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The Fulness of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The field of our meditation mainly will be the book of Joshua and the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. The fragment which is the key to this meditation is in Ephesians 4:13:

"Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a fullgrown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

This verse might very well be placed at the commencement of the book of Joshua, and it would give a very good interpretation to that book, and be a guide for the spiritual reading and study of the book. It would explain all that is happening after Israel has crossed the Jordan and entered the land. It would explain things from both sides; from the side of the Divine intention, and from the side of the adversary's withstanding. It would represent what the Lord is seeking, and what the foes are against.

"Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith...". Carry that first clause of the verse through the book of Joshua, and it is very illuminating.

"...and of the knowledge of the Son of God..." the same applies there. It will be necessary to take just a fragment from the letter to the Hebrews perhaps, to help us in that connection as to Joshua being appointed to bring into rest. But Joshua did not fully accomplish that purpose in bringing into rest "There remaineth therefore, a rest for the people of God" (Hebrew 4:9). That "rest remaining" is found in Christ. The book of Joshua is intended to point to the fulness of the knowledge of the Son

of God in the saints; of coming to finality, to rest; "...unto a fullgrown man..." and that clearly stands in contradistinction from the wilderness life of spiritual immaturity.

"... unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." It is only possible to understand the land in the light of the fulness of Christ. All the superlative promises connected with that land are transferred spiritually to the Lord Jesus. He is God's fulness for His people in every respect.

Truly this 13th verse of Ephesians 4 is a magnificent introduction to the book of Joshua. The last clause embodies all the other clauses: "...the fulness of Christ." That is the end in view.

The letters to the Ephesians and Colossians as a whole have to do with the fulness of Christ. In the Colossian letter it is the fulness of Christ as Head; in the Ephesian letter it is the fulness of Christ as Head over all things to the Church which is His Body, *which is the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.*

The Trinity in Action

Returning to the typical, or illustrative side of this spiritual truth as brought out in the life of Israel, we might begin by noticing the three sections of Israel's history. Firstly in Egypt and the deliverance; secondly, in the wilderness; thirdly, in the land. Each of these represents a specific relation of the Godhead.

1. The Father in Egypt.

The first - Egypt and the deliverance - sees God the Father acting in Sovereign grace. The thought of the Father is very definitely introduced when the commission is given to Moses. Moses was told to say to Pharaoh: "Let my son go that he may serve me "; and "Thou hast refused to let him go; behold, I will slay thy son, thy firstborn." It is God the Father acting in Sovereign grace in relation to Israel in Egypt, and Israel's deliverance. It is God, Whose heart is set upon His family, His children, Who takes the initiative in relation to men and women in the bondage of the world of sin, and Satan. It is God who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. The paternal element is there in Sovereign grace to secure a family.

2. The Son in the Wilderness.

In the second case - in the wilderness - it is Christ as the pattern and basis of life. The pattern, perhaps consummately represented in the Tabernacle and all the ordinances of the Tabernacle, is Christ in Person, and Christ as a heavenly order, a spiritual system, to which the people of God are to be conformed, unto which likeness they are to be brought. It is brought out very clearly in the New Testament. Christ is there spoken of as the basis of life. In the wilderness there were many types of Christ as the life of the heavenly people, the Manna, the Bread: "I am the bread of life"; "Your fathers did eat the manna in the wilderness..."; "I am the living bread." The water from the rock, is referred to by the Apostle Paul: "I would not have you ignorant brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptised unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea... and did all drink the same spiritual drink; for they drank of a spiritual rock that followed them; and the rock was Christ." And so on many other occasions we find Christ in the wilderness as the basis of life.

3. The Spirit in the Land.

When we come to the third case - in the land - we come to the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit in energy concerning attaining unto the fulness of Christ. Joshua, as we well know, is a type of the energy of the Holy Ghost. Joshua came under the government of the Captain of Jehovah's hosts - the Holy Spirit in relation to Christ in the place of absolute authority.

These three sections of Israel's history bring into view the three relationships of the Godhead in their specific expression; the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. The Father and redemption; the Son and the redemptive object; the Holy Spirit and the redemptive energy.

Four Features of the Book of Joshua

The book of Joshua corresponds to Ephesians and Colossians in four things, in the main:-

Firstly, in Christ risen - on the far side of Jordan.

Secondly, in the heavenlies in Christ. A people who are regarded as entirely detached from this world and who are forbidden to have any kind of voluntary relationship therewith.

Thirdly, spiritual increase - going on unto full growth, to God's end.

Fourthly, spiritual government.

Those are the four things which are the main lines of the book of Joshua, and they are the four things which characterise in an outstanding way the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians.

The important thing to see is that these are successive steps, each of which makes the other necessary, both before and after.

If you are in Christ risen, then, as Paul says in Colossians 3:1, you must seek those things which are above, where Christ is. The risen life with Christ demands the heavenly position and the heavenly life in Christ.

To have a heavenly life with Christ now you must know resurrection life in Christ. It is impossible to know a life in heavenly fellowship with the Lord if you do not know Him in the power of His resurrection. It is a thing which is basic. It is a crisis at a certain point, but it is a thing which goes on all the time. Every day, in order to maintain and continuously enjoy our heavenly life and position in Christ we have to apply the power of His resurrection; that is, live upon His risen life. If we are daily and really living upon the risen life of the Lord Jesus, we shall know what heavenly fellowship is. These things demand each other, both ways.

Then, if we are risen with Christ, and in a heavenly fellowship, we shall move to the third thing spontaneously - spiritual increase; growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ; moving on to maturity, to fulness.

Let us work back again. There can be no spiritual increase only as we are living out of voluntary contact with what is meant by the world spiritually and morally. We can never grow in Christ if we have any kind of root in, or link with the world spiritually or morally. If we have, it will keep us back

from spiritual growth. We can never know spiritual increase only as we know the energy of the risen life of the Lord Jesus.

Then the fourth thing follows - spiritual government, ascendancy, authority, power, dominion. That is something more than position. That is putting your position into an executive form. You may have a position in which you are not functioning. That wants explaining, but it is easily made very simple and very practical. What is spiritual government? What is spiritual ascendancy? Some people have, it seems, reduced this question of authority, government and power to apply merely to the realm of direct power over the enemy, and whenever authority or government is mentioned they have some idea of exorcism and dealing with demons, and so on. That may be quite a proper realm for the exercise of authority in Christ, but more often than not the experience of the average Christian is dealing with demons indirectly, and not directly. If someone just crosses a desire, a preference, a like of ours, and becomes thereby a means of irritation or annoyance, there is plenty of room for losing your position and breaking down in your ascendancy. There is, on the other hand, the very opportunity for proving that you are above and not beneath. In a thousand different ways in ordinary everyday life, the whole question of government is involved. Every provocation is a test of spiritual government. Why does the Lord not remove difficult and awkward people from the sphere of our lives, but leaves them there? We may have prayed many times for the Lord to take them out of our range, to deliver us from them; and the Lord ignores all such prayers. He is simply saying: This is unto the enlargement of Christ! How? Simply by our getting on top of the situation by faith's appropriation of Christ. That is the government of Christ. That is spiritual increase. That is spiritual ascendancy.

Countless are the ways in which we can go up or go down almost any day, and many times in a day; and whether we go up or down depends entirely upon the measure of Christ that is in us, to which we have attained. If there is a large measure of Christ, then we shall be able to meet evil with good, and so triumph. That is government. Indirectly we are simply dealing with the foe. The enemy counts upon that ground of fleshly reaction for his victories all the time. If he has no ground of fleshly reaction - that is, if we do not react in the flesh - the enemy is a defeated foe, and we are in the place of authority over him. Authority is not simply official; it is spiritual, it is moral, it is "Christ in you...".

Spiritual and Moral Ascendancy - God's Desire For Us

That is what the Lord is after. He is after getting His people into a place of spiritual elevation, *above* with Himself. That should be the outworking of our risen union with Christ, our heavenly fellowship with Christ and of our spiritual increase in Christ. Working backward, it is so plain, so patent, that you can never know spiritual dominion, moral elevation, unless you have the increase of Christ, growing spiritually, and unless you know what heavenly union with Christ is, and unless you know the power of His resurrection.

Note some of the corresponding features of Joshua, Ephesians and Colossians. Here is a little basis of study in these three books. See how many times in the first chapter of the book of Joshua there is a call for spiritual strength, or to be strong. In that first chapter the Lord says again and again to Joshua: "Be strong, and of a good courage"; "Have not I commanded thee, be strong..." Turn to the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 3 verse 10:- "That he would grant you according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man."

Chapter 1, verses 19-21: "...that ye may know... the exceeding greatness of his power to-us-ward who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead and made him to sit at his own right hand... far above all...".

Or again, in Chapter 6, verse 10:- "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might."

We must recognise that all that is unto something. It comes in the first chapter of the book of Joshua, and in Ephesians what is in view is brought so clearly out. It is a spiritual conflict, for which nature makes no provision, and for which man finds nothing in himself.

Turn to the Colossian letter, Chapter 1, verse 11:- "Strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory...".

Look again at Joshua, chapter 3. There you have the crossing of the Jordan. The typical meaning of Jordan is identification with Christ in death, burial and resurrection. It is the Romans 6, position.

Turn to Ephesians, and in chapters 2 and 3, you will find the Jordan aspect of things referred to quite definitely:- "And you did he quicken, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins... and raised us up together with him..."

Then in Colossians, chapter 2, verses 10-12:- "And in him ye are made full... in whom ye were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with him in baptism, wherein ye were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

Three Features of the Land

In the book of Joshua you are at length in the land, and being in the land represents three things:-

1. Resurrection life with Christ.
2. Heavenly union with Christ.
3. Fulness in Christ: the measure of Christ.

When you turn to these two New Testament letters, you see how much there is said about these three things.

In Ephesians it is: "And raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenlies, in Christ Jesus."

In Colossians it is: "If ye then were raised with Christ, seek the things which are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your affections on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God."

The fulness in Ephesians is: "That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inward man; that Christ may dwell in your

hearts through faith; to the end that ye... may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the knowledge surpassing love...".

The fulness in Colossians is the matchless representation of Christ's fulness, and then we are told that we are made full in Him. So that over Jordan, in the land, all these things as spiritual realities obtain.

Further, in the book of Joshua there is the conquest. In Ephesians, in the heavenlies, "our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness...". That is a Joshua touch.

As you pass on in the book of Joshua you find that you come to the question of relationships. A very interesting and illuminating section of Joshua has to do with relationships in the inheritance. In the corresponding Scriptures in Ephesians there is so much about relationships in Christ. Chapters 4 and 5 have to do mainly with relationships in the Body of Christ. The same thing is in Colossians.

Then as to government. Joshua brings the government very clearly into view. One little touch alone will at once show that line of things in the book of Joshua - the bringing of the kings, and the command to put the feet upon the necks of the kings. That will carry us to the New Testament, and on our way through (so to speak) to Ephesians and Colossians we pass through Romans, and we see: "And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly." (16:20).

In Ephesians the word is: "Far above all rule and authority and principality and power." We are called into that heavenly union with Him in ascendancy over these spiritual forces.

So we see the corresponding features between these books of the Old and New Testaments. Having paved the way for a meditation we can go a little further in seeing the present spiritual value of all this. What we need to see, in the main, is God's purpose, and then God's means and methods of reaching His purpose.

God's Purpose

God's purpose is clearly revealed to be the bringing of the saints to the fulness of Christ. Paul would put that in various ways. He uses that word: "Till we all attain unto the fulness of Christ." In another place he will express it in this way: "That we may present every man perfect in Christ." To go through Paul's letters alone with the thought of spiritual completeness, perfection (in the right usage and meaning of that word "perfection" - it means completeness, fulness), is to see how tremendous this matter is in the Divine thought. God's purpose is shown to be, by an overwhelming amount of Scripture, the bringing of the saints to the fulness of Christ. What follows is God's means and methods of reaching that end.

Some Things Which Are Basic to the Purpose

If God is going to get His end; that is, the saints brought to the fulness of Christ, then some things are necessary *to Him* for His end, as well as to us to get to God's end.

The first thing is a heart which is wholly set upon the Lord. Unless the Lord has that in us He has no hope, no chance; and unless our hearts are wholly set upon the Lord, all the Lord's purpose can never be our blessed experience.

Joshua and Caleb, as embodying the company that went into the land, clearly represent that principle. They wholly followed the Lord, and, doing so, they are set in contrast with the ten spies who accompanied them in the first investigation of the land. The others did not wholly follow the Lord, simply because their hearts were not wholly set upon the Lord; and the history of the generation which fell in the wilderness is simply the history of a heart not wholly set upon the Lord.

If you want proof of that from the Word, you may have it in such portions as we find in Psalm 7:37, or in Psalm 106:24: - "They despised the pleasant land..." That shows quite clearly that their heart was not set upon the land, and wholly after the Lord.

If you want a more vivid, and perhaps more terrible analytical commentary upon their history you have it in 1 Corinthians 10:6-11. That is a statement that their hearts were not wholly set upon the Lord; therefore, they did not enter into the land, come to the inheritance, nor attain unto God's end.

A heart wholly set upon the Lord is one which has clearly discriminated between salvation for its own sake, for blessing and gain; and salvation with God's purpose, in view. There is all the difference between those things. Salvation for its own sake, just to know that you are saved, for blessing and gain to the one who is saved, is one thing. But salvation with God's purpose in view is quite another thing. Of course, that generation of Israelites wanted to be saved. The idea of salvation in Egypt was a great idea, they would respond to it; but in their minds salvation meant something better for themselves. When at any point it seemed as though salvation was not working out as they had expected it would work out, for their own good, and they were being tested, then they regarded salvation as not being the blessing that they thought it was. This showed quite clearly that salvation for them was purely a matter of personal good, personal gain, personal blessing. It was salvation for its own sake. Joshua and Caleb, and the people who were of their spirit, went in with God's end in view. It was the Lord's delight which was in view. What was it they said? Was it not this: "If the Lord delight in us..." It is a question of the Lord's delight. They had their hearts adjusted to the delight of the Lord.

The wilderness is a very great demonstration of the larger purpose of salvation; that is, that the Lord has interests, and that His people can only know the full meaning of their salvation as the Lord has His object. The fact that they perished in the wilderness shows quite clearly that failure to apprehend the Lord's interests and the Lord's object means that we never come to the full enjoyment of our own salvation. To put that the other way; to enjoy salvation to the full it must be swung right away from ourselves and be regarded in the light of the Lord's glory, the Lord's interests, the Lord's object. The wilderness is a great demonstration of that. They never came to the full blessing of their salvation because they fell short of what the Lord was after in their salvation. The Lord said of them: "This people have I formed for myself." Over against that, this people sought to have all that the Lord meant for *themselves*, instead of for the Lord.

The wilderness represents the life outwardly in relation to the Lord, but inwardly in relation to self. On the outside they would claim to be the Lord's people. On the outside there would be all that which was the constituent of a people of God. But on the inside the whole relationship was with self.