Branch 8: The Fullness of God

πλήρωμα — Plērōma

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Introduction

What Is the "Fullness"?

The term **πλήρωμα (plērōma)** — rendered "fullness" in English — is used by Paul across multiple letters and once by John to describe Christ, the church, and the individual Christian. It is one of the most theologically loaded words in the New Testament.

1 Magnitude of Indwelling

Plērōma describes *how much* of God dwells in the believer — not a partial measure, but His **fullness**. The question it answers: *How much of God have we received?*

2 Goal of Indwelling

However, like all things in Christianity, it is designed to produce the character, thoughts, words, attitudes, and conduct that it produced in Christ as well.

3 Located in Christ

This fullness is found in Christ, who was the fullness of the Godhead in flesh (Col 2:9) and remains so in His current state of glory.

Received at Immersion

The Christian receives this fullness at immersion — God making His abode in us through the Holy Spirit. This is not a secondary experience or an elite attainment. It is the birthright of every baptized believer.

Transforms Us to a Stated Goal

"...to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ" Eph 4:12b-13

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Introduction, cont.

Declared Fullness → Demonstrated Fullness

The concept of plērōma follows the same pattern as righteousness in Paul's theology: it begins as something **reckoned and declared** — real and objective — and then moves toward something **practiced and demonstrated** as the believer is transformed.

1

Declared Fullness

Real and objective. God has made His abode in the believer. The fullness is present — not earned, not partial.

2

Faith in Its Reality

The declared fullness begins to take over the individual as they exercise faith in what is already true about them in Christ.

3

Demonstrated Fullness

Transformation follows — a **joint venture between us and God**. The fullness is expressed outwardly as the inner reality takes hold.

Why This Matters for the Sermon

Due to the epic nature of this concept, it stands to reason there would be attempts to obscure it. Before we can fully appreciate what Paul and John mean by plērōma, we must examine **how it was distorted** — and by whom.

This message covers the distortion. Subsequent messages will develop the positive content of the fullness in Christ and in the believer.

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The Fullness: Treading Carefully

The most influential Gnostic movement to distort the concept of plērōma was **Valentinianism** — a sophisticated, internally diverse movement that operated not on the fringes of Christianity but *within* it.

Valentinus — Founder

Born: c. AD 100, Egypt
Died: c. AD 165
Active: Rome, mid-2nd century

A highly educated Christian Gnostic who nearly became bishop of Rome. His movement became the most theologically developed branch of Gnosticism.

Used Paul & John

Valentinians did not reject the New Testament — they reinterpreted it, using the very terms Paul and John employ.

Inside the Church

Unlike Marcionism or Manichaeism, Valentinianism operated *within* the church — making it far more dangerous.

Concealed Beliefs

Many followers would not reveal what they believed up front. Initiation was gradual and deliberately obscured.

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A Secret Movement Within the Church

> *"Not even to their own disciples do they commit a secret before they have made sure of them. They have the knack of persuading men before instructing them."*
>
> — **Tertullian**, *Against the Valentinians*, c. AD 207

Tertullian's observation captures the core strategy of Valentinian recruitment: **persuasion precedes instruction**. A person would be drawn into the community, convinced of its value, and only then — once sufficiently committed — would the deeper cosmological system be revealed.

This made Valentinianism extraordinarily difficult to root out. Its members could sit in ordinary Christian assemblies, affirm the same surface-level confessions, and remain entirely undetected.

The Tactical Problem

Because Valentinians used the same vocabulary as orthodox Christians — including *plērōma*, *logos*, *sophia*, *ekklesia* — their presence was nearly invisible until the deeper system was exposed.

The Patristic Response

Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen all wrote extensively against Valentinianism — a measure of how seriously the early church took the threat.

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Three Categories of Humanity (Valentinian View)

Central to Valentinian theology was a fixed, ontological division of all human beings into three species — determined not by choice or faith, but by nature (Deterministic like Calvinism). This tripartite anthropology had profound implications for how salvation was understood.

🔥 Pneumatics

(Spiritual)

Possessed the divine spark — a fragment of the Pleroma trapped in matter. They alone were capable of attaining **Gnosis** (secret knowledge) and returning to the divine realm. Salvation was their destiny by nature.

⚖️ Psychics

(Animate / Rational)

Ordinary, uninitiated Christians. They could achieve a lesser, **terrestrial salvation** through faith and good works — but not the full Gnosis. This category included most church members.

🪨 Hylics

(Material)

Entirely physical beings with no divine spark. Incapable of salvation in any form. **Doomed to perish** with the material world at the end of the age.

⚠️ **This fixed tripartite division stands in direct contradiction to Paul's teaching that all believers — without distinction — have received the fullness (Eph 3:19, Col 2:10).**

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What Valentinians Believed: The Pleroma

The Valentinian cosmological system is elaborate. At its foundation is a divine realm called **the Pleroma** — the fullness — a concept they borrowed directly from Pauline vocabulary and filled with entirely different content.

01

Bythos — The Father God

At the center of the Pleroma stands **Bythos** ("depth"), the ultimate, unknowable father god — the first principle of all existence.

02

The 30 Aeons

Bythos fathers **30 Aeons** — divine emanations that populate the Pleroma. These include: *Sophia* (wisdom), *Nous* (mind), *Alethia* (truth), *Logos* (word), *Zoe* (life), *Anthropos* (man), *Ekklesia* (church).

03

Sophia's Fall

The Pleroma is thrown into chaos when **Sophia** procreates alone — without her divine consort. This act produces the material world and the inferior creator god (the Demiurge).

Key Observation

Every major term Paul uses — *plērōma*, *logos*, *sophia*, *ekklesia*, *anthropos* — appears in the Valentinian system as the name of an Aeon within the divine hierarchy.

The Aeons as a System

Aeon Name	Meaning
Sophia	Wisdom
Nous	Mind / Intellect
Alethia	Truth
Logos	Word
Zoe	Life
Anthropos	Man / Humanity
Ekklesia	Church / Assembly

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The Valentinian "Christ"

The Valentinian solution to the chaos caused by Sophia's fall introduces their version of "Christ" — a figure constructed from the attributes of the Aeons, who bears a slight resemblance to the Christ of Scripture only through using the some of the same terms.

1 Composite Construction

The father god's solution: take the **best attributes of all 30 Aeons** and combine them into a single being — "the Christ." He is not God incarnate; he is a divine composite.

2 Embodies the Fullness

This constructed Christ **embodies the Pleroma** — the fullness of the divine realm. He is the sum of the Aeons, sent to restore order to the disrupted divine hierarchy.

3 Descends at Baptism

He descends upon the **earthly Jesus at his baptism** — a separate, material figure — and brings order to the Pleroma. At the crucifixion, the divine Christ departs before Jesus suffers.

4 Secret Knowledge

All of this is **secret knowledge** — accessible only to the "spiritual ones" (Pneumatics). Valentinians grounded this claim in 1 Cor 2, where Paul speaks of wisdom among the mature.

The Exegetical Maneuver

By reading 1 Corinthians 2 as a reference to esoteric initiation rather than the revealed gospel, Valentinians could claim Pauline authority for their entire system — including their use of *plērōma*.

The Result

A "Christ" who is not the eternal Son of God, not truly incarnate, not truly crucified, and not the one in whom *"all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily"* (Col 2:9). The vocabulary is identical. The content is entirely foreign.

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Why This Matters for Us

The Valentinian system is not merely a historical curiosity. It represents a deliberate and sophisticated targeting of the very vocabulary Paul and John use to describe the most transformative realities available to the believer.

1

Same Terms, Different Conclusions

Valentinians used *plērōma*, *logos*, *sophia*, *ekklesia* — the same terms Paul and John use — but filled them with an entirely alien cosmological system. The vocabulary is identical; the theology is irreconcilable.

2

Targeted the Most Powerful Concepts

The most influential branch of Gnosticism did not attack peripheral doctrines. It targeted the very terms that unlock the most powerful concepts for transformation in Scripture — the fullness, the indwelling, the mystery.

3

The Chilling Effect

Anyone coming close to understanding these truths could be **dissuaded by the fear of being labeled Gnostic**. The association of plērōma with Valentinianism has functioned as a theological deterrent for centuries.

4

Why We Address It

This is why we are addressing it — so it is on record. The distortion must be named and understood before the truth can be fully received. We are not Valentinians. We are reading Paul and John on their own terms.

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The Differences (Abbreviated)

Having examined the Valentinian system, we can now state clearly — and on record — where the biblical teaching on plērōma departs from it at every decisive point.

The Mystery Is Publicly Revealed

Not secretly transmitted to an elite. Paul declares it openly to every believer (Eph 3:3–5; Col 1:26–27).

No Fixed Species of Humans

The Corinthians had the *choice* of being spiritually or fleshly minded (1 Cor 3:1–3). Nature is not destiny.

The Fullness Is Not a Divine Location

It is not a realm populated by Aeons. It is found in **Christ alone** — "in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col 2:9).

Christ Is Not an Aeon

He is not a member of a divine hierarchy or a composite of lesser beings. He is **God in the flesh** — the eternal Son, fully incarnate, truly crucified, bodily risen.

One God and Creator

No Demiurge. No plethora of gods. The God who created is the God who redeems — there is no inferior craftsman responsible for the material world.

The Body Is Not the Problem

The physical creation is not evil matter to be escaped. **Christ proved this** — He took on flesh, redeemed it, and rose bodily. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Salvation Is Not Secret Knowledge

It is found in Christ as revealed in Scripture — accessible to all, proclaimed openly, received by faith and immersion. No initiation. No hierarchy of knowers.

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