

Filled to the Measure of All the Fullness of God

We're headed toward Ephesians 3:14-21 and one of the greatest prayers ever prayed, but first a word on context. Paul's Ephesian letter is an amazing document, and should be read often and carefully by Christians. It reflects this great apostle's worldview close to the end of his life. So Paul tells us as this letter or epistle begins (in 1:10) that it is God's intent – that it has always been God's intent – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under Christ. Raised as I was with an aggressively militant minority complex (that “only we few” were saved), when I first saw this, it blew my mind. The point is to bring all things together. It turns out a lot of other Scriptures say this too.

But then Paul goes on in Ephesians to say one amazing thing after another. He says, for instance, in 2:8-9, without disclaimer or addendum, “It is by grace we have been saved, not from ourselves! It is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” And now grace reigns. Paul is always saying this. It's an end to the letter of the law, to jockeying for status, to self-righteousness, to arrogance when I think I'm right, and fear and defensiveness when I'm not so sure. It's an end to all the things that alienate good people from one another.

Then Paul says that Jesus himself is our peace (in 2:11-22) – that Jesus destroys the dividing wall of hostility, that he breaks down the barriers by which we divide ourselves off from one another. And next he says (now in 3:1-13) that all this will happen through church! All this will happen through a group of people who take what Jesus did and said seriously, who “die to self,” who become poor in spirit and pure in heart, and who learn to love, really love, love even their enemies. Presumably this includes everyone.

With this we come to Ephesians 3:14-21. Paul turns to prayer, and what a remarkable prayer it is.

“For this reason I kneel before the Father,
from whom his whole family
in heaven and on earth derives its name.
I pray that out of his glorious riches
he may strengthen you with power
through his Spirit in your inner being,
so that Christ may dwell in your hearts
through faith.
And I pray that you,
being rooted and established in love,
may have power together with all the saints,
to grasp how wide
and long
and high
and deep
is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge

– that you may be filled
to the measure
of all the fullness of God.
Now to him who is able to do
immeasurably more
than all we ask
or imagine,
according to his power
that is at work within us,
to him be glory
in the church
and in Christ Jesus
throughout all generations,
for ever and ever!
Amen.”

Now when I read a text like this, and I let it inside me, when I reflect on it and stop and really hear it, I begin to wonder. I begin to wonder if I haven’t been really missing something, if most of us, most of the people I know, many of them good churchgoing people, haven’t been missing something. Conditioned as we have been by our culture and by centuries of Christian thought, we have pursued doctrine and we have learned all sorts of things about God: about God, church, Scripture, Jesus and atonement, sin, plans of salvation, right ways to worship and wrong ways, resurrection and afterlife. And we have learned this about God, and that about God, and on and on. And then we come to passages like this one and we think, “Wow! Wouldn’t it be nice if we could have that too, if we could be strengthened with power through God’s Spirit in our inner being, if Christ could be inside us, if we could grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, if we could be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God?” Wouldn’t it be nice?

Wouldn’t it be nice if we could have all sorts of experiences in which we encounter the presence of God, if streams of living water were flowing from within us, if we could know God, if we could find the liberation that comes from dying to self and Christ living in us? Wouldn’t it be nice if we could get all the doctrine right, but also get this life, if we could get all the facts about God right, but also get, well, God?

But maybe, and here is the question for my life now, and maybe for yours: What if we’ve gotten this all backwards? What if we’ve gotten – what is it? – the cart before the horse? Maybe this incredible prayer, this possibility of being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, goes to the core of the matter. Maybe it goes to the central truth that we are to invite the Spirit of God to come to us, to enter us body and soul, to fill us, to heal us in all our broken places. And then, having done this, after having done this, then we go back to doctrine and try to get that right. But now with encountering the presence of God at the center of our life, as the ground of our being, maybe we’ll do better with our doctrine. Maybe we’ll understand doctrine in both more loving and more realistic ways.

Knowing God, we'll know that certain traditional understandings of certain doctrines cannot possibly be true.

The book we discussed a while back at the Interfaith Book Club that once met here was Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*. It's a novel of India, and it tells of happenings in and around a government rest house on the banks of the Narmada River. And all of life's big questions come up. Near the end of the book, a wise old man tells the narrator, "But you have chosen a hard path to knowledge, little brother. Hearsay, not experience." That's true, I think, for most. We have chosen a hard path to knowledge, hearsay, not experience. Hearsay? Scripture? Hmm. Scripture, it is true, is not exactly hearsay; but the truths most people know about Scripture are hearsay. They're what someone else told them Scripture says. And so our spiritual lives depend on this fragile foundation of what others have told us about truth and Scripture when all along our spiritual lives might have depended on a foundation much more secure, knowing God, directly encountering the presence of God. But it's not doctrine first.

It's not doctrine first, and then maybe if we're blessed encountering the presence of God. It's encountering the presence of God and then seeing doctrine in that light. It's not knowing about God first and then maybe one day knowing God. It's knowing God first, and then over time working out what it is that we now know about God. It's being strengthened with power through the Spirit of God in your inner being. First. It's grasping how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. First. It's being filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. First.

It's waking up to our own oneness with God – to feeling inside us the very life and energy of God. It's experiencing God as Spirit, as a force field that is deeply personal, that penetrates and influences us all, that surrounds and animates us, that calls us into loving connection with all that is, that fills us deeply exactly when we empty ourselves. If I could just die to self, transcend my selfness, become poor in spirit, become pure in heart (that is, seek God with all my heart in the words of Jeremiah 29:13), and learn to reach outside myself in love, then all of Paul's prayer is answered in me. I begin to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. And I begin to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Because here's the truth: When we cease being so obsessively individual, we end up penetrating the whole world. We end up expanding into all that is and being filled to the measure of the whole fullness of God.

– Dale Pauls