

INTRODUCTION
WHAT SEEMS
TO BE MISSING...IS NOT.

A young man was desperate to travel to another country where he felt his future waited for him. He sacrificed for several years, saving what was to him a fortune, just to buy a ticket on an ocean liner that would take him to his destiny. Finally, he was ready to travel. Having said his good byes, he began to board the ship when it suddenly dawned on him that he would be without food for seven long days. He quickly purchased as many bags of cookies as he could carry and took them on board.

Each day the ship's crew knocked on his door, inviting him to eat in the dining hall with the other passengers. He politely declined and made up excuses for not eating. By the seventh day he was out of cookies and miserable. When he eventually emerged from his cabin the staff saw his state and asked him why he had not eaten. He confessed that he didn't have any money and was embarrassed to ask for help. The shock on their faces told the young man something was wrong. Finally, one member of the ship's crew took him aside and gently said, "All the meals were included in the price of the ticket. You had all the food you could eat waiting for you."

What was missing from the young man's life - was not missing! He was miserable without needing to be because perfect provision had been made for his journey.

That's the thinking behind this book. There is nothing essential missing from the life of any Christian. God has made abundant and perfect provision for daily living. What makes us think something is missing is that we don't believe in, cultivate, or enjoy the perfect presence of Jesus in our lives.

When Jesus ascended, He left His disciples with all they would ever need to be fully satisfied 24 x 7. He promised that His leaving would actually lead to a better reality for them. To describe this constant perfect provision, Jesus gave them a metaphor of this abundance. It's found in John 15. We call it abiding, and it's the blueprint for Christian living.

Jesus said in John 15,

I am the true vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can

do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. (John 15:1-9)

Abiding is learning to enjoy a barrier-free relationship with the presence of Jesus. In fact, the person and perfection of Jesus now abide in every believer. If we would but receive His perfections, rejoice in them, and release them, we would be like Him. It's a perfect plan for living as He lived.

This book is also an outgrowth of a change in my approach to discipleship. In 1995 I made a dramatic switch in my discipleship ministry in that I stopped 'putting in' to Christians and started to 'call out' what was already there in Christ. Let me explain.

I grew up with the old-school model of accumulating resources, getting organized, initiating a program, and putting in to people. Then I realized that to disciple people as if they lacked something does tremendous damage to the quality of their lives. People who have Jesus abiding in them lack absolutely nothing. Just as surely as we have a perfect Savior, we also have the perfect presence of Jesus to sanctify us and make us what God intends for us to be.

I further realized that discipleship in North America is resource-driven. On the surface that may seem fine. But in most of the world there are no such resources. Yet without such resources I've encountered strong, daring, and, yes, resourceful discipling outreaches overseas. What was the difference? I call it response discipleship. It is teaching people to respond to Jesus as the Christian life. It is teaching people to abide.

Abiding is to discipleship what reading is to learning. Those who do not learn to abide are like those who could learn so much more, but they lack the key ability - reading. Until they learn to read, the door to so much is closed no matter how intelligent they may be or how many resources they have.

Abiding is to discipleship what breathing is to singing. Even a beautiful voice cannot overcome a lack of air or improper breathing. A believer who does not abide shows the strain in keeping the simplest of Jesus' commands. It is not a lack of desire that weakens most Christians, but a lack of perfect 'air' from a perfect source.

Abiding is to discipleship what proper nutrition is to strength. The absence of food and water cannot be hidden. Those who fail to abide never experience the promise of avoiding hunger or thirst. They find the

Christian life strenuous and tiring, just like those who do not eat and drink find life to be unbearable.

According to John 15, we never move on from abiding because God's abundance in Jesus is the perfection and provision our souls long for every day. We never find a better source from which to live moment by moment. We cannot improve on perfection in forgiveness or discipleship, and we have perfection for both right now. His name is Jesus.

**Perfect provision has been made for every believer
through the perfect presence of Jesus in us.**

As you read these words do not look for perfection in them. This book is a dialog about perfection but it's far from perfect. The words point to two places - Calvary and the Vine - and to one Person. These two very real places reveal two perfections of Jesus for us and in us. Whoever comes to these places will lack nothing for the journey.

So this book is not about what's missing because what seems to be missing...is not. This book is what you already have in the perfect presence of Jesus.

CHAPTER 1
THE ABIDING PRESENCE

Shortly after my conversion I was told that I could never really be like Jesus in the world. In fact, I was told that the Sermon on the Mount was so tough in its standards because Jesus wanted me to know I could not be like Him. The idea was that this high standard would keep me humble and committed to the discipleship process forever.

Unfortunately, that kind of thinking stopped the natural joy of discipleship I was experiencing. Right after my conversion I really did think I could be like Jesus; I actually thought it would happen in much the same way that I had been forgiven by grace.

By grace I knew the presence of Jesus in me and that my life had begun to bear fruit. Very soon, however, the kind of thinking that said I could never be like Jesus sent me into nearly three decades of trying hard to be like Him all the while knowing I couldn't be until I got to heaven.

When believers fail to focus on and appreciate the perfect presence of Jesus in their lives, they suffer enormous personal loss and develop disturbed souls.

As a result, non-believers fail to sense His presence in believers' lives. The invisible God who could appear through believers remains invisible because the fruit of Jesus' presence is just not there.

Sadly, millions of believers live as unbelievers. Many who know His perfect forgiveness know little or nothing of His perfect presence now in them. So the dreams of an unshakeable soul, the absence of hunger or thirst, fruitfulness, and being like Jesus wait until heaven. How far from Jesus' claims we have drifted when we leave being like Jesus to another time and another place!

Consider for just a moment these claims made by Jesus.

"Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock; and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock." (Matthew 7:24-25)

"Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become to him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life." (John 4:13-14)

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." (John 6:35)

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

In these brief words Jesus claims He can produce in anyone an indestructible, unshakeable soul without changing the tragic nature of the world. He says He can create within us an eternal source of satisfaction. He can stop forever the hunger and thirst of a human soul, and He can enable us to bear the kind of fruit (behavior) God wants. But without Him we can do none of that.

These are astounding claims that change the very concept of what can happen in a human life - if they are true. Jesus' claims are all or nothing. Either His presence changes everything, or it changes nothing. He wants that to be absolutely clear to His followers.

Never once did Jesus recant on any of these claims or the dozens more He made. In fact, His words force all who hear Him to decide if He is crazy, demon-possessed, or truly the Son of God. The early disciples were convinced the presence of Jesus changed everything forever. It certainly changed them, and His presence was all they had.

Two millennia later do we still believe His presence changes everything forever? There is a way we can tell. Let's ask ourselves a very sobering question: If the presence of Jesus was removed right now from our lives, what would immediately change? In other words, what would be left of our Christianity without Jesus? The first disciples would have said everything would change and that they would have nothing left. They had heard Jesus clearly say, “Without Me you can do nothing.”

Would we be able to say the same? After all, we would still have our Bibles, spiritual knowledge, spiritual disciplines, and recipes for daily spiritual success. Couldn't we still do something acceptable and Christian with these? Because if the first disciples only had Jesus' presence while we have so many other things that they lacked, would we not be better off than they?

Now think on a larger scale. What would change if the presence of Jesus was removed from all Christian organizations across the world? Again, the first disciples would have said everything. They would have said Christianity would be over from that moment on. Remember, they had no Christian infrastructure to point to. They only had the presence of Jesus. To them, no Jesus meant no Christianity.

Would we say the same? We would still have our denominations, real estate holdings, and impressive numbers of Christians and Christian organizations. Could we not do something Christian with that?

Yes, we have so many things the first disciples did not have, but do we really have more? Does anyone really need more than the presence of Jesus to be Christian or live the Christian life?

If Christianity is Jesus, then whoever has Jesus lacks nothing.

This is where true Christian life begins and ends - in Jesus' presence. Everything else we have (Bibles, seminaries, and buildings) points to Him - only Him.

Here is the sobering Christian reality: If Jesus' presence suddenly left all believers' lives, then the world would be without light, salt, or fruit and God's glory would stop being visible and available through men and women. The world would be plunged into total spiritual darkness. Yet millions who say they believe in His presence live as if He is already missing and that His presence makes little practical, day-to-day difference.

Whatever happened to the essential need for Jesus' presence in our spirits and our souls for Christianity to exist? Without that presence Christianity is over and so is our life. Have we missed this? Are our current ideas about Christianity getting in the way of true faith in Jesus?

Many who say they believe His presence matters in their lives often fail to live as if it matters at all. What's important to them is His presence on earth 2,000 years ago and going to heaven some day. They accept that first presence of Jesus in the world, but His presence right now seems far less important.

These precious saints fail to abide - to enjoy a barrier-free, soul-satisfying, stabilizing, fruitful relationship with Jesus. And because of that, they fail to bear fruit and glorify God. They fail to make the invisible, eternal attributes of God visible and available to a lost and dying world.

Living in Brazil, I see the impact of wrong ideas about Jesus in people's spiritual lives. Many of my dear Brazilian friends seek Jesus and salvation in the Catholic Church where the certainty of going to heaven right now is unthinkable. The Catholic salvation system that Martin Luther set out to reform does not present Jesus' perfect work on Calvary clearly enough for personal knowledge of salvation right now. How sad!

In Catholic thinking, with time, the church's input, and with each believer's effort, Jesus' merits can become enough to know salvation... eventually. Still, no true disciple of Catholicism would dare claim a personal knowledge of salvation right now. Why? Because that would be committing a sin of pride, and pride means they are far from going to heaven.

Moreover, not knowing for sure creates humility, and sincerely seeking without knowing is better than risking the terrible sin of pride. If I were in that system of thought, I suppose I would agree. But since I see Jesus' perfection clearly as God's provision for me on Calvary, I can see I am saved, and I need not worry. Jesus is perfectly enough right now. He is 100% of our salvation. I wish every Christian could be this sure.

Every Christian should be. That is why I point my Catholic friends to Jesus alone as their salvation.

Unfortunately, they do not know for sure they are saved because Jesus' perfect death, burial, and resurrection are not given the full force of their power for perfect justification and forgiveness right now. This has gone on for centuries, but I have seen what happens when Jesus is clearly presented to people hungry for certainty. When the "light goes on" among my Catholic friends, they are set free to enjoy forgiveness now. A perfect Savior changes everything. They are changed by seeing for themselves the perfection of Jesus. They see personally that Jesus is enough right now and for all eternity. They see and they are not proud. They are humbled. The pride they feared would come from knowing forgiveness is erased by grace.

The first and greatest of God's perfect abundance for us is the forgiveness of our sins. By His death, burial, and resurrection the issue of sin's penalty over our eternal destiny is satisfied by the presence in the world of God's own sacrificial lamb - Jesus. Without forgiveness the idea of enjoying any kind of barrier-free, abiding relationship with God is unthinkable and immoral. No soul can become satisfied and unshakeable until the foundation of forgiveness is forever established at Calvary.

All hope for receiving any of the other perfections of God, for which our souls thirst, is rooted in the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus. A perfect God has every right to demand a perfect life in order to accept us back and invite us to live in His perfect presence. This is not only just; it makes sense that perfection demands perfection. If we as imperfect sinners long for perfect abundance, how can we doubt that our perfect God longs for and demands perfection?

It is my concern that even we who know Jesus as our perfect Savior have missed His perfection, too. We miss it in the area of discipleship and Christian living. We have done much the same thing with discipleship that the Catholic Church has done with salvation. Most evangelical and Bible-teaching churches do not diminish Jesus in the area of salvation, yet I personally have diminished His perfect presence in the areas of discipleship and fruit-bearing.

I am deeply bothered that the failure of evangelical, Bible-believing churches to present the perfect presence of Jesus in us right now as the essence of Christianity has caused us to disciple people with a fundamentally flawed belief that no Christian can truly be like Jesus right now. To claim that as an evangelical is to risk being proud, and that sin makes us less advanced as disciples. So we teach new converts in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways that they can never be like Jesus. No wonder we see so little Christ-likeness! We really do not believe that Jesus' perfect presence in us changes everything. It might eventually, but don't expect too much now.

What I had criticized my Catholic friends for doing with salvation. I was guilty of with discipleship! Certainly the one system that leaves a person not knowing forgiveness is the more dangerous. Yet, to diminish Jesus' perfect presence and ability in discipleship is to put our light under a bushel and everyone suffers for that attitude.

His perfect presence in us right now is the source of true Christian behavior, yet we have buried the truth of this perfect source under layers of evangelical recipes for trying to be like Jesus even though we don't believe we can be. When I personally stopped using and preaching the recipes for discipleship and started receiving and offering the perfect food and drink from Jesus the perfect Vine, my true discipleship began in earnest and so did the discipleship of the church I led. Sadly, it took a long time for me to see the perfect Vine in me and in them! What was missing was not missing. The light had to go on for me, too.

I know I felt something similar to what my Brazilian friends feel who suddenly discovered they could be saved and know so right now. It was so simple! Why had it become so complicated? Why had their church not told them? When I saw the perfection of Jesus, the true Vine, in me right now, my discipleship became simple, too. Why had I complicated it so? Why had those who discipled me not told me?

Like my Catholic friends who finally did see the perfection of Jesus, I felt a deep sadness that I wasted so many years working for what was already there. While I feel as though I wasted a lot of time, I am now compelled to tell all I meet that the perfection of God has taken up residence in every believer, and we can experience what it is to be like Jesus if we will but receive from Him the perfection He is willing to give moment by moment.

This perfect Jesus **for us** (at Calvary) and **in us** (right now) destroys all pride. The more we look to Calvary, the more humble we become about salvation. The more like Him we become by abiding, the more humble we are made by the experience of living like Him by grace. The words "without me you can do nothing" ring more true every day to anyone who is abiding. In fact, you become glad you can do nothing.

This perfect Jesus who lives in every believer has plans to show up throughout this world through us. That is why it's essential that every believer abides in Him. Christians need to be like Jesus in the world right now, because the world can't wait for us to be like Him when we arrive in heaven.

Many who know for sure they will enter heaven through Jesus' perfect life, death, burial, and resurrection live as if His perfect presence in them now is just to guarantee their entrance into heaven at death. Is confidence to face death all His presence is for? What about facing and living life like He did?

The perfection and abundance of God for which our souls so deeply hunger come to us only by way of the presence of Jesus. Without Him

the perfect abundance of God is like water from a fountain located a thousand miles from the desert in which we live out our days. Nice thought, but no substance for my thirst. The water's existence has no power to revive me until it is placed within my reach.

The transformation of our souls into satisfied souls like His is also why Jesus came into the world. He wants to make the perfect abundance of God visible and available to us and to bring the Kingdom's water to the dryness of our souls. Now we can say without fear and scarcity as we receive the symbols of His death at the Lord's Supper, "I have a perfect life. I have a perfect sacrifice. I have the perfection God demands."

This perfect sacrifice happened at a moment in space and time that was so separate from our personal experience and works that all we can do is look, marvel, and live. The gospel is the presence of Jesus in the world **for us**. It's something that happened outside of us. Over the centuries theologians have called this "an alien righteousness," that is, from outside of us and in no way dependent on us. This is the first and foundational presence of Jesus we preach to all who will receive it. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we dare not miss it. Every Christian should be perfectly sure of salvation in Jesus.

Keeping the perfect work of His forgiveness clearly outside of us prevents us from claiming any credit for our forgiveness and justification before God. Our salvation is a perfect work of God outside of us in the person of Jesus at Calvary. His presence at Calvary is ours by faith and never by works.

Paul says in Galatians that any other "gospel" is anathema. So in order to bring the perfect universal work of forgiveness inside of us as substance and reality, it must first be completely and perfectly finished outside of us by Jesus. When Jesus cried from Calvary, "It is finished!", we could all rest. The presence of Jesus **for us** is perfectly and abundantly complete. That is why the cross is the symbol of our forgiveness. It happened for us and outside of us.

Yet, the presence of Jesus outside of me and **for me** is not the full story of what God intended. The perfect presence of Jesus outside of my personal time and space was the door for the beginning of Jesus' perfect presence inside my personal time and space. By His Spirit, **the perfect Jesus now lives in me**. The perfection and abundance of God, which Jesus claims to be, has arrived in me! I must stop fearing perfection and embrace His living presence in me. Only His perfect presence can produce in me an unshakeable soul and moment-by-moment Christ-likeness. His perfection can make me like Him. Nothing else can.

Although our souls deeply long for a source of perfect abundance, we're still afraid of the word 'perfect.' All we hear is condemnation

when it's mentioned. How sad! Perfection died for us and now lives in us!

What is surprising to our minds, that are so filled with fear and scarcity, is that the One who demands the perfection would give the perfection He demands! God gave Jesus' perfection to us because He longs for it...**for us** and **in us**. This is God's perfect abundance in action on our behalf. His mind knows no scarcity and no fear. His thoughts are not our thoughts. He is not afraid of perfection. He is perfection for us and in us.

I have now personally experienced the liberating power of Jesus' perfect presence in me for discipleship and daily living. It is called abiding, and it changes everything about discipleship. I believe every Christian can and should be like Jesus right now. In our attempt to avoid pride we have hidden Jesus' true power to release His life through us as His fruit. We can be like Jesus today as surely as we can know we are saved today. We need to go back and read His claims again and start fresh.

If you are a sincere believer in Christ, this idea that you can be like Jesus right now will not be easy for you to accept. I'm glad for that. That means you're careful with what you claim for yourself. If, however, you can come to see that being like Jesus is something you **receive** in the same way you received forgiveness, perhaps then you will receive this ability as a daily provision just as you received forgiveness as a once-and-for-all provision from Jesus' life and perfection. I assure you from Jesus' words in John 15 the ability to be like Jesus abides in you right now if you will receive it and release it as fruit.