

Filled with the Spirit

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- [0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 5th of December 2004. The preacher is Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled, Filled with the Spirit, and is based on Ephesians 5, verses 18 to 21.
- Or maybe it was my birthday. I got this. It's a do-it-yourself Holy Spirit illustration kit. Seriously, this is what I got for birthday Christmas.
- Can't remember. Contents, one sponge. The user must supply his own bowl and water. And then instructions for misuse. Well, I actually thought this said instructions for use.
- I've only realized it was misuse. Firstly, wave sponge around as illustration of spiritual dryness. Secondly, quote some helpful Bible verse on dryness, such as Proverbs 17, 1.
- [1 : 0 0] Better a dry crust with peace and quiet than a house full of feasting and strife. Thirdly, produce bowl of water. Well, I didn't get that for Christmas, so I can't use that.
- Fourthly, quote some helpful Bible verse on bowls. For example, I see a solid gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it with seven channels to the lights from Zechariah.
- Notice the seven channels refers to a future Christmas present of a TV station, seven TV stations. Fifthly, immerse the sponge in water. Sixthly, quote helpful Bible verses about water.
- Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be detestable to you, Leviticus 11. Seventh, conclude that this is clearly what the Holy Spirit is like. I'm not sure whether that's with scales and fins or just a dripping wet sponge.
- I think the latter. And then eighthly, people will literally fall at your feet in admiration. Warning, the makers accept no liability for lightning strike damage in response to heresy.
- [2 : 0 0] Let's pray. God, our Heavenly Father, as we come to this passage tonight that exhorts the Ephesian Christians to be filled with the Holy Spirit, we pray that you may indeed fill us with your Holy Spirit.
- For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Well, at Christian bookshops, I think you can still buy a Bible that is headed a Spirit-filled Bible.
- I've often pondered what makes a Bible Spirit-filled, whereas other Bibles presumably are not Spirit-filled. Is there something really special about it? For example, if you read it, does the reader fall down and shake or roar like a lion?
- Or is it made of special paper? Or are the words of the Holy Spirit in red, perhaps? Well, it's a crazy idea, but it shows us in Christian circles what a cliché the expression Spirit-filled has become.
- It used to be born again. It used to have, you know, buy a born-again car, meaning a used car that's full of rust. But now Spirit-filled seems to be the Christian cliché around the place. And so people might ask, you know, is your church Spirit-filled?

[3 : 15] Is your minister Spirit-filled? I'm not sure how you'd answer that. Well, I think I do. And is your hamster Spirit-filled? Or so on. I mean, it becomes a bit banal if you push it to its extreme.

What is it all about? What is it to be Spirit-filled with the Holy Spirit of God as a Christian? Certainly, I think there are lots of misconceptions. There are probably also lots of fears.

There's lots of confusion, especially over recent years with things like the Toronto blessing and so on. And having said that, people across the spectrum have fairly fixed ideas about what it means to be filled with God's Holy Spirit.

That's the expression used in Ephesians 5 in the Bible reading that Sophie read for us. I want us to understand that reading tonight. But firstly, I want to, in a sense, help us to know how to understand it by, in a sense, drawing our attention to the context of those words, which gives indications for how we must understand those words.

If we take a big step back firstly, it's worth thinking that in the New Testament as a whole, the 27 books from Matthew through to Revelation, only nine times is the expression filled with the Holy Spirit ever occur.

[4 : 31] Three times in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit, and that led to him having a ministry of preaching the Gospel. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, is filled with the Holy Spirit in Luke 1 also, and as a consequence of that, she proclaims, in a psalm come song come prophecy, to Mary.

And also in Luke 1, Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and as a consequence, he prophesied and praised God. The other references all occur in the Acts of the Apostles, also written by the same Luke who wrote Luke's Gospel.

In Acts 2, 120 people at Pentecost are filled with the Spirit, and that results in them speaking in other tongues and preaching the Gospel. Peter, in Acts 4, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and that results in him preaching to the high priest, the scribes, and indeed to all of Jerusalem.

The Christians, in the same chapter in Acts, are filled with the Holy Spirit, and that results in them preaching with boldness. In Acts 9, Paul, on the road to Damascus, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and, sorry, in Damascus, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and he proclaims Jesus as a result.

Paul, again, in Acts 13, filled with the Spirit, proclaims the word to Elymas the magician. And finally, in Acts 13, Christians at Pisces and Antioch are filled with the Holy Spirit, and as a result, they spread the word of God.

[5 : 52] Now, they're the only occasions in the Bible, in the New Testament, where you get that expression, filled with the Spirit, or filled with the Holy Spirit of God, other than what we're seeing tonight in Ephesians 5. My point here, not only to help us understand this verse, but to give us the model of interpretation, is that we should take a preliminary step to see what does this expression mean or imply in other parts of the Scriptures.

And all of those occasions, without exception, show a result of preaching, praising, prophesying, proclaiming the Gospel.

That's the primary focus of the result of being filled with the Holy Spirit of God in those verses in Luke and in Acts. None of them primarily describes an experience.

Only one of them mentions speaking in tongues. And none has any indication of how you might be filled with the Spirit. All show the sovereign work of God.

Now, you do get in a few places the expression to be full of the Spirit, slightly different expression. That applies to Jesus in Luke 4, when he's led into the desert and tempted, and as a result, he reads and preaches the Bible back to the devil.

[7 : 07] In Acts 6, seven men, full of the Spirit. They have good character and are filled with wisdom. Stephen, one of those, is separated again in chapter 6 of Acts as being full of the Spirit, also full of faith.

And again, Stephen, for the third time in Acts 7, as he's preaching just before his martyrdom, gets a glimpse of glory and preaches. And then in Barnabas in Acts 11, full of the Spirit, also full of faith, preaches and is a man of high repute and character.

Again, in those few examples, preaching seems to be the primary result in many of them, and good character, godly character, that flows from it. Again, no indication of how those people were filled with the Spirit, other than a sovereign work of God.

Now, elsewhere in the New Testament, there are people who are full of joy, joy through the Spirit, grace and truth. Jesus is filled with grace and truth. Christians in different places are filled with faith or grace and power in Acts.

And there are prayers of Paul, amongst others, who prays that others, the people to whom he writes, will be filled with the fruit of righteousness or knowledge or wisdom or peace in some of his letters.

[8 : 20] Now, that's the wider context. The next step to come a bit closer to understanding Ephesians 5.18, which talks about being filled with the Spirit, is its context in the letter to the Ephesians by Paul.

And in particular, I guess I want to highlight a couple of things from Ephesians 4 and 5. I do that because that forms a unity of exhortation built on the doctrine of chapters 1 to 3 in the letter.

The heading for this exhortation in chapter 4, verse 1, is lead a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called. And the contrast that is being painted from there all the way through chapters 4 and 5 is in contrast, leading a life worthy, in contrast to pagan ways of life and idolatry and practice.

So, for example, we see in verse 17 of chapter 4, moving up towards chapter 5, 4.17, I affirm and insist on in the Lord you must no longer live as the Gentiles live in the futility of their minds.

Literally, no longer walk as the Gentiles walk. The contrast is clear there. Chapter 5, verse 2, across the page. Live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us.

[9 : 42] Again, it's walking in love, literally. And in the wider context of that verse, it's in contrast to the strange behaviours of fornication and impurity and so on that follows that's pagan.

Chapter 5, verse 8, walk as children of the light, not as children of darkness in contrast to the pagans round about. So that's the general context of Ephesians 4 and 5.

It's about walking or leading a life worthy of the calling. And that is in contrast to the pagans amongst whom the Christians live. It will mean good character and good behaviour.

It will mean unity and maturity of faith, as chapter 4 goes on to explain. It will mean truth and honesty in our words, as chapter 4, verse 25 said. It will mean dealing with anger rightly, chapter 4, verse 26.

It will mean edifying talk amongst people, chapter 4, verse 29. It will mean being kind and forgiving, chapter 4, verse 32. Pure speech, 5, verse 1. Goodness, righteousness and truth, chapter 5, verse 9.

[10 : 45] That's a selection to show you the general context in which this statement about being filled with the Spirit occurs. It's a context of unity and maturity about imitating God's character about righteous or godly living.

All of those are the context for being filled with the Spirit in chapter 5, verse 18. And indeed, it's worth pausing for a minute to see the contrast painted in chapter 4, verse 30, where grieving this Holy Spirit of God, is associated with, in its verses around about it, with acts of immorality, disunity, and so on.

So that's the first comment about Ephesians 4, 5 as a context. Secondly, in the passage that we're looking at, chapter 5, verse 18, do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.

That's the third, don't, but, in succession. In verses 15 and 16, just above it, be careful then how you live, not as unwise, but as wise.

Making the most of the time, that is, because the days are evil. And then secondly, don't be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And then in verse 18, don't get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.

[12 : 06] Now what we've got to see there is sequence of three, don't do this, but do this. Don't do this, but do this. Don't be foolish, but be wise. Sorry, yes, don't be unwise, but be wise.

Don't be foolish, but understand the will of the Lord. Don't get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit. So in that context of that paragraph, what it's showing us is that to be filled with the Spirit is part of being distinct from pagan life.

It is about living a wise life. It is about living a godly life in the context of Ephesians 4 and 5. The final point of context is to remember that Ephesus, where this letter was directed to, a city in what was then called Asia Minor in Turkey today, on the west coast of Turkey, near the Aegean Sea, was the center of one of the seven wonders of the world.

The temple of Artemis or Diana. And there, there was a great riot when Paul came preaching the gospel in Acts chapter 19. Part of the cult of Dionysus that was associated with this temple in Ephesus was a cult of drunkenness as part of its mystery religion.

And so to be drunk was to be transported into a higher mystical religious plane as part of the pagan worship in Ephesus. Focused in Ephesus at the big temple that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

[13 : 36] So that's part of the context too. As we read Paul saying, don't be filled with wine or drunk with wine. That is like all these pagans round about you as part of their religion. But, be filled with the Spirit that is the Holy Spirit of God.

Now pause here just for a danger that I've heard before in various places or in books or people speaking about the Holy Spirit and what it means to be filled with the Spirit. And there are those who would claim that what Paul is saying here about being filled with the Spirit will mean that the effects will be similar to the effects of alcohol.

You might fall over, you might say things you never remember, you might roll around on the carpet or on the floor or shout or roar like a lion, that sort of thing. It's clearly misunderstood this passage.

Don't be drunk but be filled with the Spirit. It's a contrast not a similarity and there's no hint of similar effects being portrayed in this verse at all.

And indeed, if you remember back to the day of Pentecost when Peter and others were filled with the Spirit and preached the Gospel it was the mockers who said they're drunk with wine not those who accurately described what was going on.

[14 : 50] Well now we come then to the expression itself. What I've tried to do as we've approached this verse is to see the relevant context to understand it. The New Testament context of the expression the immediate context of Ephesians 4 and 5 now we come to the verse itself verse 18 be filled.

Two words very important very important that we get these right. It is firstly passive. Now for those who never studied English grammar which means those who went to school after about 1970 it seems to me may not understand what I mean.

I don't mean to be patronising in saying that but a passive means and let me put it in the contrast an active verb here would be fill something but the passive is be filled that is the agent of the filling is not you but someone else or something else.

Be filled is passive where you are the recipient or the object of the action not the one who does the action although it's actually as we'll see slightly ambiguous in a minute.

It indicates the passive indicates that it is an action of God. No other person is referred to who does the filling and very often in the scriptures these passive verbs are referring to an action that God does.

[16 : 10] So here God is the one who fills. There's an element of cooperation about this because after all this is a command to people to be filled you've got to in a sense let yourself be filled if I can put it like that but we're not told how.

It's just a command. The second thing about it is it's plural. It's not saying Fred be filled or Mary be filled it is saying Ephesian Christian church to whom I am writing be filled.

It is a plural verb and it's not saying individually each one be filled but it's really saying that church is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Now admittedly we don't want to overstate the case here because there are in other places as we saw individuals who are filled with the Spirit Paul, Peter, Stephen and others that we've already referred to in the wider context but we must note that this is a plural verb.

It's addressed to a church and it's not enough not good enough for an individual Christian to think in terms of well I'm filled with the Spirit and my church may not be.

That is there's a corporate nature about this in these verses. Fullness of the Spirit fits in a church that is filled with the Spirit. The third thing about the verb there's four things about this verb hopefully you're learning a little bit of grammar as we go it's passive it's plural it is present tense that is it's not referring to something in the past or something in the future and in the Greek the present tense has got a continuous sense about it.

[17 : 39] So we could fairly translate this as keep on being filled with the Spirit of God. When Jesus goes to the wedding feast at Cana the instruction is given fill those jars with water.

It's a different form of the verb. He doesn't say keep on filling them as though somehow they're just going to keep overflowing with water. Fill them and then they'll be full. But this has got a present sense about it.

Keep on being filled with the Holy Spirit. It's worth also noting a contrast because earlier in this same letter in chapter 1 Paul made the comment that we are sealed with God's Holy Spirit and the form of that verb is a distinctly once off action.

That is when you become a Christian you are sealed once and for all with the Spirit but as a Christian we are to keep on being filled with the Spirit. So we need to keep these things in perspective and balance I guess.

It also means that we can never say well I'm filled with the Spirit and that's it. It seems to be an ongoing thing and we see that with Stephen three times we're told that he's filled with the Spirit Paul a couple and others and so on.

[18 : 48] And sometimes it seems to be for a particular point or ministry or occasion in those examples in the Acts of the Apostles. Now this is where the sponge came in in case you failed to understand the connection which is fair enough because it's fairly obscure.

Frequently I've heard the example given that basically we're like a sponge and as we preach the gospel and do our ministry and live our godly lives it's as though the Spirit oozes from us and we have the danger of becoming like a dry sponge so we have to be filled again as though somehow we're like a petrol tank.

One of the ironies let me tell you a slight funny story here is that I preached a version of this sermon some years ago and the very next week a visiting preacher came and used exactly the sponge illustration that I demolished the week before and everyone turned to me and I turned red but I wasn't convinced by his explanation.

That is when an example or what's called a metaphor or an illustration is used we can't push it all away to make every connection that we might want to make just because we're told here to keep on being filled doesn't mean we're like a sponge and we somehow drop off the bottom drops of the Holy Spirit.

So we've got to be careful when we use figurative or interpret figurative language not to push it too far. There's nothing here or anywhere else about somehow dripping out or oozing out or drying up the Spirit within you.

[20 : 16] The only metaphor that is is being filled with it. Fourthly about this expression it's passive it's plural it's present and just to show this I'm not totally hooked on alliteration it's an imperative.

It doesn't begin with P. That is it's a command. It's an obligation for Christians. It's an obligation for every Ephesian Christian. It's an obligation for every Christian.

This is not an optional extra. It is not for the super holy. It is not for the charismatic wing of the church. It is for each and every person who is a Christian to be filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

Now some consequences because as I've said nowhere are we told how to be filled. In one sense we might object and say this is not very helpful when we're told to do something and not told how to do it.

It's actually God who does the doing of it but yet the command is we must be filled. But some of the consequences are drawn out in the verses that follow and that's the connection between verse 18 and verses 19 to 21.

[21 : 25] Sadly in our translation verse 21 is sort of separated off with an artificial heading placed in between. It's actually the same sentence as is verse 18. Don't get drunk with wine for that's debauchery but be filled with the spirit and then come for what are called dependent participles.

That is they show that these things flow from being filled with the spirit is what I mean. Four of them. Firstly in verse 19 as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves.

That's the first thing. Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We don't need to make the distinction between what type of song or music. Again notice that the consequence is speaking things that are understandable.

Praising God and edifying each other. Just as we saw the most common consequence of being filled with the spirit in Luke and in Acts is preaching or speaking something of the word of God or of God.

And notice again the corporate nature. It's addressing one another within the church. There is a mutual edification role for every Christian. It's not just the person up the front but it's each one of us encouraging or addressing each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

[22 : 43] The second dependent participle, the end of verse 19, is singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts. Now in your hearts doesn't mean silently. It's really just meaning sincerely or genuinely.

That's what the Greek idiom means. So here it is singing and making melody directed to Jesus or to God, not to each other in this case. But again it is the proclamation by word or maybe word in song of some truths about God and about Jesus.

Thirdly, dependent participle, verse 20, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Again it's plural. It's for all of us to give thanks to God in all circumstances for all of us.

And it's Jesus centered. Our thanks is in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And then literally the fourth dependent participle, verse 21, should be saying being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Admittedly it's transitional because there are some examples of submission that follow. But submission one to another is an expression of being filled with the Spirit of God regardless of age or gender or class or education or anything else.

[23 : 57] All of those things, the addressing one another in Psalms, the singing and making melody in your hearts, the giving thanks, the mutual submission, are all in contrast to pagan practice in Ephesus of the day.

And that's the contrast that we've seen through chapter 4 and the first bit of chapter 5. The question is, is it a description of us? Is it a description of you?

Are you a person who encourages others with words of truth in songs and Psalms and spiritual songs and so on? Do you direct singing of praise to God?

Are you one who gives thanks to God in everything? Are you one who's submissive to other people? Are they characteristics that we as a church exhibit?

Is praise and proclamation a part of our life? Well, if yes, there is evidence that we or you are filled with the Spirit of God.

[24 : 55] If no, Paul's exhortation stands over us. Be filled. I want to make some concluding comments.

Firstly, on what's called the quest for experience. One of the great dangers, I think especially in recent times, though it's not a modern or postmodern phenomenon, is the importance we, people in general, and within the church as a spin-off of that place, on experience.

And too often, experience becomes the deciding criteria for truth. If I give a digressive example, in the argument, for example, for the acceptance of homosexual people as in marriage or in ordination or in the church, very often the arguments that are spun out at the Melbourne Diocese Synod, the general synod of the Anglican Church in Australia is, I know gay people who are Christian, it's a good experience, therefore it must be right.

In effect, I'm caricaturing it a bit. But in this sphere of being filled with the Spirit, the same sort of thing occurs. For example, people like Nicky Gumbel, who's the author of the Alpha Course and now the rector of Holy Trinity Brompton in London, has said in effect, and other charismatic leaders the same, that if you have feelings of heat in you, a fullness of chest or as though you're somehow being immersed in water or shaking, that perhaps you feel like you're glowing, then you're filled with the Spirit.

That strikes me as not being biblical and it strikes me as being experiential above the authority of God's Word. Now don't get me wrong here, there's nothing wrong with experience, but it isn't our primary authority and it isn't to be our primary quest either.

[26 : 49] You see, it seems to me from the descriptions in the New Testament, there is no normative experience of being filled with the Spirit. What matters is what flows from that.

The preaching of God and the praising of God in a mutually encouraging context or evangelistic context. Indeed, we may not even be conscious of anything special when we are filled with God's Spirit.

It's not the feelings that matter. But it's the practice that flows from it that is crucial. In all these verses here and in the New Testament as a whole, in the descriptions of people who are filled with the Spirit, there is nothing about being ecstatic, screaming, falling over, warm hearts or closed up chests, feelings of drowning, falling over on the carpet, rolling around, roaring like a lion, saying things that you don't understand, inside glows or heightened emotionalism.

Those things may occur sometimes, but they're not the definition or the goal of being filled with the Spirit. The context always is about the spread of the Gospel, the growth of Christian character, the praise of God.

So if our interest in being filled with the Spirit is a desire for some experience that will warm us and excite us, please be very careful.

[28 : 16] That's not actually what it's about. Being filled with God's Spirit is a means to what we might call a kingdom end, to proclaim, to praise, to worship and to submit.

So we must not rewrite our theology under the authority of what we feel or what we experience. We must be careful to write it under the authority of God's Word, which is why I've preached the way I've done, by showing the context of God's Word to help us understand this passage correctly.

Emotion, of course, is a good thing. It's part of being human, but it's not our authority nor our goal. Second thing is, and in some ways perhaps a corrective to the first, is the close association between Word and Spirit.

That is God's Word and God's Spirit. Too often there is a polarizing in the Christian church of those who are under the Word and those who are under the Spirit, but the Bible never sees that sort of polarity.

Indeed, it sees a closeness that as the Word of God is over us and in fact infused in us, that the Spirit is over us and working within us. The two work together and in harmony to bring us under the authority of God's Word into the likeness of Christ ready for the final day.

[29 : 35] So interestingly, in the letter to the Colossians, which has very similar themes to the letter to the Ephesians, in a passage that is very similar to this leading into the issue of submission and so on, we find in fact the expression in Colossians chapter 3 verse 16, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom and with gratitude in your hearts, singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.

And then it goes on to talk about submission. So we could see here a parallel between the Spirit of God being filled with the Spirit and letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.

It's not one or the other. It's not defining two groups of Christians. In a sense, it's both the same. And there perhaps we find some indication of the how.

How to be filled with the Spirit? Well, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly and you'll find that you are being filled and keeping on being filled with the Spirit of God.

For the Word and the Spirit work together. Surrendering to the Spirit is obeying the Word and vice versa. Being filled with the Spirit is having the Word of God dwell in you richly and vice versa. Finally, two other points to remember.

[30 : 55] Two keys to understanding the work of the Spirit in the letter to the Ephesians. The first is unity. One of the reasons for being given God's Spirit is to bring us unity as the beginning of chapter 4 expresses.

I haven't got enough time to explain that more now. The second thing in emphasis in Ephesians by way of the Holy Spirit comes back in chapter 1, a verse I've referred to already.

That we are already sealed with the guarantee of the Holy Spirit. That is, the role of the Spirit is to give us assurance and guarantee of our eternal destiny.

God is in the business of preparing us for heaven. Heaven is a place where we together will praise God forever, submitting to him.

And God's in the business of preparing us for that heaven of his, his kingdom. Being filled with his Spirit is preparatory for heaven.

[32 : 01] God is preparing us for that place. That we become like Jesus. That we practice together in corporate unity of God's people, the praise of God, the proclamation of his word.

Sitting under his word, being filled with his Spirit. Isn't that to be our prayer? That we are to be filled with God's Spirit. Each one of us together as a church, as Christians united.

It's not an optional extra. It's there for every Christian. There's no halfway here. Not half filled with the Spirit. Be filled and keep on being filled.

And we pray that God's kingdom will indeed come in glory. Amen. Amen.