

An Atmosphere of Truth, Part 1

Ephesians 5:18

Turn in your Bibles to Ephesians 5:18. How do we assimilate the truth? If the Lord wants anything for his people, it's this: Be saturated with the revealed Word of God. How do we take it in, then? How do we incorporate the truth into our lives? We need to listen to the truth, read the truth, study the truth, memorize the truth, meditate on the truth, obey the truth. Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" It is written; what is it written? Where is written? Why it's back in Deuteronomy 8:3. Jesus was saturated with the Word of God, and he went back in his contest with the devil, at his temptation, he went back to quote Scripture to the devil.

God had humbled Israel in the wilderness, let his people hunger and thirst so that he could feed them with manna, so that they might know, Deuteronomy 8:3, "that man does not live by bread but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of

the Lord.” Life by his Word. Life and God’s Word, you keep those closely connected in your mind.

That revealed Word, like all Scripture, comes directly from God. 2 Timothy 3:16, the word is *theopneustos*. *Theopneustos*, God breathed literally. It’s breathed out from God, and since it comes directly from God, it will teach you. It will reprove you. It will correct you, will train you in righteousness. Do you want that? All true Christians do. They know they’re ignorant without God’s Word, so they want to be taught. They know they err, so they want to be reproved. They know they stray, so they want to be corrected. And since they hunger and thirst for righteousness, all true Christians seek to be trained for righteousness.

Understanding God’s Word, then, is the most essential, most fundamental thing. As we’ve already said, it informs, it edifies, it strengthens, it guides, all the one another’s of the New Testament, as well as every Christian virtue and every command that we’re responsible to obey. That’s why Peter said, 1 Peter 2.2, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow up into salvation.”

Ever watched a newborn baby when it’s feeding time? That cute, pink, cuddly little baby becomes a piranha. It cannot be

satisfied until it, gives, gets that life-giving milk. Beloved, that's how we're to long for God's Word. We need its life-giving nectar so desperately. So we need to assimilate it. We need to imbibe it. We need to digest it. We need to absorb it into our bloodstream. You need to, Colossians 3:16, you need to, "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." Richly! Which is really a parallel concept that helps us understand what it is to be filled with the Spirit.

Take a look, then, at Ephesians 5:18, "Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." You say, it didn't say anything about a marijuana. Can we smoke marijuana? No, Colorado, you cannot smoke marijuana. I don't care if it's legal, you cannot do that. Think about it, this isn't, this isn't just about imbibing intoxicating substances, wine, drugs, whatever.

Wine, here, stands in the text, as a metaphor. It's a particular figure of speech that we call synecdoche, where the part represents the whole, or vice versa. So in this case, wine represents anything that intoxicates. Anything that alters brain function because it diminishes the ability to do what? To think. To communicate. To receive truth. To practice truth.

Now I don't want to push the metaphor too far, but it is biblical to protect our minds from anything that intoxicates, from anything that could diminish its function, its capacity, its ability to think, to process, to analyze, to make wise decisions. Solomon's mother told him in the Proverbs, "It's not for kings to drink wine, Solomon. It's not for rulers to drink strong drink; otherwise, they might drink and pervert justice."

So kings, authorities, ought not to drink. That's what he's telling, that's what she's telling her son; it's very wise advice from a wise mother. So you're not to drink wine or smoke marijuana. Good for you, okay? You don't do that. But are you dulling your brain in other ways? Through television? Other forms of visual entertainment. Are you filling your days with activity that just is trivial? Activity that just occupies all your time so you have no time or energy left to think?

Some people engage in mind-numbing activity, occupying themselves with just unprofitable busyness that just leaves no time to read, to study, to think, to meditate, to ponder. Others, especially among the young, they dull their brains with video games, distract themselves by surfing the web, Facebooking, Googling, flitting between tantalizing bits of

trivia, information, news stories, and they are unwittingly distracting themselves to death.

Listen if we're going to assimilate the truth, if we're going to take seriously what the Bible commands us to do, we're going to have to make some choices, aren't we? You can't have it both ways. You can't indulge in the distracting enticements of the world and that not have an effect on you. I'm talking about the non-sinful pleasures. I'm talking about non-sinful pastimes. Just these things are permissible. These things are lawful for us as Christians. But you can't indulge in those things and still effectively assimilate God's truth into your life to transforming effect. You will be stunted.

We need to be aware of the cultural forces that are stacked against us, to fight, to assimilate the truth. And that's really what this is about. I want to commend assimilating the truth to you, and I want to make you aware of a couple of forces that are stacked against you, such as worldly culture, that's a challenge to us. There are assumptions and expectations that have arisen within evangelical culture that hinder our assimilation of the truth as well.

By God's design, our brains, the most complex organ in our bodies, the neural pathways and synapses in the brain can change

based on external influences. Might be organic factors, like injury and disease, but most commonly it's inorganic influences, things we watch, things we read, things we react to emotionally, things we think about the most, what we put before our eyes, what we listen to. Our brains react to those things. They change to adapt our neural pathways and synapses to a flow of stimuli, whatever that stimuli is. Now God designed it that way because he wants our minds to be renewed by the truth of his Word. If our minds can never change, if our brains are static, organs there's no change to them, there is no hope for renewing our minds because our spirit uses our brain to think. However that works, I don't know; it's a mystery.

But our spirit uses our brain, this organ, to think and God designed that brain, that organ to be moldable. Look it up. It's called neuroplasticity, or brain plasticity, in which studies cellular changes in the brain, re-mapping, re-wiring. So the brain is not a static organ, it's dynamic, it's mutable, not immutable. It's changeable. It's malleable. And that is a good thing. But with the wrong stimuli, it's a bad thing. We're like computers: garbage in, garbage out. On the other hand, truth in, truth out.

All these fantastic developments in technology, smartphones, high-definition television, interactive gaming, the Internet, the almost instant access, all of that gives us to seemingly infinite amount of information, all at the click of a mouse. All these blessings have hit the cultural mainland like a tidal wave, and it's radically altered the intellectual landscape, including the way we think and process information.

This high-speed medium, this high-speed conduit, this new way of accessing information, it's subtly, quietly, almost imperceptibly changing our brains. Our brains have re-wired themselves, re-mapped themselves to adapt to the new environment. The ease of access following all the hyperlinks, flitting from thing to thing, it's changed the way we assimilate information. We assimilate it more on a superficial level, now.

We're very superficial thinkers even though we think that we're deep thinkers because of all the vast amount of information. So rather than readers, we've become skimmers. We scan instead of really reading. For most of us, getting the gist of the story is good enough. We don't seem to have the patience anymore for longer, more complex arguments. We're unable to follow the development of thoughts.

Look, I hope you can see, that's bad for us as Christians. That's bad for us as we seek to assimilate the truth. That's working against us. God does not reduce his truth to sound bites. He does not reduce his truth to Twitter messages of 140 characters or less. The truth of the Gospel, though a child can apprehend it, it is infinitely complex. It is amazingly profound. It is beyond our complete comprehension. Look, even the so-called *Reader's Digest* version of the Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, that's still 678 verses. That's a lot of sentences, though, for a generation afflicted with this media-induced attention deficit disorder.

My job as the main teaching, preaching, elder in this church, is to get that complex, profound, ultimately incomprehensible truth into each one of you. How am I going to do that when the culture's working completely the opposite direction, and you're unaware of its implications. I need to raise this to you. Like Paul, my job in discharging my pastoral teaching responsibility, is to declare to you, Acts 20:27, "the whole counsel of God," not the *Reader's Digest* version. I'm not to, quote, "shrink back from declaring to you anything that is profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house," Acts 20:20.



Well, why is that? 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.

The teaching ministry of the local church is the indispensable means to that end. In fact, the teaching ministry of the local church is the primary and the immediate way to apply Ephesians 5:18. You ask, does this verse mean that I'm supposed to do more personal Bible study? Well, that's one very good application that should come out of it, but it's not the immediate application. It's not the primary application.

Think about hearing this letter for the very first time. Put yourself back 2,000 years, and you're a resident of Ephesus. You're a new convert who attends First Baptist Church of Ephesus, because all those churches were Baptist churches, by the way, just saying, and you're sitting under the ministry of Pastor Timothy. Pastor Timothy pulls out his letter from the Apostle Paul, and he reads it out loud from the pulpit one Sunday morning to you.

When you hear the command in Ephesians 5:18, you know what you're not going to do? You're not going to run home, brew a cup of tea or coffee, grab your Bible, and get into your daily devotions. Why not? Because you don't even own a personal copy of the Bible. Not many did. You just heard the letter from the pulpit. You don't have a copy of it at home. In fact, many people, because writing was expensive, it was becoming cheaper

during that day, but it was still expensive, maybe they had scraps of the Bible, copies that they'd written down, went to the synagogue, copied down parts of Deuteronomy, Moses, whatever. But they didn't have a whole Bible.

What you would do to apply this text? You'd be at the church whenever they were meeting because you'd want to avail yourself of the church's teaching ministry. You'd realize what Paul said earlier in his letter, that Christ personally gave some in your church to be pastors and teachers, specifically, Ephesians 4:12, "to equip the saints." That's you, "to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ."

You'd, you'd realize the essential and foundational nature of the truth. You'd realize it's transforming power to unify God's people, to provide the full perfect knowledge of the Son of God, to bring maturity and growth in Christ-likeness. You'd recognize the need to become discerning and strong, so you're no longer children in your thinking, Ephesians 4:14, "tossed to and fro by the waves, carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes." You'd see how assimilating truth into your life is foundational to all growth and godliness.

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.

I guarantee you, communing with the God of heaven is better than what’s on TV, it’s better than time with family, as good as that is. It’s better than camping and backpacking in the mountains. Communion with the Triune God is what you were made for, and you have access to him right now through his Word, by his Spirit.

One of the benefits of the way God made our brains to change and adapt is our ability to recover something we’ve all but lost in the culture, something called deep reading, deep reading. Deep reading is active reading, it’s thoughtful reading

it's focused, concentrated, undistracted. Deep reading allows us as readers to get into the flow of an author's argument, his thought processes, his mind. It's possible to achieve a very close, even intimate, communion between author and reader through deep reading. This isn't mystical.

Understand that at the very core of who you are, you are spirit. You're also flesh, but you're spirit. The author, also spirit. And when we verbalize, when we write, you know what that is? That's one spirit talking to another spirit. It's a communion of spirits. So when we're getting into an author's work, in one sense we're communing with that author. We're following his thinking, our thinking following his thinking, our spirit following his spirit and his thought. Or, in the words of the Apostle Peter, through the assimilation of God's precious and magnificent word, through that "we may become partakers of the divine nature." You get how important this is?

Deep reading leads to deep communion. So what I do as a pastor, really helpful for you. I'm here to help you understand the meaning of what you read in the Bible through the exposition of passages of Scripture, I'm informing your own study and reading of God's Word. I'm here to enable you to become a deep reader of the Bible, so you can read thoughtfully, so you can

imbibe its truths deeply, where you can meditate on it day and night.

That's why you need to partake of the regular teaching ministry of your local church. A local church that's doing this, learning from its spiritually gifted teachers so you can better understand the meaning of what you read. And as you understand the meaning, you can obey its truths, you can truly commune with the author, the divine author, of this book.