

Abiding Continuance

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Date: 10 September 2017

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[0 : 00] In St. John's account of the Gospel, we read chapter 15 in verse 4, We abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me.

Now, on a superficial reading, this chapter may appear simply to be about fruitfulness and love, and that's not an inappropriate understanding of it.

I would suggest to you, however, that there is more than that. And that the overriding concern of this chapter is continuance with Christ.

Continuance with Christ, without which there will be neither love nor fruitfulness. Let me take verse 4, and as an example, we read verse 4 where we read, Abide in me, and I in you.

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye, except ye abide in me. Three times in one comparatively short verse, we have this word abide.

[1 : 03] In verse 5, again, we have, I am the vine of the branches, he that abideth in me, and I in him. The same bringeth forth much fruit. And likewise, again, in verse 6, we see, If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered.

Verse 7, we have, abide twice. Verse 9, the term, continue. As the Father had loved me, so have I loved you. Continue ye in my love. Verse 10, we put these terms, keep, abide, kept, and so on.

It says that there's a pattern emerging here. Verse 11, remain. It's what we read here. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be through.

Again, in verse 16, the same idea. You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you. You should go and bring forth much fruit, and that your fruit should remain. Again, verse 20, remember the word I said unto you, Sermon does not break on his Lord.

If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you. If they have kept my say, they will keep yours also. Remain, keep, kept, continue, abide, abideth. It's an emphasis to this recurring throughout this chapter here.

[2 : 10] Abiding, continuing, remaining in and with Christ is the prerequisite for being fruitful and being enabled to love even unto death.

No true relationship with Christ is ever merely temporary. The faith of Christ is no worldly pick-and-mix religion.

Those who are Christ's will bear witness to him, as he says there at verse 27, the last verse, and ye also shall bear witness because ye have been with me from the beginning.

Because ye have been with me from the beginning. We might say, but where is the beginning? The beginning of Jesus' ministry? Is it his baptism?

Well, if we were to read Acts chapter 1, verses 21 and 22, that might suggest that that's the case. We remember when they're choosing a new apostle to replace Judas, and they end up choosing Matthias, of course.

[3 : 08] But Peter, in his speech, he says for them, And that might imply from the time when Jesus was baptized by John.

And that's the point. That's the time when the beginning is. But, there again, very few of Jesus' disciples appear to have been actually around at that point.

If you look in John chapter 1, we see that there's Andrew and another unnamed disciple there, who most commentators think to be John. I personally think it's Philip, but never mind.

And then you've got that Philip called the next day, and then Nathaniel. And there's only three, at the most four, at that point. You know, by the time you get the wedding at Cairn Galilee in chapter 2, it just talks about Jesus' disciples.

In general, James and John appear to have been called later, when Jesus is walking by the Sea of Galilee and calls them from their nets. Matthew is later still from his tax collector's office.

[4 : 18] As to the others, unless we take, you know, Luke 6 at verse 13, where we read this, as what we find, when it was day, he called unto him his disciples, and of them he chose twelve, whom he also named apostles.

Now, you take that as being the occasion when it all begins, but even for that, for him to choose those apostles from amongst his existing disciples, they must already have been with them to start with it.

Start with it. As being, that being the occasion of beginning, they must have already started with him before that. We have no clue as to when they were called, and even in the light of that, Luke 6, verse 13, as we say, they must have been with Jesus for more time, some considerable time, before being set apart in this way.

So, is the beginning, is it their baptism, is when they were baptized by John, or is it their appointment as apostles, or what? I would suggest to you that a key word in verse 27 is the word from.

Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. Jesus does not say, you are my witnesses, because you were there at the beginning, but rather, you have been with me from the beginning.

[5 : 42] Whatever the beginning may have been, the key thing for Jesus is not simply that they were there then, but rather that they have continued to be with him ever since.

Ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning. In the Christian life, where we begin is far less important than where we end.

And between the two is the vital distinction of continuance, of going on with the Lord, that having begun with him, it is in him that we remain, abide, continue.

Christians can and do spend huge amounts of time and energy and debate on disagreements over beginnings.

Whether it's about, you know, what actually constitutes conversion, or what about creation, and whether, you know, some take the literal six-day creation, which, you know, is what the Bible actually teaches, or some will say, oh yes, but the six days actually means millions and millions of years, or whatever the case may be.

[6 : 55] And these things are not unimportant. They also disagree about baptism, and about the point at which one enters into a certain Christian life. Is it at the point of baptism?

Should it be reserved simply for confessing adults, who are able to give, a reason for the hope that is in them, or is it okay to give it to infants as well? And huge amounts of ache and time and energy have been spilled over these debates about beginnings, about creation, about conversion, about baptism, and so on, or whatever.

Now, these are not unimportant. Don't think, because I'm using these things as examples, oh, it doesn't really matter about these things. It does matter about these things. First, they have a very definite view on each of them.

They are not unimportant, but they are less important than being in Christ now, and abiding in Christ always.

This is what he says, abide in me, verse 4, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in me.

[8 : 05] When do we identify? The change in the soul. When do we say, oh yes, this is the point, I'm switching on a light, that's the point, at which the change began.

Time and time again, is it not the case? I know, we've referenced this in the past. When you hear somebody's testimony, when you hear about how they came to the Lord, there'll be a definite point at which they professed it, at which they came forward, and they, yes, acknowledge, well, out of the current section of the world, and generally, yes, I accept Christ as my Savior, testify to what he has done in my life.

But when they're giving testimony later on, they'll be the first to admit that their Christian life, or God's dealing with them, didn't just begin at that moment, when they actually professed faith.

Any more than, say, a couple who are getting married, their love doesn't begin on the wedding day. The whole reason for the wedding day is because they have first met, and got to know each other and fallen in love.

So, likewise, anyone who is enabled by grace to acknowledge Christ as their Savior, can only be because he has first begun to do a work in their lives earlier.

[9 : 19] We don't know whether that begins with the influence of being prayed over in the cradle, or whether it is, you know, in Sunday schools, or upbringing, in, you know, a Christian home, or whatever.

None of these things will convert anyone. Only the Spirit of Christ will convert anyone. But these may be the means by which the Lord chooses to work, to prepare us all, working with influence in. And just like, you know, if you take a loaf of bread out of the oven, say, oh yeah, smells great. But it doesn't begin then. It begins when you take the flour, and the milk, and the water, and all the other stuff, and you work it together, and the dough, and you add it, whatever it means, and then you put it in the oven, and so on.

All the ingredients are first to go in. All the work and the needy is still to be done. And the oven has to do its work too, before you get the final product. God is at work in lives.

It's long before the world actually sees any effect. When a tree grows, or when a plant grows, the only reason it first sticks a little green shoot up above the soil, is because first of all, roots have been spreading out, and going outward under the soil.

[10 : 31] It is what we don't see, that God is at work doing. We think, if we were to say, well, sunrise is a definite time, that we can identify. We see when the sun first appears on the horizon, that's sunrise.

But we all know, if you're sitting in pitch black, and gradually the black turns to grey, and the light and the dawn begins to rise, that all happens before the sun rises on the horizon.

When does the light first begin to come? The exact point at which we identify a beginning is less important than the fact that it happens, and that it continues.

If we take the man who was born blind, whose eyes the Lord opened, and we read in John 9, 25, and they said again, they called him, give God the praise, we know that this man is a sinner.

He answered and said, whether he be a sinner or no, I know not. One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see.

[11 : 31] Whereas I was blind, now I see. He doesn't know exactly what point it happened. He doesn't know exactly when, whether his eyes began to clear, or whatever, whether it was gradual, whether it was sudden, whether it was instant.

Yes, go and wash in the pool of Silo, and come see it. And so on. He opened my eyes. Whereas I was blind, now I see. This, as we approach the Lord's Supper, is something which is a sacrament of continuance, of showing forth the Lord's death until he come, and keeping on showing forth the death of the Lord, and all that it has achieved for sinners.

Those who partake of the symbols of Christ's death, are themselves to be, as 2 Corinthians puts it, chapter 4, verse 10, always bearing about in the body, the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus, might be made manifest in our body.

Like Elijah in the wilderness, we are strengthened with this God-given food, so that we can continue on the journey. If you think about Elijah, 1 Kings 19, where he's had this great big victory, over the prophets of Baal, and they've all slaughtered the prophets of Baal, and you would think, oh yes, the worship of God's about to be restored, and then the rain comes, and it has been drought for like, two and a half years, or three and a half years, or whatever it is, and finally the rain comes, everybody should be rejoicing, but instead, then Ahab tells Jezebel, all that Elijah had done, Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, so let the gods do to me in the world, so if I make not thy life, there's a life of one of them, by tomorrow about this time.

Never mind that the rains have come, and the soil will now be bringing forth, its fruitfulness, and its harvest, it doesn't care about that, the prophets of Baal have been destroyed, so Elijah's life is now under threat.

[13 : 40] Now you would think, then Elijah would say, well tough, you know, I've just thought of the prophets of Baal, I'm big, I'm strong, but instead, when he saw that, he arose and went for his life, it's as if all the spirit, all the strength, is just drained out of Elijah.

He went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree, and requested for himself, that he might die, and said, it is enough now, oh Lord, take away my life, for I am not better than my fathers.

Now here's what the Lord does for him, as he's going to make his way, to the mount of the Lord. As he lay and slept under a juniper tree, behold then an angel touched him, and said of them, arise and eat.

And he looked, and behold, there was a cake baking on the coals, and a cruise of water at his head, and he did eat and drink, and laid him down again. And the angel of the Lord came again, a second time, and touched him, and said, arise and eat, because the journey is too great for thee.

And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat, forty days and forty nights, unto Hora, the mount of God. And clearly, humanly speaking, without that intervention, without the Lord providing that food, and drink for Elijah, in his exhausted, and drained state, he wouldn't have made it, to the mount of God.

[14:58] God wanted him to come, to mount Hora, and God wanted to do business with him, at Mount Hora, to show him his glory, and to show, I'm not finished with the Elijah, you're not the only one left.

There's seven thousand in Israel, that have not bowed the knee to Baal, every mouth that have not kissed him. I have reserved to me seven thousand in Israel. Not only that, but when you go back, there are these various people, I want you to anoint the successors.

I want you to anoint the next king of Syria. I want you to anoint the next king of Israel. I want you to anoint your own successor, in the sham. There's work for you still to do. Not long now, Elijah, but for now, you've still got work to do.

And so, in the strength of that, may he went, to Mount Hora, in order to have this encounter with the Lord. But without that intervention, the journey would be too great for him.

So the Lord provides what he needs, as the Lord provides what we need, for the ongoing journey of faith. We do not know what is up ahead. We do not know what encounter we may have, with the Lord, or with anyone else.

[16:06] that if we are to get to our destination, to, as it were, a celestial city, to a holy city as described in Revelation, if we are to get there, we can only do it one day at a time.

And we need the strength and the support that the Lord alone can give us day by day. Starting is good. Starting is essential.

And we must start somewhere to follow the Lord. Though invariably, as we've said, we find he has been at work in us long before we knew it. But abiding in him, continuous with him, is the difference between success and failure.

Between victory and defeat. Life with the Lord, or death without time. Now, it is not an easy thing to continue to abide with the Lord.

It is a stardom in this world where we are strangers and pilgrims. But the Lord promises to give us this thing if we abide and continue in him.

[17:12] Like the recovering alcoholic who counts each sober day as a victory in itself. So, we have to let each day in the Lord be a strengthening, a nurturing, a building on for the next day and the next and the next.

It should be the case that every day we go on with the Lord, we are learning something. Or we are increasing strength. Or we are increasing in our knowledge of God or our experience of God.

We should be little by little. It doesn't mean we have to have some wonderful Damascus road encounter every single day. You've got an apple growing on a branch of a tree and you look at it every single day from one day to another.

You know, from the spring when it's just a little hard green sort of little knot on the branch to when it actually is ripened in the autumn. You won't see much change from day to day to day.

But each day it will be drawing in a little more strength and nurture and succulence from the sap and from the branches from the sunshine from the rain. It will be growing. It will be ripening.

[18:20] It will be increasing. Even if you can't see it with the naked eye and we ourselves if we are abiding in Christ will be and should be growing in grace. Growing in the knowledge and the love and the strength of the Lord a little bit day by day.

We can't afford to let go of the Lord even for a day. One day of letting go of the faith as one day for the recovering alcoholic letting go of his sobriety or if what it's saying you've been vigorously dieting in order to reach some perceived goal or whatever the case may be.

Usually what you find isn't it the case that when you finally break the diet or the thing that you're desperately trying to keep to you don't want to think oh well it's only one day. Back again tomorrow

to start again.

Isn't it the case that when you finally do break you think oh well I've broken it now I might as well just pig out. Or the alcoholic who having done so well finally succumbs and takes a drink it's not like one drink might better put that away back to sobriety tomorrow but rather the sheer the sheer crushing weight of failure of having taken that fatal step means that people plummet.

They end up completely over indulging over letting go and falling so far. It's not just one day we go back if we let go of Christ.

[19 : 48] it may plunge us miles behind. We cannot let go for a day. It is far far easier to hold on for that extra day than it is to clamber your way back up again having let go and having fallen so far.

But if we do if we do let go he is merciful to us. It is a merciful God that we have. 1 John chapter 2 reading verse 1 my little children these things write unto you that ye sin not and if any man sin we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous.

This is a gospel for sinners. The Lord's Supper for which we are preparing is a sacrament for sinners. It is not for people who never put a foot in the wall. It is not for people who never fail. It is precisely because as a human race and as individuals we have failed that we have need of what Christ has done. these things write unto you that ye sin not and if any man sin we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous.

Again in chapter 3 verse 20 but if our heart condemn us God is greater than our heart and knoweth all things. We have a loving and a gracious Lord who is not ashamed to call us brethren who is not ashamed to help us and to strengthen us if we are prepared to abide in him.

[21 : 17] Verse 4 Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except to abide in the vine no more can ye except ye abide in thee.

That is the requirement. That is the condition. We can't afford to let go of the Lord even for a day and each day as we go on with Christ it won't seem like a huge victory.

It's just we got through that day. It's just that we got through that day with the Lord we worship we pray we take the Lord's strength as we go to our beds and as we start the new day in the morning we go with him we seek his help his strength in all that we do we live in him we live with him we live for him and each day we think well Lord I haven't done anything for your kingdom today.

I haven't done anything special I'm not a particularly great example of a Christian what have I done? but we continue and we abide in Christ and each day is itself in that sense and we give it to him each day in that sense is our abiding in Christ and he will give the fruitfulness in the fullness of time.

It doesn't seem like we're making much progress in my younger days I've used an illustration like this before of course I used to know about hill walking and sometimes you know you park the car down in the valley whatever you start climbing up and sometimes it's pretty steep on your hands and knees but by and large the steeper it was the quicker you made progress and when you finally stop for a rest and hug and sit on a rock or whatever you look down you think wow you've come an awful long way but it doesn't feel like you are when you're clambering up step by step and pecking and grunting and so on you don't feel like you're getting anywhere until you finally stop until you finally take a breather sit down and look back down how far you've come you had no idea you've come so far when one of the my own children was small we'd take a little walk along the road near where we lived and one time I remember or I remember distinctly is when they seemed to be making such little progress you know little steps kind of like each corner like when children are small that's what they do and I think

[23 : 29] I can't know whether I'll go to post a letter or something like that and then remember I'd forgotten something back at the house so I had to go back again and it's only when you have to turn around and go back you realise just how even the little potty steps that a little child takes to you step by step you realise how far you've come how far you had to go back again to the house to get the thing you'd forgotten because the progress was being made step by step along the way and you forget something you have to backtrack all the way and it doesn't seem like it's far but it all adds up day by day by day abide in me and I in you as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except that abide in the vine no more can ye except ye abide in me abide well for how long for how long do we have to go on with the Lord for a lifetime oh well how long is a lifetime you know it could be another 70 years it could be another 40 years it could but then again it might only be another 70 days none of us knows how long we may have it would be a wonder indeed if there were not some souls in the Florida Keys or the Caribbean or whatever who were snatched into eternity as a result of the tragic hurricanes that are hitting that area again and again and there will be people who will be again hale

and hearty and the fullness of life and going about their business and all that they thought expect years ahead of them and yet nobody foresaw this which has come and which may yet snatch many more souls into eternity none of us knows what a day may bring forth all that we know is that we must abide in Christ for a lifetime we don't know how long that lifetime is to be we don't know how long we must continue it is by definition all the years from when you begin with the

Lord that's what he says verse 27 you also shall be a witness because you have been with me from the beginning wherever that beginning is doesn't matter so much when that beginning was but from that beginning point and maybe not only to God you continue with Christ and if you fall back you clamber back up again with his help and by his grace and yes it's twice as difficult to clamber back up again twice as difficult to come back and let go but it is possible and it is doable do I believe personally that if Judas had genuinely repented and if he had said oh what have I done I have to go and repent to my Lord I have to say look I'm sorry I should never have done this I do repent from the heart would he have been saved?

yes he would have been saved if he'd repented there's nobody outside the reach of God's grace but when it says in the Bible that he repented himself the word that is used in the original doesn't mean that he turned away from that sin it means that he was filled with remorse and he says oh no it hasn't worked out the way I thought it hasn't worked out the way I intended everything's gone wrong and there is a difference between remorse which we might liken to for example the thief getting caught in the act to actual repentance which is a thief whether or not he's caught in the act again I shouldn't be doing this this is stealing this is wrong put it back and go away you see the difference that there is and there is nobody who's beyond the reach of God's grace but when we give ourselves to the Lord he would have all our life all of our days from all the years from when you begin with him or when you start again maybe 17 years or maybe 70 years or maybe 110 or maybe 46 none of us knows but what we know what we do know is he is entitled to it all and he wants us to give it to him because he wants us to be like him and that is what he gave for us he gave his all for us he gave what was a comparatively young life in the full flush of strength and vigor and youth and he laid it down on the cross he gave his whole life all his combination there of divinity and humanity laid down upon the cross as a once and for all perfect sacrifice he gave it all for us he held nothing back if he had held anything back the sacrifice would not have been complete if it had not been God the son dying on the cross it wouldn't have been enough to pay for our sins he held nothing back he gave it all now his all is so much greater than ours just like a millionaire's all is so much more than man of a pauper but the Lord isn't concerned with the actual volume of what he's given he's concerned with the proportion if we are holding anything back from the Lord we become like Ananias and Sapphira who say oh yes here it is that's what we've got for the field but he kept it for himself and Peter says to me you're always free to do that you could always keep anything for yourself but to pretend that it's all for the Lord when it's not that's the sin he requires our all because he wants us to be like him and that is what he gave for us he invites his children he invites his followers to be as he is to give themselves to him as he has given himself to them or we might say as the hymn writer put it love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all abide in me and I in you as the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except that abide in the vine no more can we except you abide in me can or well on can do my can to