

© 2011, Robert J DeGray
mail@trinityfellowship.net

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This work contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

Chapter 7: Abiding

Lloyd was shocked to realize it was almost the first Sunday of the New Year. The days since Christmas had been a blur; he had hardly prepared at all for last week's sermon. He hoped to do better this week, preaching his New Year's message from John 15. Abiding in Christ was a timeless message that was very timely this year.

On Christmas Day, after the delayed but joyful Christmas service, they had decided it was best to all go home and save the clean up for later. But Ned, Arthur, Henry and Lloyd had agreed to do a quick check on the families that had not made it to the service, just to make sure everything was alright.

Looking forward to the Christmas roast, Lloyd hurried into town to check on John and Mary Wheeler, and found that they had missed all the excitement and slept in until after they thought a church service would be over. They were enjoying their Christmas dinner, so he wished them a Happy Christmas and went home for his.

Arthur and Henry found several other families who had chosen to stay home Christmas morning for one reason or another. None had any damage. Between them they accounted for two more bomb sites, one in a field behind a house that only destroyed a chicken coop, and a second on High Street that had destroyed the façade of Hartwell's furniture store, but left the contents largely undamaged.

It was Ned, going the other direction, who found the Coopers standing outside their home. Their house had taken a direct hit. But the Coopers were one of the few families in Stokely who had an Anderson shelter in their back garden, something Eveyln had insisted on after Lily's illness. The shelter had kept them safe. The air raid wardens would not allow the Coopers to rummage the bomb site, so Ned offered them a place to stay and Christmas dinner at the farm.

Lloyd later learned that one other bomb had hit a home on Station Street. This one was devastating, killing Lois Blake and her two young children as they sheltered in the cupboard under the stairs. The father, Joseph, was overseas in the Army. Lloyd couldn't imagine a loss more devastating: to be at the front protecting your family and then find they had all been lost back home.

The morning after Christmas Lloyd went to the Powell's after breakfast. Remembering Ernest's report the previous week, that Evelyn had been almost disabled by Lily's sickness and was now unhealthily compulsive about her safety, Lloyd was anxious to check in.

He found the two families sitting at the long farmhouse table. Alice had prepared a rasher of bacon for their Boxing day breakfast, and she insisted on serving him second breakfast: he welcomed bacon and eggs after the thin porridge at home.

The Cooper family looked surprisingly chipper, given the circumstances. Not even Evelyn had her face lowered, and Lily was happily engaged, almost bouncing on the bench. Ernest had said she was pining: it appeared the change of scenery had done her good. "So how are you doing?" Lloyd asked.

Ernest answered. "We're fine Reverend. Ned and Alice are more than gracious, and Evelyn and the girls are doing well." He looked Lloyd in the eye "This family has backbone, Reverend; it'll take more than losing a house to derail us." Last week Ernest had said that Evelyn had lost her backbone over Lily's sickness. He wondered whether his present optimism was bravado or a positive change.

Evelyn spoke up, and her voice sounded strong "We're hoping to recover some clothes and such today. But we're going to have to find a place to live, Reverend. Ned and Alice are going to be housing a contingent of Land Girls who are coming to work on the local farms." Lloyd already knew that the only bed left on the farm was going to be the one Ned and Alice slept in.

"But I'm sure God will provide." Evelyn continued. Then her voice faltered. She looked at her empty plate, then back up. "Lloyd, can we talk to you for a minute?" She glanced right and left, indicating that she needed to talk away from the girls.

Lloyd nodded. "Certainly. Just let me finish Alice's excellent eggs."

While the rest cleaned up, Lloyd, Evelyn and Ernest sat in Ned's rambling front room. Evelyn spoke in her old direct manner: "Lloyd, God has been showing me just how wrong I've been not to trust him since Lily was sick. I've hurt my family and myself. I've apologized and asked forgiveness, but I want to tell you about it so you can pray for me."

"You know I've never prayed hard as I did when Lily was sick. But when God raised her up, all the fear I bottled up during her illness overwhelmed me. I began to fear every potential danger, no matter how remote. I acted like if I just tried hard enough nothing bad would ever happen again. Of course that did result in the Anderson shelter, so it wasn't all bad. But my attitude was crazy. I knew I couldn't keep Lily and Phyllis from risk, but I couldn't help myself."

"I've asked Ernest to forgive me because I was so hateful to him. Whenever he wouldn't go along with my compulsive caution I yelled and screamed. I even accused him of hating his own daughter. I've apologized to Lily for keeping her captive since last May. She told me she was better, but I wouldn't hear it. I've apologized to Phyllis for neglecting her in Lily's favor and including her in my fear. Mostly I've apologized to God for not trusting him."

"I don't know if I ever would have come right without the bombing. As the plane's roar and the bomb's whistle penetrated the Anderson, I was overcome with fear. I threw myself over Lily, trying to protect her. But the moment the bomb went off, I realized all my precautions were vain. I could no more prevent the next disaster than I could prevent the sun from setting. I suddenly remembered a verse I seemed to have forgotten: 'apart from me you can do nothing.' Only God can be my trust: I can't depend on my own strength or wisdom.

"But Reverend Lloyd I want you to pray, because all this return to sanity feels fragile. I'm afraid the next alert, the next sound of a bomb dropping or the next report of an illness spreading, even the realization of what we've lost at the house will push me back into helpless fear. Will you pray for me?"

Lloyd prayed that Jesus would be very present for Evelyn in the days to come, that she and the family would know strength and confidence and peace in him.

Lloyd was pre-occupied with the housing problem as he walked through town. Between the evacuees, the various organizations occupying the larger estates, the lack of construction and displacements from the bombings, there were no unoccupied rooms in Stokely. Where could a family like the Coopers call home?

It was at that moment that Lloyd decided to preach the New Year message from John 15. He was impressed that a fragment of a verse ‘apart from me you can do nothing,’ could make such a difference for Evelyn. But that same text was the one that taught us to find our ultimate home in Christ, as he in us, and that could make a difference for a lot of people in this war-torn year.

Late Christmas week several families made a concerted effort to clean up the church. The tarp on the roof was replaced with a careful, though still temporary frame and lathe, covered with some scavenged tiles. Lloyd suspected the temporary fix would be there for years. Inside, one pew had been completely destroyed by the unexploded bomb, but the others were repaired. They wasn’t any glass to be had for the windows. They had to be boarded up. Lloyd hoped that fix would be temporary.

On New Year’s Eve Henry Padbury stopped in with big news. He was leaving for war service January 1st. Lloyd was shocked: he assumed Henry’s mathematics teaching at the University of Reading exempted him from conscription. And wasn’t he too old? Henry explained that he wasn’t being called up, but had been recruited by a certain organization within the British Government looking for people gifted in the area of mathematics. That was all he could say.

“The difficult thing,” he said “is going to be leaving the church. Except for my years at University, Stokely Free has been home for me all my life. I took the job in Reading when I could have had jobs in more prestigious schools because I wanted to be able to care for my parents. And since they passed on, I’ve felt no need to move. I love my students in Reading, but I’ve really focused my life on helping this church follow Jesus; it’s been home all these years.”

His voice caught, and Lloyd stopped to pray with him. He knew better than to push too hard for details. Many secret organizations had been springing up, and Lloyd suspected Henry would be moving to some secluded estate where relocated mathematicians could play some key secret role in defeating the Nazis.

Annie and Lloyd didn’t go out New Year’s Eve. Almost no one in Stokely did. Instead they stayed up and talked quietly in the sitting room long after the kids were asleep in the Morrison. There were no alerts.

But they lamented the fate of London after the huge raid two nights ago. The Cathedral had only been saved by a miracle and by the sacrificial efforts of its fire watch. The local fire brigade was still in London, along with every other unit in the vast London area. Annie showed Lloyd the picture of St. Paul's above the smoke, which the Daily Mail was calling the greatest picture of the war.

Annie asked about the Coopers. It would only be a few days before they were homeless again, when the Land Girls arrived at the Powell's farm. She was also concerned for the Simmonds, who now had Nellie and Billie's grandparents living with them; the situation was every bit as squeezed as Lloyd had predicted. As the clock struck midnight, Lloyd and Annie prayed for their family and the people they cared for, that Jesus would be very present to strengthen and guard them during the coming year.

At breakfast the next morning Annie was a bit surprised to find Henry Padbury on her doorstep. He usually wasn't a 'morning' person. She invited him to sit with Lloyd, who was finishing a bowl of her thin porridge. Today she had managed to find one orange for each of them, to celebrate the New Year. But little Meg had not wanted hers, so Annie offered it to Henry; he accepted with evident enjoyment.

While he was eating he told Lloyd that he'd been thinking about his move. He said his original plan had been pretty selfish: he had intended to keep his house as it was on the hope that from time to time he'd be able to use it. But in thinking and praying about it he had realized that his four bedrooms could be a huge blessing to the Coopers. They could borrow it for the duration, lock, stock and furniture.

Annie, overhearing this, thought it was a great idea, but as she stood in the kitchen doorway, watching Lloyd and Henry pray for God's strength for this next step in Henry's life, she had an idea she thought even better. The Coopers weren't the only people in Stokely who needed a home. When Lloyd said Amen and began to walk Henry to the door, she hurried over. "Can I make a suggestion, Henry?

"I'm open to anything the Lord wants to do."

"Well, I don't know that it's from the Lord, but I was thinking that your house is really more than Ernest and Eveyln and the girls need. What if, instead the Coopers squeezed into the Simmonds little house, and the Simmonds, with Billie and Nelly and the grandparents, took Henry's house?"

Both Lloyd and Henry looked thoughtful, working out the details. Annie could see them coming to the same conclusion she had, that everyone would benefit from this new arrangement.

Lloyd went to tell the Coopers immediately. He found them scattered across Ned's farm, preparing living places for the Land Girls. Half would stay in the best of Ned's buildings - one that had been used for servants in the past and had rudimentary plumbing and a hearth. The remaining six would stay in the house.

As soon as he could Lloyd began rehearsing Henry's plan and Annie's modification of it. The Coopers were enthusiastic, especially when they realized that their misfortune could be used to provide a place for someone else. But then Evelyn, looking and acting more like her old self every minute, asked "Are you sure Meg is going to be willing to move out of her little house?"

"Why wouldn't she be?" Lloyd asked.

"Because it's her home" Evelyn replied.

"Because it's my home" Meg said. Lloyd had figured he'd better bring Evelyn to the Simmonds when he proposed the plan. Now he was glad he had.

Remembering that Bert would be asleep, they had knocked softly. No one came, and they could hear a woman's strong Cockney accent apparently berating little Nellie for something. He knocked again and finally Meg answered. She looked worn and frazzled; if anything a bit irritated, not an expression he was familiar with on Meg's usually kind face.

"Come in," Meg said. "I don't think either of you have met Mr. and Mrs. Cotton, Nellie and Billie's grandparents. Florence, Tom, this is Reverend Lloyd Robins, minister at the Stokely Chapel, and Evelyn Cooper, a good friend."

Tom Cotton spoke with a Cockney accent. "Don't 'old to Chapels or dissenters, but I'm right glad to meet you, Reverend. Don't 'old much with the Anglicans either." Mrs. Cotton remained seated "'scuse me for not getting up rev'rend, it's me arthritis. 'Scuse Tom too. He's so old he don't 'old to nothing, he don't."

“Come into the kitchen, Lloyd, Evelyn and I’ll get you a cup of tea.” Meg interrupted, cutting short what could have been a challenging conversation.

“So how is it going Meg? You look worn.”

“Worn to a frazzle, Reverend, I admit. It’s not taking care of the old people, it’s that they constantly bicker and say the craziest things. And it’s how they treat the little ones. Of course, as you predicted, I’m more than a few hours short of sleep.”

Meg turned to Evelyn, and her face once again wore its usual kind expression “And how are you Evelyn? We’ve missed seeing you at church. Ernest said you were feeling under the weather, but he didn’t give any details.”

Evelyn took her cup of tea from Meg. “I’m fine now. I’ve been struggling to recover from Lily’s sickness; struggling to trust God, really. But the bombing seems to have done me good. I’m seeing again that he’s the only one I can trust.”

“And he seems to have found the Coopers a home,” Lloyd broke in. He described Henry Padbury’s departure and his offer to house the Coopers. Meg was excited for them. But then he shared the idea of the Simmonds taking Henry’s house.

That’s when Meg objected. “But this is our home. I love it. I know it’s too small, but it’s ours. I’m not going to leave this home unless it’s bombed out.”

Lloyd pointed out all the obvious advantages of the plan, but Meg was unmoved. Finally Evelyn broke in “I was afraid you’d feel that way Meg. I think I’d feel the same. I’ve had a different idea: what if Earnest and I and the girls moved into Henry’s house, but we only use two of the upstairs bedrooms? We could save the third one in case Henry gets to visit. And the back bedroom downstairs - we could give to Tom and Florence.” She gestured with her head toward the front room.

“But I’ve made a commitment to take care of them.”

“You would be taking care of them. Through us. And they’d be a lot less burden with their own room, and with four people to take care of them, not just you.”

Lloyd leaned back while the women went round and round on this. It was a little like watching two highly trained fighter pilots maneuvering for the advantage in a dog fight. But finally Evelyn wore Meg down with the sheer logic of needing sleep and needing to some distance between the grandparents and the grandchildren.

“Okay, Evelyn, but take your time settling in, and we’ll start with a week’s trial.”

“If you insist Meg, but I’m sure it’s going to be fine. God has provided this place for us, and I’m remembering more and more that if I trust in him, I can do what he calls me to do. It was only when I insisted on trying to do the impossible on my own that I stumbled.”

Meg grinned “All right then, I take your point. You get moved in. I don’t think I’ll have any trouble getting Florence and Tom prepared for a room of their own.”

On the way home from the Simmond’s Lloyd’s mind turned to his text: “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” A few minutes later he chuckled to himself and then began to pray “Lord I ask that all this abiding in various homes would allow all these people to more fully abide in you - to make their ultimate home in you so that they bear fruit by growing to be like you.”