

Abiding in Christ in 2023

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everybody. If you are new, my name is Kevin. I'm one of the leaders here. And I know that it is the 8th of January, which means that New Year's feels like a long time ago, right?

Schools are back happening for some of us. Work didn't cease at all. Work just continued. And so it feels like 2023 is already into full force and Christmas and New Year were a long time ago.

But that being said, it is a new year and it's a great time to think about the year ahead, to think about what is it that we're going to give our focus to or our attention to.

What is going to be the fruit of our lives this year in our own lives and also in the lives of those around us in Hong Kong? How is Hong Kong going to be better off because we've lived our lives this year in 2023?

And there's, of course, a number of ways that we can think about this year ahead. Leo was just mentioning at work, everybody's got KPIs and targets.

[1 : 03] And so maybe you've got some KPIs for yourself this year. I guess one way to think about it is how can we this year maximize our joy and our pleasure and minimize the pain and anything uncomfortable or difficult in our lives this year?

And so we start off the new year and we have New Year's resolutions for a new year to maximize joy and minimize pain. And that's not a bad thing.

I love New Year. I love reflecting on the last year and thinking about the year ahead. Those are good things to do. But I guess if we're honest, how many of us have the start of the year had New Year, new you, and it hasn't worked out very well?

And I think there's a couple of reasons. The one reason is because just looking at our track record, how many of us have new goals for the year? And three weeks in, you've completely forgotten about them.

They've gone out the window and nobody can even remember what they said they wanted to do this year. New Year's resolutions have a way of having a very short shelf life. But I think there's another reason why that might not be the best approach to this new year.

[2 : 17] And the reason is this, 95% of what's going to happen in our lives this year is outside of our control. Right? I mean, just think how many of us on the 1st of January 2020 could have predicted what has transpired the last three years.

Most of life is outside of our control. Right? And so maybe this year you get that promotion, but maybe you lose your job. Maybe you find the love of your life and you get engaged and you get married.

Maybe you get diagnosed with a life-threatening disease. 90% of what's going to happen in our lives this year is outside of our control. And so what happens between now and December 31st, 2023, we don't have that much control over.

And so thinking, okay, it's a new year. It's a new me. I'm going to make the most of my life. This is going to be the best year yet. We have little control over that. But there's another approach we can't take.

So the one is, okay, I'm going to sort out my life. I'm going to get my life on track. The other approach to think about 2023 is you could call it a religious approach. If that's a secular approach, here's a religious approach.

[3 : 24] You could flip open your Bible to Isaiah 43. Anyone know what Isaiah 43 says? Every year somebody texts me Isaiah 43, verse 18.

You know what it says? It says this. Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I'm doing a new thing. Right? Anybody had that texted to them this year?

I've already had a couple of those this year already. And so we think, okay, God's going to do a new thing. God's doing a new thing in the world, a new thing in my life. This is the year. But the problem with that approach is that it's often based more on wishful thinking than genuine revelation. Right? And so often when people text that to me, my response is, let's see, maybe, but maybe not. And so one way to approach this year, 2023, is to think it's a new year, it's a new me. I'm going to get my life back on track, and this is the year that's going to count. The other approach is to take some verse from that God spoke to Israel 700 years BC about them leaving Babylon and going into Israel and trying to think that that'll magically apply to our lives. [4 : 33] But both of those somehow, if we're honest, life still happens to us. And so here's my question. As we start out this year, is there a different approach?

Is there something we can do differently than take the reins and say, I'm going to sort out my life, or to try and apply some magical verse from the Old Testament to think that that's going to wish away everything bad in our lives?

Is there something we can do differently? I'm so glad you've asked that question, because Reza is going to come and read our scripture for us this morning, and then we're going to see what might Christ want to say to us at the start of 2023.

So let's listen to the reading of God's word. Good morning, everybody. Before I read the scriptures, I just want to say my name is Reza, and today is Helpers Appreciation Day.

And if anyone of you who don't know me and you have helpers here, just let me know, and we're just waiting here for us to be together in the community center. Thank you. The scripture reading for today is from the book of John, chapter 15.

[5 : 39] Starting in verse 1, we read, I am the true vine, and my father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away.

And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you.

As a branch can't bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. Neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine.

You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him. He it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

[6 : 37] If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you. By this my father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so fruit to be my disciples.

As the father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Just as I have kept my father's commandments and abide in his love.

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is the word of God. Wonderful, Risa.

Thank you for reading that so wonderfully. So John 15, this passage may be familiar to you. We spoke about it at our leaders retreat in October last year.

And again in November, when my father was in Hong Kong and came and preached at Watermark, we gave him this passage. And so it's a passage that may be familiar to us. And one of the reasons for that is because as leaders, as we've been thinking about this year and praying about it at the end of last year, it's a passage that kept on coming up.

[7 : 47] And we kind of felt like this is a passage that the Lord really wants us to think about and reflect on for this year. Now, in John 15, Jesus speaks about three sets of relationships.

In the last section, verse 18 to 27, he talks about the way that his followers are going to relate to the world as the world persecutes them and opposes their message.

And in verse 12 to 17, he talks about the followers of Jesus, their relationships to one another. But those two relationships, he says, are contingent or dependent upon one more important relationship, which is what he talks about in this passage, which is how they relate to Christ.

Jesus' big idea in this passage is fairly straightforward. What Jesus says to us is this. You are not the center of the universe. And you are not the source of life in your life.

Jesus says, if you want to find life, you are not the source of that life. You've got to come to me.

Look at how he says in verse one, he says, I am the true vine.

[8 : 58] Vine imagery was very common in the Old Testament, common in the first century. It was a sign of fruitfulness, a sign of vitality and liveliness. And Jesus straight away says, listen, you are not the vine.

Life and abundance isn't in you. I am the vine. Look what he says in verse five. I am the vine. You are branches. Whoever abides in me, he it is that bears fruit.

But apart from me, you can do nothing. To use Jesus' analogy, the way that we tend to think about life is we tend to think of ourselves as vines or maybe a tree.

And we've got all these branches in our lives. So you've got a work and career branch. You've got this family and children branch. Maybe you've got a financial branch to your life.

And you've got a spiritual faith, religion branch to your life. You've got all these dimensions to your life. And the goal is to make sure that each branch has enough resources and attention to make sure that none of them die off.

[9 : 59] Right? So we give a lot of focus to work and career and some to family. But also a little bit to faith and work and finances. And we've just got to make sure that each kind of branch stays alive.

But look what Jesus is. He says, no, no, you are not the tree. You're not the vine. I am the vine. You find your life not within yourself but actually being embedded and connected to me.

To the degree that you are embedded into me, says Jesus, that's to the degree that you will flourish. Jesus says all the hopes and the dreams that we have for our lives, the energies and the efforts to do something really meaningful.

Something really worthwhile to make our lives really count and last are utterly futile and useless if not in relationship with him.

And if you're not a follower of Jesus this morning, that may sound like a very bold statement to say. But again and again, Jesus is unequivocal about it. He's absolutely bold.

[11 : 05] Again and again, Jesus will say that all of life is found in me. Jesus says again and again that we are not the ultimate cause of the most important aspects of life.

Anything real or lasting. The source point, the origin, the point of life is found in him. And you'll notice that in this passage, Jesus actually doesn't give much advice.

He doesn't give us three tips for a great 2023. He doesn't give us a bunch of options or a buffet of possibilities. He really is just describing this is the way that life works.

This is how life was designed. When the maker organized life, he designed it in such a way that we find life by being embedded in him. I am the vine.

You are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he or she it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me, you can do nothing. Now, the word abide is a strange word, right?

[12 : 03] It's not really a word that we use much in English. Even if you're an English first language speaker, abide is still a strange word. What does it mean? Well, some translations translated as the word remain.

Remain in me as I remain in you. That's a good translation. The root word for abide, mene, is the word that's often found in the words for continue, wait, endure, persevere in the Greek.

So there's definitely an element of remaining in place there. But sometimes in life, you remain somewhere against your will, right? You're incarcerated in prison. You're going to remain there maybe a long time.

We heard last week about some people that were in lockdown in Shanghai early last year. Maybe you're in hospital. You've got to remain there. But maybe against your will.

You don't want to be there, but you remain there. But the English word abide means more than just stay in place. It has an element of embedding your heart there.

[13 : 04] There's another English word that is even more strange. I don't know if you're familiar with it. It's the word abode. Anyone know what abode means? Your abode is the place where you live, your home, where you dwell, right?

And abode and abide are almost identical. It's just obviously one letter in the middle that's changed. Your abode is the word that describes your house.

It's where you live. It's where you return to. It's where you rest. It's where you go day after day. It's where you replenish yourself for a new day of work or study or to accomplish what you call to do.

So it's not just a hotel that you check in and check out of. It's not just the country club you go to for a meal on a Thursday night. It's the place you come back to to replenish your soul out of which you live for the next day.

And so obviously the word abide comes from the word abode. It's not just an activity that you do from time to time. It's the posture out of which you live your life. And so when Jesus says abide in me, he's calling us to bring every aspect of our multi-layered, multifaceted, complex lives to bring that to him.

[14 : 20] Our hopes, our dreams, our fears, our insecurities, every aspect of who we are to bring them to Christ and to embed them in Christ so that Christ enaminates and empowers them.

And resources them. Or to change the analogies, excuse the mixed metaphors, it's like rather than just bringing our lives and plugging them into Christianity for a quick recharge like we do with our phones, it's bringing the complex circuit board of our lives and deeply embedding them, plugging them into Christ and saying, Christ empower my life.

I'm sure you're like me. Every night I plug my phone in, recharge it. I go to sleep, not interested in what's happening. It's doing its thing. And then I wake up. Okay, now's my chance to really do my thing.

And sometimes we can think of Jesus like that. Okay, I come for a quick recharge Sunday morning. Done for the week. Now I can go live my life. Jesus says bring the multifaceted complexity, layers, everything that intersects with your life.

Your finances, your relationship, your work, your faith, your hopes, your dreams, finances, sexuality. Bring them to me and embed them in me. Jesus says, I am the vine.

[15 : 38] You are the branches. Whoever abides in me, here it is that bears much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. Now when Jesus says that you can do nothing, he doesn't mean that you're going to be completely incapacitated.

Right? Like you're just going to be in a coma on a bed. Actually, we can do lots of stuff apart from Christ. Right? We can be very busy. And you can actually produce a lot of stuff.

We as a church can be very busy this year. But what Jesus says is that though we can be very busy, like John Piper says, all we will do is produce monuments to our own futility and finitude.

All that our busyness will produce are these statues that show we are finite and ultimately futile. And this is true for Christians as much as it is for churches.

At our church leaders retreat at the end of last year, we spoke about the fact that churches as a family can be very busy doing lots of stuff, but disconnected from Christ himself and how ultimately that is futile.

[16 : 48] And we looked at a couple of examples. There's a, I think one of the best examples of this, there's a church built in the 1980s called Crystal Cathedral by Robert Shuler. It was built in Orange Grove, California.

And when this church was built, it was known as the biggest glass structure ever built in the world. It seats two and a half thousand people and it has the biggest, or at that stage, the biggest instrument in the world, the Hazel Wright organ.

This insane two and a half thousand seater glass structure. Do you know that church doesn't exist today? The building still exists, but the church doesn't exist.

It's completely dead. Nothing left. I think of maybe a more modern example is a Mars Hill church. Many of us would have heard of this. In 2012, they had 15,000 people, 15 different sites across America, four states, 25 or 35 different services on a Sunday.

One of the fastest growing, influential, powerful churches in the world. Within six months, the church was dead, did not exist anymore. And today, Mars Hill is a phrase that is synonymous with epic failure.

[18 : 05] Friends, it's very easy to look alive on the outside, to be tangentially connected to Christ, to come to church, to go through the motions, and yet have no vital union, no connectivity with Jesus Christ himself.

And Jesus says that if you're to do anything worthwhile, meaningful in life, you must abide in me like a branch that's connected to the tree, to the vine.

You know, friends, one of my greatest fears for Watermark Church is that we will be a church that is so busy doing so much stuff with so much activity, outreach events, social just events, training, CGs, programs here, programs there, so busy, and yet we don't care about Jesus.

We don't love, trust, or treasure Christ. That Christ is not the most important thing, and that we lose our connectivity to Jesus Christ. And friends, when that happens, we will be our own Hong Kong version of the Crystal Cathedral or Mars Hill Church.

And we can do a bunch of the coolest stuff in Hong Kong, and we can become the most popular church. But if Christ is not essential, if Christ is not empowering and vitalizing everything that happens, if we don't love and treasure Jesus above all things, it will be all utterly meaningless. [19 : 24] As Jesus so beautifully put it, we will be like whitewashed tombs that look impressive on the outside, but inside are full of rotten bones. Jesus says, abide in me as I abide in you.

He abides in me will bear great fruit, but apart from me, you can do nothing. But what does that actually mean?

What does it mean to abide in Christ? Well, I hadn't noticed this before this week, but look at verse 1 and 2 with me. I've often read this passage, and I read the first few words, I am the vine, and then kind of skip over to verse 4, where Jesus says, abide in me, etc., etc.

But look at what he says in verse 1 and 2. Jesus says, I am the true vine. My Father is the vinedresser. That means the gardener or the keeper of the vineyards. Every branch of me that does not bear fruit, he takes away.

Every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes. He cuts back that it may bear more fruit. Well, look at verse 10. Jesus says, if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.

[20 : 34] Verse 14, Jesus says, you are my friends. If you do what I command you. What's Jesus saying here? Jesus is saying that to abide in Christ means to receive him as Lord.

To submit to him as the highest authority in your life. Even to submit to his pruning shears. You know what pruning shears is? To prune means to cut off the dead wood.

So at the end of each season, the farmer will go to his vineyard and you'll cut back all the branches until it's kind of bare minimum. And if you've ever seen a vine or a grape vine, you think that the farmer has killed the vine.

I mean, he cuts it back so ruthlessly. You think, what have you done? You just killed your vine. I mean, there's nothing left. Jesus says that to abide in Christ means you have to submit to him as king.

You have to submit to him as Lord. You even have to submit to his pruning shears to allow him to have his way in your life. Jesus says that in order to experience his animating, empowering life, you first have to come to him as sovereign Lord.

[21 : 41] You've got to allow him to have his way in your life. You've got to obey his commands. You've got to let his voice have the ultimate authority in your life. And as Abide suggests, it's not just a once-off decision.

We do it daily. And so how do you know if you are abiding in Christ? How do you know if you're connected to Christ? Well, the passage gives us a couple of thoughts. Firstly, it says there'll be internal fruit in your life.

There'll be internal fruit in your heart. Look at what Jesus says in verse 9. He says, To abide in Christ is to abide in his love. To know, not just intellectually, but to know experientially, vividly in our hearts, the radical love of Christ.

To go into your work week, onto your university, into your studies, to go into your life rock solid, assured, secure that, Yes, I'm a sinner. Yes, I'm a mess.

My life isn't altogether, but Christ loves me. Christ is for me. To abide in his love. Jesus says in verse 7, To abide in him is to abide in his word.

[22 : 48] That means to have his word speaking to you. So that you don't just go through dry tradition and religion, But actually day by day, Jesus is speaking to you. He's letting you know his will.

He's letting you know it's on his heart. He's speaking by his spirit. He's speaking by his Bible. To have the living word of God actually speaking to you so you know what God wants and desires for you.

Abide in Christ and you abide in his word. Look what he says in verse 11. Jesus says to abide in him means to abide in his joy. To have the joy of the living God residing in your heart.

Not a frivolous superficial joy. Not just a frivolous happiness. A deep seated contentment. In the ups and downs and the trials and the struggles of life to be deeply content that God is real and Christ is in you and you are in Christ.

So how do you know that you abide in Christ? Well there's internal fruit in your own heart and life. But there's also external fruit. There's fruit that other people see and witness about you.

[23 : 50] I think that's what Jesus means when he keeps on talking about you will bear much fruit. You'll bear much fruit. Other people will see the change in your life because Christ is at work in you. They'll see you becoming more gracious.

Seeing you becoming less judgmental. More forgiving. More patient. More compassionate. You know one of my highlights of last year was hearing Kenny's testimony.

I don't know if you remember it. Kenny becomes a follower of Jesus around April, May last year through Colin and Kristen's influence and witnessing. And Kenny's wife Katie is kind of on a journey but she's not so sure about Jesus.

But she's you know on the journey. And one point a month later she says, listen I don't understand everything there is to know about Jesus and Christianity. But I know Jesus must be true because nobody can change you as much as you've changed in the last month.

Nobody can change your anger. Nobody can make you as patient as you've become. I don't know who this Jesus guy is but he's changed you. He must be real. You see what Jesus says?

[24 : 56] That those around us will see the fruit of a changed lives. But look at what else Jesus says. How do you know that you're abiding in Christ? Because you'll experience the tender pruning of a God who loves you.

Look at verse 2. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit my Father takes away. And yet every branch that does bear fruit because they're abiding in me, he will prune that it may bear even more fruit.

Now that might not sound like a very good thing, right? Jesus says if you abide in him, God is going to bring his pruning shears, his sharp scissors to bear in your life. But as every farmer knows that at the end of the season, unless they prune the vine, that vine is going to die.

And it cannot produce any more fruit. The only way for it to keep on growing is if they bring their shears to bear on that vine. And cut away everything that's no longer useful for the next season.

Friends, Jesus says that because God loves you and he's committed to you, that if you abide in Christ, there'll come times when God will come to you and say, let's look under the hood of your life.

[26 : 04] There are things that need to go. And sometimes he'll cut away sin. Sometimes he'll challenge character issues. But sometimes he may even cut away good things that no longer have a place in your life in the next season.

Sometimes the only way we can continue to experience the fullest possible impact of the inner life of Christ and his spirit is for God to bring painful, providential experiences into our lives and cut away all that hinders us from the life of Christ.

And so friends, you and I truly can abide in Christ. This year, day by day, night by night, at work, at school, at home, in the everyday reality of our life, to know that we are in Christ and Christ is in us.

Andrew Murray said this. He said, There is no reason that you have for coming to Christ in the first place that does not plead with thousandfold greater force, remain in him.

And so why did you come to Jesus in the first place? Was it because you wanted assurance of your sins to be forgiven? Maybe you knew yourself a sinner. You're aware of your guilt. And someone told you Christ can forgive you.

[27 : 13] Friends, do you want that assurance every day? Abide in Christ this year. Friends, maybe you want assurance of his love. And you came to Christ and you're flooded with his love.

You want to be rock solid, secure in the love of Christ? Abide in Christ this year. Friends, maybe you're worn out from doing life on your own terms. Tired, weary, anxious, without hope.

So you turn to Christ for rest for your soul. You want that every day this year? Abide in Jesus this year. Friends, maybe you want to live with living hope.

Living hope of the gospel. Abide in Christ. And every step you'll take will resonate with hope and hopefulness this year. Andrew Murray says, This is what Jesus is saying to us.

In 2023, there's going to be lots of ups and downs. Challenges, joys, things to celebrate, things to mourn. You may not be able to minimize all the hardship.

[28 : 31] You may not be able to maximize your joy. One thing we can do, abide in Christ. Abide in Christ. Let's do that. So how do we do that practically? Well, let me suggest four very simple practical things.

Firstly, come to Jesus decisively. In other words, make a decision. Nobody just slips into abiding in Christ. Nobody just casually falls into it.

No, you've got to make a decision. Who's going to be your priority? Where are you going to find the source of life this year? What are you going to look to for hope and joy and meaning and purpose? Friends, what other source of life are you looking to to empower you?

Where are you looking for truth and joy and rock-solid assurance? Choose Christ. Put your hope in Christ. Turn from false gods that offer false hopes of salvation and turn to Jesus this year.

And not just once off every day. Choose Jesus decisively. But come to Jesus daily. It's not just a once-off decision, a New Year's resolution that we make, and then we get on with our lives.

[29 : 33] Day by day, choose to get to the feet of Jesus in His Word. Have daily devotions. Follow the Watermark Bible reading plan. And day by day, come to Christ.

A branch that only connects to the vine once a week is not very connected. No, day by day, come to Jesus. Encounter the living God. Start the Watermark Bible reading plan.

It's not too late. We're only on day eight. We've got 358 days to go this year. Come and join us. But day by day, come to Jesus. So come to Him decisively.

Come to Him daily. Come to Him honestly. I think one of the temptations for Christians is we know how to put our best foot forward. We know how to put on the Christian smile.

We know how to say the right things. But actually, come to Jesus honestly. Come and open up the depth of your heart and let Him know what's really going on. Friends, redemption starts with confession.

[30 : 32] Wholeness starts with repentance. And freedom often starts with honesty. And so friends, come to Jesus honestly. Come and let Him shine the spotlight of His light into the deepest recesses of your heart.

But the places that you are tempted to hide, the places that you're tempted to let no one else in, open them up to Christ and say, Jesus, this is my shame. This is my fear. This is my anxiety. Jesus, come and have your way in my life. And what you'll find is that what you think is going to be painful and shameful is actually going to be liberating and healing. Friends, come to Jesus decisively.

Come to Him daily. Come to Him honestly. But finally, come to Him surrendered. Come and put your hands at His mercy. Come to Jesus and say, Jesus, here's not just a branch of my life.

Here's my entire life. Come and be the King. Come and be Lord. Father, here are the keys to my life. Here are the reins of my life. Take the steering wheel of my life and take me where you want.

[31 : 34] Jesus, come and have your way in my life this year. Friends, come and let Him be your King. Let Him be your Lord. Let Him be your sovereign master.

And as you do that, you'll find He'll empower you with His life. Friends, maybe God isn't doing such a new thing this year after all. Maybe He's doing what He's always done, which is ruling and reigning on the throne of the universe.

But He's also coming to us with open hands. And He's saying, come and abide in me. Come and drink of me. Come and find your life in me. Turn from those false gods that offer false offers of salvation.

Come and find your life in me. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we don't know what 2023 holds, but You do.

Because You are God and we are not. But God, one thing we do know with certainty, that Jesus, You are King. Jesus, You are Lord. And You're calling us to come to You.

[32 : 36] Decisively, daily, honestly surrendered. To open up our lives and to hand over our lives to You. Jesus, we must confess that it's sometimes hard to do that.

Sometimes feel safer for us to be in the driving seat of our lives. But God, as You've reminded us this morning, apart from You, we can do nothing. Other than build monuments to our own futility.

And so Jesus, I pray this morning, won't You give us faith to trust You where it's hard? God, won't You open our eyes to see Your majesty and Your grace? God, won't You help us to come and embed our lives in You?

The complexity, the multifaceted, multilayered areas of our lives. Jesus, help us to come and find our life in You. We pray this in Your wonderful and gracious name.

Amen.