
EPH 3:14-21: AN APOSTOLIC PRAYER (11)

No. EE24

We come now to the third and last petition of this prayer. Like a mountaineer, Paul has ascended to a height where the thin air leaves us giddy - or, to mix our metaphors, we are out of our depth. What does the apostle mean when he prays, "that you may be filled to the measure of all the fulness of God" (19b)?

Firstly we need to carefully analyse the text, otherwise we could get totally lost. We therefore need to ask ourselves what the Greek text tells us.

WHAT ON EARTH DOES THE APOSTLE MEAN?

□ The words, "to the measure of the fulness of God", indicate movement, or growth, on the part of the Christian - progress towards a certain goal.

What is this goal? It is "all the fulness of God"!

In the original Greek this expression can be interpreted in two ways. It could refer to the fulness that comes from God, that which flows from Him, everything He gives to us - in other words our full inheritance in Christ. Or it could mean the fulness that fills God in His deity.

Surely Paul could not have had the latter interpretation in mind. Even in glorious eternity, although we will be without sin and indescribably more glorious than now, we will still be human. We should therefore think in terms of the first meaning.

□ Yet, if we ask ourselves what this fulness is that flows from God into us, we realise that the two alternatives mentioned actually walk hand in hand.

Is it not at the heart of our inheritance in Christ that we become more and more like God? Does Christian growth not have everything to do with the forming of Christ's image in us?

According to Rm 8:29 we have been chosen to be conformed to the likeness of the Son. And 2Cor 3:18 assures us that we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ with ever-increasing glory. Think also of the typical Biblical injunction, "Be holy because I am holy" (Lev 11:44-45; 1 Pet 1:15-16). And Jesus orders us, "Be perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

Finally, a few verses on from our text we read that the end goal of the ministries mentioned in Eph 4:11 is specifically to ensure that the church grows and becomes mature, "attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ" (4:13).

□ To summarise: In the final analysis this prayer is concerned with the Ephesians receiving their full inheritance in Christ. And the culmination of that is conformity to the image of Christ.

Taking also the previous verses into consideration, this prayer reveals to us one of the most fundamental keys to genuine sanctification: *to the extent that the Holy Spirit dwells and works in us, to that extent Christ will live in our hearts. And to the extent that we become Christ-centred, to that extent we will get to understand and experience Christ's love for us. And to that extent our inheritance in Christ will become a reality in our lives - at the heart of which is conformity to the Son.*

WHAT DOES ALL THIS TELL US?

1. Let us not get bogged down by the first principles of our faith.

Too many churchgoers are quite satisfied to rest in the knowledge that they have been saved. Nothing is more against the spirit of the Word than such a self-centred mentality!

Leading up to one of the most serious warnings in the Bible, the letter to the Hebrews cautions us not

to stick to the elementary things about Christ, with no interest in forging ahead in knowledge, sanctification and perseverance (Hb 5:11-6:12).

The apostle sets a wonderful example in Phil 3:7-11. He forfeits everything and forcefully strives to obtain Christ as his only gain - to know Him; and the power of His resurrection; and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death; and finally sharing in the resurrection.

Don't ever forget: *those who do not persevere in the race will never receive the prize!*

2. Let us not misunderstand this prayer - and perhaps become arrogant and full of pride.

Some televangelists and cult leaders apparently regard themselves as little gods. They forget that the Fall came about when Eve believed the snake that she would become like God if she ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:5).

There is an essential and total difference between God as God, and man as man. It is the difference between the Creator and the created, the completely Sovereign and the totally dependent. Conformity to the image of God can therefore never be absolute. It is always qualified. *In fact, in a sense the ambition to be like God is the worst of sins.*

There are accordingly two vital truths that we must hold on to. In one sense it is man's greatest calling to be like God. In another sense this desire is the most terrible sin man can commit.

It is therefore clear that unless the Lord himself reveals to us in what ways we should become like Him - unless He clearly limits and defines it - we run the danger of transgressing all kinds of blasphemous limits. But, of course, the Lord did not leave us in the dark. To His Old Testament people He gave His law, which is an expression of His perfect character. And for His New Testament church he supplemented His law, refined it, and rounded it off perfectly in the person, teaching and example of the Word who became flesh (Jn 1:18; 14:9; Heb 1:3). By His life Christ demonstrated here on earth, and in a body like ours, what a godly life of

obedience looks like. The will of God could not have been shown to us more clearly.

3. The fact that the apostle prays here for God to work in the lives of the Ephesians should not mislead us into an attitude of passiveness.

We *must* pray, as the apostle is doing here. This is, after all, what this passage teaches us. Let us never forget: the Lord's enabling work in us, on the one hand, and our own responsibility on the other, are not in conflict.

How then should we live in order to grow in conformity to the image of Christ - so that we can be "filled to the measure of all the fulness of God"? Such prominence is given to the call to sanctification in the New Testament that we could give dozens of different replies to the question, without once contradicting ourselves. Nevertheless, Paul's teaching on the fruit of the Spirit in Gl 5 is both fundamental and practical.

- We are like Jesus to the extent that the nine Spirit-given virtues in Gl 5:22 find expression in our lives. But this does not happen automatically. Reborn believers also have to do with ever-present sinful desires. We are incapable of producing the fruit of the Spirit in our own strength, least of all for any length of time. That does not mean, however, that the battle to live a life of holiness is doomed to failure. Not in the least! When a person is regenerated the Lord not only gives him or her a new heart with His commandments engraved on it, but also the Holy Spirit as a permanent Helper. The Lord therefore makes me *willing* to carry out His will (by giving me a new heart); and He *enables* me to do it (through the power of the Spirit) (Ph 2:13).

But, if I am to bear this fruit, I need to have the right attitude towards both the flesh and the Spirit.

- The correct way of dealing with the flesh is described in v 24: Those who belong to Christ have crucified their sinful nature with all its passions. To crucify something is to execute it. It is the strongest

possible way of distancing yourself from it, of finally turning your back on it. The image speaks volumes. The correct attitude towards the flesh is to be totally merciless. In ancient times only criminals who were guilty of the most heinous crimes were crucified - those who deserved no mercy.

This negative aspect of sanctification was referred to as *mortification* by the old Puritans.

Mortification is *final*. Nobody has ever come down from the cross. A true Christian refuses to look back. He is not prepared to reconsider his decision. It is final.

Mortification is *painful*. There has never been a worse form of execution than crucifixion. The battle between flesh and Spirit is no joke. It is very real.

Mortification is a *lifelong* process. Crucifixion was a slow death. It sometimes took days. We have to take up our cross daily, right up to the end.

One of the main reasons why we have such a long drawn out battle with some of our sins is because we have not really crucified them. We fool ourselves. We have secret sins, bosom buddies, with which we keep on flirting. Do you have such a persistent sin in your life? Perhaps you have found the real reason for it.

- The correct attitude towards the Spirit is described in two vital ways.

Firstly, we must allow ourselves to be led by Him (Gl 5:18). The verb is in the passive form. The emphasis is on what the Spirit does and what I should allow Him to do. Elsewhere the word "lead" is used to describe a shepherd leading his flock, or the wind driving a ship. I must therefore submit to the initiatives and guidance of the Spirit. I must take His demands on my heart seriously and obediently.

Secondly, we should "live by" (v.16) and "keep in step with" (v.25) the Spirit. To think that our only responsibility is to passively submit our lives to the control of the Holy Spirit would be a mistake. No, living in the fulness of the Spirit demands serious commitment and effort.

The word translated as "live by" in v.16 is the

word normally translated as *walk* in the New Testament. But the word translated as "keep in step with" is a loaded term, emphasising a way of life in accordance with an example, a principle or a norm (Acts 21:24; Rm 4:12; Gl 6:16; Ph 3:16). Here in Gl 5 the Holy Spirit Himself is that norm. I must follow the road that *He* has determined.

But what does this mean in practice?

The close relationship between the Spirit and the Word indicated elsewhere (compare for instance Eph 5:18 and context with Col 3:16 and context) makes it quite clear that the way of the Spirit is also that of the Bible. A life lived in step with the Spirit is a life in harmony with the Spirit-inspired Word.

We should therefore not understand this to mean that we should live in obedience to certain subjective promptings of the Spirit. No, we are talking about principled obedience to God's Word. This has always been how the true church has interpreted this matter.

History has confirmed over and over again: *dedicated obedience to the Word has always ennobled man; mysticism has always misled him.*

CONCLUSION

Let us then "go on to maturity" (Hb 6:1). All of us who are in Christ are, after all, called upon to seriously pursue the fulness of God.

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