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ASSURANCE OF ABIDING

1 John 4:12-16

By

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1 John Lesson 20

Assurance of Abiding
1 John 4:12-16

Almost every Christian at some time has struggled with assurance of salvation. Perhaps you heard some godless university professor rail against the Christian faith, or you heard about a book or movie like *The Da Vinci Code*, and it caused you to doubt the truth of Christianity. Then the enemy hit you with the thought, "How could you be a genuine Christian and have these thoughts?"

Or, it may have been during a time of severe trial, where God did not seem to be answering your prayers. The difficulties in your life multiplied without relief. You cried out to God, but He seemed to be on vacation. You just couldn't make sense out of what was happening to you. Then, you began to doubt both the Christian faith and whether you were really a Christian at all.

The enemy has many such ways to shake our assurance of salvation. In the case of John's first readers, false teachers were spreading heresy among the churches. They had left to form new churches, and many had followed them. When your friends join a new group with new teachings, it can cause you to question whether what you believe is really true. So the apostle John writes to his little children to give them assurance that they were truly abiding in Christ. Note these verses:

2:3: "By this we know that we have come to know Him...."

2:5b: "By this we know that we are in Him...."

2:13: "... you know Him who has been from the beginning."

2:13b: "... you know the Father."

2:20: "... you all know."

3:10: "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious...."

3:14: "We know that we have passed out of death into life...."

3:19: "We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him...."

3:24b: "We know by this that He abides in us...."

4:2: "By this you know the Spirit of God...."

4:6b: "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error."

5:2: By this we know that we love the children of God....”

5:13: These things I have written ... so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Clearly, John wants us to *know* some things with assurance. He wants us to be solid and secure in our relationship with God. In our text, he wants us (4:13) to “know that we abide in Him and He in us....” In 4:12, John mentions God’s abiding in us. Then in 4:13, 15, & 16, he repeats the same truth in terms of mutual abiding, God in us and we in God. John wants to give us assurance of this mutual abiding relationship.

While “abide” is John’s word for fellowship with God, it would be a mistake to think that only some believers enter into this abiding relationship, while other believers do not abide. To be sure, the abiding relationship grows and deepens over a lifetime. Those who have walked with Christ for decades enjoy closer fellowship with Him than those who are newer in their faith. But in John’s mind, *every* Christian abides in Christ and Christ in him. If you are not abiding in Him and He in you, then you are not saved. So when we talk about assurance of abiding, we are talking about assurance of salvation. John’s message here is...

We can be assured that God abides in us and we in Him if we see His Spirit producing in us love for one another and confession of the truth about Jesus Christ.

Some commentators put 4:12 with the preceding paragraph, but I am treating it with the following because of the theme of abiding. John’s statement (4:12) about God abiding in us and His love being perfected in us, serves as a topic sentence for 4:13-21. In 4:13-16, he discusses the abiding relationship; then in 4:17-21, he talks about God’s love being perfected in us.

1. Although we cannot see God, we have evidence of His abiding in us when we love one another (4:12).

At first glance, verse 12 seems out of context. John has been discussing God’s love for us and our love for one another. Then, somewhat abruptly, he states, “No one has seen God at any time.” You wonder, “Why did he throw that in here? What does God’s invisibility have to do with a discussion of love?” The same words occur in the prologue to John’s Gospel (John 1:18): “No one has

seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him." But here, John continues, "if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us." What does he mean?

He means that the unseen God, who was historically revealed in the incarnation of the Son, is now revealed by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit in His people when they love one another. It's an amazing thought! People do not see God and they may not read the Bible, but they do see and read the lives of Christians. They read your Christian home. They read this church. They read you as you interact with others at work or at school. If they see a remarkable, other-worldly love in those places—especially if they see love when they would expect retaliation—they see God abiding in you. If they see anger, bitterness, verbal attacks, and hatred, then we are failing to "testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world" (4:14).

A writer named Caecilius (ca. A.D. 210) said of the Christians, "They know one another by secret marks and signs, and they love one another almost before they know one another." The Greek writer, Lucian (ca. A.D. 120-200) said of the early church, "It is incredible to see the fervor with which the people of that religion help each other in their wants. They spare nothing. Their first legislator [Jesus] has put it into their heads that they are all brethren." The church father, Tertullian, said, "It is our care for the helpless, our practice of lovingkindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. 'Look,' they say, 'How they love one another! Look how they are prepared to die for one another!'" I wonder how often outsiders would describe modern Christians like that?

John's point (in 4:12) is that if we see God's love surfacing in our relationships with others, then we have evidence of God's abiding in us. This is especially true in situations where, if we were acting in the flesh, we would be indifferent at best or antagonistic or hateful at worst. When our knee-jerk reaction is to lash out at someone who has wronged us, but instead we feel an inner check and we speak in kindness, it is evidence that God is abiding in us. Although we cannot see God, who is spirit, we can see the evidence of His abiding in us when we love one another.

2. We know that we abide in God and He in us because He has given us of His Spirit (4:13).

God's Spirit is both the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) and the Spirit of love (Gal. 5:22). John has just spoken about love and he will go on to speak about the truth and love. As we saw last week, John does not separate truth from love or put love above the truth, so as to minimize or negate the truth. In verse 13, he is going to the source of love and truth in us, namely, God's Spirit.

Note that John here does not say that God has given us His Spirit, although that is true. He says, "He has given us *of* His Spirit." The Greek word means "out of." Thus John is looking at something which God has imparted to us out of His Spirit, namely, truth (4:14-15) and love (4:16).

In John 3, when Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the new birth, He said (3:6-8),

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The Christian life is not only a matter of subscribing to certain doctrines, although it includes that. It is not merely a matter of stopping certain sinful practices and adding certain godly ones, although it does require that. At its root, Christianity is receiving new life from the Holy Spirit. At the moment that you are born of the Spirit, He comes to indwell you. Thus Paul writes (Rom. 8:9), "However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him."

To come back to 1 John (4:13), the apostle says, "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." You may wonder, "Is this just an inner, subjective feeling that the Holy Spirit is in me?" In the context, John is saying, "Don't focus on subjective feelings. Look for evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in your life." You can't see the wind, but you can see its effects. Do you see love? Do you believe and confess the truth

about Jesus Christ? These are effects of the Holy Spirit in your life. These things show that God has given you of His Spirit. When you see them, you can know that you abide in Him and He in you.

We could list many other effects that God's Spirit produces in believers (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Love of God* [Crossway], pp. 97-101, develops these in some detail). Here are a few: Are you concerned about the things of God? Do you have a desire to experience more of Him? Do you love God's Word? Do you have a sense of sin, so that you recognize that you are a sinner? Do you hate your sin and struggle daily against the flesh? This inner war between the flesh and the Spirit is a sign that you have the Holy Spirit within you (Gal. 5:17). Do you have a living relationship with God, where you see His hand at work in your life? Do you have the sense that you may come before God as your loving Father, not as your Judge? Do you find joy in using any spiritual gifts that He has given you in ministry to others?

John says (4:13), "By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit."

3. We know that God abides in us and we in Him when we confess the truth about Jesus Christ (4:14-15).

John first states the apostolic testimony about Christ (4:14) and then applies it to the one who confesses this truth (4:15).

A. The apostolic testimony is that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world (4:14).

When John writes, "We have seen and testify," it takes us back to the beginning of this letter (1:1-3):

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

John and the other apostles reported to us their eyewitness testimony about Jesus Christ. The gospel is rooted in verifiable history, that the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. Jesus did not become the Son of God in the incarnation. He is the eternal Son of God, and He came to this earth because the Father sent Him to come and die to save us from our sins.

It is vital to affirm that the Christian faith does not rest on the philosophic speculations of some creative religious thinkers. It does not rest on inner, personal impressions or mystical visions. Recently in our local paper, a man wrote a letter to the editor in which he claimed that religious faith is simply a matter of personal, subjective experience. Thus there is no such thing as absolute truth in spiritual matters. One person's experience is as good as another's.

But if God really exists and if He has revealed Himself to us in His Son, it is false to say that one view is just as true as another. And, it is false to say that religious faith is just a blind leap in the dark. The Christian faith rests upon the historic, apostolic witness to the person of Jesus Christ. They became convinced that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about God's promised Messiah. They saw His miracles, heard His teaching, and saw Him transfigured in glory on the mountain. Concerning that event, Peter declares (2 Pet. 1:16), "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty." The apostles also watched Jesus die on the cross, they saw Him risen from the dead, and they watched Him ascend into heaven. All of these events, John says, "we have seen."

But, of course, these are more than historical notes of quaint interest. These momentous events have to do with Jesus being "the Savior of the world." *Savior* implies that the world is lost and needs saving. It also implies that the world cannot save itself. It is helplessly, hopelessly lost. It needs more than reviving, because it is dead in its sins. The *world* refers to the evil system and people who are under Satan's dominion, opposed to God. Thus it implies the *wickedness* of those who need saving. Jesus came to save sinners. It also looks at the *wideness* of God's mercy in Christ. He did not come just to save a few Jews. His good news reaches to the uttermost parts of the world. Any sinner, no matter how wicked his life,

may believe in Jesus as his Savior and receive eternal life as the gift of God's grace and love.

- B. If we confess that Jesus is the Son of God, it is evidence that God abides in us and we abide in Him (4:15).

John's point here is that if you confess the apostolic testimony, that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who saves you from your sins, you didn't come up with that idea yourself. The Spirit of God opened your eyes to see it. Thus your confession of Jesus Christ sent from God as the Savior of the world is evidence that God abides in you and you abide in God.

In Matthew 16:15, Jesus asked His disciples the most important question in the world. It is the most crucial question that you can answer personally: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter gave the great answer (16:16), "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus' replied (16:17), "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."

That is John's point here: If, in your heart, you truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God, sent by the Father to be the Savior of the world and that He is *your* Savior, you didn't figure that out on your own. God revealed it to you by His Spirit. Your confession is evidence that God abides in you, and you abide in God.

Then John comes back to the theme of God's love that he developed in 4:7-8:

4. When we know and believe God's love for us and we abide in love, we abide in God and He in us (4:16).

It is important to know that John is *not* saying in these verses that the way to abide in God and have Him abide in us is to confess that Jesus is the Christ and to abide in love. Rather, he is saying that if we do these things, it is *evidence* of God's abiding in us and us in Him. When John says, "We have come to know and have believed," he uses a verb tense (the Greek perfect) that means, "We have come to know and believe in the past with continuing results in the present and future." Faith is not a blind leap in the dark. It is based on knowledge. John and the apostles came to know and believe God's love for them in the person of Jesus Christ and His voluntary sacrifice on the cross.

Then John repeats what he already said in 4:8: "God is love." As we saw last week, He is not *only* love. He also is holy and righteous. His love never negates any other of His attributes, nor do those attributes negate His love. The supreme demonstration of God's love is the cross, where He gave His only begotten Son to die in the place of sinners. There love and justice met and both were satisfied. God's love was demonstrated to us as sinners. God's justice was satisfied when Christ paid the penalty that we deserved.

John then concludes, "The one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." By "abides in love," I think that he means both, "abides in God's love" and "abides in love for others." As we saw in 4:11, you cannot separate the two: "If God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." If you have come to know and believe God's love for you, then you are under obligation to be the channel of His love to others, including those who do not deserve it. Remember, you didn't deserve it either!

It is crucial that each of us be able to apply personally God's love in Christ. The apostle Paul did. He wrote (Gal. 2:20), "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me." That is John's confession, "I have faith in the Son of God." It also is John's love, which God has for us: He "loved *me* and gave Himself up for *me*." Can you say those things personally? "I believe in the Son of God. I have come to know and believe that He loved *me* and He gave Himself up for *me*." If so, John says that it is evidence that you abide in God and God abides in you.

Conclusion

Some may still be thinking, "I do believe in Jesus as the Son of God and as my Savior, but I don't have strong faith. I often have doubts. I do abide in His love and seek to be the channel of His love to others, but I often fall short. How can I have assurance that I abide in Him and He abides in me?"

As we've seen throughout 1 John, the issue is *not perfection*, but rather, *direction*. The important questions are, "What do you do when your faith wavers? Do you come before the Lord in confession, asking Him to strengthen your faith? What do you do when

selfishness dominates your life, rather than God's love? Do you grieve over your hardness of heart and ask God to fill you with His Spirit and to produce the fruit of His Spirit in you? Fruit is not an instant product. It takes time and cultivation. Faith and love take time to grow (Phil. 1:9; 2 Thess. 1:3).

John wants you to know that if these qualities are growing in you, you can be assured that God abides in you and you in Him. If you do not see faith and love growing in your life, then do as Isaiah (55:6-7) directs: "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

Application Questions

1. In light of verse 12, why is it crucial for Christians to love one another? Is it ever right to go public with a dispute with another Christian? If so, when and why?
2. How can a Christian be filled with the Holy Spirit? Can we know if we are filled? Are there degrees of fullness?
3. Why is it important to affirm that Christianity rests on eyewitness testimony, not on subjective personal feelings?
4. Why is assurance important? What consequences may follow if we lack it or if we have it?

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