

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND
THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL:
A STUDY OF EPHESIANS
(LESSON FIFTY-FOUR)
“TILL WE ALL COME”

EPHESIANS 4:11-13
(KING JAMES VERSION)

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.

12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ.

13 This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ.

In our previous **Lesson**, we stated that in **Ephesians 4:11**, Paul identifies the ministry gifts which the Lord Jesus Christ has given to His Church. He writes, “*And he gave some, **apostles**; and some, **prophets**; and some, **evangelists**; and some, **pastors and teachers**.”*

In verse **12**, he informs that the purpose of these ministry gifts is for “*the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*” The purpose of the ministry gifts, given by our Lord, is to completely outfit the members of His Body for service. Paul explains that it is the responsibility of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip believers to carry out the work of the ministry, so that the Body of Christ might be edified. It is not the responsibility of the ministry gifts to do the work of the ministry. Their work is to equip the believers to do the work of the ministry. And the instrument or tool that is to be used to do the equipping is the Word of God.

It is the opinion of most believers that it is the job of pastors to do the work of the ministry, but such a view is not based on the revelation of Scripture. God's design is not for believers to hire a pastor to do the work of the ministry for them. God's design is for believers to follow the leadership of a God-called, God-gifted pastor as he, by utilizing the instrument of God's Word, equips them to do the work of the ministry. It is God's revealed will for every member of the Body of Christ, and not just a few leaders, to carry on the work of the ministry.

Unfortunately, most churches today do not follow this New Testament template for “success.” It is common practice for the leaders to do the bulk of the ministering, when their job is to train the saints to be the workers, which will make the overall ministry far more effective.

The statement of the great purpose of the ministry gifts, given by Christ to His Body, is followed in verse **13** by a statement of the time this provision is to last, or the point at which the great purpose in view is to be realized. Paul writes, “*Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.*”

The ministry of the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, is to continue until all the members of the Church have come to their proper unity and maturity in their Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul gives no clear indication of the specific time that this will occur, and it may be, therefore, that he has in view, only the goal itself and the attainment of it at whatever time that may take effect.

Paul is viewing the church on two levels in this section. He sees the Body of Christ made up of all true believers, growing gradually until it reaches spiritual maturity, but he also sees the local body of believers ministering to each other, growing together, and thereby, experiencing spiritual unity.

Paul writes, *“Till **we all come in the unity of the faith.**”* The words *“we all,”* are a translation of the Greek word **pas** which means, “all in the sense of every part that applies.” It means, “all without exception.” The Greek word strongly suggests a collective idea and clearly indicates that, in Paul’s understanding, Christian growth and development does not occur in isolation. God’s people come into the unity of the faith, not as individuals, but together. It is not a goal to be attained by a select few “elite” saints only, but by all believers, and it will be fully attained by all believers when our Lord returns. If an individual believer is to mature fully, he or she needs the fellowship of other believers. The idea of an arm or a leg of a physical body developing in isolation from the other members of the body is ridiculous! In the same way, it is not possible for any member of the mystical Body of Christ to attain full spiritual maturity apart from the rest of the Body. When Christ returns, the entire church will arrive at complete maturity or glorification.

The word *“come,”* is a translation of the Greek word **katantaó: (kat-an-tah’-o)** which means, “to come to, arrive at, reach, with the implication of something definitive and final coming upon one.” The word is used figuratively in this verse and means to arrive at a particular state, with the focus on the end point.

katantaó is used nine times in the book of **Acts** to refer to a traveler who takes a journey and arrives at his destination. It is the responsibility of the ministry gifts, to equip the members of the Body of Christ to do the work of the ministry. When the members of the Body are actually effectively doing the work of the ministry, we can be assured that the goal of that equipping will be realized. And the goal of that equipping is, that *“we all come in the unity of the faith.”*

Ray Stedman explains that *“the unity of the faith”* is the shared understanding, in the church, of the great truths revealed in the Scriptures. While it is true that the Word of God never changes, new light is continually issuing forth from it through the ministry gifts that have been given to the Church, as they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Believers grow and develop when they exert themselves to understand the Scriptures with the help of the ministry gifts who make themselves available to be used by the Lord to feed God’s flock.

It is vitally important for us to understand and appreciate that it is impossible for the Body of Christ to attain unto the unity of the faith in the absence of doctrinal integrity. The unity of the faith is attained when the body of doctrinal truth is taught, believed and practiced. This oneness and harmony among believers is possible only when it is built on the firm foundation of sound doctrine.

The phrase *“the faith,”* as it is used by Paul in this context, does not refer to a person’s trust or belief in the Lord Jesus Christ *per se*. Rather, it refers to the **content** of what he or she believes. It refers to a very specific system of belief, which of course, is **the body of revealed truth that constitutes Christian teaching**, particularly the complete content of the gospel. In other words, Paul is not speaking here of the **act** of believing but rather to **what** is believed.

Jude uses the phrase *“the faith”* in the same context in **Jude 3**: *“Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for **the faith** which was once delivered unto the saints.”*

Here, Jude is clearly not referring to the faith of the believers, but to the whole body of revealed truth concerning God's plan of salvation contained in the Scriptures. He is speaking of the objective truths which all believers should agree on and be willing to contend for.

John MacArthur, the pastor-teacher of **Grace Community Church**, Sun Valley, California, made the following comments in respect of this verse:

"The ultimate spiritual target for the church begins with the unity of the faith. As in verse 5, faith does not here refer to the act of belief or of obedience but to the body of Christian truth, to Christian doctrine. The faith is the content of the gospel in its most complete form. As the church at Corinth so clearly illustrates, disunity in the church comes from doctrinal ignorance and spiritual immaturity. When believers are properly taught, when they faithfully do the work of service, and when the body is thereby built up in spiritual maturity, unity of the faith is an inevitable result. Oneness in fellowship is impossible unless it is built on the foundation of commonly believed truth. The solution to the divisions in Corinth was for everyone to hold the same understandings and opinions and to speak the same truths (**1 Corinthians 1:10**)."

Brothers and sisters, it is the will of God for all believers to attain, not only to the unity of the faith, but to "*the knowledge of the Son of God*." This is not a reference to the knowledge of Jesus Christ by which we were first saved, but to a deeper, more intimate and experiential knowledge. Paul is referring here, to a growing encounter with the Lord Jesus Himself, so that we come to know Him more and more - not merely know about Him, but know Him, directly and personally. It is of this knowledge that he speaks in **Philippians 3:7-10**:

7 *But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.*

8 *Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,*

9 *And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:*

10 *That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death.*

The knowledge that Paul speaks of in these verses is not primarily **intellectual** but **experiential**. The expression "*the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord*" in verse 8, refers to the knowledge of the Lord Jesus which Paul gained through the experience of constant companionship and communion with Him. In this context, the knowledge of Jesus Christ is personal and intimate. It involves the believer making Christ his or her possession. The knowledge of Christ Jesus in its distinctive biblical usage may be said to primarily involve one's heart. Paul came to know the heart of Jesus and the will of Jesus, as one comes to know another person through intimate fellowship and close association with that person.

The knowledge of Jesus Christ is a blessing so wonderful and glorious that nothing else is worthy to be compared with it. Paul held everything else to be worthless in comparison with that knowledge, and he was willing to sacrifice everything else in order to gain more of it. In the light of this new evaluation, Paul now sees everything that he had inherited or accomplished as "*dung*." The Greek word rendered "*dung*" can mean either "excrement" or "that which is thrown to the dogs," that is, "refuse," or "garbage." In any case, the idea is that of utter worthlessness and disgust.

The motive of Paul's reevaluation is to "*win Christ*." This expression does not refer to Paul receiving Christ as his saviour in the initial salvation experience, but to his appropriation of Christ. It refers to him making Christ his very own personal possession. It speaks of him, being so transformed as a result of his relationship with Christ, that the beauty of Jesus is consistently being seen in him. This is Paul's stated goal.

Paul desired to appropriate Christ to himself so fully and practically, that Christ would become the dominating power in his life, exerting a complete and controlling influence over his whole being and circumstances - an influence that would be easily recognized by anyone who observed his life.

In verse **10**, Paul informs the Philippians that he has forfeited the loss of all things not only that he might appropriate Christ as his Saviour, but in order that he might know Him. He writes, *“That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.”*

When Paul says, *“that I may know him,”* he is speaking about experiential knowledge. Paul wants to come to know the Lord Jesus in that fullness of experiential knowledge which is only wrought by being like Him. Obviously, Paul is speaking about a personal experience. When he was living under the Law, all Paul had was a set of rules. But now he has a Friend, a Master, and a constant Companion! Now, he has a relationship with Christ! **Knowing Jesus Christ in this intimate, personal, experiential way should be the greatest desire of a Christian. Every other desire should pale into insignificance when compared to this one.**

What is in Paul’s mind when he speaks about knowing Christ? Paul says “All I want is to know Christ and to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death.” Knowing Jesus Christ involves experiencing *“the power of his resurrection.”* The power of his resurrection does not mean the power by which Christ was raised from the dead, or the power of Christ by which Paul would be raised from the dead. Rather, it refers to the power of the resurrected Christ which is at work in the life of the believer, through the Holy Spirit, raising him from death in sin, to the new life in Christ. Paul wants to know in an experiential way, the power of Christ’s resurrection. That is, he wants to experience the same power which raised Christ from the dead surging through his own being, overcoming sin in his life and producing the Christian graces. The Greek word for *“power”* used here, is the same one that is used in **Romans 1:16**. It means, “that which overcomes resistance.”

But knowing Jesus Christ also involves experiencing *“the fellowship of his sufferings.”* This phrase is to be taken closely with the preceding clause *“the power of his resurrection,”* since it is linked with a connective *“and,”* and the noun *“fellowship,”* shares the same definite article with the word *“power.”* **This indicates that experiencing the power of the resurrected Christ and participating in His sufferings are not two separate experiences, but two aspects of the same experience.**

The Greek word for *“fellowship”* here, means “a joint participation.” The sufferings of Christ spoken of here, are of course not His substitutionary sufferings on the Cross, but His sufferings for righteousness’ sake while on earth. To share in the sufferings of Christ refers not merely to outward hardships and persecutions but perhaps more fundamentally to an inward experience, in the same way that the experience of the power of the risen Christ is an inward experience.

Paul wanted to so completely identify with his Lord in all things that he desired to participate in the same kind of sufferings that his Lord had endured! **Paul wished to be just like Jesus in every way.** He felt that it was an honour to live as Christ did; to manifest the spirit that He did, and to suffer in the same manner. All that Christ did and suffered was glorious in Paul’s view, and he wished in all things to resemble Him. Many persons are desirous of reigning with Christ, but they are not willing to suffer with Him. Many desire to wear a crown of glory, but they do not desire to wear a crown of thorns. Many ask to share in His glory, but they would never ask to share His grief or pain. This was not the feeling of Paul. **He wished in all things, to be just like Christ, and hence, he counted it an honour to be permitted to suffer as He did. This is intense Christianity!** The true Christian will esteem it a privilege to be made just like Jesus Christ, not only in glory, but in suffering.

Knowing Jesus Christ in the Biblical sense, is to have intimate personal knowledge involving experience and appropriation. **Knowing Christ, experiencing the power of His resurrection and the sharing of His sufferings, are not three distinctive events, but are all part of the same event.** This kind of knowledge is a glorious component of a maturing faith. It is a lifelong process that will not be complete until we see our Lord face to face.

Brothers and sisters, the work of the ministry gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers is to continue until *“we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, **unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.**”*

The word *“perfect”* is a translation of the Greek word **teleios: (tel’-i-os)**, which means, *“brought to its end, finished; lacking nothing necessary to completeness; perfect.”* The word speaks of consummate soundness and includes the idea of being whole. **Teleios** also speaks of that which is fully developed as opposed to that which is immature. It describes persons who are full grown or mature. A man who has reached his full-grown stature is **teleios** in contradistinction to a lad. A student who has reached a mature knowledge of his or her subject area is **teleios** as opposed to a learner who is just beginning. In the New Testament, the word does not imply complete knowledge but a certain spiritual maturity in the faith. It refers to that which is in a state of full preparation or readiness.

In all the above variations of meaning the underlying idea is that of a purpose being achieved. The idea is of something or someone carrying out the purpose for which it or they were designed.

In **Colossians 1:25-29 (New English Translation)**, Paul wrote the following to the believers in Colossae:

25 *I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God — given to me for you — in order to complete the word of God,*

26 *that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to his saints.*

27 *God wanted to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

28 *We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ.*

29 *Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.*

Paul’s heartbeat in discipleship, was to see every single believer continually growing in maturity until they attained *“unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”* This should also be the heartbeat of every God-called, God-gifted minister of the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit desires for all of us to measure up to the full and complete standard of Christ! What a goal! In a word, this is Christ-likeness or conformity to the image of Christ, which is what every believer was predestined to, according to **Romans 8:29**. The state at which unity is lacking, is the stage of immaturity; the stage in which oneness in faith and knowledge of Jesus Christ is reached, is the state of mature manhood in Christ. The apostle has in mind, the spiritual maturity of each saint.

The expression *“the fulness of Christ,”* refers to the sum of the qualities which make Christ Who and what He is. These Christ-like qualities are to be imaged in the Church by every believer. When these Christ-like qualities are consistently seen in us, we will have reached a state of spiritual maturity and attained to the goal set before us. The term, *“spiritual maturity,”* as applied to a believer, is always a relative term; it is never an absolute term. The process of conforming a believer to the image of Christ begins in the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification as soon as he or she is saved, and this work is never completed, no not even in eternity, for the finite can never equal the infinite.

On a wall near the main entrance to the **Alamo** in San Antonio, Texas, is a portrait with the following inscription:

“James Butler Bonham — no picture of him exists. This portrait is of his nephew, **Major James Bonham**, deceased, who greatly resembled his uncle. It is placed here by the family that people may know the appearance of the man who died for freedom.”

No literal portrait of the Lord Jesus Christ exists either. But His likeness should be seen in the lives of His true followers who are being equipped and built up by sound doctrine, expounded by Spirit-filled pastor-teachers. The Body of Christ is to radiate the beauty of Christ to a spiritually dead world by walking in a manner worthy of the calling to which we have been called. God wants every believer to manifest the qualities of His Son Jesus Christ, Who is Himself the standard for their spiritual maturity and perfection.

The British biblical scholar **F. F. Bruce**, made the following observation concerning the matter of believers measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ:

“When the goal is ultimately reached, and the Body of Christ has grown up sufficiently to match the Head Himself, then will be seen that full-grown Man which is Christ together with His members. That spectacle will not fully appear until the day when they are glorified together with Him; but the expectation of that day will act as a powerful incentive to spiritual development in the present time.”

Brothers and sisters, let us exercise patience with ourselves and each other in the matter of our spiritual maturity. We must recognize that while the saving of a soul is the work of a moment, the making of a saint is the work of a life-time! The proper attitude for a healthy believer is an eagerness to grow. Someone has said that we do not need to ask ourselves, “Am I mature? Am I completely like Christ?” Instead, we should ask ourselves, “Am I on the way? Am I making progress? Am I growing in the right direction?” Remember that an oak tree takes decades to mature, while a pumpkin takes only 90 days to grow. Which of these would we rather be!