expounding them very much. I may have a little bit to say about each one, but the purpose of this sermon is just to give an overview that is laying a groundwork for the importance of these parallels.

How important is the eating parallel, the eating imagery, that is given in the Bible? Let me give you a little idea. I am going to quote something from one of the Bible dictionaries that I researched into. Now the quote:

With seven hundred references. . .

Did you hear that? Seven hundred references to the act of eating. We always say, "If God says something once, it must be important. If God says something twice, boy, that is really important!" How about seven hundred times? That is sobering! And sometimes we treat things like eating as though it does not matter.

With seven hundred references to the act of eating, not counting references to drinking or food, we can say with confidence that eating is a master image of the Bible. No biblical image combines the literal and the figurative, the physical and spiritual, more inextricably than does the imagery of eating.

In the Old Testament ceremonial laws, rules governing eating are at once physical reality that is a health measure and a covenant sign. The references to eating serve as a reminder of the physical identity of the people in the world, but they are equally a reminder of the spiritual realities of biblical faith.

Both literally and figuratively, eating communicates the paradigm of a providential Creator and dependent humanity. It also demonstrates the news of God's most gracious acts.

The phrase, "God's most gracious acts" is referring to His providence, and eating is a prime evidence of how abundantly God provides. But one of the conclusions that can be reached is that how God provides pretty much depends on our circumstance, combined with what He is working out.

Let us go back to the Old Testament once again to Deuteronomy 29.

Deuteronomy 29:5-6 And I have led you forty years in the wilderness. Your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandals have not worn out on

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your feet. You have not eaten bread, nor have you drunk wine or similar drink, that you may know that I am the LORD your God.

What He is referring to here is the fact that they did not have to provide these things through normal means. Their circumstance was such that God took care of that need in miraculous ways while they were out there. But things are not always that way. Not everybody is always out in the wilderness making the trek from Egypt to the Promised Land, so the way, the means, and the amount that God supplies is going to vary depending upon what He is working out, as well as the circumstance that is going on in our life.

But these two verses in its broadest context is actually a warning before they went into the land, and it is a warning to all of us as well. If you want to study this whole chapter, you will find that despite all that He did for them, (with this being the example, as well as the manna that He provided, and the water that came out of the rocks) was all ineffectual because they did not do their part in working with Him according to the instructions that He gave them, and thus the instructions that He gave them never became practical in their lives. They listened, but they did not do. That is the warning.

Go now to II Corinthians 6, where Paul draws upon this as a warning to those to whom he was writing, and of course a warning to us now because we are reading what he wrote.

II Corinthians 6:1 We then, as workers together with Him, . . .

Remember, I stated as I was beginning the explanation there and expounding Deuteronomy 29:5-6, that their circumstance did not do them any good because they did not work with God. They did not cooperate with Him. "We then, as workers together with him," shows that there is a responsibility on us to work with God. God supplies the instruction, but we are going to have to do something to take advantage of the instruction. We are going to have to do something to make it practical.

If there is something that we can do, that it is well within reach for us to do it, do you think that God is going to supply it? If it is impossible for us to do, if we are in such a circumstance that we cannot do it, the chances are very great that He *is* going to supply it miraculously. We might say "providentially." But if it is in our ability to do it, and we do not, you see then we are not working with Him. We are not cooperating.

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II Corinthians 6:1 We then, as workers together with him, also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

That is what those Israelites did. They received the gifts of God in vain. That is what grace means. Gifts. He provided food, clothing, water, protection from the sun. He provided them guidance. Regardless of what it was, they did not cooperate with Him.

II Corinthians 6:2 For He says, "In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you [met your needs]." Behold [as an encouragement, as an admonishment], now is the accepted time [for you and me]: behold, now is the day of salvation.

One of the major things that we need to learn from this series is that God uses eating—food and water—as the vehicles to far more serious instruction. Common and everyday they are, but spiritually unimportant they are not.

Let us begin to expand out by looking into some of the ways that God supplied needs for people. We will not spend a great deal of time on this, but let us go back to I Kings 17, and we will see here how circumstance dictates a great deal within the Bible. He is speaking to Elijah here.

I Kings 17:4-6 "And it will be that you shall drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there." So he went and did according to the word of the LORD [He cooperated with God. He did the work required of him.], for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread [meaning food] and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook.

That is pretty clear. Much of the rest of the chapter (I Kings 17:8-16) is another example. Understand this. This widow passed a test. Remember, this was at the beginning of a famine. It did not rain for three and one-half years, or whatever it was. She gave her last food to Elijah for a meal. *Last food!* Do you know what God did in return? He supplied her, rewarded her, because of her kindness, because of her sacrifice, with an inexhaustible food supply until the drought ended. He met the circumstance in that case.

Two of Jesus' miracles involved food and wine, and John specifically says that these were "signs."

If we can just spread this principle out maybe even away from the food to other areas, perhaps if we are not being supplied with what we think we should, maybe our perception of our circumstance might need adjustment. Maybe we just have to be humble to admit that maybe we are wrong in our thinking about what is really our need, because our God says, "I will supply all of your needs," and so maybe our judgment of our need is not quite right, and that is what needs to be adjusted, and then God will supply it.

Let us go back to Genesis 3. This is a little bit of a turn in the use of eating, but a very common thing at least in terms of knowing what it says. We will touch on it anyway and mention it briefly. This is part of the curse.

Genesis 3:19 In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground. For out of it were you taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return [because of sin].

The reference here is to the curse of the burden of providing food for the self in a world that has turned its back on God. It made things much more difficult than God ever intended that it would be.

Go now to Ecclesiastes 6. This is a little bit different take here, but is somewhat along the same line.

Ecclesiastes 6:7 All the labor of man is for his mouth, and yet the soul is not satisfied.

Here the inference is to the sheer receptiveness and monotony of having to provide food for oneself, and even to eating it as somewhat burdensome, nagging, never ending, having a profitless aspect to it. Because of sin it is that way.

The Bible places a high value on hospitality, and eating is often seen as the focal point of that hospitality. Let us go back to Genesis again, this time to Genesis 18..

Genesis 18:1-2 Then the LORD appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, . . .

I think he recognized immediately who it was.

Genesis 18:3-8 . . . and said, "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant." They said, "Do as you have said." So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Quickly, make ready three measures of fine meal; knead it and make cakes. And Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf tender and good calf, gave it to a young man, and he hastened to prepare it. So he took butter and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree as they ate.

This meal might have been the very first fast food meal in the history of the world, but fast food by our standards it was not. It is also unusual that Abraham did not even eat with them.

There is something here that really struck me, and that is that we often feel that we do not have time to do such things. But brethren, here was God the Creator! Is there anybody in all the universe who is busier than He is? Hebrews 1 says that "He upholds all things by the word of His power." I cannot grasp a mind that is able to contain all the things that He must be paying attention to, but He had enough time to sit down while Abraham killed a calf, skinned the calf, roasted the calf, and Sarah prepared what amounted to several gallons of meal, and undoubtedly bread besides. That is pretty stunning.

Now maybe Jesus was sitting there working all the while that he was doing that, but He still took the time to respond to Abraham's hospitality. It is quite a witness to those of us who think we are so busy and so important that we cannot take time to do those things. Satan has really sold this world a bill of goods. But this meal is an indication that sitting down and eating with your family is so important even the Creator is willing to do it. Think on that. How many of us eat on the run? How many of us eat fast food virtually all the time?

One of the things of course that we can learn from this and add to our fund of knowledge of the way food and eating is used in the Bible is that it is the focal point of

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Abraham and Sarah—the father and the mother of our faith—as their means of hospitality. It is not unimportant.

The Bible also shows the importance of banquets. Banquets are never merely mealtimes or not always a celebration. There are a lot of them in Scripture, and God put them there and they are worth studying. They are worth thinking about.

Let us go to Genesis 43. This involves Joseph and his brothers.

Genesis 43:31-32 And he [Joseph] washed his face [because he was crying], and came out; and restrained himself, and said, "Serve the bread." So they set him a place by himself, . . .

Now this was a pretty good banquet, but Joseph had to eat by himself because of his station. See, this is something to learn about the culture of the times.

Genesis 43:32 . . .and them by themselves, . . .

The culture of the times demanded that the Egyptians not eat with Israelites because Israelites were shepherds, and so Joseph ate by himself. The Egyptians that were invited ate by themselves, and the Israelites had their own table as well.

Genesis 43:32-33 . . .and for the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves; because the Egyptians could not eat bread with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth; and the men looked in astonishment at one another.

I want you to notice how Joseph arranged this. He positioned everybody according to rank, and the youngest according to his youth. "And the men [the Israelites] were astonished. . ." Of course they wondered, "How in the world does this man understand all of this about us?" They did not know yet who he was.

Genesis 43:34 Then he took servings to them from before him, but Benjamin's serving was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

Banquets in the Bible are loaded with messages about who is up, who is down, who is in, who is out in status; who is in the political circle, and who is out of the political circle; who is in the social circle, and who is out of the social circle. Where a person is seated, and the amount of food and drink offered, also indicates status. If you start thinking about this, you are going to realize that things were not so much different then as they are today, really.

Now let us turn to Esther 1. Here we have another banquet.

Esther 1:5 And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

Esther 1:7-8 And they served drinks in golden vessels, each vessel being different from the other, with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king. In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory; for so the king had ordered all the officers of his household that they should do according to each man's pleasure.

Esther 1:10-12 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command brought by his eunuchs; therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him.

Understand that this dinner sets the stage for everything else that unfolds in the whole story. It is the springboard for everything else that occurs. The banquet is used to convey a powerful king who was aloof, and yet on the other hand he was generous, but in whose character was such a weakness that in a moment of impatient irritation and drunkenness he framed a law that had vast consequences to everybody who was affected.

What is the picture? "Be careful at banquets" is an overall thought here, because there are undercurrents of very important things going on. They may not be on the surface, but in the Bible they are communicating instruction and understanding of the context in which they are given. You will recall that later in the story it is during Esther's banquet

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for the king and Haman that Esther's trap is sprung, and Haman's fate was sealed.

Do you see the way the Bible is using mealtimes? Meals have uses for all kinds of things, and there is very searching instruction in God putting this instruction into His Word. There is the infamous banquet of Belshazzar during which the handwriting appeared on the wall, saying, "MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN," bringing that impious feast, and in fact you might say the entire nation, to a very sobering close.

Banquets are venues for political and social discourse and wheeling and dealing, and an invitation to attend is a distinct honor. Refusal to attend when invited, or being refused entrance, carries a very strong, powerful, and sobering message.

There are aspects of the coronation banquets that are given of both David and Solomon. Banquets give us many insights into Israelite cultural customs that teach us that we are not a great deal different today.

Again let us go back to that book of beginnings to Genesis 21. We find Abraham banqueting again, but this one has a homey touch to it.

Genesis 21:8 So the child [Isaac] grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

This was a happy time, a celebration on a significant occasion. I do not know how old Isaac was. Maybe he was two. Maybe he was three. I do not know, but reading something like this is not to say that good things always happen at banquets. Some are. Some are not, because the Bible shows Israelite communities holding banquets for a variety of reasons, and frequently evil things occurred at these banquets.

Let us go to Judges 9. I hope that I am getting through to you here that banquets are springboards for other instruction, and that banquets are places where things happen. Do you think it is any wonder that businessmen want to wine and dine their customers? Food creates an atmosphere that makes people more pliable, more acceptable, more agreeable, and a little later we are going to say, "Be on guard." God warns, "Control yourself at banquets."

Judges 9:22-27 After Abimelech had reigned over Israel three years, God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem; and the men of Shechem dealt treacherously with Abimelech, that the crime done to the seventy sons of Jerubbaal [Gideon] might be settled and their blood be

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laid on Abimelech their brother, who killed them, and on the men of Shechem, who aided him in the killing of his brothers. And the men of Shechem set men in ambush against him on the tops of the mountains, and they robbed all who passed by them along the way; and it was told Abimelech. Now Gaal the son of Ebed came with his brothers, and went over to Shechem; and the men of Shechem put their confidence in him. And they went out into the fields, and gathered grapes from their vineyards and trod them, and made merry. And they went into the house of their god, and ate and drank, and cursed Abimelech.

What this is saying is that for a period of time people were talking back and forth, and there was an undercurrent of resentment about what had happened to Gideon's sons. But when the harvest time came, it was a cultural occasion that people celebrated the harvest, to come together and feast and have a big to-do wherever it might be, and that was the time that they used to come together and conspire to do their dirty deed of revenge. Do you know that over a thousand people died from the planning that went on at that harvest celebration where food was the means of getting them together?

Go now to I Samuel 25. We see something that is in a way quite similar. David is involved in this one, and Abigail and Nabal. It seems like such an innocent thing in terms of circumstance you might say that Nabal says, but what he is referring to is the celebration banquet when the sheep shearing is done.

I Samuel 25:11 Shall I then take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men when I do not know where they are from?

Nabal ended up dead. This verse shows his attitude, that he was not about to share an abundant wealth that God had given to him. He was going to keep it only for himself and for his shearers. I do not think God appreciated that.

Turn now to II Samuel 13. Again we have a circumstance leading up to another sheep shearing celebration.

II Samuel 13:10-11 Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the bedroom that I may eat of your hand." And Tamar took the cakes which she had made, and brought them to Amnon her brother in the bedroom. Now when she had brought them to him to eat, he took hold of her and said to

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her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."

First, food was part of the ploy that Amnon used to seduce Tamar. Then in verses 23 through 27, Absalom uses the sheep shearing harvest and celebration, when everybody would be getting together, to kill, to take revenge.

II Samuel 13:23-27 And it came to pass, after two full years, that Absalom had sheepshearers in Baal Hazor, which is near Ephraim; so Absalom invited all the king's sons. Then Absalom came to the king and said, "Kindly note, your servant has sheepshearers; please let the king and his servants go with your servant." But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all now go, lest we be a burden to you." And he urged him, but he would not go; and he blessed him. Then said Absalom, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us." And the king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" But Absalom urged him; so he let Amnon and all the king's sons go with him.

Amnon ended up dead.

Thus the Bible shows banquets as occasions of great celebration not only for sheep shearing, not only for harvests, but also they are a symbol of victory in warfare. A tiny insight is given following Abraham's victory over the five kings in Genesis 14, and you will recall there that whenever he returned victorious, Melchizedek brought out food and wine. They had a celebration in mind, and that is exactly what they did.

We are going to go to Psalm 23. Here is one of the best-known sets of scriptures in the entire Bible, and this shows up right here.

Psalm 23:3-5 He restores my soul; he leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.

David is extolling the security of God's provision. It does not matter whether it is in peacetime or in war, and that is what is being pictured here. He is secure even in the midst of the warfare, and so this verse is actually pointing to a victory celebration that God gives to His servant David.

Now there is more to this, because eventually it leads out to what is probably the best-known banquet to all of us: the marriage supper of the Lamb, which is a marriage celebration as well as a victory celebration—the two of them combined into one. And so we will sit down as it were in the midst of our enemies, and God will provide a place for us to celebrate together. We get into the Kingdom, and virtually the first thing we do is eat. Is that not interesting? I think that is worth thinking about.

God intends, as we are going to see as we go along here, that the eating of food—being one of the most enjoyable and significant things that we do every single day—should never get to the place in our lives where it is just taken for granted, that it is done with an understanding of the providence of God. That food at the marriage supper of the Lamb is going to represent to us that it was by His providence that we got there. Food, the providence of God, the physical food is the image of the providence. Thus the spiritual providence of God can always be depended upon even as He daily provides physical food.

At the end of that same chapter (Revelation 19:17-18), there is a very gruesome banquet to consider in which an angel calls all the fowl in the midst of heaven to eat the flesh of those killed in the great end-time battles.

Let us conclude this section in Isaiah 25.

Isaiah 25:6 And in this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees .

This is describing the blessing of God on regathered Israel when the oppression of Satan's rule is overcome, and that curse that is spoken of there in Genesis 3:19 is lifted from the earth and from the shoulders of mankind. It is as though here in Isaiah 25 that the entire Israelitish nation is enjoying a continuous banquet from God's blessings.

So all in all, do not overlook banquets in your studying. Do not just hurriedly pass by them. Most frequently they imply and display blessings, prosperity, abundance, wealth, victory, and joy at which God is the unseen Host. They are evidence of God's faithful provision, and sometimes even human righteousness. They are deeply involved in each and every holy day except Atonement, where the banquet is entirely spiritual. They are an insight into what is to come.

Eating is involved in some of the most famous sins—probably the most famous sin of

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all. That of Adam and Eve in the Garden had perhaps the greatest negative impact of any sin ever committed, because it affected all of mankind all six thousand years, and food was the means through which the sin was expressed.

Literally eating, and at times one's attitude toward eating, takes on symbolic moral meaning. And sometimes these are shown as tests of a person's morality. Turn to Matthew 4, because we have here a clear example.

Matthew 4:3-4 Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"

Eventually we are going to get to that last phrase, but not in this sermon. It lies yet ahead.

Here is a clear example of Satan tempting Jesus to use His powers to produce food at a time when He was very hungry. The word "If" at the beginning of Satan's taunt is in no way suggested by Satan to tempt Him to doubt His Sonship, but to get Jesus to reflect on His Sonship's meaning. Now part of the question that needed to be settled was undoubtedly whether He, like Esau, would reject His birthright simply because He was hungry.

So Satan is suggesting to Jesus that He had every right to satisfy His own need regardless of circumstances. "Yes, Jesus, take care of Yourself first regardless of duty and obligation to others." Jesus' reply was, "I have to perform My duty to God first." A far cry from Esau whom we are going to pay a great deal of attention to later on, because what Esau did touches on us just as surely as what Jesus did. Food was involved. Food has been the central issue in some of the most serious sins and tests that have ever been given to mankind, and they are recorded in this Book as instruction to you and me.

Sometimes there is abstinence from eating. For instance, refraining from eating the forbidden flesh meats listed in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 is a sign of keeping the Covenant. Do you understand the spiritual issue that is involved in this? Do you understand that your and my health is secondary? The issue is *holiness*—spiritual holiness; not physical health. Why did God do this? I do not know. Maybe it was only arbitrary. He wanted to see whether we would restrain ourselves. That is a possibility. Restrain ourselves, refraining from eating those things that everybody else in the world seems to be enjoying and finds tasting so good.

Now please do not be misled by what I said, because I think there is a physical health issue involved here. But God wants above all that we be holy, and that is the real issue, and so the first place that the "clean and unclean" appears is in what book? Leviticus—the book of holiness.

We find other places where the Nazarites abstaining from eating certain foods is a part of their regimen. Daniel and his friends refused to eat the Babylonian king's food. In addition to that we find in Isaiah 58 fasting—not eating.

Isaiah 58:6 Is this not the fast that I have chosen: To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and that you break every yoke?

Not eating is central to this.

Isaiah 58:7-9 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor that are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him, and you hide not yourself from your own flesh? Then [if we fast properly, in the right attitude, and for the right reasons] your light shall break forth like the morning, your healing shall spring forth speedily, and your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then shall you call, and the LORD shall answer; you shall cry, and He will say, 'Here I am.' If you take away the yoke from your midst, the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness.

If we are fasting for the right reasons, and if it is done in the right way and in the right attitude, it is not only a means for drawing close to God, but of great spiritual and physical blessing.

Go now to Psalm 104. I will give you this in summary for this sermon today.

Psalm 104:27 These wait all for You. . .

"These all" are the things that God has mentioned in the previous paragraph or so. When you read this in a wider context, when you get to verse 27, then you will understand what "These all wait for You." They serve You.

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Psalm 104:27-29 . . .that You may give them their food in due season. What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand [in providence], they are filled with good. You hide Your face, they are troubled.

What if God shut things down? What if God did not uphold this creation by the Word of His power? What if He decided to take a vacation or quit working? Everything would fall apart.

Psalm 104:29 You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

And so eating is at once a physical and a spiritual reality in the Bible. At the physical level it is a continuous evidence of God's daily provision for people and animals. Eating should remind us every day how dependent we are upon our Creator's beneficence. Eating should remind us that God's provision and human need apply also on a spiritual level. Eating is one of the primary images of what is absolutely necessary for both physical and spiritual life. The very goal of human life is to number among those whom Christ allows to eat and drink with Him in His Kingdom.