

Abiding in Christ
Chapter 3: Consistent but Unpredictable God
(Bob & Graham Interview, edited by Bob Clarkson)

Effortless Relationship, Just Enjoy

John 15:4 "...Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of its self, unless it abides in the vine; so neither can you, unless you abide in Me."

I think the vine analogy is brilliant because it's actually about God's DNA. And our privilege is living within the vine. I live in California close to Napa Valley which satisfies the European in me deeply. I travel around all the vineyards just encouraging people and just talking to these guys. And the thing I love about just traveling around, just talking to these guys, is that they all have stories to tell. All of the long established vineyards have stories that go way back. Their family members came across the country from the east coast to the west coast in Conestoga wagons carrying vines. They have stories about coming through the dessert where water is in short supply. They would take mouthfuls of water, swirling them around in their mouths and spitting them out on the root balls of the vines. They did everything they could to keep the vines alive. Some of them even have the original wagons right there in their vineyard. They talk about the vine and their relationship with it.

I love the fact that God is the vine, and His agape love flows from Him, as our primary source. The vine sap (love) rises to the highest point without any problem. One of the prime things we simply must

believe is that God is incredibly passionate about us; He loves us deeply and understands us very well. Nobody understands you like God understands you. Nobody sees you like God sees you. It is so important for us to understand the depths of Gods affection for us and the lengths to which He has gone to bring us into fellowship with Him. He goes to any length to help us maintain that fellowship with Him. The grace of God is utterly astonishing for us. And to be able to live in that place day after day is to come to totally depend on the goodness of God. Make it a lifestyle choice to become vulnerable to the goodness of God.

Whether I am strong or weak is immaterial to God. He is the same. So, when you are having a bad day with God, He is **not** having a bad day with you. He is just totally the same. So whatever you are going through, however you are handling it, whether you are handling it well, badly, or you could improve, He is still the same. When you are having a rebellious day, He is still the same. He never changes. You always know exactly where you are with Him. And if you are having a stupid rebellious day, grace abounds towards you. He knows on days that we are going to be idiots and He has kind of like budged for it. "Graham's having a bad day. The boy needs some help right now".

God Is Always Joyful, Loving and Accepting

Everything in God's heart is about laughter. He is the most joyful person I've ever met. God loves to laugh. He likes laughing with us, but I think mostly He laughs at us. It's like, "Can you believe what Graham just said? I don't know. What is wrong with that boy?"

It's a good thing that I put him into Christ. Otherwise I might slap him right now." I like the fact that the grace of God is like such a dependable life source. You can relax! You are always accepted. You are always acceptable because of Who God is. I love the fact that my relationship with God doesn't depend upon my performance as a Christian. I love that especially.

God Loves Me, Not My Performances

God isn't really interested in my performance. He's interested in me knowing Who He is for me. I love that fact that when we get to heaven there won't be any judgment for us because Christ has been judged on our behalf. When we come before Jesus, He is going to have a few questions for us. They will be mostly about what we were able to receive about Him and from Him. He will say, "John, I had all this to give you but you only let me give you this. I had so much that I wanted you to see in life and get, but you only saw this. You had such a narrow concept of Who I was and you never saw me in all my immensity. I could never get your heart to stretch so that you could receive the bigness of Who I was in your life."

We mostly see God's character and largeness. What we most don't see is the immensity and unconditional quality of His love for us. We don't recognize that grace (undeserved favor) is a by-product of agape (unconditional love). The thing that grieves the Holy Spirit is **not** sin because He's dealt with that. What grieves Him is when we don't see God as He really, really is. We don't become like absolutely rapt and astonished.

If we skip over to chapter 16, we see the role of the Holy Spirit is clearly defined. Unfortunately His role in the life of believers is taught incorrectly in most Christian circles. The Holy Spirit's role is "... to convict of sin, righteousness and judgment ... before we have believed on Jesus..." His role for the believer is "...to guide us into all truth." Mostly we erroneously preach that the Holy Spirit convicts Christians of their sin. If you disagree, reread the previous five sentences over and over until you believe what John wrote instead of what so many well-meaning people have wrongly told you.

Boring Christianity

God has so much love, joy and peace to give us. What grieves Him is not sin. It is that we just don't get the enormity of Who He is and His capacity to love us. We just don't lay hold of the immensity of God. One of the last things said in the book of Acts is a warning about dullness and a plea for astonishment. I think sometimes you look around the Western Church and notice that it is incredibly dull and boring. If you have attended one service, you know how all the others will be. If you have attended one church, you have seen what is happening in most others.

When I look at the Western Church I think. "My gosh is God like **that**?" Is God about Christians preaching the Gospel to those who are already saved? Is God into the choir preaching to the choir? Is our affection for each other dependent upon doctrinal agreement or is it solely based on mutual faith in Jesus for salvation? Do you ever push anyone away because of their misbehavior or differing beliefs? Would smokers,

drinkers, carousers, and ‘improperly’ dressed people be not just welcomed, but embraced as fully as the church leaders? Likely not! Is it any wonder how small and unappealing the God of such people would be to the unbelievers looking into the church.

The Church Is Very Predictable; God Is Not

God is incredibly creative to the point of amazement. He is **consistent**. But He is **unpredictable**. You always know where you are with Him. But you seldom know what He is going to do next. He may do one thing when you are in a certain situation and do something entirely different when that same situation arises again. Look into Joshua’s quest to inhabit the Promised Land. God is rarely going to do it the way you think it ought to be done. Which is why He is God and frankly you are not. God was not content to make a few species of bug. He made millions. You look at creation and see the incredible variety. What an amazing imagination went into creation.

Then you look at the Church and you think it is one dimensional; it's boring, its mind numbingly boring on days. We do the same thing every week. All of our meetings are exactly the same. And to top it off, we have rehearsals, bulletins and sermon preparation instead of spontaneously meeting THE HOLY together awaiting His Holy Spirit’s surprises and delights. It's also a hymn-prayer sandwich. Hymn, prayer; Hymn, prayer; Hymn prayer, talk; ministry and go home. We may get hyped-up, ecstatic and weepy, but within a short time we are twisted and anxious and just the way we were before church.

I was at a church the other week and I came in and they gave me this typed sheet of the meeting. 17 minutes of worship, 4 minutes for the offering, 3 minutes for announcements, 21 minutes for a talk (I know, I laughed as well). They wanted to be out of there in exactly an hour and 10 minutes. So the Pastor gives me this program. I look at it. Then I look at him and I say, "Do you know, if we're quick, we can get to the hotel, I can pack my bags and there's a 10 o'clock flight that I can get out of here, because I'm so not doing this!"

And then I ripped up his list into tiny little pieces and I put them in the top pocket of his jacket and I patted it and said, "Why don't you all keep that, because prophets and Spirit-filled preachers don't keep to a time table. Neither does the Holy Spirit. I am so not doing that. So now, do you want me to go home or what do you want to do?" He looks at me like a rabbit caught in the headlights. He answered, "Well the people won't stay." And I said, "Trust me! God shows up! Everyone stays! The problem is, when you have something like this schedule, it's just you that's gonna show up. So this is about you."

He asked me to stay. So I stood up in the meeting and said, "Look, I know you guys are used to coming here and staying an hour and 10 minutes, this is so not happening today. So this is the deal, I won't get mad if you leave, if you don't get mad if some people stay". Nobody left. Hey, an hour and 10 minutes later we were not finished. We were still there 3 hours later. It's not about time. It is about Who the Holy Spirit is and

what He wants to do.

So we have this God Who's wonderfully creative and consistent, but He is unpredictable. He is consistent in Who He is, but He is unpredictable in His actions. God is so unpredictable that there is absolutely no security in what God is doing. There is only security in Who He is.

God's Wild and Crazy Choices [Moses]

So it says in Exodus that God wants to rescue over a million people from bondage. You and I would send an army with tanks, and guns and planes. He sends one old boy (80 years old!) with a stick and a stutter. Like, what's that about? He surprises Moses on the backside of the dessert. How many times do you think he's seen a bush spontaneously combust? Yet on this particular Tuesday, he looks at this bush. And he is thinking, "Well it's burning, but it is not like being consumed." There's nothing else to do in the dessert. It's like sheep, goats, sun, scorpions, nothing else to do. So he like wanders over and suddenly finds himself deep in conversation with a shrub. I mean like what is that? That's kind of bizarre, eh? The best stand-up comedian ever couldn't have written a better story than that.

This shrub says to Moses, "Take your shoes off. You're on holy ground." He's thinking, "It's hot today and I'm talking to a shrub." And then suddenly this shrub wants him to go to Egypt. "So, Mo, what are you all doing for the weekend?" "Well nothing." "Well just skip down to Egypt and bring back a million people with you." "Uhhh. No!" How do you explain that one to your father-in-law? So Moses at supper that evening is asked,

"So, how was your day?" "It was interesting!" "Oh, interesting? So what do you mean?" "Well, I saw this bush kind of like burst into flames." "Well you've been there and seen that like dozens of times." "Yeah, but this one didn't burn up!" "What? It didn't burn up?"

"So I wandered across there to the bush. Uhhh. Anyway we had a chat." "Excuse me?" "Yeah, I had a conversation with a shrub." "You talked to a bush?! Did you take your hat today?" "Well, yeah. So I'm standing there like in my bare feet." "You were in your bare feet?" "Yeah. Well it told me to take my shoes off. Apparently all the ground around the bush, this shrub, was like holy." "Okay, so do you want to make a doctor's appointment?" How do you ask your father in law, "Can I have some time off?" "Well are you going on vacation?" "Well not really. I have to go down to Egypt and give a message to Pharaoh. And then I have to bring a million people back with me." How do you explain all of that, eh? It's kind of weird! Many of the things that God does are just like that.

God Is Both Logical and Intuitive

Don't expect God to be only logical because He's not. He's also very intuitive. The only time God will speak to your reason is when you've sinned, then He says, "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sin's be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow." That's the only time He speaks to your reason. The rest of the time He just says, "Don't even lean on your own understanding. Trust Me without reservation or hesitation!" What are you trusting? You're not trusting God's actions. You're trusting His nature and wisdom.

His actions are generally unpredictable. But you can rest assured that His actions, and those He reveals for you to do, are in the best interest of God's purposes for all creation! You may never see the light at the end of the tunnel. Your life may be a complete and utter sacrifice to bring glory to God despite your miseries or maybe even because of your response to your misery.

God Wins Wars without Weapons [Joshua]

Ok guys, here's a story with Joshua as the front man. He is at Jericho, the biggest, most fortified city in the Promised Land. You don't have to build ramps and shield towers. God says to him, "Why don't you all just walk around it for a week and say nothing then on the last day just shout as loud as you can and the walls will come down." "Yeah! Right!" Try to get evangelicals to do that. It's going to be messy. Imagine all the women saying, "You want my husband to walk around that city for a week and say nothing? You want my husband to walk for a week? And say nothing? Are you mad?" And then they have to shout and the walls will fall flat. That's not in anyone's war manual for like taking a city. No army on earth has like copied that stunt. That's unpredictable, eh?

How about getting across Jordan into the Promised Land, when you are surrounded by the enemy and they've got better weapons than you? They've got chariots, weapons and more people than you. Then, once you cross over the Jordan, the first thing God wants to do is circumcise everybody. So they're all walking around stiff and sore for three weeks totally incapable of fighting. Like, God, why now? "Excuse me, Josh," says

the chairman of the newly formed committee. You know, like our elder board comes up and the deacons arrive, “Shouldn't we have done this on the other side of the Jordan? Wouldn't that have been more sensible and logical?” “Yeah, but God isn't logical. He's intuitive. And apart from that He has a really bazaar sense of humor.” So they are all walking around for three weeks incapable of fighting and God is just killing Himself laughing. What has He been drinking?

Pitchers, Trumpets and Torches ?! [Gideon]

Here's another God plan that makes no sense. So you're out numbered 4 to 1 and Gideon is thinking.. “If everyone fights to the best of his ability, we might just have a chance.” All the Sergeants are going around to all the guys, “Kill four and you can have a coffee.” So all the soldiers are going, “Kill how many? — Kill four! Starbucks! Ok, just kill four and we'll all be cool.” Gideon is praying something like, “Dear God, please be with us. Let everyone fight to the best of their ability.” God's nudging one of the angels meanwhile thinking, “I think Gideon's got too many men. I know these boys, if by some fluke they do win this battle, they'll be impossible to live with for the rest of their lives. They'll be “high-fiving” each other forever, shouting, “We're bad!”

So God sends out a word to Gideon to pass on to the warriors, “If anyone is scared right now they can go home!” Hey! And 22,000 guys can't believe their luck. If this was a contemporary story all you would smell was burning rubber in the parking lot. So Gideon is now down to 10,000 guys, he's outnumbered 16 to 1 and he's

saying, "Don't help me Lord, Hey!" Meanwhile God is still kind of like a bit iffy about the numbers. They're only out numbered 16 to 1 and they've got Me. So God chooses His army based on whether He likes the way you drink your water. What is that? Let's send all the guys down to the river and get them to drink and we'll just choose the ones that drink only in a certain way.

It's Wednesday and God's probably bored, I don't know. What's the deal? So Gideon ends up with only 300 men. That's less than 1%! Now, He's outnumbered over 500 to 1, but God's happy! Hey! So God grins at Joshua and says, "Now you can go out and surround the enemy." Gideon's thinking, "Math is not your strong point, eh? I couldn't have surrounded them with 32,000, how the heck do I surround them with 300?" But the agony is not over because then God sends out a message, "Tell the guys I want all their shields."

So he's got all the guys lined up. They are like grumbling, "What have I done wrong? I pay my tithe. I always get to the meeting before time. I've been involved in the children's work. I've even run the sound system. What have I done wrong? All kinds of guys all lined up and God wants to take away your shield. "What does He want it for? I mean I need this shield. This is the only thing between me and certain death. Buzz off, you ain't having my shield! He wants my shield?" Eventually there is a big pile of shields.

And in the contemporary version of the story the truck pulls up and they start handing each man a vase. Can you imagine a sergeant coming up and saying, "Here's a vase." "What?" "You've got to hold this"

“Okay, your vase is bigger than mine!” So they're holding this vase. Soon the 300 guys are all holding a pot. “Oh, great. Thanks!” Then another truck pulls up and they start handing out trumpets, “Here's your trumpet.” “Okay, but Gideon I can't play the trumpet.” I mean, Gideon is totally weirded out. By this time Gideon is pulling his hair out. It's like bazaar. And then God says, “So Gideon, how are you doing?” “Well, I was doing okay until You started messing around.” “Well, would you like a prophecy?” “Yeah. Okay.”

“Go down into the camp of the enemy and I'll give you one.” “Can I not have one here?” God's thinking, “Yeah, but it wouldn't be half as much fun.” So here he is like the enemy has about 160,000 guys. So here he is in the middle of the night tripping over tent ropes, thinking to himself, “I hate my life. And I want to be a plumber!” And somewhere in the middle of that huge camp he ends up on the outside of the one tent where the guy on the inside is having a bazaar dream.

A huge round loaf of bread comes rolling down the hill crashing through the camp. And his friend inside the tent says, “Ah, that's the sword of Gideon!” Gideon's outside thinking, “Round loaf of bread, sword. Sword, loaf of bread. I don't get it.” But, God's prophesying through the mouth of the enemy their own destruction. So Gideon kneels down in the camp of the enemy and worships. You know, like you do when God is incomprehensible. And he's in awe of that all day. It's strange! It's God being unpredictable. So there can never be any certainty in what God is going to do or asking you to do. There is only certainty in Who He is. God is consistent and faithful, but His actions are unpredictable.

The Church Reborn

The church on the other hand is inconsistent in relationship but boringly predictable in how we do church. Somehow we are moving away from functional Christianity to a relational spirituality that carries at the heart of it a hunger for the presence of God. We are going to set our minds on the presence of God and nothing else. And in all of that we are going to have to become unpredictable in how we do things. We'll have to develop sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Like the wind, it blows where it will. You can't catch it. You can't tie it down. You can't maneuver it in anyway. And we're learning how to be relationally consistent but sensitive to God's love and presence and unpredictable in our ways. So our meetings will never be the same. Each one will be something new, something different, something creative. Why? It's in our spiritual DNA. We are returning to our Biblical roots in that context.

Peace Is Equilibrium of Pressures

Remember that abiding is the ability to remain in unbroken and continuous communication no matter what is occurring. At times, abiding is simply living a quiet life in God. Abiding is learning to live from the inside to the outside. Abiding is learning to come to a place of peace in God where stuff from the outside does not bother you, because life flows from the inside out. We are called "Christ-Ins" because He is living from the inside of us to the expressions on the outside. We are learning how to live in a state of constant peace. We are learning how to live in a deep place of rest.

I practice my rest and my peace every day. I Practice the Presence of God. That is, I remain **constantly aware of Christ in me** all the time. My aim is to be the most tranquil person on the planet. I want to be a peaceful man. I know that rest is a strong weapon. I expect to defeat the enemy through my rest and being fresh. The enemy wants us to be stale in our spirituality. The enemy wants us to be exhausted with the work we do for God. The Bible says that everything is new every morning, so we are fresh every day. So I intend to maintain my spirituality at a level of freshness because freshness defeats the enemy. New every morning is the blessing of God. My goal is to live always fresh.

Sometimes abiding, being at rest, looks passive, looks like inactivity to other people. I can do more out of rest than out of panic. Scripture says though, "...that we have to labor at entering into rest. You have to work at it. It's a paradox. (Hebrews 4:11)...work at entering into rest. But really, the only work in this is to be constantly intentional about it. So for me the bottom line is this. Being at peace means that I push away everything that causes dispeace. Any sense of anxiety, panic or fear I'm holding it out there, pushing it away. "No you're not coming in! You're so not welcome! You're not coming into my heart. You're not coming into my head. I resist you!

Peace is not God delivering us from the pressure of difficult circumstances so that we don't have anxiety. Peace is an equalizing pressure on the inside. Life is full of pressure. And life is stressful. But peace is an equalizing pressure within. If pressure from the outside is a 1000 pounds per square inch, peace is a 1000 pounds

of outward pressure on the inside. Peace is an equalizing pressure within. I can live in sustained pressure happily for weeks and weeks on end because my peace runs at a very deep level, which makes it very difficult for the enemy to actually defeat me on anything, because I have patience and he doesn't. The enemy has no access to the fruit of the Spirit. So what's he looking for? He's looking for an easy victory. He's looking for a quick kill. He's hoping that you won't show up for the fight. He has no patience. So, sometimes you just have to take your problems out into a deep place and drown them. What's that deep place? It's the deep place of God's unconditional, unfailing affection for me no matter what I am doing.

So for me when the enemy comes calling I don't go out to meet him. I go deep within to meet God first. I make the enemy wait. So the equalizing pressure comes from waiting on the Lord. If you know how to wait on the Lord, the enemy can't touch you. The enemy can only come and try to generate in you who he is. He is impatient. So he generates impatience in you when he comes. That's what he wants.

The church is probably the most impatient culture I've ever been in. Everything is fast in the church in this country. Everything is about speed, results and activity. I want it! I want it now! Everything is about that. It's a really impatient culture. Even Isaiah had a better handle on patience than Christians generally do. Isaiah 40:31 states, "They that wait upon the Lord will regain strength, fly like eagles, run without tiring and walk without needing to ever sit down."

What we're learning is, how to be still, how to be patient and how to wait. The great thing for me is that being patient is so cool, and waiting is so brilliant because you just get in the face of God and wait on Him. That's like a delicious treat. Meanwhile the enemy is on the outside thinking, "You all gonna come out and fight or what?" "Nah, later dude, later, much later! Sometimes waiting on the Lord, means when we come out and are ready to fight, the enemy has disappeared anyway. Sometimes it is not necessary to fight him, it's just necessary to get into the presence of God (the tower).

The enemy hates you with a malignancy. It is a malignancy that is truly awful. He is after you. He is pursuing you. He'll do anything to stop you from abiding in Christ. His intention is to pull you out of the place of abiding into a place where he can get you down. But he is not stupid. He won't chase you into the Holy of Holies (the tower). Because when he knocks on that door it won't be you that opens it. Our only goal, really, is to run into the presence of God. The Name of the Lord is a high tower, the righteous run in and they are so safe.

So you have to know God as your refuge and your fortress, which is brilliant. This is the way it works. The enemy comes, calling. You step back into your refuge, that place of defense, and you get into God. Then in some mysterious way, when you do come out, you come out strong and powerful and ready to duke it out. Often the enemy's a no show. Or when you come out, suddenly he realizes you're a heck of a lot bigger than you were when you went in. I like that. Being in the presence of God always makes you bigger. {Presence in silence is far more therapeutic than words in absentia.}