

Testimony: "Abide"  
EvFree Women's Retreat  
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Although I cannot really define what it is to abide in Christ or in God or in the faith, I can certainly think of some of the blessings that it brings. God in his word has even described those blessings, including joy and fruitfulness, and depending on the extent to which I have used the means he has given me, I have experienced them more or less in my life. Now that may sound like a riddle to you, but I hope that it will become clearer as I describe God's working in my life. That working has four chapters: Christ saved me, Christ held me, Christ sent me, and Christ brought me back.

**Chapter 1: Christ saved me** Let me begin by saying that you cannot abide anywhere unless you are there to begin with. So here is how I came to be in Christ. Until January 1976 (many of you weren't even born yet) I was not in Christ, in God or in the faith. I was a happy atheist and had just completed my MA in French at the University of Iowa. I was not attending church, reading the Bible, associating willingly with Christians, or looking for a relationship with God at all. I had gone to Sunday school and even Vacation Bible School until the age of 12, but, although there were glimmers of affection for the things of God, I was blind to the truths of the Bible and living in rebellion to God. But he was after me.

In 1975, in the context of my studies, I went to Bordeaux, France, to spend a year teaching English at a French high school. In Bordeaux, I shared the upper floors of a small house with John, an undergraduate student from England, and Elspeth, also an undergraduate student, from Scotland. John was a believer, and he was very clear and open about it. He immediately connected with a small Evangelical church just outside the city, where he worshiped each Sunday, went to a prayer meeting each Tuesday, and attended their youth group, in a kind of adjunct leadership role, each Saturday. Through him, Elspeth and I began to get to know the people of this small but passionate church. First, we only went to youth group (which went up to about the age of 25), but soon we were going to worship services on Sundays, then to Bible studies and to the Tuesday

night prayer meetings, where I would sit trembling, unable to speak, as these believers spoke to God. This was the first time I ever heard anyone but a minister pray out loud—and their prayers were nothing like those I had heard before. It was clear that they knew the One they were speaking to, that they loved him and believed that he loved them and was attentive to their prayers.

By January 1976, I had, by the grace of God, crossed over from unbelief to belief. However, it was not until I saw a clear answer to prayer that I begged John to tell me what I was supposed to do. I remember saying, “I believe—so what should I do?” He suggested kindly that I might want to pray, confessing my sins to God, and entrusting myself to the salvation provided by Jesus on the cross. And so I did! I confessed every sin I could think of, a lengthy list, knowing and rejoicing that in Christ, they were all forgiven! Second Corinthians 5:17 became my so-called “life verse”: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

I was in Christ, in God, in the faith. Now I had the opportunity to abide. And I used every means God had given me to do so. I dove into the Bible, which now had meaning for me. I spent time in God’s word and in prayer, and I grew in the faith. I was filled with the joy of being reconciled to God with my sins forgiven and my future secured. The effects of abiding were evident in my life: joy and the beginning fruit of becoming more like Christ. My old self, seeking popularity with the opposite sex, enjoying drinking too much, other obvious and not so obvious sins were no longer part of my life. My motivations and my goals had changed when God made me a new creation. Mission accomplished: Kim is saved! Or is she?

My testimony of coming to Christ has a second part, a **chapter 2: Christ held me**  
By the time 30 years had passed, during which I grew gradually for a while, then seemed to stay “on hold”, I was striving, mostly under my own power, to live obediently, but with no real joy and no significant measure of success. I was unable to get into any kind of regular reading or study of God’s word outside of organized Bible Studies. My

prayers were cold, brief, and self-centered. I was frustrated with my only child's growing lack of interest in God and angry at my husband's frequent overtime. My resemblance to Christ was minimal. It should have been obvious to me that something huge was missing. But in the moment, I was unaware of what it was. Looking back, I can see that I was no longer enjoying the blessings of abiding. I will not say that I was not abiding because no one abides by their own power. God puts us in Christ, and he keeps us in Christ to the end. But I believe he gives us means, things we do, by which we reap the benefits of abiding. And I was not reaping those benefits.

At that time, late in 2004, I was forced by our financial irresponsibility to take a job which providentially opened up in our church office. How I love the providence of God! We were searching for a new pastor, and when he was called in 2005, I was just praying that we would get along well enough for me to stay in my position as his administrative assistant until my son graduated from high school the following spring.

When Steve and Heidi came, God began to reveal the reason for my struggles. In his first sermons on Ephesians 1, Steve challenged me, along with many others in our church, with the absolute sovereignty of God in election and in salvation, as in all things. I remember telling him that I wasn't sure I agreed with him, but God would not let me go. Through his Holy Spirit, his word, and Steve's wise and patient teaching, he opened my eyes to his majesty and goodness, to the fact that he works all things according to the purpose of his will. The real turning point came when Steve had me put in the Sunday bulletin a list compiled by Nancy Leigh DeMoss describing "Proud, Unbroken People" on one side and "Broken People" on the other. As I went through that list, God revealed the depth of my sinfulness to me and how far I had drifted from him. He graciously broke me, causing me to weep and to cry out to him. At the same time, I was reading *Desiring God* by John Piper. I was overwhelmed by the majesty of God revealed there, the emphasis on his sovereign, saving love and the joy that is in him. It was everywhere in the Bible. It captured my heart, and I fell in love with him. I felt as if God had seen me floundering, about to go under, and grabbed me saying, "No, you will go no further. You are mine." This personal encounter with God's relentless love is beyond my

understanding. I have been reading a treatise on “The Glory of Christ,” by the Puritan John Owen. In it, Owen includes a chapter on recovering from what he calls spiritual decays, where he urges believers who feel the coolness and distance that I was feeling to use the means of the word, prayer, and Christian fellowship to reignite their affections for Christ. Then he writes

This is the ordinary method of the communication of all supplies of grace to make us spiritually flourish and be fruitful,—namely, that we be found in the diligent exercise of what we have received. God sometimes deals otherwise, in a way of sovereignty, and surprises men [and women] with healing grace in the midst of their decays and backslidings....In this way many a poor soul has been delivered from going down into the pit. **The good shepherd will go out of his way to save a wandering sheep....**”

My good shepherd had gone out of his way to keep me from wandering farther than I already had. Psalm 40 verse 2 puts it this way: “He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.” I realized that it is God’s faithfulness that keeps us abiding, even when we are doing nothing ourselves to that end.

Soon, I found it difficult to leave my study where I devoured God’s word and communed with him in prayer as I had never dreamed was possible. New understanding and appreciation for Christ’s love for me, displayed on the cross, “captured me,” as one of my favorite songs says. From that point on, I began to experience again the effects of joy and fruitfulness that come from abiding. I now see that my “spiritual decays,” as Owen calls them, were at least in part the result of not using the means God had given me to live consciously abiding in Christ, especially drawing near to him in his word and in prayer. And since then, I can honestly say with Paul, as he wrote in Philippians 1:21, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

That brings us to **chapter 3: Christ sent me**

Since death and the gain it would bring were not imminent, I prayed, as Paul states in Philippians 1:22, that “to live in the flesh [might mean] fruitful labor for me.” God

answered that prayer in part in Salt Lake City, as I became involved in Women's Ministry, in reading and discussing Christ-centered books with women, and leading a Bible study in my home. But God had more in mind. After preparing me with about 5 years of intense discipleship in the church office, God moved me out of my comfort zone. Way out.

In January 2010, Haiti was devastated by an earthquake. In a country where the people had next to nothing, the little they did have was taken away. The Evangelical Free Church ministry called Touch Global put out a call for churches to send teams to help rebuild what had been destroyed. That included a call for speakers of French, perhaps retirees, to help with local interactions. God had prepared me for this: I was eager to use my ability with the language to help. I was not quite as eager to sleep for three weeks in a tent or a small room with 6 bunk beds, potentially with 5 other people, in a hot, humid, nearly destroyed area of the world where bugs abound. I am mildly claustrophobic and cannot sleep in tents or bunk beds and mildly paranoid about bugs (just ask my husband). Could I even survive? And worst of all, I would be without my daily supply of spiritual nourishment in the church office. It may help you to know that it was said at the time that I was an addict (for spiritual food), and Steve was my dealer (answering questions, giving me books to read, challenging me). I spent intense times of prayer, seeking God's affirmation of the call I was feeling. In the end, I decided that even if I couldn't sleep for three weeks, I would probably not die. And in 1983, God had sustained me for 6 months in the Central African Republic, in a small duplex rampant with large cockroaches. I went.

The time there was rich in experiences of God's abiding presence, of his working through me and others to bring hope to people in dire need of it. The greatest challenge after claustrophobia and bugs came when a missionary asked whether I could teach a one-week course on trauma counseling to schoolteachers and medical professionals who were dealing with children who had lost home and family and were traumatized by the whole tragic situation. The teachers and medical professionals I was to teach, were traumatized, too. Good materials were provided for the counseling part, which I

translated into French, and God had taught me enough about his sovereignty and his love that I was able to speak truth from the Bible about his part in this earthquake and the results, and his possible purposes in it—and to do it in French. I came home filled with the joy that comes from being close to God, relying on his grace, and knowing I had been obedient. He had been faithful to provide all the spiritual nourishment I needed for those three weeks.

But he was not done proving his faithfulness. Ten months later, in March 2011, he decided to test my trust in him by moving my husband, Benno, and me to Germany, away from our son, away from my friends, away from my human spiritual “source.” Three weeks in Haiti was one thing, but now we were to leave permanently, as we thought at the time. As I researched churches on-line, looking in vain for one that might be in line with the theology I believed to be sound, I became even more unhappy about this call. I did not want to leave, but I could not deny that God wanted us to go. For me to refuse would be to rebel against his perfect wisdom. Trusting in that wisdom and in his proven faithfulness, we went. We went to a country, where the true gospel had all but disappeared, praying that we might, in some small way, be part of bringing it back.

Following God’s leading to become an active part of a local church, we joined a Brethren Church in Wendelstein, where Benno’s company had moved us. There were no churches in our area that actually matched our theology, but this elder-led church taught the essential truths of the gospel and wanted to know God’s will from his word and to obey him. And their heart for the lost was huge, a sincere and active desire for people to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We hoped that we might be a help and an encouragement to them and support them in ways that God showed us. They welcomed us as an answer to their prayers for mature believers to come and help them.

Although there was no official Women’s Ministry in that church, there were two small groups of women who met weekly, not really for Bible study, but for fellowship and prayer. Their Bible intake was limited to rather shallow devotionals, the predigested and

watered-down Word. Some had been in the church for decades, but their knowledge of the Bible and their understanding of the gospel were limited. The one exception among the women of the church was a young woman named Iris, whose maturity was far beyond her years. We began to meet weekly to discuss the Bible and pray in English. God began to use me among the women, helping Iris to grow in her understanding of God's character, studying the Bible with each of the two women's groups, and initiating a quarterly women's breakfast, with topics such as becoming more like Christ, God's design for women, God's purposes in suffering, and others. As not only the oldest woman in the church, but also the one who had had five years of informal training in the EvFree Church Office Seminary, I was the primary speaker. God even answered my prayer that he would cause me to be able to speak German better than I actually could.

Beginning in 2016, God led me to invite a small group of women, including Iris and several other women of various ages, to join me in what we called a discipleship group. We studied various books of the Bible, such as Philippians, 1 Peter, James, and Colossians, as well as other books, including Jerry Bridges' *The Pursuit of Holiness* and *The Practice of Godliness*, with a view to becoming more like Christ. It was a busy, joyful, fruitful time made possible only by God's faithful presence and equipping. The women grew visibly in their hunger for God's word, in their understanding of the work of Christ on the cross, and in their desire to be like him. God was bringing fruit from my work as I stayed close to him.

But I began to grow weary, missing my spiritual support group in Salt Lake City. I wanted more than on-line sermons from EvFree of Salt Lake City, occasional conferences from a German organization associated with the Gospel Coalition, and solid teaching from good books. I was longing for a mature Christian "warm body" to disciple me, guide me, challenge me, and encourage me. As I began to feel sorry for myself, I was praying one evening for such a person, pouring my heart out to God. And God answered me, not audibly, but in words nonetheless. His encouragement stopped my tears and self-pity and made me feel a bit ashamed. "You don't need anyone besides me," he said. "I am enough. I will feed you, teach you and strengthen you. As you pour

out, I will pour in.” It was as if he were saying, to use the vocabulary of this retreat, “Abide in me!” His faithfulness and presence carried me joyfully through our remaining time in Germany.

So here we are, **chapter 4: Christ brought me back** When we arrived back in Utah a little over a year ago, we were exhausted from the move. My personal time with God and in his word had suffered. I arrived persuaded that God had something for me here, but I had no idea what and felt unmotivated to seek it out. Realizing that I was at risk for Owen’s “spiritual decay,” I racked my brains trying to figure out what I could do to prevent that. I was for some reason reluctant to take part in the Abide study that Judi Wright was leading that year (and will be leading this year, too). Realizing my need for help, I turned to God in prayer, asking him to show me what I might do to regain the joy of abiding. In his faithfulness he answered: “You ask me how you might regain the joy of abiding, but you are reluctant to join a group of women to explore that very topic?” He did not call me a fool, but the implication was clear. So I spent nine months with a godly group of women, exploring together the meaning of abiding, and encouraging each other.

As I was thinking about where God might use me, I thought about the love he has given me for interacting with other women in studying God’s word, and how much I miss my discipleship group in Wendelstein. Yet when Heidi asked me about leading the Thursday evening study of Judges, my first reaction was, “That’s not really what I had in mind.” God’s response was, “Well, maybe it’s what I have in mind.” Since obedience to him has proven to be a means of abiding and a source of great joy in the past, I trust him that that will also be the case in the future.

To sum all of this up, I think there are three things that God has taught me through my experiences with him:

First, once we are in Christ, God is faithful to hold us there. He will not let us go.  
My abiding is in his hands.

Second, there is joy and fruitfulness as we abide in Christ. Psalm 16:11 says, "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." And Jesus said, as we have mentioned more than once at this retreat, "Whoever abides in me...bears much fruit.

Third, to enjoy the blessings of abiding, we must use the means God has given us to experience them.

I would like to close with the words of Psalm 92:12-15:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. They are planted in the house of the Lord [They abide.]; they flourish in the courts of our God [They experience joy.]. They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

My greatest wish is to remain "full of sap and green," at least in my inner self. I want to continue to bear fruit and more than ever to declare God's righteousness and faithfulness with my words and my life. I will continue to use every means he has give me to enjoy all the blessings of abiding in him!