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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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## In God or Outside of God?

by T. Austin-Sparks

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**(A message given at a conference in Switzerland in 1964)**

*Reading: John 15:1,2,4; 1 Peter 3:18.*

There are two words to be underlined in the fifteenth chapter of John. The one word is 'true' - "I am the true vine" - and the other is 'abide'. which occurs eleven times in the chapter.

If you look at these three chapters in John's Gospel, chapters 14, 15 and 16, you will be impressed with one thing. (This is one way of obtaining the real message of any part of the Bible: try to sense the atmosphere of what is being said.) How do these chapters impress you? In them there is an atmosphere of crisis and uncertainty. There are questions in the atmosphere, and there is doubt and there is fear. Look back in chapter fourteen and you hear Thomas saying: 'Lord, we do not know where You are going. How can we know the way?' Philip says: 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be sufficient'. You see, there are questions in the air. The disciples are uncertain, not knowing the meaning of things. They want to know what it is all about. In their hearts they are saying: 'Where is it all leading us?' There is the feeling that a great upheaval is about to take place and that everything is about to be shaken. And they were right. In a few minutes the Lord Jesus will be saying: "*They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the hour cometh, that whosoever killeth you shall think that he offereth service unto God*" (John 16:2). 'They will put you out of their whole religious system, and when they have done that they will kill you. Having killed you, they will think they have done a good thing for God.' Of course, that was their way of looking at it, but there was another way of looking at it, and it was this that was really causing the tension in the air.

What Jesus was really pointing to was the repudiation of that whole historic religious system. That whole system of Judaism was about to be put away. These disciples had already begun to lose faith in that system, but their trouble was: What is going to take its place? Judaism may be a poor thing, but perhaps a poor thing is better than nothing, and here is Jesus saying that He is going away and leaving us. What shall we have left? It is rather impressive, is it not, that Jesus says: 'I am going away; yet abide in Me.' The disciples were asking: How can we abide in someone who has gone away and left us? That will be worse than our Judaism!

That, you see, is the setting of these chapters, and chapter sixteen is the answer to those questions and doubts.

Before we go on with this, may we not say that there is something very much like that in the atmosphere today? If you were living in any other part of the world than Switzerland, you would be full of questions as to what is going to happen next. The whole world is full of that question, and even Christians feel that we are coming to a great crisis. Many Christians have already lost faith in the religious system. Much that they were brought up in, much that they believed in and hoped in, and much that they thought for a long time was the true thing, has disappointed them. There are very many Christians who are disappointed with Christianity, and they are seeing that it is something that is going to be shaken and perhaps removed. The big question that is in the heart of many Christians is: Where are we going to? What is it all leading to? What really are we going to have in the end?

That is exactly how these disciples were feeling. Israel had been called 'God's vine'. The Psalmist said of God: "*Thou broughtest a vine out of Egypt*" (Psalm 80:8), and at the time that the Lord Jesus was speaking to His disciples, that vine had proved false. It was not giving fruit to God or to man. It was disappointing everyone. It only had the name of being a vine, and was not a true vine. Jesus said: "I am the true vine". Everyone was asking: What is truth? The common people were asking that, and Pontius Pilate will presently say: "*What is truth*" (John 18:38). The answer of Jesus is: "I am the *true* vine". 'Abide in Me and all your questions will be answered and all your uncertainty will be removed. Abide in Me and you will know what is true.' That is the immediate setting of these words.

But there is a much bigger context to these words than perhaps you recognize. And here is another thing that you must always try to discover when you are reading any words of the Lord Jesus. Anything that He says is not just something for an immediate local situation. What Jesus says, even though it just be one thing, has the whole counsels of God in it. It comprehends all the ages. I venture to suggest that you never saw that in these three simple words: "Abide in Me"! When Jesus said that, He was getting right back behind everything to the great eternal factor, and in those simple words He was taking up the one thing for which He came into this world. It is the question with which the whole Bible is occupied from beginning to end, and the one question which comprehends everything that Jesus came to answer. The question: In God or outside of God? That sounds very simple, but it comprehends all the ages. It is the question of all time and eternity.

We must open that up a little more. In the beginning, when everything came fresh from the hands of God, the whole creation, including man, was in God. God was the sphere of everything. He was man's sphere - man lived and moved and had his being in God. I often wish that we had a fuller account in the Book of Genesis of what things were like at that time, but we have to draw our conclusions about that by seeing what they were like afterward. We have enough there, however, to show us that it had been a very blessed condition. God was man's environment - and that is a very blessed condition. It is like a beautiful garden, the Bible says. Man walked in a beautiful garden with God, and there were no weeds or thorns there. Man did not have to fight adverse things in that

garden. You know, there are some gardeners who are very particular. You take them to gardens that you think are wonderful, and they are not a bit excited about them. They have such a high standard that they are bound to find some fault somewhere. Jesus says here: *"My Father is the husbandman"*, and God is a very particular gardener. If He says 'It is very good', then it *must* be very good. We are told: *"God saw every thing that he had made, and behold it was very good"* (Genesis 1:31), and that is how it was when all things were in God. We do not know how long it was like that, but while all was abiding in God, it was all very good.

But then came the tragedy: Man and the creation fell out of God. We speak about 'the fall', but have we ever realised what a terrible thing that fall was? Man and the creation fell out of God - and they fell into Satan. So, the New Testament says, *"the whole world lieth in the evil one"* (1 John 5:19). In God? Or outside of God? In God? Or, not just out in a vacuum, but in Satan?

Now that is the great question that Jesus came to answer in His own Person, and that is why we read that little fragment from Peter's letter: *"Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God"*... back into God!

We have pointed out that there are two sides to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. There is the one side of the Man in God. Jesus lived His life on this earth *in* the Father - He said: *"I and the Father are one"* (John 10:30). He always abode in God, and that was a lifelong battle for Him, for Satan and all his kingdom set themselves to drive a wedge in between Christ and His Father. We will not stop to look at all the ways which Satan employed, but the whole earthly life of Jesus was one continuous battle to prevent a gap coming in between Him and His Father. Satan did not trust this business to his demons - I don't think he *could* trust any of them to do this. I think Satan had said: I must do this, so it was always Satan who was mentioned in this connection. No doubt he drew upon all his forces for this, but he set himself personally at the head of them to try to open this gap between Christ and His Father.

Jesus triumphed in this battle. On the one side, as the Man in God, Satan could not separate Him from His Father. I do want you to recognize that this is something that you and I have to know about, for there is just one thing that Satan wants to do with you and me. It is to separate us from God, to get us away from Him, and he will use anything in our lives to do that. On the one side he will use our sufferings and our adversities. When we are going through a bad time he is always very near to whisper: 'You see, God does not love you. He is not with you - He is against you. You have evidence that He is against you, for if He loved you you would not have to suffer like this.' If we allow a doubt about God to come into our hearts when we are having a bad time, we shall find ourselves away from the Lord, and it is much easier to get away from the Lord than it is to come back to Him. It is a lifelong battle to keep our fellowship with the Lord unbroken. If Satan cannot break it in our sufferings he will sometimes try it in our prosperity and blessings. He offered Jesus all the kingdoms of this world and said, in effect, 'I can make you great and prosperous in this world.'

But we must get over to the other side of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus - the Man out of God. When Jesus was 'made sin for us' - and He was made sin for us in the end - He went out from God. I never fail to be more and more impressed with that terrible thing that happened. Here is this Man who had fought a lifelong battle to abide in God. It had been His one great object never to be separated from His Father, and He had won that battle in Himself, but here at the end He is crying: 'My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? I am where I have fought the battle so that I should never be. I am outside. I am forsaken of God. I am separated from My Father. I am like that scapegoat away back in Israel, upon whose head the priest laid his hands and transferred the sin of all the people. He then led the goat far outside the camp, away until it had gone right out of sight. Then the priest

drove it away and it was alone in the wilderness, where it died in its loneliness. I am like that now. I am not only forsaken of men, but I am forsaken of God.'

But that is where all men would be but for Jesus Christ. He suffered, *"the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God"*.

When Jesus was crucified all His disciples were scattered abroad everywhere. You might have had great difficulty in finding them if you had tried to. Two of them went down to Emmaus. Where poor Thomas was hiding himself we do not know, nor where Peter had gone to after denying His Lord. They were all broken and scattered.

Do you notice what happened after the Cross, when Jesus was raised from the dead? He knew where every one of them was and He brought them all back together. He reunited them in Himself and the last picture we have of them is that they are all together in Christ. They would agree that it is nothing but desolation to go out from God. It is not a garden, but a wilderness. Peter would agree with that, and so would Thomas. When the Prodigal Son went out from his father's house, he went out to bankruptcy, from a garden to a wilderness. When he came home he came to a life of fruitfulness and of rest.

Do you see something of what the Lord Jesus meant when He said "Abide in me"? 'Outside of Me it is just a wilderness. There is no fruit there. If you abide in Me you bring forth much fruit'... *"Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit"* (John 15:8). God's satisfaction is the one great thing through all the Bible. His satisfaction is now in His Son, and if we abide in Christ we abide in God's good pleasure and shall bring forth much fruit. If we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us - as we are supposed to have - we shall know in our hearts whether we are out of fellowship with the Lord or whether we are abiding in the Lord and we shall know because we shall feel that we are in the wilderness when we are out, and that we are in the garden when we are in. Jesus was very emphatic about this. He knew what a tremendous thing it was and so, eleven times in a short chapter, He said "Abide... abide... abide in Me."

May the Lord keep us abiding in Christ! All other things will prove to be false and only what is true will stand us in good stead to the end. "I am the *true* vine... Abide in *Me*".

That is only one way of saying: 'We must know the Lord and our place in the Lord'. What are you abiding in? Are you abiding in people? Are you abiding in conferences? Are you abiding in a religious system? Well, all these things will pass, and the time will be when there will not be any more conferences and when you will not be able to depend upon any people. The whole religious system will disappoint you, but if you know and abide in the Lord Jesus, it will be all right to the end.