

EPHESIANS – THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST: THE CHURCH

Blessed with Every Spiritual Blessing

Week 18

Separated by the Holy Spirit for His Work

(Acts 13:1-3)

Daily Food
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Monday

Scripture Reading: Matt. 24:14; Gal. 4:1-2; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:7; Col. 2:2, 9; Heb. 2:5-6; 1 Pet. 1:4

“And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”
(Eph. 4:11-12)

THE CHURCH LIFE IS FOR OUR GROWTH IN LIFE

Along with Colossians, the books of Ephesians, Philippians and Galatians make up the heart of Paul’s writings, presenting us a complete vision of God’s New Testament economy.

The book of Colossians speaks of the mystery of God, which is Christ (2:2), in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (v. 9). In other words, Christ expresses the Triune God Himself. On the other hand, the book of Ephesians speaks of the church as the body of Christ and the fullness of the Son of God (1:22-23). Hence, we can say that the church is the mystery of Christ.

In previous weeks, we have used the diagram of an airplane to better explain the importance of these epistles. In this illustration, the book of Galatians, which gives us a panoramic view of God’s economy, is represented by the airplane’s cabin. This cabin can also be compared to the church life—a place where all of us who have the Lord in our hearts can grow in God’s life (Gal. 4:1), attain full sonship and be

qualified to administrate the inheritance reserved for us in the heavens (1 Pet. 1:4). Here we can see how important it is for us to remain in the church life until we arrive at our final destination.

In order to help us grow, the Lord prepared a place where we have guardians and stewards who teach and feed us spiritually (Gal. 4:2); this place is the church life. The book of Ephesians also mentions the shepherds and teachers whose function is to transmit God's Word. We can exercise our gifts into ministries under their constant care, that we may reach maturity (Eph. 4:7). These brothers, these stewards in the house of God, feed and teach us.

In addition to participating actively in the church meetings and helping our brethren grow in life, we need to take part in the work of preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 24:14). This work consists of proclaiming to all of God's children that they need to mature in life in order to reign with Christ in the coming world (Heb. 2:5-6). This is part of the commission God has given us these days.

Key Point:

Growing in life and preaching the gospel of the kingdom.

Your Key Point:

Question:

How has the church life helped you become a mature son?

Tuesday

Scripture Reading: Acts 8:1-8; 9:1-25; 22:3-4; Gal. 1:14

“Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (*John 13:16-17*)

THE CONVERSION OF SAUL

In Philippians 3, Paul testifies of his life before being saved, when he was still known as Saul. A descendent of the tribe of Benjamin, Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews, and a Pharisee concerning the law (v. 5). As for his zeal and conduct pertaining to the law, he was a blameless man (v. 6). Paul had been raised at the feet of Gamaliel, a renowned Pharisee and teacher (Acts 22:3), and was advanced in Judaism beyond many of his contemporaries (Gal. 1:14). His zeal for the Jewish law and traditions ultimately led him to systematically persecute and arrest anyone found calling on the Lord’s name (Acts 22:4). He also stood with those who stoned Stephen to death (8:1).

After the great persecution that befell the church in Jerusalem following Stephen’s death, the believers might have refrained from calling on the Lord’s name publicly. It is possible that those who continued calling on the Lord’s name did so secretly. Others chose to flee the city and travelled to other regions, such as Judea and Samaria, preaching the word of Christ and bringing salvation to people with much joy (Acts 8:2, 4-8).

Having decided to also pursue Christians outside of Jerusalem and arrest them, Paul was on the way to Damascus when he found the Lord (Acts 9:23 1-9). Paul was left blind by that encounter, but eventually began to see again. After being baptized, Paul immediately went out to dispute with the local Jews (vv. 20-22). While he may have won every argument, the Jews were left exceedingly angry (v. 23).

During this time, Paul earned himself a group of admirers who became his disciples, and later helped him escape an ambush set by the Jews (Acts 9:25). While this episode is seemingly nothing more than an escape, we believe that God was sovereignly keeping Paul from his own apostleship. Here lies a lesson to us all: though we might be tempted to make disciples for ourselves when we exercise our function as a guardian or a steward, we must never forget that those we care for, as well as ourselves, are all followers of the Lord Jesus alone.

Key Point:

Disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Your Key Point:

Question:

Based on today's reading, what was God's real intention in taking Paul away from Damascus?

Wednesday

Scripture Reading: Matt. 3:1-11; 11:2-19; 14:3-12; Mark 2:18

“He must increase, but I must decrease” (*John 3:30*)

JOHN THE BAPTIST AND HIS DISCIPLES – THE DANGERS OF SELF-EXALTATION

Still on the subject of discipleship, let us take a closer look at the experience of John the Baptist. In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist begins his work of preparing the way for the Lord. He was quite humble at first, and even considered himself unworthy of carrying Jesus’ sandals. Little by little, however, some of his admirers who began following him became his disciples.

While his commission was to lead people to Christ by baptizing them unto repentance, John the Baptist ended up making disciples for himself. Eventually, when the Lord came, there was even conflict between the disciples of Jesus and those of John the Baptist. On a certain occasion, John’s disciples even joined the Pharisees in questioning the Lord Jesus and His disciples about fasting (Mark 2:18).

John the Baptist was eventually arrested (Matt. 14:3-4). While keeping his parallel discipleship, he was

certain that the Lord would free him. God's commission and charge for John the Baptist was to make straight the Lord's path, and nothing more. In the end, during a celebration held by Herod, John the Baptist was beheaded by request of Herodias's daughter (vv. 6-12).

The end of John the Baptist shows us that, except for the Lord Jesus Himself, no one should have disciples. Our fallen human nature, however, desires to be exalted and admired by others. This is not the Lord's way. Paul was allowed to escape Damascus, that he might leave behind the apostleship he had created there. In Jerusalem, Tarsus and Antioch, he learned to serve alongside others and became even more useful to the Lord.

Key Point:

Avoiding exaltation and following only the Lord.

Your Key Point:

Question:

What important lesson can we learn from the end of John the Baptist?

Scripture Reading: Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-30; 11:19-26

“When he [Barnabas] came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith ” (Acts 11:23-24a)

BARNABAS’ SERVICE IN JERUSALEM AND HIS TRIP TO ANTIOCH

After fleeing the city of Damascus, Paul went to Jerusalem. When he sought out the disciples, they were afraid and suspicious of his conversion. Then, Barnabas took him to the apostles and told them of Paul’s encounter with the Lord on the road, and that he had spoken boldly in the name of Jesus in Damascus (Acts 9:26-27). However, Paul sought out the Jews to dispute with them, and again they wanted to kill him (v. 29). With his life at risk, the brothers decided to send Paul back to Tarsus (v. 30), where he remained for a while until Barnabas came for him (11:25-26).

Barnabas was a deacon of the church in Jerusalem who received the Lord early in the church life in that city. Acts 4 contains the record of an offering made by him (vv. 36-37), which indicates his desire to cooperate by sharing the material resources the Lord had given him. In another passage, the Bible tells us that Barnabas was a

good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (11:24).

When the Lord's Word came to Antioch, the saints in Jerusalem decided to send Barnabas there (Acts 11:22). When he saw the grace of God there, he rejoiced and encouraged the saints to remain in the Lord with purpose of heart (v. 23). After that, his service was once again manifested when he remembered Paul, and brought him from Tarsus to Antioch (v. 25).

Here we can see that Barnabas' service had the special characteristic of helping others awaken their own function. Moreover, in no passage does the Scripture tell us that he was after a work for himself. He introduced Paul to the fellowship of the apostles in Jerusalem, and later on brought him from Tarsus to Antioch, that he might live a normal church life in a prayerful atmosphere. Praise the Lord!

Key Point:

A spiritual atmosphere with much prayer.

Your Key Point:

Question:

Which characteristics can you see in the service of Barnabas?

Scripture Reading: Acts 13:1-3; 15:1-11

“As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them”” (Acts 13:2)

THE FIRST JOURNEY OF PAUL AND BARNABAS AND THE CONFERENCE IN JERUSALEM

The Bible tells us that there were prophets and teachers in Antioch, serving the Lord with prayer and fasting (Acts 13:1-2). Their prayerful spirit opened up a way for the Lord to separate Barnabas and Paul, and send them out for His work.

The region they were about to visit was quite mountainous, which meant traveling by boat through the stormy Mediterranean Sea. In their first trip, Paul and Barnabas were led by the Spirit and many churches were established, including some in the region of Galatia.

As we have learned in previous weeks, some men from Jerusalem went to Galatia with the goal of introducing Old Testament practices to the local believers, including the practice of circumcision. These different teachings confused the new believers in those

churches. Not knowing what to do, they informed Paul, which is the reason he wrote an epistle to the Galatians.

This intervention in Galatia prompted Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem and speak directly to the apostles (Acts 15:1-2), as they were receptive to the opinions of other saints (vv. 6-7). However, we must understand that there is no place for dictatorship or democracy in the church life, as the prevailing direction must come from the Spirit alone. This was the direction Paul followed with Barnabas in their first trip, and also the direction he and Silas took in their second trip.

Key Point:

Following the direction of the Spirit.

Your Key Point:

Question:

Why can we say that the atmosphere in Jerusalem was not completely adequate?

Saturday

Scripture Reading: Acts 12:12; 13:13; 15:36-38

“Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him)” (Col. 4:10)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BARNABAS FOR THE LORD’S WORK IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Paul’s first journey with Barnabas was marked by difficulties, which the young John Mark, who had also come along, was unable to handle, thus returning to Jerusalem long before the trip was over (Acts 13:13).

John Mark was the son of a sister named Mary from the city of Jerusalem. When Peter was arrested, the saints were gathered at her house, praying for him (Acts 12:12). Due to the persecution in Jerusalem, the saints who remained in the city met in their own homes. After John Mark prematurely returned from the trip with Paul and Barnabas, Mary certainly encouraged him not to give up, as she wanted him to serve the Lord. Like Mary, parents need to encourage their children to participate in activities promoted by the churches, so that they can have new experiences with the Lord.

When it was time for Barnabas and Paul to revisit the churches, Paul refused to allow John Mark to come along (Acts 15:36-38). Paul’s stance resulted in a sharp disagreement with Barnabas, and the two parted from one another (v. 39). Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas and went to Syria and Cilicia.

That is the last record of Barnabas in the New Testament. For quite some time, we believed Barnabas’ subsequent disappearance

from the biblical record to be the result of his grave mistake: of leaving Paul.

Nowadays, however, we can see that this is not quite the reason. Yes, the Bible indeed does not mention Barnabas' name after his disagreement with Paul; however, this does not necessarily mean that he made a mistake in trying to bring John Mark.

In the Lord's work, we must all be like Barnabas, helping others regardless of any recognition or mentioning. The most important thing is that the Lord gets what He is after. The fact that the Lord has been blessing us these days is an indication that there are many "Barnabases" among us, caring for others behind the scenes.

Although Barnabas is no longer mentioned after Acts 15, Mark eventually goes on to serve with Peter in his latter ministry. In other words, Barnabas' work eventually bore good fruit. Mark, who was supported by the unwavering help of Barnabas, eventually become useful to both Paul and Peter. Despite having previously rejected Mark, Paul eventually acknowledges him as a coworker in Colossians 4:10. It is important that we acknowledge and learn from the role Barnabas plays here.

Key Point:

Always having the desire to help others.

Your Key Point:

Question:

What was the result of Barnabas' decision to keep caring for John Mark?

Sunday

Scripture Reading: Acts 15:1-11; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:13

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods”
(Matt. 24:45-47)

JOHN MARK – THE FRUIT OF BARNABAS’ HIDDEN LABOR

We learned yesterday that, while Barnabas’ name is no longer brought up after leaving Paul, the young John Mark is eventually mentioned in one of Paul’s writings (Col. 4:10), as someone useful in his ministry (2 Tim. 4:11).

In the end, Mark reappears in Peter’s first epistle (1 Pet. 5:13), as his helper. Peter regarded him as a son, and it was based on his narrative that Mark eventually wrote his gospel. For this reason, a number of people say that the gospel of Mark is, in fact, the gospel of Peter. Since there were no cars or airplanes at that time, the young John Mark may have had the help of his cousin, Barnabas, to reach Peter in Babylon (Acts 15:1-11). Praise the Lord!

Based on these verses, we can say that John Mark

was the fruit of Barnabas' hidden labor. His patience and persistence produced a young man useful for the Lord. Like Barnabas, we must take care of others, even if it means doing so in a hidden way. This way, our service will be perfected and it will bear much fruit. Jesus is Lord!

Key Point:

Taking care of people, even if it means doing so in a hidden way.

Your Key Point:

Question:

Why can we say that John Mark became someone useful in the Lord's work?

Additional Reading

Enrich your reading of the Daily Food by simultaneously reading the books suggested below:

The Great Diamonds of the Bible – Chap. 16 – Dong Yu Lan