

The Greatness of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the greatness of Christ and the apostle's revelation of it, highlighting the need for the church to recover the immensity of Christ and live on a higher level, worthy of Christ.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:8

Topics: "Spiritual Knowledge", "The Greatness of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the immeasurable greatness of Christ in his sermon 'The Greatness of Christ', drawing from Ephesians 4:8-10. He reflects on the Apostle Paul's profound spiritual knowledge, which was revealed through his experiences and revelations of Christ, leading to a deep understanding of Christ's role in filling all things. Sparks highlights that this understanding of Christ's greatness is essential for believers to overcome their troubles and live in the fullness of grace. He urges the church to grasp the expansive nature of Christ, which transcends time and space, and to recognize their identity as part of His body, the church, which complements His greatness.

Transcript

Reading: "Wherefore he saith, When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into 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.)" Ephesians 4:8,9,10.

"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 Purpose.

We know that the letter to the Ephesians was a circular letter sent to certain churches in Asia; and in this letter the apostle poured like a torrent the very quintessence of his spiritual knowledge: a knowledge which had come to him by what he in other places called "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:12) or: "It was the good pleasure of God... to reveal his Son in me" (Galatians 1:15,16). That revelation to and in the apostle was very full indeed. It was a 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, to try to fathom something of its depths. It kept him there in the desert for three years -- the breaking of a new world of spiritual knowledge upon him.

Later the apostle said that there had happened in his life history another mighty opening of heaven. He said he was "caught up even to the third heaven... and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." (2 Corinthians 12:2,4). It is 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 words which it is impossible for a man to utter". That must have been a wonderful fulness of knowledge!

And we know that on several other occasions the Lord Jesus came to him, stood by him, and spoke to him: and out of all this experience his knowledge was growing. It was 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 much in 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, to 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 eighth chapter to the Romans? Going right back before the world was, telling us what happened by divine act when Adam brought the creation into bondage and it was subjected to vanity. Where did he get all that about foreordination? "Foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). And the much more that is there that you and I are quite sure no man could ever find by searching, or by studying, however great a brain he might have. Those latter verses of Romans 8 are a mighty fragment of revelation!

Again, where did he get that fifteenth chapter of the first letter to the Corinthians? It is all about the diversity of glorified bodies in resurrection and the nature of the body of resurrection of believers. It is a very rich chapter! We have explored it long and deeply, but we know that we have not fathomed it.

In his letter 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 is rich, it is deep, it is full: but it is 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 do -- just pour out of that fulness which had been accumulating through the years: just pour out of his spiritual fulness.

And we are not surprised that that word "fulness" is very characteristic of this letter. True, it is the fulness 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 light and spiritual knowledge had been circumscribed and confined, 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! You cannot read this letter carefully and watchfully and feelingly without feeling that it is like the release of a bursting 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 referred to the repetition of the word "fulness". If you could really sense the feeling of the apostle at this time you could understand how that word dropped from his pen so often. "Exceeding", -- "Exceeding greatness of his power" (1:19): "The exceeding riches of his grace" (2:7). "The riches" -- "The riches of the glory of his inheritance" (1:18): "the riches of his grace". And "glory". Underline the word "glory" in this letter. See how it is constantly coming out. "Glory" everywhere here. "Abundantly" -- "Exceeding abundantly above" (3:20). "Surpassing". This is 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 have not worried yourself very much about that when reading the letter, but if you try 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 in something altogether irrelevant, it seems. A long paragraph -- and then he comes back to where he broke off, or where he started. That is not very helpful, you know, if you are trying to follow closely a sequence of thought. Yes, he is full of tangents and interruptions in his statements here.

And then, as to the concepts, these fragments: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (1:4). "In the heavenlies" five times repeated. (By the way, you may need your mentality adjusting on that word. He is not talking about the heavens; he is talking about the heavenlies. And the difference is: the heavens are a realm, if you like a geographical realm. The heavenlies are a spiritual concept. The letter is based upon the spiritual concept of things, not a geographical.) This five-times-repeated "heavenlies", that is the church's place. The celestial principalities and powers looking on and learning from the activities of God in the church: "Now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places" (3:10). And then the diabolical forces in the heavenlies. What concepts are here! How tremendous this Paul is! And that very phrase itself: "Our wrestling is... against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness" (6:12). Those hosts of wicked spirits in the heavenlies, in the spiritual realm, that goes beyond all our power to understand. "Foreordained"! These words which have been the bane and 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 six-fold repetition of the word "mystery"?

And then to come to our mighty fragment: "That he might fill all things". 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 up almost beyond his control? But what is it all about? What is all this? And the answer? No, it is 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 hopeless 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 out-ranged all bounds of time, took him back into the ages of eternity past, before the world was, and carried him on -- as he uses the phrase -- "unto the ages of the ages" (Galatians 1:5 -- R.V. margin). Christ for him had out-ranged all time limits, had outbounded all limits of space. He ascends into the highest heavens and Christ is there; descends into the deepest depths and Christ has fathomed and plumbed them. Christ has compassed the all-above and all-beneath of space and, as Paul says, has embodied all the divine fulness: "It was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell" (Colossians 1:19). And more: Christ has transcended all

other authorities and all other rule, every principality and power and every name. Christ was above all. The greatness of Paul's Christ led him to make this, which, as we have said, he, perhaps more than anyone else, felt to be a hopeless effort: defeating all language to bring Christ as He really is in His dimensions and fulness, into view.

But that, of course, is not all. With this, and set over against any idea that might come into our minds, and 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 in Christ. Here he calls the church the very complement of this Christ. It is the fulness of Him. The real word is "the very complement", the completion of Him "that filleth all in all" (1:23). Paul had seen this elect body as bound up with this immensity of Christ. And that accounts for this sublime thing in the letter -- thirteen times he uses the word "grace".

First, the unspeakable greatness of Christ, the immeasurable greatness of Christ, the transcendent glory of Christ, the unspeakable significance of Christ in God's universe from eternity to eternity. And then he says: "God, ...even when we were dead through our trespasses, quickened us together with Christ"(2:4,5). "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (1:4). We are brought into this as our inheritance in union with Him. No wonder the word "grace" falls over itself in this letter again and again! Grace! "The riches of his grace" (2:7).

Whether you and I are moved by this or not, we have said -- and it was very true -- the apostle could not contain himself any longer. We have seen that he no sooner got into that imprisonment -- and between the times when the visitors were coming -- than he just gave himself up to this two-fold object of 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 fulness.

Grace! "Even when we were dead through our trespasses, (God) quickened us together with Christ" (2:4). That is the beginning of grace: union with Christ in His new risen life. But trace grace through this letter and see how it 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 fulness, His eternal and universal fulness. What grace!

So we are led, to our fragment: "That he might fill all things". This incomprehensible "He" -- the centre of all things. Look at some other fragments in that connection.

You remember John himself had spoken about this. In the first chapter of his gospel he tells us that "All things were made by him" (John 1:3). Turn to the companion letter, the letter to the Colossians, chapter one: "For in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether 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 consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence... and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself" (Col. 1:16-18,20). Then the letter to the Hebrews. It may not have come actually from the pen of Paul, but undoubtedly from the influence of Paul. -- "At the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds." (Hebrews 1:2): "For it became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:10). This phrase "All things" of which Christ is the very essence and substance.

Now it is this One about whom we are thinking, on whom we are concentrating, this centre of "all things" -- Jesus Christ. The Bible throughout is a progressive history of this One: the unfolding of this mighty "He", who is to fill all things. That history begins with an intimation. Just an intimation which is very often missed and overlooked. That history ends with this passage about His filling all things. The intimation? "In the beginning God" (Genesis 1:1). That is where the Bible begins: but that name "God", as you know, is in the plural form indicating that there is more than one person. There is another -- and a third -- gathered into that form of the name of God. And as the story grows the second One intimated as being present there becomes more and more discernible. It is not long before He assumes a name and is seen and 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 appearing, but when He goes they speak of Him as the Lord. You will call to mind those occasions. This One -- the Lord. In those divine appearances His becoming known by men. Later He takes human form in a specific incarnation and lives and moves and works 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, at 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 is seen by all creatures in heaven and earth, so that every eye beholds Him. He is known by "a great multitude, which no man could number" (Revelation 7:9).

So we are shown Him in the Bible in His aloneness with the Father before times eternal. We are shown Him in the busy activities of the creation, creating all things. We are shown Him with the wayward nation in its wilderness wanderings as the angel of His presence. We are shown Him in this same Bible returning as the victorious Monarch, the King of Glory, and the everlasting gates opening to receive Him back after His campaign here with evil and the false rulers of this world. We are shown Him coming again to judge the nations, to set up His Kingdom. Are we right in saying that the Bible is a progressive history and unveiling of this One, this "He" who is to fill all things?

Notice: we have marked seven stages in this history, His history. In the eternal past, in creation, in the Old Testament age, in the earthly life, in His present session and intercession in heaven, in the great Day of the Lord and in the eternal future. That is really the Bible story. It is the story of a Person, the story of this mighty "He" of whom we are thinking, who is to fill all things.

In that seven-fold progressive revelation of Him in the Bible, the outstanding feature, the feature which comes to our hearts with such comfort, is His expanding grace. Note how grace is growing, is developing. What grace! His expanding power and His expanding glory. Trace that three-fold development -- grace, power and glory -- in Christ Jesus right through the Bible.

All this brings us back to our little clause -- it is wrong to call it a little one! -- "All things". He has expanded to the full range of "All things", and, having done so, He is to fill all things Himself. You know that it is a phrase scattered in the New Testament, particularly in the letters of Paul as we have noted, related to Christ. "All things". In creation -- and I would have you note that it is not only said that He created all things Himself, that is, that all things were created by Him, but they are created in Him. It opens a door to very much profitable reading of the Word. God has through Christ, His Son, by the Eternal Spirit, created all things in Christ. That is, He has made Christ the encompassing, encircling sphere of all things in creation itself. The creation is bounded by Christ in the thought and intention of God. Eventually there will be no created thing in this universe outside of Christ, because they were all created in Him. If they have gone out, they have been given the option in this dispensation to return into Christ. If not, they are for ever

expelled from the whole domain of Christ, and all that does remain is found, as was intended, in Christ.

You and I, the church, are a new creation in Christ. Creation! And, as we read in Colossians 1:20 "through him to reconcile all things unto himself". All things are reconciled in Christ. Again: "that in all things he might have the pre-eminence" (Col. 1:18) All things under His pre-eminence. Again: "In him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17 -- R.V. margin). And finally "That he might fill all things".

What is the concern in our hearts as we say all this to you? Would there not be a wonderful and glorious emancipation from nine-tenths -- if not ten-tenths -- of our troubles if we only had the apprehension of Christ that the apostle Paul had? Put it in another way. Most of our troubles are due not to our mental failure, but our heart failure really to grasp and apprehend the greatness of the Christ to whom we have been introduced, and to whose fellowship we have been brought by the grace of God. Is it not the need, the greatest need today everywhere, and particularly in the church of God, to recover something of this immensity of Christ? We are too small, are we not? Too petty. That is the cause of our trouble, of all our troubles. How mean we are! How paltry! How little! What small-minded, small-hearted people we are! How occupied we become with the little things that really, after all, don't matter so much! What a low level we are content to live upon! How this very nature of ours is always bringing things down and down and down to the level of what is unworthy of Christ!

Perhaps you have had similar exercise to myself over many things, and, not least, how this man Paul at this very time of writing this letter, could write it! How could he write it? He is in prison, cut off from all his activities and work, separated from all his friends in the churches. There is a movement on foot to isolate him spiritually as well as in other ways, leaving him, departing from him; there is a mighty movement to discredit him and his work, and destroy it. Churches are by no means answering to all his prayers and entreaties and outpourings. His was a life just given for them -- and see how they are! "All that are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15). And so on. His own condition and position, and the state of things for which he had given his life, and much more -- and then, for the man to sit down and write a letter like this, a document like this! As we have described it -- a pouring out like a mighty torrent and deluge of wonder and amazement at the greatness of his Christ and of the calling of this elect body. I wonder what sort of letters would come from us under similar conditions!

Well, what is the secret? What is the answer? A rebuke to our hearts, to yours and mine -- a real, sound rebuke. Paul had such an apprehension of his Lord that was more and greater than all these troubles, these afflictions, these disappointments, these adversities, these sorrows, these sufferings of body and of soul. It was his apprehension of Christ that explained a letter like this. Are we not right in saying that is what we want, what we need? It is a mighty, emancipating thing, isn't it? It really is! The first revelation of Jesus to Saul on the Damascus road effected something that all the tortures and laws and prisons and oppositions that were heaped upon him could never have done, that is, emancipated him from Judaism, from Israelism, made him the great apostle of the church and of the nations.

That was the first effect of apprehending Christ, and that is no small thing. It is tremendous! This enlarged, increased revelation of that same Christ accounted for this ultimate, this final emancipation from all that which would have crushed him, broken him and sent him into utter despondency.

This is but an introduction. But it is the only way to get at anything. We will never get anywhere at all until we have come to look at the Lord again and see Him. I do trust that all that has been said has not been to you as words, as language, ideas, as just teaching of doctrine, but that you, with me, have just caught a

glimpse, a fresh glimpse of the greatness of this One who is to fill all things.

May that emancipating work be done in us by a fresh seeing of this great "He" from eternity to eternity, "that He might fill all things".

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