

Exegetical Brief: Ephesians 1:23 – The “Fullness” of Ascension Comfort

By Daniel P. Leyrer

As he walked with the Emmaus disciples and before he explained what Moses and the Prophets had to say about him, Jesus gave a preview of his ascension into heaven by saying: “Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26). Just as there is comfort in being assured that the Lamb of God suffered the punishment our sins deserved, so there is comfort in knowing the Son of God has entered his glory in heaven. Every Ascension preacher will want to communicate this comfort in his Ascension Day sermon. The second lesson appointed for the festival this year (Ephesians 1:16-23) includes Paul’s inspired commentary on the comfort every Christian may gain from Christ’s ascension. In this lesson the apostle prays that his readers know the power of God exerted in raising Jesus from the dead and seating him at his right hand. Then Paul assures us that the ascended Savior now rules all things for the ultimate good of his church. In this exegetical brief we concern ourselves especially with the grand crescendo of Paul’s ascension thoughts, his last words in this section:

τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ τὰ πάντα ἐν ᾧσαν πληρουμένου.

This last clause in the section, in apposition to τὸ σῶμα earlier in the verse, has been called the most problematic in Ephesians. What most commentators and translations agree on is that it is a description of the church as the body of Christ. What has vexed commentators through the years is determining exactly what point Paul is making about the church and Christ by using cognate forms (πλήρωμα and πληρουμένου) to describe them. How is the church Christ’s “fullness?” How is Christ someone who “is filled?” These are the questions we’ll seek to answer on the basis of the Greek text, all the while trying to connect our answers to specific applications of Ascension comfort and encouragement for God’s people.

The noun πλήρωμα may have an active or a passive sense. In other words, it can refer to that which fills something up or to that which is filled up. For instance, ancient Greek writers used this same word to refer to the cargo which fills up the ship (“fullness” in the active sense), and to the ship which is filled up with cargo (“fullness” in the passive sense). Most often the word πλήρωμα has the active meaning when it is used in the New Testament. Jesus uses it to refer to the patch that fills up an open space in a garment (Matthew 9:16), and Mark uses it to refer to the pieces of bread that filled twelve baskets after Jesus fed the five thousand (Mark 6:43). In this active sense πλήρωμα is a term for something that brings something else to completion.

This is where many good commentators and exegetes have balked. To take πλήρωμα in Ephesians 1:23 in its normal active sense would suggest that Paul is saying that the church is something that brings Christ to completion. How can this be? Our Lord Jesus is not incomplete in any way. The church does not make him more of a Lord or more of a Savior by anything she does. Perhaps it would be better to consider the church as Christ’s fullness in the passive sense, that is, in the sense that she is filled by Jesus with all his grace and gifts. This is the scriptural thought behind the *God’s Word to the Nations* translation of “completely filled by him.”

Yet, the context argues for taking πλήρωμα in the active sense. In verses 22 and 23 Paul calls Christ the head and us, his church, the body. While the head controls the body, it is also accurate to say that the head is incomplete without the body. It is in apposition to the church as Christ’s body that Paul refers to the church as Christ’s πλήρωμα. Just as the body completes the head, so also the church completes Christ. Of course, this completing is all part of Christ’s perfect and gracious plan for his church in the world. He doesn’t need us to complete him. He allows us to be his body, his effective instruments on earth. He could have chosen angels to spread his gospel after he ascended into heaven. Instead, he chose us! What a gracious privilege it is to complement him in this way. To fill Jesus up is to carry out his work in this world. A prayer attributed to Teresa of Lisieux expresses the thought nicely:

You have no body on earth but ours,
No hands but ours, no feet but ours,
Ours are the eyes showing your compassion to the world;
Ours are the feet with which you go about doing good;
Ours are the hands with which you are to bless us now.

Paul wrote a similar thought in Colossians 1:24. There he writes of the privilege it is to be the one who brings the gospel to the Gentiles. He is quick to point out that faithful gospel preaching sometimes brought suffering his way. But because the suffering was a by-product of evangelizing people, Paul rejoiced in it (χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν). Paul was so certain he was acting as Christ's effective instrument on earth, as a part of his body, that he even goes so far as to say that he was completing what was lacking in Christ's afflictions (ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ). Note the similarity in Paul's use of ἀνταναπληρῶ in Colossians 1:24 and πλήρωμα in Ephesians 1:23. The idea is the same – not that any Christian can add to the finished work of salvation, but that, in his mercy, Jesus views us as precious souls who complete him. Just as a doctor is incomplete without the patients to whom he may give aid, so our Savior views himself as incomplete without the souls he has healed with his blood and commissioned with his gospel message. What amazing grace!

This amazing grace is highlighted even more by the last word Paul uses in our verse: πληρουμένου. It is the present participle of πληρῶ and it modifies Christ. Whether it should be understood in the passive or middle voice has been debated, since the passive and middle forms look the same in a contract verb like this. Because the middle voice had already lost much of its force in the Koine of the New Testament, it's generally a good idea to think passive first in these instances, unless context makes clear that the verb should be understood as a middle. Here we have one of those occasions. Paul is magnifying the paradox of grace with this final word. He's telling us that even though the Son of God "completes all things in every way for himself" (taking πληρουμένου in the classic middle sense), he still allows us to be the ones who complete him. Even though all things depend on Christ, he deigns to depend on his church to spread his words in the world. Who can fathom such a glorious, and gracious, mystery?

There is powerful Ascension Day comfort and encouragement in these last words of the Epistle Lesson. Each one of your hearers can be assured that the one who fulfills all things in every way is watching over his church in this world. Each one of your hearers may be encouraged to be what they already are: vital parts of Christ's body whom he allows to serve as his instruments of love and mercy now that he has ascended from this world. God bless your proclamation of the Ascension gospel.