

The Filling of the Spirit

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Introduction

Fifteen times the New Testament refers to someone being “filled with” or “full of” the Holy Spirit (see appendix).¹ As New Testament believers we are commanded to be “filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Yet most of us would probably find it difficult to define what the filling of the Spirit is, or even to list some of its evidences. This lesson will investigate Spirit filling and attempt to answer the *who*, *when*, *what*, and *how* of the matter.

Body

Who experienced the filling of the Spirit?

The filling of the Holy Spirit is not referred to as such in the Old Testament.² According to New Testament narrative, a number of believers—both individuals and groups—experienced the filling of the Spirit.

- John the Baptist (Luke 1:15)
- Elisabeth (Luke 1:41)
- Zacharias (Luke 1:67)
- Jesus (Luke 4:1)
- Believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:4; 4:31)
- Peter (Acts 4:8)
- Deacons in Jerusalem church (Acts 6:3)
- Stephen (Acts 6:5; 7:55)
- Saul/Paul (Acts 9:17; 13:9)
- Barnabas (Acts 11:24)
- Believers in Iconium (Acts 13:52)

When does the filling of the Spirit take place?

New Testament believers experienced the filling of the Spirit at various times:

- At the coming of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4)
- At, or shortly following, personal conversion (Acts 9:17)
- Prior to birth (Luke 1:15)
- Following prayer (Acts 4:31)
- In connection with a specific opportunity for service (Luke 1:41; 1:67; Acts 4:8; 13:9)
- Continually (Luke 4:1; Acts 6:3, 5; 7:55; 11:24; 13:52 cf. Eph. 5:18)

Life in the Spirit is the norm for New Testament believers after the Day of Pentecost. Paul commanded the Ephesian church corporately, “Be ye filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). The language of the Greek from which this text is translated makes it clear that God intends for all believers to experience Spirit filling on a continual basis. Given the diversity of activities during which believers are said to have been Spirit-filled, one may conclude that Spirit filling is to be a constant or near-constant state of affairs for the Christian.

¹ Two Greek verbs--*pleroo* and *pimplemi*--underlie New Testament references to Spirit filling. While there is no clear distinction between the two, the adjectival form *pleres* often refers to a persistent quality of spiritual fullness rather than to a single incident of filling.

² Discussion of the role of the Spirit before the coming of Christ is outside the scope of this lesson series.

What is the filling of the Spirit?

LEXICAL INSIGHTS

Two Greek words—*pleroo* and *pimplemi*—are used in reference to Spirit filling. Their meaning is quite plain, implying that believers, though indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are spiritually empty and ineffective apart from his continued activity in their lives.

GRAMMATICAL INSIGHTS

We can understand the fullness of the Spirit somewhat better by analyzing the verb *plerousthe*, which occurs in Ephesians 5:18. This verb is . . .

- *present*, indicating continuous or repeated action
- *imperative*, indicating the duty of believers to be Spirit-filled
- *passive*, implying that the Holy Spirit is the agent of the filling, and that our role is to allow him to fill us
- *plural*, indicating that there is a collective dimension to spiritual fullness, and that it is the responsibility of every Christian, not merely a congregation's leaders, to be filled with the Spirit

CONTEXTUAL INSIGHTS

We can learn about Spirit filling from the context in which it appears in the New Testament. Ephesians 5:18 contrasts the filling of the Spirit with drunkenness. According to this text, the two are incompatible. As is the case with intoxication, spiritual fullness involves surrendering one's control to an outside agent.

The verses that follow Ephesians 5:18 name four positive evidences of Spirit filling:

- *speaking to yourselves*—exhorting one another to worship
- *singing and making melody*—worshiping the Lord from the heart
- *giving thanks*—thanking God at all times for everything, not complaining
- *submitting to one another*—yielding to others inasmuch as it is possible to do so without spiritual compromise (Stott 57-59; cf. Leggett 11-12)

Judging from the wider context of Ephesians 5:18, Spirit-filled living is not merely a matter of internal fellowship with God. Rather, it makes itself known in believers' personal conduct, especially in their marriage, family, and employment relationships.

The book of Ephesians as a whole sheds further light on what it means to be filled with the Spirit. It is noteworthy that Paul also refers in this same epistle to the fullness of God (3:19) and the fullness of Christ (1:23; 4:13). Since these forms of spiritual fullness are clearly the province of the church as a whole, one might expect that the Spirit's filling is not strictly an individual matter.

Elsewhere in the New Testament spiritual fullness is associated with . . .

- God-honoring speech³ (Luke 1:41ff; 1:67ff; Acts 2:4ff; 4:8ff; 4:31ff; 7:55; 11:22-24; 13:9ff)
- drawing others to faith and repentance (Luke 1:15-16; Acts 2:4ff; 11:24; 13:9-12)
- faith (Acts 6:5; 11:24)
- victory over temptation (Luke 4:1ff)
- wisdom (Acts 6:3)
- supernatural vision of God (Acts 7:55)
- joy (Acts 13:52)

CONCLUSIONS

“To be filled with the Holy Spirit involves an expansion and intensification of the impact of His indwelling presence. It is to have His presence saturate one's being with His qualities of godliness in life

³ Spirit-filled individuals pronounced praise, prophecy, tongues, testimony, encouragement, and judgment.

and power in ministry. [. . .] It means that He takes possession of the believer's mind, thereby pervading his or her disposition and guiding the individual" (Woodcock 73).

"Believers [. . .] are now exhorted to allow the Spirit to have the fullest control that they are conscious of in their lives and to open themselves continually to the one who can enable them to walk wisely and to understand Christ's will and who can inspire their worship and thanksgiving" (Lincoln 345).

"It [*pleróo*] is used to describe people characterized positively by the control of the Holy Spirit, and by wisdom, faith, grace, power, and good works [. . .]. These characteristics have control of the person; they describe the dominant expression of the life [. . .] that the individual asserts in society or in the church" Hughes 2: 369).

"In all these passages the image implies being empowered by the Holy Spirit to an extraordinary degree and receiving that power from a source beyond oneself" ("Fill, Fullness" 284).

"The picture involves certain Christians described as filled with the Holy Spirit as a continuing condition while intermittently empowered by Him for ministry. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive" (Woodcock 75).

How can one be filled with the Spirit?

Some authors have suggested that the participles that follow Ephesians 5:18 are not evidences of Spirit filling but the means by which it can be induced. However, respected commentators on Ephesians give little credence to this view (e.g., Lincoln 345; O'Brien 387-88). Erickson takes a middle position:

It may be pointed out that these marks of the Spirit-filled life are as much the cause as the result of the fullness of the Spirit. An encouraging word from a brother or sister, a song sung in a time of discouragement, a disciplined word of thanks when the heart does not feel particularly thankful, and even acquiescence to the needs of others, can all lead to the heart's swelling with the joy of the Spirit just as much as the joy of the Spirit leads to these very same deeds. (1030)

Since the New Testament does not tell us specifically what we must do in order to be filled, we must guard against dogmatic statements in this area. Below are some relevant principles:

- *Passivity*

We cannot fill ourselves, but we can remove encumbrances to the Spirit's filling. We cannot expect to be filled if we are quenching or grieving the Spirit (Willmington; cf. Eph. 4:30; 1 Thess. 5:19). We must confess known sin to God and yield to his will as we know it.

"The imperative call in the passive voice indicates that God acts upon us with our cooperation (literally, 'let the Spirit keep filling you')" (Leggett 11).

"How can we be filled with the Spirit? In the same way as we obtain a new mind, even the mind of Christ. The process is comparable to the raising of a harvest of wheat which is both a gift of God and a work of man. Men can not have it unless God gives it; God can not give it unless men work for it" (Richards 38).

- *Discipline*

Intoxication imagery implies personal involvement in filling oneself: "We are filled with the Spirit of the Lord in the same way as we are filled with the spirit of a nation, a poet, a historian, a scientist—by personal contact, by constant fellowship" (Richards 37).

There is a relationship between prayer and Spirit filling, but it is not necessary one of direct causation. Köstenberger adamantly argues that there is no biblical command to pray for Spirit fullness. In Acts 4:31 members of the Jerusalem church were filled following prayer. However, it is important to note that the text does not say that they asked to be filled; rather, they asked to be emboldened. Similarly, Luke 11:13 refers to asking for the Holy Spirit, not asking to be filled.

These caveats notwithstanding, the book of Ephesians seems to associate fullness with prayer. Paul expressed by way of a prayer his desire for the Ephesians to be filled with God's fullness (3:19).

There also seems to be a connection between the Word of God and Spirit filling. Colossians 3:16, which is essentially parallel to Ephesians 5:18, instructs us, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Ephesians 5:17 tells us to be "understanding what the will of the Lord is." Both of these references imply that being filled with God's Word is a prerequisite to being filled with his Spirit.

There is also a corporate dimension to spiritual fullness. Both Ephesians and Colossians assume a plurality of readers. In addition, other references to fullness in Ephesians are clearly corporate. By implication, we should seek the filling of the Spirit in Christian community. As with so many other aspects of the Christian life, we cannot directly control whether we are Spirit-filled. But we can create the right conditions for God to fill us at his discretion.

Eph 5:18 [. . .] enjoins believers to exhibit a wise, maturing lifestyle which is to be expressed in corporate praise and worship as well as in proper Christian relationships. [. . .] Individual believers [. . .] are to manifest the Spirit's presence and to avoid anything that might grieve him or hinder his operation. [. . .] Since the Spirit already lives in them, believers' major efforts should be directed toward manifesting the Spirit's presence in ever-increasing measure, both individually and corporately [. . .]. (Köstenberger 235)

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Appendix: New Testament References to Spirit Filling

Luke 1:15

For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

Luke 1:41

And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost:

Luke 1:67

And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Ghost, and prophesied, saying,

Luke 4:1

And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

Acts 2:4

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

Acts 4:8

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel,

Acts 4:31

And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.

Acts 6:3

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

Acts 6:5

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

Acts 7:55

But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

Acts 9:17

And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, *even* Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost.

Acts 11:24

For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.

Acts 13:9

Then Saul, (who also *is called* Paul,) filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him,

Acts 13:52

And the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost.

Eph. 5:18

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;