

"Filled With the Spirit"

Before Jesus left His disciples to return to heaven He promised that when He was gone He would send the Holy Spirit to them. The Spirit would be *his own presence with them, and inside them!* This happened on a Jewish festival day called Pentecost. Over 120 of Jesus' followers were together in Jerusalem, waiting for the Spirit to come (as Jesus had instructed them to do). Acts 2:4 says, "They were all *filled* with the Holy Spirit." Some years later, as part of a letter written to Christians in the church in Ephesus, this command is given: "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but *be filled* with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). (Debauchery means depravity, immorality).

Both Acts 2 and the Ephesians passage talk about being *filled* with the Holy Spirit! What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? How important is this? Is this even something for us today, or was that only for those first followers of Jesus? Let's ponder these questions, and some others.

What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? The Bible itself does not give a definition. But we all know what it means to be filled with something, don't we? We eat too much at a meal and we say, "Man, I'm so *filled!*" We say somebody's "filled with rage" or "filled with laughter". Or we say, "He's so full of crap!" To be filled can be defined as to have an overwhelming presence, to pervade. To be filled with the Holy Spirit means there's an overwhelming presence of the Spirit in our life; the Holy Spirit just pervades our whole being.

Phrases like "filled with the Spirit" or "full of the Spirit" are not used that often in the Bible. I counted about 13 times. Other than the verse in Ephesians, all of the other passages about being filled with the Spirit are found in either Luke or the Book of Acts (both written by Luke). So this seems to be Luke's way of describing a deep participation in the life of the Holy Spirit, having the Spirit of God saturate our thoughts, desires, motives, actions.

Is this something for today? Of course it is! The coming of the Spirit in fullness on the day of Pentecost fulfilled a prophecy in the Book of Joel that in the *last days* God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh. The command in Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit applies to us today just as much as the Ten Commandments or Jesus' command that we love one another!

So how important is it that every follower of Jesus be filled with Spirit? And why? I've come across Christians who say, "Well, I'm a Christian, but I'm just not into this Holy Spirit stuff!" Really? Here are just a few reasons why being filled with the Spirit is so important.

It made a tremendous difference in the early church. Before the Spirit came in fullness at Pentecost the followers of Jesus were huddled together, hiding behind locked doors, timid and afraid. After they were filled with the Spirit it was like somebody turned on the power. And this motley handful of followers boldly went out and shared the message about Jesus with the world even sometimes at the cost of being persecuted and killed. Believers in the first church were far from perfect, but they had a power that churches today often seem to lack!

Being filled with the Spirit is important for another reason: We have to be filled with something! The human spirit can't be a vacuum. It doesn't stay empty. And if we're not filled

with God's Spirit, other things get sucked into that empty space in the human heart. So often if we're not filled with *God* we're filled with *garbage*! Self-interest, bad habits, sick attitudes, unloving behaviors.

The Apostle Paul talks about this in Galatians 5 and 6, and Romans, chapter 8. He reminds us that there are 2 different natures trying to fill us and control our lives if we are a Christian: the *flesh*, and the *Spirit*. The "flesh" (Greek word *sarx*) doesn't mean skin and human tissue; it's a technical term that describes unredeemed human nature, our sinful human nature apart from God. "Spirit" means the Holy Spirit. These two (the Holy Spirit, and our sinful human nature) are in opposition to each other: "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (Galatians 5:16-17).

Paul goes on to describe what happens when we're not filled with the Spirit, but controlled by this unredeemed human nature: "Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God"(Galatians 5:19-21). I mean, are these the qualities we want in our life? Think of the social consequences when people are filled and driven by our sinful human nature: Immorality, drunkenness, carousing – this hurts people, degrades people. Jealousy, envy, resentment – think how that spoils human relationships. Strife, quarrels, factions – this tears apart the fabric of our work places, our schools, our communities.

In contrast to this, this is what it's like when God's Spirit fills us, and the Spirit is in control of our life: "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Wouldn't you rather be this kind of person! Don't we prefer that our lives be marked by these kinds of beautiful qualities?

We have to be filled with something! How much better it is for individuals and society when we're filled with the Spirit rather than our unredeemed human nature.

Another reason why it's so important to be filled with Spirit is this: It leads to life rather than death. "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... so then, brothers and sisters, we are obligated, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:5-6, 12-13). "Life" and "death" are contrasted here. "Death" means spiritual death, separation from God. "Life" means life with God, the fulfilling life God intends, that leads to eternal life. This is also mentioned in Galatians 6:7-8: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from your own flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit."

So the command to be filled with the Spirit is not just a *suggestion*! Like, "Be filled with the Spirit, if this is kind of your idea of what a Christian ought to be", or "Be filled with the Spirit, unless you're an Episcopalian or United Methodist!" It has to do with whether we're on a track that leads to spiritual life or death; whether groups and peoples in the world can ever get along, whether the church cowers in fear or has an electrifying power to change the world!

How can I be filled with the Spirit. What must I do to receive His fullness? The Holy Spirit comes to individuals in different ways. Your experience may be different than mine. But here are some suggestions:

The beginning point is to really and truly yearn to be filled with God's Spirit. Frankly, the problem with some of us is that we just don't care. We don't even think about whether or not we're filled the Spirit. We're satisfied the way things are. To be filled with the Spirit there has to be a hunger, a brokenness, an emptying of the self-will. This means a willingness to turn away from evil, to put away sinful attitudes and behaviors. We can't be filled with the Spirit if our inner life is filled with trash! Step 1 is to really long that every nook and cranny of our being is possessed by God's Spirit!

Then, simply ask God to fill you with His Spirit! Here's a wonderful promise of Jesus: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). *Pray* and ask God to fill you! You think He doesn't want to do that! Pray and keep on praying. Ask and keep on asking. Don't give up!

There have been periods of spiritual revival and outpourings of the Spirit in churches, in Christian groups, even in whole cities and towns and communities – and they've all come about because God's people have been on their knees praying!

Does the fullness of the Spirit come instantaneously, all at once? Or is it gradual, a process that takes some time? The answer is Yes! It can be either. Or both. Sometimes God's Spirit comes on people and fills them instantaneously. We find examples of this in Scripture. It happened on the day of Pentecost – the group of Jesus followers were filled with the Spirit, *just like that!* Other places in the New Testament the apostles lay their hands on people, or pray for people, and they get filled right there on the spot.

There is the so-called charismatic movement today, where Christians have a deeper experience of the Spirit, a decisive experience, and often speak in tongues. John Wesley and the early Methodists talked about a "second blessing", where someone already born again and a follower of Jesus, has a deep and life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit, and is elevated to a higher plane of Christian living! Praise God when this happens. There's no reason why we should not seek that!

But I also believe being filled with the Spirit is a process. It's a day in and day out matter of seeking God, and disciplining our life: praying, reading God's Word, making those little

decision where we turn from evil and turn to God. And so gradually, over weeks and months and years, the Holy Spirit occupies a more central place in our life and thoughts and desires and motives and actions. (Even for those who get filled all at once, I think there is still that process of being filled more and more).

Our text from Ephesians says, ""Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but *be filled with the Spirit*" (Ephesians 5:18). Hopefully we take care of the first part of this command: we don't get drunk on alcohol! But the positive side of the verse is the command to be filled with God's Spirit!

So, are you filled with the Holy Spirit? Am I filled with the Holy Spirit? Do we want to be filled with God's Spirit?

We can be! And it can make an amazing difference in our life! When those first followers of Jesus got filled the Spirit, it produced a fire in them that enabled them to live victoriously and make an impact for Jesus in the world! It can do the same for us!

An English bishop once visited a sleepy little parish along the Thames River. The village priest was discouraged and depressed, not really accomplishing much. Finally, the priest confessed, "Bishop, I can't say that we are setting the Thames on fire." The bishop looked him sternly in the eye, and said, "Young man, I am not the least bit concerned about setting the Thames on fire. What I want to know is, if I take you out and drop you in it, will *you* sizzle?"

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