

THE ABIDING PRINCIPLES

by Ray C. Stedman

We return once again to our study of the time our Lord spent with his disciples just before the cross, as he is teaching them marvelous and precious truths. In this passage we have seen some tremendous concepts which he has brought out for their understanding, and for ours as well. He has told them that a replacement for himself was coming to them -- the Holy Spirit. Another Comforter, another Strengthener was on the way. And when he came he would no longer merely be with them but he would be within them. Their strength would no longer come from without, as when Jesus was their Comforter, but would come from within.

Thus he marked the prominent characteristic of the day of the Spirit, in which we live. He told them that the primary work of the Spirit would be to take the life of Jesus and release it to these believers. This is the great and marvelous truth which the Scriptures seek to set before us. There is probably no greater truth in all the Bible than this one. For, when the Spirit would come to release Jesus' life within them, they would then live by him, as he lived by means of the Father. This is the fantastic secret which makes possible the fulfillment of the high demands of Christian living. A Christian lives by the same principle as Jesus did. As he lived by means of the Father, in dependence and trust in him, moment by moment, so we are to live by means of the Son, in dependence and trust in him.

And he told them that when this happened, the Spirit would guide them into all truth, would gradually unfold to them the facts about life, the reality of existence, and would enable them to love one another -- thus fulfilling the qualification which is so necessary as the mark of Christians -- and to bear much fruit and thus glorify the Father, to be Christ-like in every situation, and to endure the world's hatred and resist the opposition and persecution which would come. All of this has been covered so far in this discourse.

While he had been speaking they had left the Upper Room and, passing through the vineyards on the slopes of Mount Zion, our Lord and his disciples have come around the city walls into the very shadow of the Temple. As this talk is coming to a close, they are about to cross over the Kidron Valley and make their way up the Mount of Olives into the darkness of Gethsemane's garden. At this point our Lord resumes a conversational style in his address to them.

It interests me to watch Jesus with his disciples and to observe his method of teaching. Sometimes he spoke rather formally and at some length, as in the Sermon on the Mount. But here he intersperses these periods of formal teaching with opportunities for questions and discussion. He is so anxious to clear up their fears that he now gives them an opportunity to break in with questions. Verse 16 introduces this section:

"A little while, and you will see me no more; again a little while, and you will see me." Some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" They said, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he means." Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him; so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'? Truly, truly, I say to you [that mark of great significance in the words of Jesus], you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you." {John 16:16-22 RSV}

Notice that the concern of the disciples here is on how long this absence is going to last. Jesus had said, "A little while, and you will see me no more," and his disciples had immediately picked up that phrase, "a little while." Their hearts clutched with fear, they said to themselves, "How long does he mean?" Their attention is on that, and also on his words, "because I go to the Father." They said, "Why does this have to happen? What does he mean, 'because I go to the Father'?" You can see that the focus of their concern is on "When?" and "Why?"

If you and I had been there, that is exactly what we would have asked! We are always concerned about how long a trial is going to last, and about, "Why we have to go through that, anyway?" Are these not the questions we inevitably ask whenever we have trouble -- "Why?" and "How long?" But you notice that when Jesus answers the troubled disciples he ignores the whole matter of time. He repeats the questions, so they know he heard what they asked, but he never answers their questions directly. His answer stresses the process, and the result which is certain to follow. In other words, Jesus isn't concerned with the "Why?" and "How long?" but with the "How?" and the "What?" He makes clear to them that a period of sorrow is inevitable. He cannot spare them, cannot save them from it. There will be a time when they will weep and lament and be in sorrow, and when the world around will be rejoicing. "But," he says, "your sorrow will be turned into joy." How long it takes is not significant; the inevitable result is the important thing.

That is a very important lesson to learn. I've been saying to the Lord, "How long, how long do I have to go through this?" And the Lord's emphasis is strictly upon what is coming at the end, the joy which is certain. To illustrate this, our Lord used the beautiful figure of childbirth. A mother goes through a time of sorrow when her child is being born, but later she experiences a time of joy when the baby is delivered.

This morning we had a dedication of children. I don't know if you could see them plainly from where you were sitting, but, when their babies were being dedicated, the faces of the mothers were a picture of joy. They were "turned on" with the gladness of that moment. What was causing the joy? The baby. Yet a few weeks ago those same mothers were in anguish and pain, and their faces pictured that anguish. And what was causing the pain? The baby. In other words, the same thing which caused the sorrow would later be the cause of the joy.

That is different from what we usually think. Most of us assume that our sorrow is going to be replaced by joy. But the promise of Jesus is that the very thing which caused the sorrow is also going to be the cause of the joy. That is a revelation of one of the great principles which mark authentic Christianity, one of the ways by which our Lord works in our life. He takes the very thing which causes us heartache and sorrow, and turns it into a cause of joy. That is most remarkable!

And God doesn't care how long it takes. We do, but he doesn't. He is anxious only for the increase of joy. And that joy will come from within. It will not be due to the circumstances. As Jesus has made clear all along, it will be due to the presence of the Holy Spirit within.

Recently I read an account of the life of Dr. R. A. Torrey, one of the great Bible teachers of a past generation and founder of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Dr. and Mrs. Torrey went through a time of great heartache when their twelve-year-old daughter was killed accidentally. The funeral was held on a gloomy, miserable, rainy day -- dismal and melancholy. They stood around this forlorn little grave and watched as the body of their little girl was put away. As they turned away, Mrs. Torrey said, "I'm so glad Elisabeth is with the Lord, and not in that box." But even knowing this to be true, yet their hearts were broken.

Dr. Torrey said that the next day, as he was walking down the street, the whole thing broke over him anew -- the loneliness of the years ahead without her presence, the heartbreak of an empty house, and all the other implications of her death. He was so burdened by this that he looked to the Lord for help. And I want to share his words with you. He said,

And just then this fountain, the Holy Spirit, that I had in my heart, broke forth with such power as I think I had never experienced before, and it was the most joyful moment I had ever known in my life! Oh, how wonderful is the joy of the Holy Ghost! It is an unspeakably glorious thing to have your joy not in things about you, not even in your most dearly loved friends, but to have within you a fountain ever springing up,

springing up, springing up, always springing up three hundred and sixty-five days in every year, springing up under all circumstances unto everlasting life!

That is what Jesus is talking about here. The alchemy of the Spirit is to take the thing which causes pain and to transmute it until it causes joy. It will take some time. It is a process. There will be sorrow and tears and lamenting. But eventually it will turn into joy. "Your sorrow will turn into joy."

Now, what releases this joy? Well, Jesus tells us. For the third time in this discourse he repeats the promise of answered prayer:

"In that day you will ask nothing of me [you will ask me no questions]. Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask anything of the Father, he will give it to you in my name. Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." {John 16:23-24 RSV}

The process which leads to that kind of joy is a trustful prayer, a resting upon God to answer your need. This is why our Lord has underscored this for the third time. The key, of course, is the phrase, *in my name*: "Ask ... in my name." We have examined this in an earlier study, so I will merely review it briefly now. "In my name" means at least three things. It is not tacking on at the end of your prayers, "This I ask in Jesus' name." This does not necessarily make it a prayer in Jesus' name. You can ask exactly contrary to Jesus' name and add those words, and it becomes nothing but a pat formula which is meaningless.

"In my name" means, first, asking in line with our Lord's objectives. To ask in anyone's name means to ask as though you were that person. This means we are to ask for what Jesus would want, what he is after, and not for our own desires. Prayer is not a means by which you get God to do what you want. It never is that. Prayer is a means by which God does through you what he wants, and it is a very necessary part of the process that you pray. James tells us, "You have not because you ask not," {Jas 4:2b RSV}. Prayer is an integral part of that process. We must ask. But James also says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to consume it on your passions" {Jas 4:3 RSV}, your own desires. Rather, it is to be for the objective God has in your life.

Now, that permits a vast range of prayer! There are many things God wants you to have, and you have every right to ask. This covers material things as well as spiritual blessings. Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" {Matt 6:11, Luke 11:3}, and there is nothing wrong with that. There is nothing wrong with asking for other material needs. Some people get the idea that prayer is just for spiritual blessings, but that is not so. But what you ask must further the objectives God has in mind.

Second, to pray "in Jesus' name" means an acceptance of the process by which God works, and which Jesus relied upon. That process, as we know, is the cross and the resurrection -- i.e., a cross which represents the end, the hopelessness of everything else, and a resurrection beyond it, beyond what could possibly be anticipated by men. That is the way God works. He is a God of resurrection!

That is why God often pushes us to the very limit before our prayers are answered. We cry out, "Lord, why don't you answer? If you would just step in now you could stop all this tragedy which is occurring!" But God sometimes doesn't stop tragedy. He is a master of brinkmanship. He pushes you right to the brink, sometimes over the brink, in order that out of what appears to be an absolutely hopeless condition, from man's point of view, he may restore the whole thing.

This is the kind of God you are dealing with. You can expect him to act this way because this is what he says he will do: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord," {Isa 55:8}. And Peter reminds us, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to try you, as though something strange were happening to you," {cf, 1 Pet 4:12}. No, no; this is God's way of working. If he pushes you to the brink, don't be surprised, for resurrection lies beyond.

The third element of praying "in Jesus' name" is to pray in dependence upon his performance, upon his activity. It is Jesus who will do these things. He says so! "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the

Father may be glorified in the Son," {John 14:13 RSV}. It is not done by our scurrying around trying to arrange things and work them out for ourselves. It is done by our reliance upon him to carry it through in his own unique way.

Therefore, to ask "in Jesus' name" is to consent to those three elements of prayer. That is the way joy is brought to the full, the way sorrow is turned into joy.

In the next section, here, our Lord underscores another great principle by which the Christian life is to be lived, beginning with Verse 25:

"I have said this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in my name; and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father. I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and going to the Father." {John 16:25-28 RSV}

Up to this point in the disciples' lives, they had been very much aware of this marvelous, unique relationship which Jesus had with his Father. They had noted that he had a dependence upon the Father, a trust of the Father, and a fellowship and communion with the Father which they knew nothing about. They had relied upon Jesus to obtain for them privilege and favor with the Father. "But now," Jesus says, "that must end. You are no longer to look upon yourselves as separated from the Father, nor to think that I have a special link with him which you cannot know. This is now brought to an end, for the Father himself loves you directly, just as he loves me."

And notice why -- not because you behaved, but because you believed. That is so important! I find very many Christians who really feel that God owes them something because they have behaved well, have tried to do what he says. They feel that if they live a good, clean, moral life, God therefore owes them some special treatment. I am tempted this way myself, as I am sure you are. When trouble strikes, I have heard people say, "Why should this happen to me? How come God sent this to me? What have I done to deserve this?" Most of us are ready to cry out and to tell God, "It's not fair, Lord! Here I've been working for you and helping you out, and this is the way you treat me! It's not fair!" But, you see, it isn't on the basis that you behave that God loves you; he loves you because you believe. You believe in Jesus, and, on that basis, his love is manifested as a Father's love -- directly to you. We used to sing in Sunday school,

Near, so very near to God, nearer I could not be;
For in the Person of His Son, I'm just as near as He.
Dear, so very dear to God, dearer I could not be;
The love with which He loved His Son, such is His love for me.

This is what Jesus wants us to know. We have a direct relationship with the Father, and his love is toward us, is as it was toward Jesus. He loves us!

The past few weeks I've had the joy of having my eleven-year-old daughter travel with me, and Laurie and I have spent a lot of time together. We have studied and prayed and read together, and played together, and just had a great time! I seized the occasion to teach her how to get up in the morning. Do you fathers ever teach your children how to get up in the morning? Not only to get up, but how to get up? There is a three-fold technique in getting up:

- First, we stretch. That gets the body going.
- Then, smile. That puts the soul in the right attitude, so that we don't start the day grumbling.
- And then say, "God loves me," because that sets the spirit right.

You are reminding yourself of your identity in that way, and -- body, soul, and spirit -- you are starting the day right. Stretch, smile, and say, "God loves me." That is what Jesus is saying here.

The second great source of security in the Christian life is this remarkable love which the Father has for us as

individuals. The Father loves us!

The last division, beginning at Verse 29, stresses a third word:

His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure! Now we know that you know all things, and need none to question you; by this we believe that you came from God." Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." {John 16:29-33 RSV}

Notice that the security of these disciples rested on the ability they thought they had to understand what he was saying to them. They wanted to know, and then they thought they would feel at peace. "Now we know," they said, "now we understand." Jesus had been speaking to them in figures -- the vine and the branches, the washing of the feet, the woman in childbirth, etc. -- these illuminating figures. "But now you're speaking to us plainly. Now we know and understand that you are indeed from God." They felt a sense of security because they *understood* that.

This is so like us! We think that God has to explain what we're going through, and that then we'll feel secure. Our peace wants to rest upon a certain knowledge of what is happening. But our Lord is very careful here to point out that this kind of peace is very insecure indeed. "Within an hour you will be running like a bunch of frightened sheep. You say you know who I am. You say you understand that I came from God and that I know all things. Do you know that within an hour's time you will be so confused and so uncertain of what is happening you will run away and leave me alone? Rather than trusting me to work things out, you'll forsake me and not want to be identified with me. And yet I'll not be alone. My security won't be threatened in that hour, for the Father is with me. And I say this to you in order that you might know the kind of peace I have. It is not based on what happens, or even on my understanding of what happens, but upon a trust in the One who controls what happens. I say this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you're going to have nothing but trouble -- trouble at work, trouble at school, trouble in your home, trouble in your family. You'll have nothing but trouble, because that is the way this world is. But be of good cheer. I am in control of the world. I have overcome the world."

Isn't that an encouraging word? I want you to know that these words have meant a great deal to me in these past few months and years. I've been going through a time of great personal stress, times of deep sorrow, times of great pressure, times of uncertainty and lack of understanding, not knowing what God is working out, perceiving him to be working in ways which I have thought were utterly wrong, thinking he had no business doing things like this to me. And I've had to rest back upon these tremendous revelations of his word, and upon these marvelous summary words -- love, joy, peace. They are the fruit of the Spirit, aren't they?

His joy, despite circumstances, sorrow turned into joy. His love, the Father's own love, the Father's tender care, lovingly apportioning to each day that which he wants for you. Just last week in Colorado Springs, I so enjoyed hearing again the words of that old song, Day By Day. I had forgotten the words, and they hit with new and fresh power:

Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here.
Trusting in a Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause to worry or to fear.
He whose heart is kind beyond all measure,
Gives unto each day what He deems best,
Lovingly, it's part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

That is the work of the Father. And then this last word -- peace. "You can have my peace," Jesus says, "my sense of security, which rests not in the circumstances, not in the understanding of the circumstances which

we so crave, but in a confidence that the One who is guiding the circumstances knows what he is doing. That is where peace comes from.

There he leaves his disciples, and us, with these words, and begins to pray. We will look at that prayer in studies to come. But he ends this discourse with these great, abiding words:

Joy, Love, Peace.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for your love for us. We thank you that you are our Father, and that you love us directly, as Jesus said; that we are precious to you, as he was precious to you; that your eye is ever upon us, as it was upon him; and that you are ever alert to our cry, always aware of our need. But we know that just as he passed through times of great pressure, times of disappointment, times of betrayal, times of heartbreak and sorrow, agony and lack of understanding, so we, too, Lord, must pass through them. But we are upheld, knowing that your promise is, "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy." We thank you for that peace which passes understanding, which we do not know how to explain, but which is there as we trust a Father's hand, a Father's heart, to guide us through. We pray for any among us who are undergoing great pressure today, that you will sustain them and strengthen them by these words, and lead them out into that broad and wide place unto which you go. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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