

# Emptying Unto Fulness

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of Christ's greatness and the need for us to be emptied of our self-life in order to be filled with His presence, character, and nature.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 22:17, Genesis 32:24, Psalm 4:1, Acts 17:31, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 1:23, Ephesians 4:10, Philippians 1:21, Philippians 2:7-8, Hebrews 12:6

**Topics:** "Emptying", "Christ's Fullness"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound truth that Christ, who descended and ascended, is destined to fill all things with His presence and character. He explores the necessity of emptying ourselves of self-fulness to make room for Christ's fullness, illustrating this through biblical figures like Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, who underwent significant emptying processes to fulfill God's purpose. Sparks highlights that this emptying is not merely negative but a divine law leading to greater spiritual capacity and fruitfulness. The sermon calls believers to recognize the importance of a crisis moment in their lives where they surrender self-life for Christ-life, ultimately leading to a glorious climax in God's eternal plan. The message encourages a deeper understanding of suffering and trials as part of God's work to enlarge our capacity for His fullness.

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## Transcript

Reading: "He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things" Ephesians 4:10.

We have been seeking already to see that into that last clause of a parenthesis the Lord's servant has packed the mighty fulness of his apprehension of Christ. We have tried to enter into the tremendous emotion in which the apostle set himself to write this circular letter. Having at last the opportunity to be free from all his travellings and journeyings and on-the-spot occupations with the affairs of the churches, being now detached and shut up in his imprisonment, he found it the occasion for which his heart had doubtless often longed for giving expression, as far as he could, to some of that mighty store of accumulated spiritual knowledge of the Lord Jesus. And this letter is an opening of those flood gates, a pouring out in superlative upon superlative, begging all language to find some way of expressing what Christ had become revealed to him.

Here in this fragment, this mighty fragment, there is a summing up of it all, a final vision of that wonderful Lord: "That he might fill all things" -- his Lord Jesus at last filling all things.

We have seen that this One, this great "He" to whom the apostle refers, is the subject of the whole Bible. We have traced the unveiling of Him in the seven great stages of that unveiling from eternity past, through time, to the ages of the ages, in each stage the apostle seeing depths of meaning.

Well, now, we come from that wide range, that vast scope, and seek to fasten down on one or two particular emphases as we go on.

Firstly, quite clearly this phrase is itself indicative of the greatness of the Lord Jesus: "That He might fill all things." The final "all things". It is impossible to get outside of that! It is final: there is no more that can be added. "All things" just means what it says -- everything. This eternal, divine determination and design, which has been revealed to the apostle, is to be that Christ does fill all things. It is the predeterminate counsel of God that He shall. God hath, it is said elsewhere, "appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained" Acts 17:31. That is the Lord Jesus. This phrase is therefore indicative of the greatness of Christ.

How can one Person fill a universe, fill all things? Well, it is not so difficult a question to answer. You will not go to any part of this world, in all its length and breadth, without finding traces of the evil one. Wherever you go you will find that which indicates and betrays that the evil one has been there. Evil by the evil one fills this world, anywhere, everywhere, and, we may say, in its natural condition he, the evil one, the devil has filled all things. And, although you do not see him in personal form, you know he has been there, and very often you know that he is there. He has filled this world with his evil self and his evil marks and traits. They are everywhere. He has filled the very atmosphere with himself. That is unchallengeable, I think. You can meet that one anywhere, in anything in the creation, which he has captured from Adam.

All right! Is that true? You meet him in his nature, you meet him in his disposition, you meet him in his evil atmosphere and presence.

And in exactly the same way Christ is going to fill all things. That evil thing is going to be purged out by eternal fire, completely purged out. No trace of it will be left or found when God has done His work in this creation, but there will not be a void. His Christ is the One who is destined so to fill all things that you may go anywhere in His created universe and know Him by His footsteps, sense Him, feel Him, recognise Him. But what a difference! What a different atmosphere!

Now this present time in which we live, though so poorly serving that purpose, is a time in which just some little reflection of what is to be can be found. It is a very blessed thing to be where Christ is. It is a good atmosphere to be in when He is present and He is filling all hearts. There is a behaviour, a conduct, and a disposition that is so different when He has His place in a company, in lives. We don't have too much of what is sometimes called "heaven on earth". There is a lot of room for more of that! But we here know just a little, a very little, of this changeover. The enemy is still present and about to spoil, to mar everything, but if only the Lord has people in whom He really has His lordship expressed, His place fully given, it is a very blessed place to be in and condition to enjoy. There is a little of it in this world. Would there were more!

What I am saying is leading to something else, of course. But here is the indication of what the Lord intends, and one says that, dear friends, because you will understand that we very much dislike living in abstractions and visionariness, words, beautiful ideas, and that sort of thing, that realm of imagination. We must always have some practical ground on which to build these great conceptions. And so, when we speak about the time when He will fill all things with Himself, in this way of character, of nature, of disposition, of conduct and of behaviour, we must have something upon which to put our feet down for the

present. And so it is that the great delight of Christian hearts is found in that kind of fellowship and relationship where Christ is everything. And it is a real thing. It is possible to know that now, is it not? It is!

But I have said it is all too small. It is not by any means in all things, but it is the determinate counsel of God that so it shall be, that He, the beloved Son, shall fill all things with Himself, His own wonderful character, His divine character.

Now here is something that sounds perhaps difficult to grasp and understand, but you notice the context of this phrase. "He ascended, what is it but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended far above all". It was never necessary to have the incarnation if God wanted to fill all things as God, as deity. God could very well clear everything out and just fill everything with Himself in sheer deity, sheer Godhead. But this statement "He descended... ascended... in order that He might fill all things" indicates this: the incarnation. How did He descend? Well, we know. By incarnation He came down in flesh, in humanity -- "taking the form of a servant... being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself" (Philippians 2:7,8). That was His descent -- into humanity, into the incarnation. Why? "That he might fill all things" humanity-wise -- in other words, have people in whom and through whom He would fill all things; have a race of human beings through whom He will fill all things, who will be His fulness, and who will minister and transmit His fulness.

Now, that is one of the great arguments of this letter: "The church, which is... the fulness of Him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). It is that the Lord should have people, human beings, for the expression of His fulness in His created universe: you and me. That is why He descended first and then ascended -- in order that He might fill all things.

This great cycle of the deepest descent to touch the heart and root and core of all the trouble, down to its very depths, and His ascent far above all was that there should be no realm left where He is not its fulness. He did that through incarnation, which itself means by way of human life, in order to have human life like that.

Well, now, this is very great. Indeed, it is the greatness of this One who is able to do that. He must be very great!

But that leads us to this law, which governs all spiritual history and experience. There is a law governing all our spiritual history and experience. It is not just something that is of its own free will happening to us. It is under this law; it is controlled and governed. The experience that we are having spiritually, the history that is being made in our case, spiritually, is held by this law, and the law is "That He might fill all things". If it is this matter of men, of people, of humanity, of human life, then there must be something in, behind and over what happens to us when we get into God's hands. And this is what it is: God is taking us the way in which He is taking us with this one object in view -- that His Son, Jesus Christ, shall fill all things.

But, you know, He cannot start from zero with us, unfortunately. We are already so full! So full of our own ideas, our own desires, our own ambitions, our own interests and our own strength. Oh, what a lot there is of which we are so full! And that is just the trouble. That is where it began with Adam. Adam made this great bid to have all the fulness in himself. Well, the Lord let him have it, and Adam is more than one person who lived so many centuries ago. Adam is a very big, corporate person, who has filled the world and is still making a bid to have everything in himself. He is very full of himself. He is very full of his own cleverness, ability, power, wisdom, and what not. And he is filling himself more and more with his own fulness.

Well, let that be as it may with the big Adam; but what about the little Adams that we are? You and I? Well, we do not know, and we would not believe it until the hand of the Lord comes upon us, just how much there is of us in the picture. And when the Lord begins to work upon us, we begin to discover there is a lot more of us than we would ever have suspected or acknowledged: indeed, this is an endless matter, a bottomless pit. All the trouble is there -- that there is something in us that has got to be got rid of and got out of the way. Is it true? Our simplest troubles with the Lord are on that basis, and our biggest and our most complex. So, if He is to fill all things with Himself, there has got to be a history, a deep history of making room for Him completely, by an utter emptying of us, of everything that is not Christ.

It is not just negative. It sometimes seems negative -- emptying, undoing, breaking, and all that, but this law is operating. It is a law in nature. God put every tree in the garden into the hands of Adam. It got cultivated, but it was not necessary for there to be evil present in order that the pruning knife should be used. That was a natural process. To produce something better you have to get rid of something that is not much good. To produce something more you have to reduce a great deal. It is a law in nature -- you see it everywhere. Unto the better and unto the more there is always a process of reduction, what looks like destruction, but we know that in the long run it is not destruction. It is construction, fruitfulness. That law operates everywhere. And just as God has written this law in the creation, so in spiritual experience it is like that. God is working, dear friends, with you and with me. On the one side emptying, breaking down, cutting off, seeming to be reducing, emptying us of that other fulness which is in His way and is not His fulness, but always with this object -- that there should be more of Christ.

Now, perhaps some of you may say "Well, there ought to be a very great deal of Christ in me if that is the explanation, because I am having a pretty bad time!" But here is where faith and patience are called for, and, oh, you may take it as a fixed law that any kind of work on God's part which has an emptying effect, an undoing effect, a weakening effect where we in our self and self-life are concerned, is determined by God to produce more of His Son. It is the eternal law, and it is the law which is governing.

Now you can see that the Bible is a record of this very thing. We have seen that Adam let in all the trouble of this self-fulness, which is the curse of humanity and is going to prove the utter undoing of humanity. Do not make any mistake about it! We have little indications of this almost weekly -- that the cleverness of man can be his undoing. What he calls his wisdom and knowledge increasing can just be to his own hurt. However, leave that as it may be -- but Adam opened this door and let in this accursed self-sufficiency.

Whenever you find that God comes on to the scene in relation to His end, His eternal end, and puts His hand upon any man or any instrument, He takes that instrument or that man through a history which for a long time is a thoroughly undoing history. Who comes to mind? Well, let us start with Abraham.

We have every evidence that Abraham, or Abram, was a great man in Chaldea, a man of considerable substance, standing, possessions and sufficiency. Stephen tells us that "the God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2) -- and how did the God of glory begin to work? Well, He just hooked him right out of Chaldea and brought him into a place where all his own erstwhile fulness and sufficiency was gradually removed. He did not give him a foothold in that place. All he had was a tent -- and moving from place to place. No "continuing city"; a life of utter dependence upon God. He was being emptied. Notice the various stages of God's dealings with him, right up to the time of requiring him to offer his Isaac. Did ever a man get nearer to the great heart of Calvary, in the utter self-emptying, than when Abraham was asked to give what to him was his all and his last, in Isaac? My, this man was being emptied! Very well! But God appeared unto him and then -- "In multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven,

and as the sand which is upon the sea shore" (Genesis 22:17). Emptying -- to vast fulness. That is spiritual history. That is no mere teaching, truth. Ask Abraham whether it is real!

Jacob: Jacob is elect, destined, mark you, to build the tribes of Israel by his twelve sons. Fulness is to come that way, tremendous fulness. This seed of Abraham has got to come through this man Jacob. All right! But Jacob, as we see him, is a man very self-sufficient, full of his own cleverness and artfulness. He can do it: he is sufficient for the situation. And for the twenty years of his life with his Uncle Laban that was the kind of life he was living, tricking and triumphing by his own self-ingenuity, cleverness and artfulness, all the time getting the advantage himself simply because he could do it. Very well -- but what about Jacob and Peniel? The Lord, in one of those theophanies of which we were speaking this afternoon, met him there and said "Now, then, we are going to settle this matter once and for all. I have allowed you plenty of scope, plenty of rope, I have given you all these years to extend yourself, but I have chosen you for something better than that. Now the issue has come. Tonight we settle this thing." Jacob started out again to try it on the Lord, and found he had met his match, and more than his match, that night. That story as told very often is put the wrong way: Jacob wrestled with the angel. He never did until the angel wrestled with him: "and there wrestled a man with him" (Genesis 32:24). God took the initiative in this matter. God took this thing into His own hands. It was God who said: "We are going to settle this mighty issue. Before you go back to that place of covenant, of purpose, we are going to settle this thing." Who is master, Jacob or the Lord? Oh, what an emptying that night! Not all at once, perhaps, for there are still some traces of Jacob after that, but when at last you meet him in the presence of Pharaoh, what a poor creature he is! He talks to Pharaoh -- "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life" (Genesis 47:9). Leaning upon his staff -- he is a very empty man, a very broken man. Now the Lord can do something: out of that will come the purpose of God.

We just mention it. It is so patent, isn't it?

What about Joseph? Well, now, our first introduction to Joseph: a good and nice young fellow in many ways, the pet of his father and a lot more, but... but... very conceited! Very indiscreet! Telling his brothers about his dreams and implying "You are going to be the ones who bow down to me", provoking the situation which was God's sovereign opportunity of starting up this work of emptying. A dungeon is not much of a place to live in for thirteen years! Being forgotten and enduring all the hardships and difficulties of such a life, so that it is written: "His soul entered into the iron" (Psalm 105:18 RV margin). Do you know anything about the iron entering into your soul under the discipline of God's hand? Well, we need not enlarge. Here is this man indeed being emptied of all his conceits, but at last, what fulness! Fulness for Egypt and fulness for his own brethren, and for the rest. It is the way.

What about Moses? Now, Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. What a man Moses was in the first forty years of his life! How full of everything! So full that he thought he could do it. He smote the Egyptian, challenged the Hebrew -- he thought he could do it. All right -- he is very full. Forty years at the back-side of a desert is well calculated to empty you of that sort of thing! You are not surprised that at the end of eighty years he says: "I cannot. I am not able". "Very well," says the Lord, "come then and I will send you." The same story -- what an emptying unto a filling!

We dare not dwell upon Israel as a nation. With the Lord's hand upon Israel, we pass to David. One thing about the Lord's dealing with David is this -- the working of this law of emptying, humbling, and making him so utterly dependent in order to bring him to the highest place of Israel's fulness in the Old Testament. There it is -- and so it goes on.

I have only taken out those illustrations. The Lord is working by this law. He is working towards this end -- "that He might fill all things", but unto that how we have to be emptied! What an emptying work He has to do! There is nothing that stands in the Lord's way more than self-sufficiency. It is only another way of saying "pride". That stands in the Lord's way, and when He has done with us there will be no room or ground for any pride. No more -- it is down there as far as we are concerned. But, oh! look at the end, the divine end! The increase of Christ -- "that He might fill all things."

Now this we note as we close for the present. This reversing of things from whatever fulness there is in ourselves to make way for His fulness has to have a crisis. As truly as the Lord met Jacob that night, as truly as the Lord met Moses in a crisis, as truly as the Lord met Saul of Tarsus in a very real crisis, there has to be a crisis, there has to be a time and a place where you and I come before the Lord on this matter of self-life and Christ-life, and we say "This is settled. So far as position is concerned, so far as acceptance is concerned, so far as the foundation is concerned, now it is settled, God helping me, once and for all, that it is to be "no longer I, but Christ" (Galatians 2:20) in anything. It is to be: "For to me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). It is a crisis. Everything does not happen in the crisis, but the position is secured, the ground is taken, and it must be so.

No doubt many of you know that. You know there was a time, more or less extended -- it may have been a day, a night, or even a period -- but it was a time in your life when the crisis was raised as to the self-life and the Christ-life, and it has to be like that. From the crisis the process begins, the process of the Christian life under the hand of the Lord, which is just this all the way along -- deeper and ever deeper. If it is so, take heart! Let us try and take all the comfort we can from it. Deeper and deeper is this self-emptying to bring to the greater fulness of Christ in us. It is a process going on. And, it seems to me, both from the Word and from experience, that at the end there won't be much of us left! If the Lord is not everything, God help us! That is what we are coming to. It is going to be the Lord or nothing. He is working that way, and when He works by that process, He intends it to be according to His predeterminate counsel that "He might fill all things".

A crisis, a process, but, blessed be God! a climax. The Word reveals in this very letter with which we are occupied, that day, that glorious day of the climax when it shall be "glory in the church... for ever and ever" (Ephesians 3:21).

Now, if what we have said is true, there is another thing that we ought to think about, at least. It is this: that measure now is going to determine the measure hereafter. What the Lord is doing with us is not just an arbitrary thing. The Lord is creating capacity for spiritual things. All the fulness of what is spiritual lies ahead, in the hereafter, in the ages of the ages. The measure in which that fulness is expressed in us will be the measure of the capacity which the Lord has been allowed to develop in us now. It matters, you know. I don't understand the New Testament at all; it is a perfect enigma if what I am now saying is not true. Why all this in the New Testament if willy-nilly we are going to come into all the fulness? If it does not matter at all about now, we are going to have it if we belong to the Lord, we are going to have it all if we are the Lord's, why all this about "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth" (Hebrews 12:6), and all this about discipline and suffering? You see what a situation that raises? It certainly says this most powerfully -- the measure in which the Lord gets His way with us now is going to determine our measure in the glory.

And none of you who knows anything about the difficulty and suffering of the Christian life fails to see that the Lord is seeking by painful means to enlarge us. We start out with a very little spiritual capacity for having, receiving, knowing, understanding spiritual things. The Lord gets to work upon us -- and this

stretching business is awfully difficult! The Psalmist said, "In pressure hast thou enlarged me" (Psalm 4:1 -- Darby). Pressure unto enlargement is a painful business, isn't it? But the Lord is working to increase our capacity. Thank God that is true! Although it is so imperfect: we feel that we have not made very much progress in this at best. Some of us can see today, we can understand, we do know in an intelligent way what at one time was altogether outside of us, beyond us. We are learning, we are growing in understanding, we are becoming more and more capable of receiving the things of God. It is like that.

Well, that is the normal Christian life. It is what the Lord is doing with us. This law of Christ ultimately filling all things is governing our spiritual history and our spiritual experience day by day. What, then, is to be done where we are concerned? Well, it is the old matter of applying our hearts very definitely and earnestly to learn the lessons of our sufferings, to learn the meaning of our trials and adversities, to find out where more of Christ has to come in by this breaking of ourselves. That is co-operation with God toward His end. He descended, came right down here, to take us in our humanity, and has ascended far above all -- and both things are governed by this purposive statement in order "That He might fill all things".

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