

That He Might Fill All Things - Part 1

by T. Austin-Sparks

This sermon explores the source and significance of Paul's spiritual knowledge, emphasizing the greatness of Christ and the church's union with him in his new risen life.

Duration: 35:15

Scripture: Romans 8:18, Romans 8:29

Topics: "Jesus Christ"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the letter of Paul to the Ephesians and highlights the unique characteristics of the language used. The speaker emphasizes the abundance of superlatives and the breaking of grammatical barriers in the letter. The imprisonment of Paul is seen as a means for the release of spiritual light for the church. The speaker also mentions the repetition of words like 'fullness,' 'riches,' and 'glory,' as well as the significance of the word 'mystery.' The sermon concludes by mentioning the gradual revelation of God to humanity, from divine appearances to the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Transcript

Fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians, we read a whole section in order to come on our particular fragment in verse eight, wherefore he saith when he ascended on high he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men. Now this he ascended, what is it but that he also descended the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens that he might fill all things, that he might fill all things. That is a consummate statement.

Into it, as you will see by the whole context, the eternities and the ages are gathered up as to divine We know that this letter was a circular letter sent to certain churches in Asia. And in this circular letter the apostle poured like a torrent the very quintessence of his spiritual knowledge. Knowledge which had come to him by what he in other places called the revelation of Jesus Christ or it pleased God to reveal his son in me.

That revelation to and in the apostle was very full indeed. The knowledge derived from experience, experience which began on the Damascus road, what a knowledge broke upon this servant of the Lord at that time in that event. Knowledge which drove him to the desert to think about it, to examine its significance, try and fathom something of its depth kept him there in the desert for two years, breaking of a new world of spiritual knowledge upon him.

Later he said that there had happened in his life history another mighty opening of heaven. He said he was caught up into the third heaven and shown unspeakable things which it is not lawful for a man to utter. An unfortunate word, that word lawful because it does not exactly convey what the apostle really said.

He really said or meant which it is impossible for a man to utter. Unspeakable things which it is impossible for a man to utter. That must have been a wonderful fullness of knowledge and we know that on several other occasions the Lord Jesus came to him, stood by him, spoke to him and out of all this experience his knowledge was growing.

It is not possible for the apostles in those days to take journeys swiftly as we can today. They had to travel and traverse long distances on foot, spending many hours in that way and nights aside and no doubt the apostle was marching meditation as he went on his way from place to place over weeks and months and years. And this inspired meditation was building up this wonderful spiritual knowledge in him from time to time in relation to specific needs and requirements here and there.

Particular situations he embodied in letters, some fragments, mighty fragments of this rich revelation which had come to him and was all the time coming to him. Where did the apostle get all that that we have? For instance in the latter part of what in our arrangement is the 8th chapter of the letter to the Romans, where did he get it? Going right back before the world was, telling us what? By divine act, when Adam brought the creation into bondage and it was subjected to vanity. Where did he get all that about foreordination to be conformed to the image of God's Son and the much more that is there that you and I are quite sure no man could ever find by searching, by studying however great a grade he might have.

Those latter verses of Romans 8 are a mighty fragment of revelation, again that 15th chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians, where did he get it? All about the diversity of glorified bodies in resurrection, the nature of the body of resurrection of believers, it's a very rich chapter there. We have explored it long and deeply but we know that we haven't fathomed it. In his letters to the Thessalonians, how did Paul come to know just exactly what would happen when the Lord returns? What is happening to the saints who have already left this earth? What is going to happen to the saints who are here when the Lord comes? Where did he get it all? It's rich, it's deep, it's full, but it's only a fragment of the whole of that wealth of spiritual knowledge.

But now at last he is free from all his travelling and all the diffusion of many activities here and there. At last he is able to do what he had been unable to do before and if this letter suggests or indicates anything, he is able to do now what he has longed to do. What he has waited for the opportunity to just pour out of that fullness which has been accumulating through the years, just pour out of his spiritual fullness.

You are not surprised that that word fullness is very characteristic of this letter. Through it the fullness of Christ but the apostle has been brought into much of that. So at long last he is able to sit down and open up the floodgates of that spiritual store and pour it into this letter.

Like the physical imprisonment of the apostle at this time, his great store of life, spiritual knowledge had been circumscribed but now the sovereign Lord had ordained that the physical imprisonment should make possible the release of the light. For the church, for the whole of this dispensation. But the release, the release.

You cannot read this letter carefully and watchfully and feelingly without feeling that it is like the release of a busting dam. You meet that feeling in the language which is crowded into this brief letter. The breaking

of all grammatical barriers and the vastness of the concepts that are here.

Think alone of the many superlatives in language which he uses. We will refer to the repetition of the word fullness. You could really sense the feeling of the apostle at this time and understand why that word dropped from his pen so often.

Exceeding. Exceeding. The exceeding greatness of his.

The exceeding riches of his grace. The superlative. Exceeding.

The riches. The riches of his inheritance. The riches of his grace.

Riches. And glory. Underline the word glory in this letter.

See how it is constantly coming out. Glory. Glory.

Glory everywhere here. Abundantly. Exceeding.

Abundantly. Above. Surpassing.

The knowledge surpassing love of Christ. This is an attempt. An attempt to express himself in language which calls for every kind of superlative at his command.

And yet he is defeated. And as for the grammar, perhaps you haven't worried yourself very much about that if reading the letter. But if you have tried to study it and reduce it to something simple, you have found yourself quite defeated.

For instance, there is the longest sentence without a period in the New Testament at the beginning of this letter. And as for breaking the barriers of language, he starts off along a line and then goes off at a tangent and puts something altogether irrelevant, it seems, in a long paragraph. And then he comes back to where he broke off or where he started.

That's not very helpful, you know, if you are trying to follow closely a sequence of things. He is full of tangents and interruptions in his statements. And then as to the concepts, the concepts, he is fragments before the foundation of the world.

Chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. In the heavenlands. Five times repeated.

And by the way, you may need your mentality adjusting on that word. He is not talking about the heavens. He is talking about the heavenlands.

And the difference is, heavens are a realm, a, if you like, a geographical realm. Heavenlands are a spiritual concept. The letter is based upon a spiritual concept of things, not a geographical.

This five times repeated heavenly, what a concept that is. What it brings to us in a spiritual position. Our place with Christ in a spiritual position called the heavenlands.

That is the church's place. These celestial principalities and powers looking on and learning from the activities of God in the church now and to the principalities and powers in the heavens and then the diabolical forces in the heavenlands. What concepts.

How tremendous this all is. And that very phrase itself, principalities and powers and world rulers of this darkness and hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlands, the spiritual realm. That, dear friend, goes beyond all our power to understand.

Foreordained, these words which have been the bane and the trouble of the theologians all through the centuries. Foreordained, predestinated, adoption. What a wealth there is in every one of them.

And what about this sixfold repetition of the word mystery and then to come to our mighty friend that he might fill all things. Are we not saying, are we not right in saying that the apostle is too full for words? That the gates have burst and this mighty torrent of spiritual knowledge is breaking out almost beyond control. Beyond his control.

But what is it all about? What is all this? And the answer? No, it's not just doctrine. Not just light, truth, teaching. The explanation is that for Paul, Christ had burst all the bounds and bonds of this universe.

All this was but his helpless attempt at bringing Christ into view as he had come to see him, to understand him, to know him. Yes, it was an impossible task and we would be right in concluding that no one felt it more than the apostle who made this mighty effort to bring the greatness of his Christ to the church. Christ, who for him had outranged all bounds of time, took him back into the ages of eternity past, before the world was, carried him on as he uses the phrase unto the ages of the ages.

Christ for him had outranged all time limits, had outbounded all limits of space. He ascends into the highest that Christ is there, into the deepest depths that Christ has fathomed and plumbed to death. Christ had compassed the all about and the all beneath and as he said had embodied all the divine fullness that it pleased the Father that in him should all.

And more, Christ had transcended all other authorities and all other rules, every principality and power and every name. Christ was above all. The greatness of his Christ led him to make this which we have said he perhaps more than anyone else felt to be a hopeless act, defeating all language to bring Christ as he really is in his dimension and fullness into view.

But that of course is not all. With this, and set over against any idea that might come into our minds or the minds of the Lord's people, that all this about Christ was exclusively isolated to himself, that is to Christ. Paul had seen that an elect body chosen in Christ was bound up with and included in all this that he had seen.

Here he calls the church the very complement of this Christ which is the fullness of him. The real word is the very complement, the completion of him that filleth all in all. Paul had seen this elect body bound up with this immensity of Christ and that accounts for this sublime thing thirteen times.

Thirteen times he uses the word great. First, the unspeakable greatness of Christ, the immeasurable greatness, transcendent glory of Christ, the inexplicable significance of Christ in God's universe from eternity to eternity. And you, when you were dead in your trespasses, we were chosen in him.

We are brought into this as our inheritance in union with him. No wonder the word great falls over itself in this letter again and again and again. Whether you and I are moved by this or not, we have said that it was very true that the apostle could not contain himself any longer.

Seeing that no sooner had he got into that imprisonment and between the times when the visitors were coming, he just gave himself up to this twofold object. Setting forth on the one hand the greatness of Christ as he had seen it and on the other hand the greatness of grace in calling him and the church into that divine grace. Grace only begins when, and you, when you were dead in your trespasses, that's the beginning of grace.

Union with Christ in his new risen life. But trace grace through this letter and see how grace is leading on and on until at last it sees this church in the ages of the ages together with him in his ultimate and final, his eternal and universal fullness. What grace! So we are led, dear friends, to our fragment that he might fill all things.

This incomprehensible he. He, the center of all things. Look at some of these other fragments in that connection.

You remember John himself spoken about this. First chapter of his gospel. He tells us that all things were created by him.

All things were created by him. You turn to the companion letter, the letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verse 16. For in him were all things created.

In the heavens and upon the earth, things visible, things invisible. For the thrones or dominions or principalities or powers, all things have been created through him and unto him. And he is before all things.

And in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the child, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he might have the preeminence. And through him to reconcile all things unto himself.

The letter to the Hebrews may not have come actually from the pen of Paul, but undoubtedly from the influence. Chapter 1, verse 2. As at the end of these days spoken unto us in his son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he made the world. Chapter 2, verse 10.

For it became him for whom are all things and through whom are all things in bringing many sons unto glory. This phrase, all things, of which Christ is the very essence and substance finally. Now it is about this one that we are thinking.

On him we are concentrating, this center of all things, Jesus Christ. The Bible throughout is a progressive history of this, an unfolding of this mighty he who is to fill all things. That history begins with an intimation, just an intimation.

Very often missed and overlooked that history ends with this passage, his filling all things. The intimation, in the beginning, God. That's where the Bible begins.

But that name God, as you know, is in the plural form. It's in the plural form, indicating that there are more than one present. There's another and a third gathered into that form, the name of God.

And as the story grows, the second one, intimated as being present there, becomes more and more dishonorable, not long before he assumes a name and is seen and is heard by men. He appears to men in the many theophanies of the Old Testament. Sometimes at the beginning they describe him as a man, but

when he goes they speak of him as the Lord.

You recall to mine those occasions, this one, the Lord, in those of divine appearance becoming known. Later he takes human form in a specific incarnation and lives and moves and walks and teaches among men. Later still, in a still more intimate way, he reveals himself in a resurrection body to individuals, groups, companies, and they are in no doubt about it.

Whereas at the beginning they had questions, wondered whether they had seen a spirit, in the end they had no doubt. They knew who he was. They could say, we have seen him, we know him, and then finally he's seen by all creatures in heaven and earth, so that every eye beholds him.

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