

"What Can We Do Through Christ?"

Philippians 4:13

'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'

It's a great verse, one that we've probably used many times. Have you ever used it or been challenged to use it to try something new for God? Or heard it used by well-meaning Christian athletes who, with the power of Jesus' strength will win a game, jump higher, run faster or accomplish a greater feat than they normally would? Or people have used it like a courageous pep talk to help them get over a hurdle in life.

The point of these one-verse sermons is to look at well known verses in their original context to make sure we're understanding it properly so we'll apply it properly. Again, Scripture was written in books or letters which were compiled in paragraphs. No verse is an island; no verse of Scripture is isolated from the context in which it was written.

Our verse this morning, Phil. 4:13, is in a paragraph that goes from v.10-20, which is in the broader context of Ch. 4, and in the wider context, a letter. We need to get the setting of the letter and ask good observational questions like who is the writer, who is he writing to, what was going on at the time in both their situations and why was he writing this letter?

What Were the Circumstances of the Letter?

It's important to ask the who, when, where, what and why questions because they often have a significant bearing on how we understand the letter. Here we understand that

Paul was in prison for the gospel

There are a number of places where he mentions this:

1:7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart, for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me.

1:12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

1:19 for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

We know how Paul got there. In Acts at the end of his third missionary journey, Paul vows to return to Jerusalem with an offering for the poor. However, the Jews were waiting for Paul to come back and tried to kill him, forcing his arrest and yet protected him from the Jews. The reason for his arrest is because his message – the gospel – is causing riots. After appealing to Caesar Paul is sent by ship (where he almost dies) to Rome where he is placed under house arrest, where most political prisoners stay until their trial is heard or, perhaps in Paul's case his accusers fail to show and Paul is

released. So his circumstances were not terrible the first time he was placed under house arrest, where in Acts 28:30 we read,

For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!

No doubt, this was because Paul was a Roman citizen that he received better treatment. But still, he was chained to a guard 24-7 and had to pay for his own quarters, and since he couldn't leave he couldn't earn money. Therefore,

Paul had to trust God for his needs (4:10-12, 14-18)

As a Roman citizen he probably received some food, but probably not very nourishing. He was reliant on family and friends to provide him rent money and better food. This is what Ch. 4 is all about, Paul thanking the Philippian believers for sending him food and money for his needs.

¹⁰ I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

¹⁴ Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. ¹⁷ Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account. ¹⁸ I have received full payment and even more; I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God.

Paul had a great history with the Philippian believers. It was in Philippi that Paul and Silas were first imprisoned for the gospel. They were being followed by a demon possessed girl who was telling everyone what Paul and Silas were up to. After a few days of this Paul ordered the demon to depart from her, which it did, and the girl stopped predicting the future because of her demon-possession. Well that upset her employers who made lots of money from her so they stirred up the people and had Paul and Silas arrested. Later that night God sends an earthquake to open the cell but Paul and Silas don't escape. The jailer thinks they've all escaped and is about to take his life when Paul yells stop, we're all here. He leads the jailer to Christ and a church is planted right then and there.

So quick were they to support Paul in his gospel ministry that they sent gifts to him twice in Thessalonica which was the very next place to which he travelled in Acts 17. Some where in the next few months the Philippians lost track of where Paul was. They wanted to help him again with his needs but they couldn't get it to him. Now that he was in a Roman jail, the Philippians sent a gift to him with Epaphroditus. They didn't just give him a gift but

The Philippians sacrificed to help Paul

Paul calls their gift an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God, a fragrant offering. In 2 Cor. 8:1 he commends the churches of Macedonia:

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. ² In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. ³ For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, ⁴ they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people.

And Philippi was one of those Macedonian churches. The context of Ch. 4:10-20 is Paul thanking the Philippians for their part in how God met his material and financial needs. That's the context of v.13 as well. It has nothing to do with physical achievements or trying something we're not equipped or gifted for. It has to do with Paul's faith in God to meet his needs. So then,

What Was it That Paul Could 'Do'?

Because he said I can 'do' all things through Christ who gives him strength. He tells us what he could do in the previous verses.

... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

Twice he tells us – because we don't listen well! – I have learned to be content whether I had nothing or whether I had way more than I need. Paul had

Learned to be content in all circumstances (vv.11-12)

The temptation when we're used to plenty and all of a sudden have nothing is to hoard the little you have and be anxious about what you don't have. The temptation when you're used to little is to waste and go overboard when you come into excess. Notice he had to learn this, as we all do. That means Paul went through times where he was needy and got anxious and prayed only to discover how God met his needs. That meant Paul had times where he had plenty and felt that was fine and perhaps didn't pray only to find out that quickly disappeared. That he couldn't rely on his tentmaking abilities or oratory skills to meet his needs. He learned to be content – which means a calm acceptance – that if he had plenty he wouldn't sit back and take it easy, or if he had little he wouldn't freak out and worry. How did he learn contentment?

Through dependence on Christ

The verb 'do' means have the ability. Let's reword the verse then. 'I have the ability to handle all things/ circumstances in life through Christ who enables me.' Paul learned contentment through trusting Jesus because Jesus was always with him. Since Jesus said He is with us always, that means He knows every situation we're going through and won't abandon us and will be there to help us wait on Him until God meets whatever need we have. Paul was content to let Jesus do what He's capable of doing. Especially in jail where he is totally dependent on Jesus to nudge other believers (like the Philippians) to meet Paul's needs. But he had to learn that over time and watch God meet need after need and slowly become less anxious about his circumstances.

In Heb. 13:5-6 the author put these two ideas together so succinctly,

^{13:5} Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

When we believe what God's Word says – He never leaves us – and then we obey what His Word says – be content with the situations God gives us – then we grow in trust – I say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper'.

But there is something more in v.13 as it relates to Paul's circumstances. Paul learned to be content in all circumstances through dependency on Jesus

To serve God wherever God placed him

God miraculously saved Paul to be his messenger to the Gentiles. Paul had travelled all over the Roman Empire sharing the gospel. Now he gets arrested. He could have thought, where's God now? His plan has failed? Why am I here? No, God's plan never failed. God says I may have changed the setting or the circumstances but the assignment hasn't changed. Paul continued serving God wherever God placed him. Why? Because he had learned to be content in his circumstances. Don't let your circumstances affect your responsibility to serve God. Listen to Paul,

1:12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.

The palace guard that Paul was talking was Rome's elite, called the Praetorian guard. This was the 'Seal Team' of the guards. Paul now had an audience with them. Instead of being discontent he saw that he had a different audience. Same message and same purpose. We see this in vv.19-21

1:19 for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul's purpose was to glorify God, to exalt Christ in whatever circumstances God placed him in. Our purpose never changes only our circumstances. This is the 'secret' Paul is talking about here.

What is the 'Secret'?

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

As Paul summarizes the end of his letter here's the secret of being content by trusting God. To trust God means,

Not being anxious when we're in need (4:6-7)

Remember v.13 is part of Ch. 4. The paragraph about contentment follows the one about anxiety. There he commanded us not be anxious about anything but to pray about everything and give thanks for everything and the peace of God (another phrase for contentment) will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Guard us from what? Being anxious about our needs.

Thinking like God not like the world (4:8-9)

And vv.8-9 tells us what to think about; things that are true, noble, lovely, admirable and praiseworthy – because when we are anxious, we have a tendency to worry and think like the world; negatively, critically and judgmentally. That does not bring about contentment or trust in God.

Being thankful for partners in ministry

Paul always appreciated everyone who assisted him in any way. He did not see himself as any better or his ministry as more important than others. Of the Philippians he said in Ch. 1:4

⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Paul said we are partners in ministry. Their prayers and gifts and service all worked together to help reach people for Christ. And then contentment comes from trusting God

Believing that God can use every circumstance in our lives as a ministry opportunity (1:12-18; 4:14-20)

Paul said his circumstances (imprisonment) had served to advance the gospel and to help the Philippians step up in their role in serving Paul to have his needs met so he could continue ministering to people without worrying how his needs would be met.

But he didn't anymore because he learned the secret of being content; trusting Jesus who never abandoned him that no matter what circumstance he found himself in, God always proved faithful by meeting Paul's needs, who in turn stopped worrying about his needs, focusing on his purpose in life; to make Jesus known and glorify God.

We can handle all circumstances through Christ because He never leaves us or forsakes us, giving us more and more confidence in His strength as He meets need after need after need. Are you more equipped now to handle whatever circumstances come your way this week? Trust Jesus in them who will give you His contentment and show you how He will meet our need so we can serve Him without worry and glorify our Father.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net