

More Than a Meal

More Than Food

by Carolyn Mahaney

Meals. They occupy a big part of our lives. Three times a day they show up – morning, midday and again at evening time. We have to plan for them. Shop for them. Prepare them. (Or pick up the phone and order them.) Eat them. Clean up after them. Often our kitchen can feel like a 24-hour diner, and we're the short-order cook, waitress and bus boy rolled into one.

Given how much time they take up day after day, we thought it might be useful to have a conversation about meals. What is the significance of mealtime? How can I make delicious food for my family (or myself!) with less effort? What are tips for a peaceful, memorable mealtime?

We'd also like to invite you to our homes for dinner. Not literally of course. Although we'd love to have you visit, our houses are not quite big enough to accommodate everyone. But we will give you a peek into dinnertime at the Whitacre, Chesemore, Bradshaw and Mahaney households as this discussion unfolds. We hope you will accept our invitation.

To answer the question: "What is the significance of mealtime?" I've solicited the help of Edith Schaeffer from her book *The Hidden Art of Homemaking*. She writes:

There is no occasion when meals should become totally unimportant. Meals can be very small indeed, very inexpensive, short times taken in the midst of a big push of work, but they should be always more than just food. Relaxation, communication and a measure of beauty and pleasure should be part of even the shortest meal breaks. Of course you celebrate special occasions—successes of various members of the family, birthdays, good news, answered prayer, happy moments—with special attention to meal preparation and serving. But we should be just as careful to make the meal interesting and appealing when the day is grey, and the news is disappointing.... Food cannot take care of spiritual, psychological and emotional problems, but the feeling of being loved and cared for, the actual comfort of the beauty and flavor of food, the increase of blood sugar and physical well-being, help one to go on during the next hours better equipped to meet the problems.

Food can't solve our problems, but it is a gift from God to help us meet our problems. Whether small or big, for a large family or just for you, meals should always be more than just food.

More Than Necessity

by Nicole Whitacre

Yesterday Mom proposed, with the help of Edith Schaeffer that “meals should be more than just food.”

Today, I want to call upon John Calvin to take us one step further. For a proper understanding of mealtime springs from a biblical understanding of food.

On the subject of food, the esteemed Calvin writes, “If we ponder to what end God created food we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer” (qtd. in *Redeeming the Time* by Leland Ryken).

If God created food merely to “provide for necessity” then mealtime, although an expression of his sustaining mercy, would be rather unspectacular. However, the fact that God created such a wide variety of foods with an unending combination of flavors and textures for our “delight and good cheer” makes mealtime momentous.

For ultimately, as with all of the good gifts that He freely gives us to enjoy, food is meant to point back to the goodness of The Giver.

More Than Dinner

by Janelle Bradshaw

“It helps to imagine an ornate gold frame. Pick it up (don't worry; it's only pretend) and place it around the image that appears when you say 'supper at my house.' Bet the picture you see is very specific: These are the seats we sit in, the things we discuss. Here is the person who shows up last. That is the bowl we use for the rice.... Sitting down to a meal together draws a line around us. It encloses us and, for a brief time, strengthens the bonds that connect us with the others members of [our family], shutting out the rest of the world.”

I love photography; that is why I love this quote. It tells you to stop for a minute and observe. To pull up the image of your family mealtime. Can you see it? It can seem so trivial: *What's the big deal?* You rush around, trying to get everything hot and on the table at the same time. Everyone comes, eats, leaves and you clean up. However this author is challenging us to take a step backwards and take a long, slow look at this seemingly mundane activity. There is something more that happens here.

Mealtime is a gathering. The people you love the most come to the same place at the same time. Conversations happen; memories are made. There is laughter and tears. A strong family bond begins to form—a bond that grows stronger by doing it again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that.

The mundane has purpose. If it weren't for the ordinary duties of food preparation and kitchen cleanup, than this moment, this mealtime, this bond, wouldn't exist.

So the next time you make dinner, hang that “mealtime picture” on the wall of your mind while you grate the cheese and toss the salad. You are making much more than dinner.

One of a Kind

by Nicole Whitacre

What's wonderful about your family's “mealtime picture” is that its one of a kind. No one else's looks quite the same. And as Janelle said yesterday, it's all the seemingly insignificant habits, etiquette and personalities blended together that make your family unique.

(Speaking of blending, I have to tell you what happened to me last night. My poor husband wasn't feeling well and so I offered to make him his favorite strawberry smoothie. I was having a little trouble getting our twenty-dollar six-year-old blender to work but that's not unusual. Then I noticed a big chunk of something grey floating in the pitcher. I fished out a section of the rubber ring that is part of the blender assembly. I'm still not sure how it became the sixth ingredient in my smoothie. I'm just grateful I didn't give my husband an even more memorable stomach-ache!)

It's something as small as the way you fold your napkins (rectangle or triangle?), who takes ice in their drinks and where everybody sits. Do you hold hands to pray for your meal or fold them in your lap? Do you pass the food clockwise or do you serve buffet style?

Conversation is another major ingredient. There was always a lot of laughter in the Mahaney home. Even though my dad and Janelle are the only ones graced with a sense of humor, Dad had a way of helping us all laugh—even when our jokes flopped. Other families might be more serious and serene or have lively debates.

Then there are the stories. Simply by hearing about the events of each person's day, you can build up a storehouse of "shared" experiences. Some of the more memorable stories become part of family lore. (Just ask anyone in our family about Uncle Grant's picnic story!) Inside jokes and serious fellowship all strengthen—often in unseen ways—that almost indescribable bond.

So here's something you can talk about at dinnertime tonight—*what are the funny, quirky, and significant things that make our family meals one of a kind?* Then thank God for these small, unique expressions of His boundless creativity.

Never Perfect

by Carolyn Mahaney

My husband has been out-of-town since Tuesday. Chad has had a basketball game or a practice for four evenings in a row (definitely out of the ordinary!). Consequently, CJ, Chad and I have not once been able to sit down face to face and enjoy a family meal together this week. I share this, not as a recommendation, but a reality.

On occasion, there will be days or even a week when family meals do not happen. Granted, we should work hard to make this a rare experience rather than the usual. But if a family-meal-lapse should occur in your home, don't be discouraged or give up. A brief departure from the norm won't destroy the big picture.

And let me mention one more important point. Even when family mealtimes are consistent, they are never perfect. I appreciate one author's perspective:

If you have an image of some ideal supper in mind, the only thing you can be certain of is that tonight's will not measure up. Still, something will happen. The surface will look shaggy, but underneath, over time, a form begins to take shape. Some type of ritual will grow. That overarching ritual, and the dozens of tiny ones

that compose it will belong to your family, and to them alone. It will give meaning, frame, boundaries, comfort.

We hope our discussion this week has helped impart worth to all the seemingly mundane aspects that go in to putting a meal on our tables. Next week we'll chat about all the practical stuff like planning, shopping and cooking meals.

A Plan That Works

by Carolyn Mahaney

Last week we reflected upon the powerful effect that consistent family meals can have over time. This week we will consider the meal itself—how to take it from merely an idea in our head (or a craving in our stomach!) to a lovely presentation on our dining room table.

I suggest that we begin with a plan. To do so, we need to figure out where we best fit on the planning continuum.

Some of you can get by with a simple “staples plan.” As long as you keep certain ingredients on hand, you can easily produce a delicious meal in a short period of time—depending on your creative urge that day.

I'm feeling a little envious even as I write this because if I tried to pull off a meal like that, it would be a disaster! Therefore, I'm part of the group who is at the other end of the planning spectrum. I need to rely on a “menu plan.”

Wednesdays are my normal day for planning a week's worth of menus and grocery list and Thursdays are my grocery-shopping day. I always plan the meals with my calendar. That way, I can coordinate the meal with the day—plan easy meals for busy days and the more elaborate meals for the less demanding days.

Also, to simplify the menu-planning process, I plan meals from the same category of foods for certain days. For example on Sundays I make a breakfast meal since CJ and Chad like breakfast foods. On Mondays, which is my husband's day off, I use a meal from my freezer. Then again on Saturdays, I make sandwiches for dinner (and add a dessert to make it a little more special!) because that is the night I babysit my grandsons.

I've found it helpful to keep a running grocery list on a tiny dry-erase board (a freebie from a seafood market that I frequent) that is on the side of my

refrigerator. The moment I run out of a food item, I jot it down so I won't forget it come grocery-shopping day. Certain family-members like to add to the list as well. This past week "cherry coke" appeared. I knew immediately—Janelle's been here.

Then there are times when all my planning goes awry! The meals don't get planned on Wednesday. I'm running to the store a few times a week to buy ingredients for a meal that I'm throwing together at the last minute. Or I serve cereal, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and hot dogs and chips for three consecutive evenings. Even though weeks like this are bound to come along, my menu plan helps me get back on track.

Whether you're the ultra-creative type who can do a lot with a simple plan or whether you need a more specific plan like me, an effective plan is key to consistently providing well-balanced, delicious, within-budget, and peaceful meals week in and week out.

So take a few moments to consider your plan—how's it working for you? If one aspect of your plan needs tweaking or if you've never developed an effective plan, let me encourage you to draw from the wisdom of other women. While we are all different, by learning from each other's strengths, we can all grow in planning meals for our family.

Shopping Time

by Janelle Bradshaw

As a young woman still living at home, I used to grocery shop for my mom. Then grocery shopping fun and easy. I simply drove to the store Mom directed me to, bought the items on her list (plus a few for myself—she said it was OK!), paid for the groceries with her credit card and then took them home and put them in the fridge. Mom would use them to make great meals for the fam.

Then I got married and switched from Mom's credit card to my credit card. All of a sudden, it got much more complicated. How often do I need to go to the store? What quantities should I buy? Which stores offer the best deals, the most quality food? How do I manage this on a budget?

I still haven't found that magic list of rules, but the following suggestions have helped me become a smarter shopper:

Go with a list.

Critical for me. When I don't have a list I end up wandering the store buying things I already have while forgetting the things that I truly need. No good!

Don't go when you are hungry.

Someone suggested this with me in mind. I lose my ability to think clearly when I'm in the grocery store hungry. Of course I need more Cheetos, and you can't eat Cheetos without Cherry Coke. I don't need cereal for breakfast—where are my favorite chocolate donut holes? Need I go on?

Establish a pattern.

Find a routine that serves you and your family's needs most effectively. Some shop weekly and others monthly. I'm a weekly girl myself, but I have a very shopping-savvy friend who finds monthly shopping (with weekly visits for milk) works best for her.

Do Internet research.

I ran into my friend Jenni at the store last week and she told me that before she heads out to shop she does a quick Internet search of the area stores to find the best sales. This helps her to decide which store she will go to that week.

Tailor a list to your store.

One reader wrote in with a great tip. She created a grocery list on her computer that follows the traffic pattern of her local grocery store. She keeps a copy on her fridge, and when it comes time to plan her meals, a quick walk through the list is all that's needed to ensure she purchases the necessary ingredients. This maximizes her time in both the planning and the shopping.

We here at girltalk hardly fit the category of "grocery-shopping experts." These suggestions are just to get you started. We hope they inspire you to fine-tune your grocery shopping technique. Consider doing a google search for more grocery shopping tips. Even better, consider your network of relationships and corner a friend who seems to have this grocery shopping thing down.

Grocery shopping may require time, thought, and skill. But by learning from others we can master this crucial task in order to prepare memorable meals for our family!

All But the Doughnuts

by Carolyn Mahaney

My mom rarely used a recipe when she cooked. That was fine by me as I daily enjoyed her delicious meals while growing up. However, when I got married and wanted to make her yummy doughnuts, it became a problem. I still remember calling her as a new bride to ask for the recipe and hearing something like this on the other end of the line: "I use about this much flour and sugar; add some milk until it's the right consistency. I throw in a pinch of this and a little of that. I knead the dough until it feels right; let them rise. And then I fry them in the Crisco until I can tell they are done."

I tried to make those doughnuts. The whole batch ended up in the trashcan. I even tried them a second time--and again, the trashcan was their final destination. I knew then that if I were to ever enjoy my mom's doughnuts, I would need her to make them.

Sadly, I can't cook like my mom. I have to follow recipes. My daughters are not endowed with my mom's gift either. They go by recipes too. So, before the three girls got married, and embarked on their cooking careers as new wives, I decided to create a notebook of all the recipes we enjoy.

Eight years later I'm only now finishing the compilation of this notebook. Of course I haven't been consistently working on it all this time; the project simply got shelved along the way. However, this past summer I made a concerted effort to complete it.

I have taken all of our favorite recipes--found in numerous cookbooks, torn from magazines, accrued from cooking classes, collected from friends, and even saved from my wedding showers years ago--typed them out on my computer, printed them, inserted each one into a page protector (to protect from food splatters) and then placed them behind the appropriate tab of a big spiral notebook.

Though the original intent of this project was to help my girls, it has served me too. I've been able to throw away all the tattered recipe cards, messy pieces of papers and folded magazine pages and compile them neatly into one notebook. I no longer have to go searching through fifteen cookbooks before I find a recipe that was a big hit with my family. It's also made meal planning easy. I can sit down with the notebook, flip through the different sections, quickly decide on a meal, and have all the meal's ingredients listed right in front of me for my grocery list.

Now, by no means am I sharing the details of my system to suggest that you must do the same. I simply hope to spark your creativity--in case you desire a more efficient way to store and access your recipes and then to pass them along to your daughters (or anyone else for that matter). And if you do decide to create a better system, hopefully it won't take you eight years like it did me!

All this talk about recipes and food is making me hungry. In fact, my mouth is watering for my mom's doughnuts. Of course, I don't have a recipe for them in my notebook. Maybe I'll just give her a call to see if she's up for making a batch for me!

Dinnertime Adventures

by Nicole Whitacre

Even with a simple menu, a lot of work and planning goes into making family mealtime a reality. So what do you do once everyone is seated around the table?

We're going to share just a couple of traditions that defined Mahaney family dinners over the years. This is not to say dinnertime at our house was perfect—like any family we had conflicts, rushed meals, seasons where nothing extraordinary seemed to happen. However, by strategically using dinnertime to make memories our family bond was strengthened.

My favorite dinnertime activity was when Dad read aloud to us after dinner. Sometimes he would read one chapter and we'd all scoot off to various meetings or activities. Other days we would sit with unwashed dishes late into the evening--all engrossed in the story. Predictably, when we'd come to the end of an especially moving book, Dad would be overcome with emotion and unable to finish. Someone else would have to volunteer.

Dad used breakfast (when everyone was fresh) for Bible study and theological teaching. After dinner reading was amusement with a purpose. Over the years, Dad read us numerous biographies, history books, and works of literature.

Particularly vivid in my memory are the many books we read on the African-American experience: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Help Me Remember*, *Help Me Forget*, and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* to name a few. Dad wanted to be sure we understood—as best as white suburban children can—the tragic history of slavery and racism in our country.

The Chronicles of Narnia were a favorite and so was *The Hiding Place*, *Through Gates of Splendor*, *Deadline* and *Dominion* by Randy Alcorn and *Our Town*. Most recently, Dad, Mom and Chad have been enjoying *The Complete Calvin and Hobbes* and *Letters From A Nut*.

It has been said that books can take you places you've never been. By reading together after dinner, our family shared many experiences and went many places—together.

The little white bear and some manners

by Janelle Bradshaw

“Children learn manners mostly by example. It’s only when they don’t pick up on some detail that we must point out their lapses...manners are a cut-to-the-chase way of teaching important life lessons.”

Just as we learned many life lessons from the books we read after dinner, the same can be said about dinnertime manners. Table manners may seem insignificant but, as the author points out in the quote above, they reinforce important qualities such as courtesy, love for others, and self-control.

When I think about dinnertime manners, my mind immediately jumps to a white teddy bear with a red and white striped hat that played Jingle Bells when you squeezed his paw. This little guy was the much-coveted prize of the “Mahaney Dinnertime Manners Contest.”

There was a time when the manners of my sisters and myself...well, let’s just say that you wouldn’t have wanted to come to our house for dinner. The regular reminders of “no elbows on the table,” “no talking with food in your mouth,” “no eating with your fingers” and “no interrupting” seemed to be falling on deaf ears. (Sorry, Dad and Mom!) Drastic action was needed and so the “Manners Contest” was born.

Rules? We had one week (one week!) to reform our backwards dinnertime habits and re-acquaint ourselves with our silverware. Dad and Mom would be the official judges, observing us closely at mealtimes and choosing a winner at the end of the week. The winner would receive the bear.

I wanted that bear so badly! I still remember thinking through my every move as I ate my chocolate chip pancakes (a Saturday night favorite). The week came to an end and it was time to announce a winner. And while

there had been much growth in all of us, one daughter stood out above the rest. Yes, it just happened to be me. And to this day, it's one of my favorite stories to recount to my sisters.

I hope this sparks your creativity. You may feel that you are constantly reminding your children to exercise better table manners. Don't get discouraged! Consider using a game or a prize to motivate your children. You will not only teach them important lessons, but a life long family memory can be made. The little white bear that played Jingle Bells when you squeezed his paw has been forever recorded in the "Mahaney Family Memory Book" to be told, retold, and told one more time!

Some Dinnertime Fun

by Janelle Bradshaw

While there are valuable lessons to be learned around the dinner table, there are also wonderful memories to be made as well. By faithfully eating together as a family, ordinary meals can together become an extraordinary memory. But sometimes it's fun to mix it up a little. When we were young, mom looked for creative ways to turn certain dinners into special memories. We chose our favorites to get your own creative juices flowing. Check these out:

Kristin's picks:

Encouragement Dinner--We took turns encouraging each member of the family over dinner. For dessert, we drew names, and with sugar cookie dough and alphabet cookie cutters, spelled out a godly character quality of the family member whose name we had picked. We were then assigned to do one thing special to honor that individual during the coming week.

Mystery Dinner--Each family member had been assigned a particular aspect of the meal (appetizer, main course, side dish, dessert, etc.) the week before. We could decide what we would make, but we had to keep our dish a secret. So, when we showed up for dinner, we had a surprise of a meal--including peanut butter sandwiches, fancy salad, green bean casserole, shrimp cocktail, and Kool-Aid. To set the mood we had mystery music in the background. The game for that evening was an invigorating round of Clue. We finished off with a mystery movie.

Nicole's picks:

Switching Places Dinner--My mom had us draw the name of another family member and we had to sit in their seat at dinner and behave like them throughout the meal. I remember it being so funny to see my dad imitating my Uncle Grant (who lived with us at the time) and my mom acting silly like Janelle.

We repeated this dinner activity years later when Joshua Harris and Andrew Garfield (who were attending the Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastors College) lived in our basement. It was even more hysterical the second time, especially since Josh gave an Academy Award worthy performance as my dad. He even wore an imitation bald cap!

Backwards Dinner--This meal was inspired by the definitions of the word "backwards": "doing something in the reverse of the usual, the right way," and "toward the past." We, of course, did everything backwards for that particular meal. We had breakfast for dinner. And we had to have fulfilled a "backward assignment" during the day and tell about it at dinner. The options were to wear an article of clothing backwards (one that people could see!), eat our lunch backwards in the presence of a friend, walk backwards around the outside of the house three times (while it was still daytime!), or wear a nametag all day with our name written backwards. Then, at dinner, after we reported on our humiliating "backward assignment," we looked backwards over the past year and recounted one specific example of God's goodness.

Janelle's picks:

Progressive Dinner--This one works great for the little guys. We ate each course of our dinner in a different room of the house while doing an activity. In the first room we ate hot dogs and put a puzzle together. The Memory Game and deviled eggs came with the second room. It was applesauce and story-time in the third room. We concluded with apple cider and talked about the meaning of each of our names in the last room (To my sisters' delight that is when I discovered that my name means "gift from God").

Silly Dinner--For this meal, we came dressed in "silly" attire. I can still remember running around my house that afternoon trying to put together all of the craziest stuff that I could find. This was right down my alley (probably not one of Kristin's favorites). We all assembled for dinner looking ridiculous--mismatched outfits and crazy hair. We ate our meal starting with dessert (a practice I still enjoy) and ending with our salad. This was made even more hilarious with Mom having us use the wrong

utensils to eat our food. Then we launched into a series of silly activities. We drew a picture in the dark. Mom turned out the lights and gave instructions: "Draw the outline of a house. Put a door on the house. Put a tree in the yard...." You get the idea. Not exactly art museum material. We then drew names and gave a silly command to the person whose name we drew. The evening ended with a lovely family picture.

Welcome to the Whitacres

by Nicole Whitacre

Here we are enjoying some tangy South Carolina barbecue. The little guy at the end is Jack. On the left is Steve's younger sister Megan, his mom, Nancy and dad, Bill. That's Steve and me on the right.

This casual Sunday evening meal was followed by family night. We had a competitive game of dominoes fueled by Bill's yummy home made trail mix (the secret's in the peanut butter chips!).

In our multi-generational household with two homemakers, three adults working outside the home, and one toddler with stuff to say, dinnertime conversation is pleasantly eclectic.

Recently, though, Steve has been training Jack to ask questions. We want him to learn to take an interest in others. And he loves taking an active part in the adult conversation. "Dad, can we do questions?" he usually asks five minutes into the meal.

Beginning with Bill he takes a verbal lap around the table, enthusiastically asking: "Pops, what did you do today?" When he's finished he wants someone to ask him about his day.

After one round, Steve helps him begin again. This time he asks each family member, "What did you read in the Bible today?" Quiet time accountability from a three-year old! Seriously, it's my favorite moment of the meal. Our son gets to hear the gospel five times over from his grandparents, aunt, and parents. Not to mention the encouragement we all receive from this time of fellowship.

Don't get me wrong. Whitacre dinnertime isn't always a worshipful experience. Some days we're rushing off to church meetings, or Jack needs discipline, or only two in a family of six can make it.

But despite our inconsistencies, a three-year-old boy is learning lessons that will shape the man that he becomes--proving that you can't measure the value of a meal by the grocery budget.

You're Invited to the Chesemores

by Kristin Chesemore

It's pizza night at the Chesemores. Many Monday evenings (Brian's day off) we take advantage of the one large pizza for \$4.99 special at Jerry's Subs and Pizza. When you've got four hungry men to feed, it doesn't get much better than this!

Other nights of the week the menu will vary. Sometimes I pull a meal I've pre-prepared out from the freezer. Or, if I'm cooking I might make the boys sit at the table and read for a while. Recently I let them all stand on chairs in a row so they could watch me make dinner.

Conversation also varies. Some nights Brian and I have a chance to chat for a few minutes about our day. But most evenings, dinnertime with three boys is pretty much about the basics. Like teaching Owen not to sing at the top of his lungs at the table.

We're working with three simple rules these days:

1. Feet in front
2. Use Inside Voices
3. No touching

(Did you catch the acronym here?)

In addition to basic manners, Brian is also using *My First Book of Questions and Answers* catechism to teach them the basics of theology. So far, Liam can correctly answer one question: "Who made you?" (It took a while to convince him that it was "God" and not "Thomas the Train," which he thought was the answer to everything!) But Andrew can now answer dozens of questions about Bible truths and we usually review 7-10 questions each evening.

After eating, it's down to the basement with the boys to wrestle with Daddy while I do dishes.

So, do you still want to come over? We'd love to have you. Hope you enjoy pizza. Oh, and don't forget to use your inside voice.

Dinner at the Bradshaws

by Janelle Bradshaw

Dinner at the Bradshaws does not always involve hats and sweatshirts, but it was a snow day and we Marylanders dress the part. The menu consisted of stromboli, steamed broccoli with butter and fresh lemon juice (yes, I do like some vegetables) and homemade chocolate chip cookies for dessert (these also make for a good breakfast option if you are on the run). Caly enjoyed some delicious grapes, cheese, and goldfish crackers.

Mike and I use dinner time to catch up on our days. He loves to say, “Tell me every little detail, I want to feel like I was there.” I usually don’t have much trouble providing him with plenty of info. Dinner is also an opportunity for Mike to enjoy Caly. She has a rather early bedtime and Mike likes to take advantage of dinner to interact with her.

After we finished eating, Mike took Caly to have some “tub-time” (she could live in the bath) and I tackled the dishes. The end! Dinner is still a simple affair in our house. We look forward to more craziness as our family grows.

Mealtime at the Mahaneys

by Carolyn Mahaney

My “two men” love to eat crab legs! Though it is not everyday fare at our house, it was Valentine’s Day, so I splurged. Adding coleslaw and garlic bread to the main course and then serving up ice cream for dessert (a must-have after crab legs!) made it an easy cooking night for me.

And yes the beautiful roses on the table are a Valentine’s gift to me from my dear husband. Would you believe that another dozen are up on my bedroom table? I don’t deserve this man’s extravagant love, for almost thirty-two years now. Yet my Valentine’s card to him best captures my heart: “After all this time together, I’m still smitten!”

But we’re talking about mealtime, aren’t we?

While last night’s menu was not standard cuisine, the goal and purpose of our dinner hour remains the same each evening. CJ always seeks to ask questions that provoke God-glorifying conversation and model biblical fellowship for our son.

Recently my husband has asked two questions that have generated meaningful interaction: *What was the happiest moment of your day?* *What was the most discouraging moment of your day?*

The other night, I was able to share with Chad that the most discouraging moment of my day was when I responded in sinful anger to his father. And the happiest moment was when CJ graciously forgave me. By dinnertime, CJ and I were laughing about this little conflict. Hopefully it was an illustration to Chad of the effect of the gospel on our marriage! And it was thoughtful dinnertime questions that made this conversation—and many others, possible.

But Mahaney dinners aren't all serious. We love to make memories and have fun. Recently we have been reading from Calvin and Hobbes and Letters from a Nut—both of which have provoked much laughter.

Even though there are only three of us now, dinnertime still retains the essential qualities of fellowship and fun we enjoyed when the girls lived at home. And I hope by the grace of God that will never change.*

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