**APOSTOLIC OPTIMISM AND OTHER SERMONS - SERMONS BY JOHN H. JOWETT**

**17. ABIDING IN CHRIST by JOHN H. JOWETT**

*"I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."*

*John 15:5-7*

"Abide in Me." The words proclaim a warning against spiritual vagrancy, against intermittent consecration, against a spasmodic religious life. They throw into contrast a discipleship of alternate spurts and lethargy, and a discipleship of calm and firm persistence. There is a religion of the gypsy type, devoid of settledness, a touch-and-go fellowship, wanting in continuity and rest. And there is a religion whose type is the settled place of abode, a fellowship steady and unfailing, whose inclinations are fixed as by some stupendous force of spiritual gravity.

There are some people who visit Christ. There are others who abide in Him. To the one class religion is a temporary expedient: to the other it is a permanent principle. To the one class Christ is an occasional shelter: to the other He is an "eternal home." By which of the two classes shall we judge the power and ministry of the Christian religion? The evidence afforded by a day-tripper is scarcely sufficient if we want to know the merits of a health resort, the purity and nimbleness of its air, and the medicinal qualities of its springs. The tripper must give place to the inhabitant: the man who dwells in the sweet, clean air must have priority over the vagrant whose secret lungs were never bathed in the bracing flood. But when we come to religion, the order is frequently reversed. The evidence afforded by the shifting and hurrying visitor is often preferred to the witness of the dweller in the promised land. If I want to form a conclusion concerning the Kingdom of God, I will disregard the religious tripper, and I will seek my evidence among the oldest inhabitants. Let us find out the men and women "who abide," who have made their home there, who breathe in it as in their native air, and whom nothing can tempt away from the gracious country; and from the health and sweetness and wholesomeness of their living let us form our judgments concerning the healing and restoring powers of the Christian redemption. Spasmodic fellowship robs the Lord of His opportunity, and interferes with His restoring ministry. He wants us to "abide" in Him that our invigoration may be thorough and permanent.

"Abide in Me." What is meant by abiding in Christ? Let us look at the implications of the great word. To abide in Christ is to maintain our belief in Him, I am to take the claims of Christ; His statements concerning His prerogatives and rights; His teachings concerning God and man, and life and duty; His Gospel concerning sin and forgiveness, and the dynamics of holiness; His warning concerning the direful issues of unrepented wrong; -- I am to take them and exalt them into the dignity of beliefs, immediate and operative factors in my daily life. It is belief that creates "abiding"; mere opinion consorts with vagrancy. Opinion is a mental judgment; belief is mental judgment applied. Opinions are loose ideas, roaming at large in the spacious field of the mind; beliefs are opinions caught and yoked in the service of practical life. In opinion there is no venture; belief is opinion risked; it is opinion converted into principle, and entrusted with the government of the life. Or, if I may again change the figure -- opinions are the patterns hanging about the walls of the weaving-shed, or resting upon the shelves; beliefs are the patterns in working looms, directing the shuttles, determining the threads, and commanding the character of the ultimate and finished fabric. Such is the distinction I desire to emphasise. I am to take the revelation given to me in Christ, and risk it in practical life. I am to put His pattern into my loom. The weaving of my character is to be determined by His claims. I am to venture on His teaching. That is belief -- to exalt His claims into my principles, to make His teachings my assumptions, and to march along the indicated way, even though it frown before me in looming storm and threatened pain and crucifixion. "Let not your heart be troubled; believe!" To believe in Christ is the secret of abiding.

"Abide in me." What other implications are there in the wealthy word? To abide in Christ we must preserve the means of our attachment. We must guard the lines of communication. There are certain ministries which have been appointed as channels of grace, through which man's fellowship with God may be strengthened and enriched. I say they are means of attachment, lines of communication; and unless they are vigilantly guarded we become isolated, cut away from our resources in Christ. I do not know how any one is to abide in vital communion with Christ who neglects the ministry of prayer. It is a line of communication which many men allow to get into the hands of the enemy, and they become severed from "the supply of the Spirit of Christ" which keeps life fresh and sweet and aspiring. I wish we could change our emphasis a little in our thought about this matter of prayer. We commonly regard it as a duty; I wish we could think of it as a necessity. I think that perhaps the perverted emphasis arises from a misinterpretation of common symptoms. If we could only rightly read our symptoms, we should discover our necessities. "Why art thou cast down, O my soul, and why art thou disquieted within me?" What are the symptoms? Spiritual depression and unrest. How shall we interpret the symptoms? "Oh, a few days in the country or by the sea is all that is needed." And yet, in many instances, a more accurate diagnosis would reveal the fact that the cardinal necessity is not a sojourn by the sea, but a restored communion with God. The primary cause is not overwork, but neglected prayer! Take a blown-out taper, the only remnant of whose flame is a swiftly blackening spark, and plunge it into a jar of oxygen, and the dying ember will revive and regain its lost ascendency. And take a soul whose fire of vitality is blackening down into depression and pessimism, and immerse it in the reviving breath of the Holy Spirit, and aspiration will kindle again, and black depression will change into radiant hope. That is the very ministry of prayer, to keep the spirit of man in the oxygenating fellowship of the Spirit of God; and if we neglect the ministry, and cease to keep the communication open, we can no more be saved from spiritual depression and unrest than men who are immured in ill-ventilated chambers can save themselves from physical lassitude and perilous sleep. If we would abide in Christ, we must "pray without ceasing."

But I do not know how anyone is going to pray with wealthy efficiency who deliberately neglects the companion ministry of public worship. Prayer is raised to its highest power when it is the fellowship of Christian believers. Its strength is then the strength of the individual hearts plus their unity. Any man who cuts himself adrift from his fellows narrows his communion with God.

Bright Thy presence when it breaketh,

Lord, on some rapt soul apart;

Sweet Thy Spirit when it speaketh

Peace unto some lonely heart;

Blest the raptures

From unaided lips that start.

But more bright Thy presence dwelleth

In a waiting, burning throng;

Yet more sweet the rapture swelleth

Of a many-voiced song;

More divinely

Glows each soul glad souls among.

And so I counsel that, in order to abide in Christ, we guard these means of attachment, these gracious ministries of prayer and public worship. Maintaining our belief, and preserving these attachments, the mystic interdependence will be effected. We shall abide in Christ, and He will abide in us. The Bible has almost exhausted available analogies in seeking to suggest how rich and abounding are the vitalising forces which will flow to the believers in Christ through the channels of an opened communion. "He that believeth in the Son hath life." This vitalising grace shall operate upon the spirits of men after the manner of "showers," "rivers," "winds," "fire," "water," "bread." Contradictory emblems have to be employed in order to give expression to the manifold ministry of reviving grace. But all the symbols and emblems appear to converge in one supreme suggestion -- that the imparted grace of God is a force which empowers and enriches the very roots of personality. It is a "centre " ministry, giving volume and force to the very springs of being. "I am come that ye might have life!"

Will all this be regarded as mysticism run mad? Why should it be thought incredible? Do we not know in familiar life, and on purely human planes, that one spirit can flow into another spirit with enervating or invigorating influence? Familiar companionships have depths and experiences which lead to the realm of the mystical. If there be spiritual infection and contagion as between man and man, why should it be thought incredible that in this fellowship that is called "abiding," the Spirit of the glorified Christ should breathe upon the spirit of man and sublime him into undreamed-of possibilities of power and refinement?

What would be the fruits of "abiding"? First of all, fulness of living. "The same beareth much fruit'' I am not going to limit that word "fruit" to any particular type of so-called practical service. We are not yet in the realm of "doing"; we are still in the realm of "being." We are still in the inner man, in the secret places of the life. Just think for a moment of man's rich and complex personality. It is possible for men to be only partially alive. A man can live departmentally, and not as a whole. For instance, a man can be mentally awake but not sympathetic. A man can be kind and yet carnal. A man can be conscientious and discourteous. Nay, the severing analysis can be more subtle and discriminating still. A man can be only partially generous; he is prodigal of his money, but niggardly of his time; he is always ready to give you a ten-pound note for Christian service, but he won't give you a slice of his time. On the other hand, there are men who are prodigal of their time, but miserly with their money; they will give you abundant service, but it is a bleeding martyrdom to give you gold. Well, here is a strange phenomenon! How do you explain it? Perhaps Hosea supplies the explanation: "Ephraim is a cake not turned." He is baked only on one side. He only partially lives. He is alive in compartments, but not as a whole. Or to recur to the figure of the text, he only bears fruit partially; there are many branches upon his tree which yield nothing but leaves. "He that abideth in Me and I in him, the same beareth much fruit." It is an increase of fruitfulness. We pass from the partial to the entire, from particular branches to the full and well-proportioned tree. "The fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness." When the divine and the human interpenetrate, the fructifying powers are enormously increased, and the tree of the individual life bears all manner of fruits. I don't think any man can ever know his fruit-growing capacity until he is possessed by the Spirit of God. It seems to me that when the supernatural comes the natural can assert itself in wealthy freedom. There is a word in the gospel by Matthew which I think is not without its significance. "They brought to Him a dumb man possessed with a devil. And when the devil was cast out, the dumb spake." The natural power was released when the spiritual bondage was destroyed. I think this suppression of natural power is more widespread than we believe. There are powers dumb because devils reign. There are branches barren because divine communion is checked and choked. The influx of the divine would mean the emancipation of the human. The natural would assert itself under the knightly ministry of the supernatural. Man would become alive, and all his slumbering possibilities would awake, and move in aspiring progress towards a perfect and glorious realisation. "He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit."

What other issues may be found in the fruits of "abiding"? You will find the gracious product described in verse seven. "If ye abide in Me ... ask whatsoever ye will, and it shall be done unto you." "Whatsoever ye will." A thoughtless interpretation of that great word has plunged many souls into profound bewilderment and pain. Things have been asked, and they have not been given. What is the explanation? The conclusion of the great promise has been taken without the premises. The offer has been seized, but the conditions ignored. What are the conditions? "If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you." Suppose the conditions were observed. If this interpretation of the human and the divine were an actuality: I, seeking my aim and motive and hope in the Lord, dwelling among the Lord's thoughts; my life governed by my beliefs; the Lord filling my life as air fills a chamber, breathing upon thought and purpose and feeling; -- if these conditions were realised, what kind of "askings" would there be? I should be so in tune with the Infinite that my askings would be His willings, and my desires would harmonise with the profoundly spiritual purposes of His great redemptive works. We do not abide, and so we are not attuned, and so we ask what cannot be given. We want lofty asking, and lofty asking implies high planes of thinking, and high planes of thinking imply unbroken fellowship with Christ. "If we abide ... ye shall ask ... and it shall be done." And so the two fruits of abiding which I desire to emphasise are just these: fulness of life and kinship with the divine. What, then, shall be the practical out-come of this meditation? Let us begin the "abiding." In his Novum Organum Bacon gives utterance to a conviction which shall express the purpose of this concluding appeal: -- "The question whether anything can be known is to be settled not by arguing but by trying." "Abide in Me." Try it; try it; and you shall find the issue in fruitful and abundant life.