

An Atmosphere of Truth, Part 2

Ephesians 5:18

Look again at Ephesians 5:18. Notice the last phrase, "Be filled with the Spirit." That phrase literally reads, "Be continually being filled by the Spirit." That's what the Greek literally says, there. So just a few points of observation about that. First, the verb voice is passive. It's the passive voice, being filled. This tells us that the filling is something that happens to us, okay? We're passive in this; it happens to us.

Second, though, even though it happens to us, because this is an imperative, because it's a command, being filled is something we have a responsibility to do. Not only that, but third, the present tense means we're responsible to be filled continually, constantly, regularly, as a habit of life. Just a fourth point of observation on that little phrase, there and here's where this involves me, my ministry to you.

Notice that prepositional phrase translated in your Bibles as, with the Spirit. “Be being filled with the Spirit,” that’s how many translations render the Greek phrase, *en pneumate*, but it’s not the best way to understand that. I’ve come to understand this phrase through study, and it’s also translated, that way, in the way I have come to understand it, in two grammatically precise translations, the Holman Christian Standard Bible and the New English Translation, it’s best to render the phrase not as “with the Spirit,” but as “by the Spirit.” By the Spirit. That is to say, the Holy Spirit is not the content that fills us; he’s not necessarily the wind that fills our sails. He is the agent who does the filling. He’s the agent who does the filling.

So Ephesians 5:18, tells us we’re responsible to be continually being filled by the Holy Spirit. With what? What, what’s the content he fills us with? Again, note the parallel, Colossians 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you.” I call that a parallel because it is. Because in Colossians 3:16, when “the word of Christ richly dwells within you,” in Ephesians 5:18, when the Holy Spirit is filling you, the effects are exactly the same.

The effects are exactly the same. The Holy Spirit fills us with the content of the Word of Christ, the Word about Christ, “and in Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” right? So the Spirit fills us with the truth of the Gospel, with the apostolic truth of the New Testament, and it’s your responsibility as a Christian to be continually being filled by the Spirit with that truth.

But that takes work, right? It takes effort. Thinking is not easy. It’s become increasingly difficult for those of us who’ve become accustomed to, getting the gist of the story, in this high-speed information age. We, we’ve gotten used to the ease, and the speed, and the entertaining nature of information these days, the visual ways that the culture dispenses information. We’ve become modern consumers of information, but we haven’t learned to do the hard work of assimilating the truth, of working it in.

Listen, beloved, there is no replacement for the method prescribed by the psalmist to open up the entire psalter, Psalms

1 verses 1 and 2. You must separate yourself from “the counsel of the wicked, from the way of sinners, and from the seat of scoffers,” and instead, you must “delight yourself in the law of the Lord.” Does his Word delight you? You must “meditate on it day and night” because if it doesn’t delight you, you’re not going to meditate on it day and night; you’re going to think about other things. All that takes work. It requires effort on our part. It requires fundamental decisions about how we’re going to spend our days, how we’re going to spend our hours, how we’re going to live our life.

But listen, beloved, the effort is so worthwhile because “Christ died to bring us to God,” 1 Peter 3:18. By studying and learning God’s precious and magnificent promises, 2 Peter 1:4, we are able “to partake of the divine nature.” By reading and studying, we learn to live out the full implications of Christ’s full and perfect atonement. We get to learn about the implications of a clear conscience, where “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” We learn about the full implications of the Gospel about the truth that Christ did die to bring us to God, the blessed slavery of living in

service to the Lord Jesus Christ; a lifetime of service to God and his people. That's what we get to learn.

Now it's not only influences, cultural influences, organic changes we're trying to overcome to get the truth into you. You've actually been taught by the prevailing evangelical culture to favor the simple over the complex. You've been taught to favor the easy over the difficult. Many of those who've been elevated into evangelical celebrity status have also been put forth as models of a simple, non-complex, cookies-on-the-bottom-shelf style of preaching.

I attended Bible college at a prominent evangelical seminary, and our homiletics professor had us studying the methods and techniques of evangelists like Billy Graham and other prominent mega-church pastors. He actually steered us away, steered us away from deep Bible study in the pulpit, and he steered us toward these models. They were set forth as *the* models for preaching in the local church, *the* way to build and grow a church, and in his mind, talking about numbers, talking about heads to count, people in the pews, which meant dollar signs for your church budget.

I was hearing that back in the mid-nineties. It was going on before I got there, and it went on after I left, and it has continued to be the gold standard pattern of preaching recommended in seminaries throughout the country and really because of our missionary enterprises, around the world. I've been in the Philippines, I've been in China, and I've seen that, I've seen it personally, visually watched that.

Now to be fair, not all seminaries have recommended that pattern of preaching. A few are standouts. But that leaves us with the question: What exactly should local church preaching look like? What should I be doing in the pulpit Sunday after Sunday to make sure I'm part of the means that the Holy Spirit uses to get the truth into you. I've always looked to Ezra as a model for preaching. Turn to the eighth chapter with me of Nehemiah. The little book of Nehemiah, post-exilic book, this is not exactly where you might go by instinct to find a pattern for biblical preaching. There are many places we could go, but this text gets to the heart of the matter very quickly.

Biblical preaching really starts with the preacher, and all faithful preachers, all faithful expositors follow the pattern set by Ezra, which is in Ezra 7:10. That verse Ezra 7:10, tells us, "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to do it, and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." You hear that? He studied, he obeyed, and out of that habit of life, he taught God's Word to God's people. Well, that's what I endeavor to practice in my own life, to study, to obey, and then to teach you.

How exactly, then, did Ezra teach? What was his pattern? And especially considering the fact that these are returning exiles; they're coming out of the Medo-Persian empire: Assyria taken over by Babylon, both those nations are the ones who exiled the Israelites and the people of Judah. Then Medo-pers, Medea, then Persia, Medo-Persia empire took over Babylon, they conquered, and Cyrus made a decree, send them back. Send them back.

Ezra set the foundation spiritually, built the Temple. Nehemiah built the walls of Jerusalem. They re-built Jerusalem together. So Ezra and Nehemiah kinda go together. But these

returning exiles, they're not well educated. They're not bookish, academic types. So how did Ezra reach this agricultural community? How did he reach these tradesmen, these poor people returning from exile?

We'll take a look Nehemiah, chapter 8, verse 1, "And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard. On the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it. Facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday." In the presence of the men and women and those who could understand. All the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law."

They "were attentive to the Book of the Law," verse 4, "And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. Beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the

sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.

“And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,” all those guys, “helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places.”

Look at verse 8, “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly,” or you might translate that phrase, with translation, “and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Ezra, along with those other Levites and I just went through the exercise of poorly pronouncing those names, so you know I didn’t waste my seminary education, or maybe I did, but Ezra, along with the other Levites, he explained the law to the people. How? By reading from the book of the law of God, by translating, by giving the meaning. Why? So that the people could understand what was read.

That's the biblical pattern of preaching that we practice here at this church. We read so you know the source. This isn't my word. This isn't my opinion. This is no human source. This is the authoritative Word of God, and today, because you all have copies of the Bible, you all can follow along in your Bibles to make sure of that. We translate what we read, so everyone is clear about what's actually being said. This is the crucial step of exegesis called observation, which consumes, honestly consumes, the majority of my preparation time.

I want to make sure, like a good detective, I'm seeing everything that's actually there. We have to see what's really there. We have to see what the Bible actually says before we can make judgments about what it means. So we read, we translate, or we observe, and then we interpret. We determine what the meaning is. For every text of Scripture, there is one and only one meaning. God wasn't of a double mind when he gave the Scripture. He meant one and only one thing. Nehemiah 8:8 says Ezra and the Levites were giving the meaning. Why? "So the people could understand what was read."

Listen, why was that important? Because Ezra, the Levites, Nehemiah the governor, and all the other godly authorities among these returning exiles, they desperately wanted the people to obey God. Remember, God judged the people, and he threw them out of the land because they failed to obey his Word. Ezra and Nehemiah understood that they would only remain in the land if they obeyed. God was always very clear about that, always had been. Blessings for obedience, cursings for disobedience.

But these leaders knew people wouldn't obey what they didn't believe, and they couldn't believe what they didn't understand, so their duty as leaders was to make sure people could hear God's Word, know for sure what it was said, what, what it said, and then understand its meaning. That's all they could do as leadership, right? It was up to the individual hearer to disbelieve or to believe, to disobey or to obey.

It's the same thing for you and me, beloved. My job is to make sure you hear God's Word, and that's why we read it together. My job is to make sure you know exactly what God's Word says, and that's why I guide you through observations that come from the text. My job is to make sure you understand the

meaning of God's Word. That's why I don't give you a list of interpretive options and then leave it up to you to decide. I tell you, based on educated study, I tell you what I believe the text means by what it says. Most often, the observations that we make together lead you to the exact same conclusions. By making good observations, the meaning comes to us, doesn't it?

My job is not to entertain you. The world can entertain far better than religious people can. I'm not good at that. My job is not to keep all the cookies on the bottom shelf, preaching to the lowest common denominator. If I do that, then we're catering to the least mature and keeping everyone else stunted in their spiritual growth. I need to set the bar high so that we can all strive for a righteous standard. I need to dig down deep so we can all anchor ourselves, our lives, into the bedrock of God's truth. And I need to do all of that faithfully, consistently, over a long period of time because transformation, you know, comes over the long haul. Growth comes over the long haul.

That's my job. It's called an expository ministry. And if we, all of us together, if we cooperate together to sustain that kind of teaching ministry, you know what? The long-term effect

will be nothing less than transformative, seeing the very power of God to change families, change lives, change a people, change an entire community. By observing my pattern of teaching every week, you're going to grow in your ability to read the text more accurately for yourself, to make good observations, to ask good questions of the text, and then come to understanding for yourself.

All of that is going to help to obey the Lord more consistently. What Christian doesn't want to obey his Lord? All of that's going to help you to worship God more passionately, to serve him more steadfastly. As you grow in your ability to read and study and understand God's Word, it's going to give you food for meditation. It's going to renew your mind with divine truth. It's going to transform you from the inside out. You will have spiritual energy to take you through your life.

Again, it's that deep reading. It's that ability to engage the text and the author of the text and his mind and his thinking with focus sustained thinking. And that's going to bring you into intimate communion with the author. When that happens, watch out, because what Jesus promised is going to

happen to you, too. John 7:38, "Whoever believes in me as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." I want that, don't you?

Well, that's the first point we need to cover for this morning. That's how we assimilate the truth. Just before we close, I want to give you a little list of things to do to grow in your ability to assimilate the truth. A list of four things, four simple things. And they have to do with before, during, and after I preach.

Before I preach, number one: before I preach review where we've been and where we're going. It's an expository ministry, so there's no real surprise about where we're going in the text. If I covered one section in Luke in one week, the next, next week you come in, I'm going to be covering the next section. So review where we've been and where we're going. Read it. Pray that God will open your heart to his Word as you read. That's one of the benefits of an expository ministry, you know what's coming. I'm not up here giving my sugar-stick sermons. I'm not up here with a bully pulpit just to tell you what's on my mind. You're here to hear from the living God, and we're going to go

consecutively through the text, exactly as the Spirit wanted you to hear it. So before I preach, review where we've been, where we're going, and pray that God will open your heart.

When I preach, number two: When I preach, take notes. Take notes. You don't have to get everything, every cross reference, every word. This isn't, dict, dictation. Just make sure you understand the main points enough to summarize them in your notes. That means you have to listen carefully, thoughtfully. You have to follow the argument. You have to be able to distill that down into some things that make sense in your notes, so that when you go back to it later, you'll be able to unpack that and remember what I taught.

So that leads us to number three, after I preach. Review your notes. Pray and ask God how to apply these principles to your life. Contrary to popular opinion, it's not my job to give you ten points of application that every single one of you can grab on to and do something with. It's not, *Twelve Steps to a Happy Marriage*, or *Twelve Steps to Independence Financially*, or it's not that. My job is to make sure you understand what the text says, what it means by what it says, and to convey the

appropriate sense of that text. If exhortation, then I exhort. If explanation, I explain. What I should also do is give you the implication of any text for your lives, which I try to do. Listen for that. Listen for not only what it means by what it says, but also the so what? So what, okay, now that I understand that, so what? Great!

So ask those kind of questions so you take this further in your own personal life. Ask questions that lead you to application. For example, what are the main points of the passage? What principles can I glean from these points? Why did God want me to hear that message, those points, this morning? Is there a sin I need to confess? Is there a relationship I need to restore or reconcile? Is there a word that need to hear to encourage me? How does my thinking need to change so I grow in consistency in living out these principles in my life? Listen, ask those questions, a number of questions like that to help you apply the messages for yourself. I'm going to post some more questions like that on the web site.

So that's before, during, after I preach. One more suggestion, number four: Expose yourself to good teaching.

Expose yourself to good teaching. Start by reading your Bible regularly. It's amazing how few professing Christians read their Bibles every day. Trust me, you'll be better able to assimilate the truth if you're exposing yourself to truth every single day. And you will be more attuned to the preaching if, if your Bible reading is a consistent, regular, inviolable habit in your life.

You need to be like the psalmist who wrote Psalm 119, "I promise to keep your words; how sweet are your words to my taste. Your word imparts understanding to the simple. The unfolding of your words gives light. I rise before dawn and I cry for help. I hope in your words. My heart stands in awe of your words." Man, if that's your heart, your gonna, it's gonna drive you right to the Bible.

That's the beauty of how God made our brains: Malleable, mutable, able to change and adapt, able to break all those old, neuro pathways and to re-wire, re-map, build new pathways. You can train your brain to read God's Word deeply, thoughtfully, prayerfully, meditatively.

While you're working on developing a habit of consistent daily Bible reading, try listening to good preaching as well. Try listening to good preaching. All preachers are not alike, but all good preachers, all faithful preachers, do what I'm doing. So read good books. Read good sermons, good articles that will deepen your understanding of biblical doctrine.

Go deeper. Engage in a little personal Bible study for yourself. Get yourself a *MacArthur Study Bible* or a really good study Bible, the *ESV Study Bible* is a good one, too, and just read a passage, read the accompanying footnote, and then write down your observations and reactions. If you like to go deeper still, get a commentary or two. Do the same thing.

Alright, well, that's enough for now. So many challenges to overcome in striving to assimilate the truth, but God is faithful. He cares more about our success in this regard than even we do, than even I do. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to help us. Nothing can succeed in standing against us, right? Let's bow together in prayer.

PILLAR OF
—TRUTH— 

Heavenly Father, I just thank you for allowing my voice to hold out, but I pray also, Lord, that you'd help us all to assimilate the truth as one body together. We love you. We give thanks to you for all of this. In Jesus' name, amen.