

CHAPTER VII

THE FULNESS OF GOD

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost. And I myself am persuaded of you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another."—Rom. xv. 13, 14.

A CHRISTIAN man was on his death-bed. He had spent a long life of service in the Kingdom of God, and a friend at his side was encouraging him with the thought of his approaching entrance into the Home above, and the joy of meeting his Lord after all his earnest labour and faithful service. The dying man responded with beautiful humility, "I shall be satisfied if I can but creep into heaven on my hands and knees." We can easily understand the spirit which prompted these words; he felt that his service was as nothing compared with his need of the Mercy of God through which alone he would reach the heavenly Kingdom. At the same time there is another sense in which the words are not rightly applicable to the Christian, for St. Peter speaks of our having "an abundant entrance ministered unto us into the everlasting kingdom" (2 Pet. i. 11). In keeping with this St. Paul was constantly

emphasising the Christian life under such figures of speech as "wealth," "riches," "abundance," "fulness," and he prays that Christians "might be filled with all the fulness of God." He was not satisfied with a bare entrance into heaven, he wished his converts and himself to have the fullest possible Christian life and experience here below, and then to enter fully into the joy of the Lord above. This is the true Christian life, the life of fulness, depth, power and reality; the only life emphasised in the Word of God, the only life that can glorify God or satisfy His purpose concerning us.

This fulness of life is brought very definitely before us in the above passage, which deserves and will need our most careful consideration. It has no less than six aspects of the full, rich, abundant Christian life.

THE FULNESS OF GOD—WHAT IT IS

The fulness of God is the fulness of *joy*. "Fill you with all joy." Joy is one of the most important and prominent elements of the Christian life. It is a condition of soul which is the immediate result of our definite personal relation to Christ. There is a twofold joy in the Bible—the joy of salvation and the joy of satisfaction. The joy of salvation comes from the experience of sin forgiven, from the consciousness that the burden has

been rolled away, and that all the past is covered in the righteousness of Christ. This was the experience of the jailer at Philippi, who "rejoiced, believing in God" (Acts xvi. 34). It was the restoration of this joy for which David prayed (Psa. li. 12).

The joy of satisfaction is the other element of the fulness of joy. "Satisfaction!" some one answers, "is it possible to use such a word in connection with the Christian life of the present?" Should we not limit this idea of satisfaction to the life to come? Satisfied with what? Not with ourselves, nor with our own attainments or service, but satisfied with Christ. The Apostle Peter's glowing words are not to be postponed to the life to come, "whom, having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1, 8). This is one of the searching and supreme tests of life—our satisfaction with our Lord. How easy it is to sing,

"Thou, O Christ, art all I want,
More than all in Thee I find,"

and yet how possible it is for the words to be really meaningless and no true expression of our personal experience. God's purpose for us is fulness of joy: "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, rejoice," (Phil. iv. 4).

The fulness of God is the fulness of *peace*. "Fill you with all . . . peace." This brings before us the passive, as joy gives the active side of the Christian life. As with joy, so also there is a twofold peace in the Word of God, the peace of reconciliation and the peace of restfulness. The peace of reconciliation is the foundation: "Being justified by faith we have peace with God" (Rom. v. 1). The enmity has been removed, the barriers are broken down and the soul is reconciled with God through Him Who is our peace. And then comes the peace of restfulness: "The peace of God" (Phil. iv. 7). The soul at peace with God enjoys a precious realisation of His presence as the God of peace, and restfulness arises and abides moment by moment in the heart. This again is part of the fulness of life which God intends for us in Christ Jesus, the fulness of His own peace. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee" (Isa. xxvi. 3).

The fulness of God is the fulness of *hope*. "That ye may abound in hope." Hope in the New Testament is a Christian grace wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit. It is to be carefully distinguished from our modern use of the word as equivalent to hopefulness, just a mere matter of buoyancy of temperament. The Christian hope will undoubtedly produce hopefulness, but the two are never to be confused, much less identified. The one is

the cause, the other the effect. Hope always looks on the future and is concerned with that great object which is put before us in the New Testament. Joy looks upward, peace looks inward, hope looks forward. The Christian hope is fixed on the coming of our Lord, and this is a very prominent element of New Testament teaching. It is to be feared that it does not obtain great prominence in much of present day Christianity. Most people look forward, not to the coming of the Lord, but to death; yet the one object of expectation set before us in the New Testament is the coming of our Lord. Now-a-days, the general idea is that death *will* come, and the Lord *may* come; but Scripture reverses this and says, "Death *may* come, but the Lord *will* come." It is impossible for the Christian to look forward to death with happiness and peace. There is something in the very fact of dying which is abhorrent to the Christian man. It is not that he is afraid to die, but that he naturally shrinks from that which is ever spoken of in the Bible as man's "enemy." "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. xv. 26). The Lord's coming, on the contrary, is a subject of joy, satisfaction, blessedness, and the contemplation of it can do nothing but good to the soul.

It is interesting to notice the place and order of "hope" in the light of what has preceded this word in our text. It is the present consciousness of joy

and peace that gives us our warrant for hope. As the Apostle himself says in another place it is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. i. 27). "Experience (produces) hope" (Rom. v. 4).

The fulness of God is the fulness of *goodness*. "Ye also are full of goodness." The place of this word following the other three in order is very noteworthy. Joy, peace and hope are intended to have their personal and practical effect in producing goodness. Our experiences are intended to result in character, and if they stop short of this, there is something greatly lacking in our Christian life. Character is a settled state of goodness which comes from the experience of Christ and His grace, and if our experiences are merely intermittent our goodness will be intermittent also. What is needed above all else in the present day is goodness, character, reality. The finest testimony that can be given to any man is that which was said of Barnabas, "He was a good man" (Acts xi. 24). A minister may be an indifferent preacher, or an ineffective visitor; he may be lacking in genius and great capacity, but if he is a good man this is the first and supreme factor of Christianity. "The fruit of the Spirit is . . . goodness" (Gal. v. 22).

The fulness of God is the fulness of *knowledge*. "Filled with all knowledge." The meaning of this can hardly be intellectual capacity, or even intel-

lectual attainments. It must be that spiritual knowledge, that perception of spiritual realities which is the mark of a true and growing Christian. This spiritual perception is the result of the foregoing elements of joy, peace, hope and goodness, and it is a sure proof of spiritual growth and maturity. The latest Epistles of the three great Apostles, St. Paul, St. Peter, and St. John are very emphatic as to spiritual perception as the mark of Christian maturity. A careful consideration of the Epistles of St. Paul, known as those of his first captivity—Philippians, Ephesians and Colossians, will reveal to us the frequent occurrence of the word "knowledge" and the original term is almost always a word which implies "mature" or "thorough knowledge." The second Epistle of St. Peter is also characterised by the same word, and although it consists only of three chapters, its emphasis on knowledge is really remarkable. The word is found in all three and then the Epistle closes with the exhortation to "grow in grace and in the *knowledge* of our Lord and Saviour." The great Epistle of St. John, known as the first Epistle, is also full of this idea of knowledge. Indeed the word "know" may be regarded as the keynote of the whole writing. "These things have I written unto you that ye may know" (1 John v. 13). Spiritual perception is of the greatest possible importance in view of the

various forms of error that are rife on every hand. It is for the lack of it that many Christians are led astray; they have not that ripe spiritual apprehension which enables them to perceive the error and to cleave to the good. The Apostle's prayer for his friends at Philippi was that "their love might abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment, and that they might *distinguish things that differ*" (Phil. i. 9, 10, Greek). This is our need to-day—a sense of spiritual discrimination to "prove all things, to hold fast that which is good," and to "approve those things which are excellent," because they are in accordance with the mind and will of God.

The fulness of God is the fulness of *capability*. "Able also to admonish." This is the practical outcome of all our experience, character and knowledge; they ought to be and must be put to practical account. The Christians at Rome did not keep their blessings to themselves; they had become capable ("able") and this capability expressed itself in testimony, in passing on God's truth and grace to others through the medium of lip and life. This type of Christianity is sorely needed to-day. Christian testimony is far too frequently limited to the ordained ministry, or to a few Christian workers as distinct from the large body of Christian people. It ought to be true of every genuine follower of Christ that he is "able

to admonish," able to express spiritual experiences, able to bear witness to his Master's grace, able to lead a soul to Christ, able to help fellow-Christians in spiritual difficulty, able to work for the Master either at home or abroad. There would be very much less dependence upon a professional ministry in time of spiritual difficulty if Christian people as a whole were more capable of dealing with spiritual anxieties of soul. This is the crown and consummation of all our knowledge and experience, the ability to do good to others and to bless them by word and deed.

These six elements of the fulness of life should be carefully noted. Each one by itself is essential and important. Their order is also to be observed; their measure, too, must not be overlooked. Not only are we to possess them; we are to have them in their fulness.

And yet perchance some reader is saying that this is quite beyond us and utterly impossible. Are we quite sure, however, that this is so? Can we for an instant think that the Apostle Paul would pray this prayer for those Roman Christians if he did not expect an answer? God never mocks us by putting before us an impossible ideal. His "biddings are enablings," and this very passage which reveals all this wonderful fulness of blessing, reveals also its secret and shows the way thither.

THE FULNESS OF LIFE—HOW IT COMES

The passage before us brings a threefold answer to this question. We are shown the *Divine Source*. "The God of hope." The fulness of life in the Christian is necessarily Divine not human. It comes from God, not from man. This title of God is very striking and occurs only in this place. "The God of hope." What does it mean? Probably in the first place it means "the God Who is the source of hope." But it may also include the idea of "The God Who is Himself hope," thus calling attention to hope as one of the characteristics of the Divine Nature. If this is the meaning, or even a part of the meaning, it is full of significance for our purpose in discovering the secret of life. We know well what hope does in connection with the teaching and training of children. If we wish a little one to undertake a task, and we show by our manner when we set the task that we expect the child to fail, we are almost guaranteeing the failure by robbing the little one of hope and encouragement. On the other hand, every true teacher knows the power of hope and encouragement in dealing with children. If we show that we expect the little one to succeed, we go far to guarantee the success. In like manner, God's attitude to His children is one of definite and powerful hope. He knows what His grace

can do, if only His children are willing to receive it. He does not expect His children to fail, but to succeed. He looks down from heaven as we yield ourselves to Him, and is to us the God of hope, full of Divine hope concerning us as we live in Christ. What a joy it is to be trusted by our God! What an inspiration to holiness and service to be assured of the Divine expectation of success and blessing! Surely we come at once to one of the deepest secrets of spiritual fulness of blessing, God's trust in us, God's hope concerning us as we yield ourselves unreservedly to His all-sufficient grace and power.

We are taught the *Divine Medium*. "Through the power of the Holy Ghost." All the elements of the fulness of life already considered are stored up for us in Christ, and it is through the Holy Ghost that they are bestowed upon us. Our joy is "joy in the Lord"; and the Kingdom of God is "joy in the Holy Ghost" (Rom. xiv. 17). Our peace is the peace of Christ (John xiv. 27) and this becomes ours by the Holy Spirit. Our hope comes from the indwelling of Christ (Col. i. 27); and this is made ours by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. v. 5). Our goodness is due to the indwelling of our Lord, and this becomes ours in the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal. v. 22). Our knowledge and capability are also gifts of the Risen Lord which are made ours in personal ex-

perience by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. And thus he is the Divine Medium through Whom everything comes which is needed for the fulness of life and power and blessing.

We are told of the *human channel*. "In believing." On our side, Faith is the response to Divine grace. Faith brings joy and peace; these in turn lead to hope; hope develops into goodness; goodness into insight; and insight into capability and usefulness. And thus Faith is the channel and means of everything God wants us to have. When we think of hope we at once realise that it is impossible without faith. God desires us to love Him supremely, but we cannot love a God Whom we distrust. God wishes our obedience, but it is impossible to obey one Whom we deny. God asks for our service, but we cannot serve a God Whom we discredit. Faith is at the root and foundation of everything in the Christian life.

Faith as revealed to us in Scripture is of a two-fold nature; there is the faith that *asks* and the faith that *accepts*; the faith that appeals and the faith that appropriates. This is probably the reason why prayer and thanksgiving are so often associated in the writings of St. Paul. They represent to us the two aspects of faith. Prayer is the faith that asks; thanksgiving is the faith that takes. We lose a great deal in our Christian life by failure to distinguish between these two aspects

of faith. We keep on asking, when we ought to commence accepting. "Believe that *ye have* received, and ye shall have" (Mark xi. 24). Two intimate friends were once lunching together, and after the host had said the usual grace, "For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful," his friend asked him when he was expecting to have that prayer answered. "What do you mean," was the reply. "Why," was the rejoinder, "to my certain knowledge you have been praying for the last twenty-five years to be *made* thankful: is it not about time that you *were* thankful?" This friend was trying to illustrate the difference between praying to be made thankful, and saying, "I *am* thankful." In the same way in the Christian life there comes a time when we should cease asking and commence obtaining. This is the value of the distinction between God's promises and God's facts. The promises are to be pleaded and their fulfilment expected. The facts are to be accepted and their blessings at once used. When we read, "My grace *is* sufficient for thee," it is not a promise to be pleaded, but a fact to be at once accepted and enjoyed. When we say "The Lord *is* my shepherd," we are not dealing with a promise or the groundwork of prayer, we are concerned with one of the present realities of the Christian experience. A man kneels down before leaving home in the morn-

ing and asks God for grace to be kept every moment that day. Then he rises at once and goes about his work. Has he done all his duty in thus simply asking for grace? There was something more and better that he should have done. He should have given a moment more after asking, for the purpose of *taking*, by saying to God, "O my God and Father, I believe that Thou art now giving me the grace that I have asked for; I here and now take Thy grace." As the hymn aptly puts it,

"I take, He undertakes."

The faith that takes is the secret of power and blessing, and the more trust of this kind we exercise the more power and the more fulness will come into our Christian life; and day by day we shall live a life of faith and shall say with the Apostle, "I can do all things through Him who is empowering me" (Phil. iv. 13: Greek), because we are able to say, "The life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God Who loved me and gave Himself for me."