



God's Plan for Our Lives

A Bible Study

Introduction

At times it appears to people that life is without purpose. We hear people talk about the futility of life. Some philosophers characterize life as meaningless. The more a person thinks about what is going on, sees or reads about things that are hard to understand, the more a person tends to become pessimistic about the outcome. As Christians we want to refrain from this kind of thinking, yet we sometimes also do have dangerous attitudes.

Discuss:

Despite what we have learned from the Word about our new relationship with God in Christ, don't we at times sense a lack of true Christian joy and zest for living? Why might this be?

We have a bad situation on our hands whenever Christians become gloomy and see no real point in living for God. In John 15:1-11, a portion of our Saviour's farewell address to His disciples, the truth comes to us that God has a plan for our lives. Moreover, it assures us that Christ supplies the power to carry out the plan of God for us in greater measure. Read John 15:1-11.

I. God Wants Our Lives to be Productive for Him

In the parable of the vine and the branches the Saviour reminds us that God has a plan for our lives. This plan is described as bringing forth fruit honouring God. To bear fruit means we do the will of God. In His Word God lets us know very clearly what His will is: that we be productive for Him in our living. This plan of God for us flows out of our new relationship with God in Christ.

Read John 15:3 again. What has Jesus done for us according to this verse? How has Jesus cleansed us? See also Ephesians 5:26. Note three ways in which fruitful branches are cleansed.

1. Branches are cleansed by the words Jesus has given to us, by the Word of the Lord Himself. The Word of God refines us by purging away all the contamination that clings to us. When we come to the Word of God sincerely, the Word of God shows
 - what we are doing and what we are not doing.
 - where we fail and how we fail.
 - the sins of commission and omission.

Read John 17:17; John 17:19; 1 Peter 1:22; Psalms 119:9,11.

2. Branches are cleansed by the mirror of the Word of God. When we look into the Word of God, we reflect both ourselves in our shortcomings and Christ in His perfection. The Word of God forces us to measure ourselves against Christ.

Read James 1:23-24; 2 Timothy 3:16

3. Branches are cleansed by "abiding" in Jesus. Note exactly what Jesus said: "Abide in me and I will abide in you." This can at least mean two things:
 - It can mean a promise: "Abide in me and I will abide in you." The believer is thereby cleansed by his position or by being in Christ.
 - It can mean a command: "See to it that you abide in me and I in you." The believer is cleansed by continuing in Christ and remaining faithful.

Discuss:

Which of the above two meanings do you think is the best? Is it a command or is it a promise?

Christians Need to Look at Their Lives

We need to look at our lives very carefully to see what kind of fruit we are producing and whether or not we are fulfilling the purpose of this planting of God in us.

Unfortunately, the fruit is not always the kind that God expects. Read Isaiah 5:4. God cannot be blamed when His gracious planting is unproductive. Respond to the following complaints against the Church today and give specific evidence if you agree or disagree.

- "The hearts of many have grown cold."
- "The Church has lost its first love."

Whenever complaints such as these are registered against Christians, they cannot be taken lightly.

People point to many things as the reason for the lack of productivity of many Christian lives, but John 15:1-11 suggests the real cause: Christians have a loose connection to the Vine, Christ. Read John 15:4,5.

It should be noted that the more a branch abides in the vine, that is, the closer the branch abides to the heart of the vine, the more nourishment a branch draws from the vine and the more fruit it bears. What do the following Bible verses say about "abiding" or "dwelling"? John 6:56; John 14:6-7; 1 John 3:6; 1 John 3:24; 2 John 2. According to these verses, where does the branch get its strength?

Satan tries to lead us from dependence on Christ to an unwholesome independence from Christ. Satan makes it sound as if it can't hurt us to have a loose contact with Christ.

God seeks to prune and make productive the branch that is in danger. The purpose of pruning is to prepare the branch to bear more fruit. Read John 15:2. What bad spots, useless buds, misdirected shoots or discoloured leaves prevent you from being productive? Believers have areas and things that must be cleaned away and cleared up, areas of:

- | | | |
|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| - thought | - behaviour | - passion |
| - attitude | - relationships | - motives |
| - commitment | - service | - willingness |

It can happen that a onetime budding and blossoming Christian can become a dry branch. He falls from the faith and becomes like a dead branch. This doesn't happen overnight. If the branch is severed from the Vine, it dies. If this happens to a person, this is the worst thing that can befall him. Read John 15:6. We can say four things about unattached branches:

- The unattached branch is "out" and off by itself; it is not abiding in the Vine. Note the words "by itself." (v 4) There is no life and no fruit in life apart from Christ.
- The unattached branch cannot bear fruit, not real and permanent fruit that is acceptable or pleasing to God.
- The unattached branch does not understand the nature of bearing fruit in life — the fact that he can do nothing (v 5). No one bears fruit apart from Christ.

- The unattached branch is doomed. He is cast forth to wither and to be gathered and cast into the fire and burned.

Christ Encourages Us to Abide in Him

It ought to be clear to us why Jesus keeps saying in John 15, "Abide in Me." The plan of God for our lives is vital so far as our success as fruit-bearers is concerned. Let's take these words of Jesus to heart: "Abide in Me." Accordingly, let's abide in His Word and sacrament. Why is this absolutely necessary?

Put Christ's Formula to Work

"He who abides in Me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit..." (v 5b) Let's put this formula for productive Christian living to work. The promises and results of abiding in Christ are threefold:

1. The attached branch receives nourishment and strength to bring forth fruit.
2. The attached branch glorifies God by bearing much fruit. Remember what the fruit is: e.g.
 - righteousness - read Romans 6:22; Philippians 1:11
 - godly character - read Galatians 5:22-23
 - new converts - read Romans 1:13
3. The attached branch will experience joy — in all its fullness (v 11).

Do you think there are ways to tell if a person really is attached to Christ? How about you?

Discuss:

- Do I bear fruit?
- Do I live righteously? Am I guilty of doing shameful things?
- Does my life bear "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control"? (Galatians 5:22-23)
- Am I leading the lost to Christ?

Yes, people are looking for a formula for successful living. We have that formula in Christ. By being grafted into the Vine, Jesus, our lives will bear the good fruit pleasing to God. Success is guaranteed — all thanksgiving, praise and honour to God! His love to us is limitless and awesome. It is God's plan for us. What a wonderful plan to share in!

Scripture references: Revised Standard Version

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