

What Many Christians Get Wrong About One of the Most Popular Bible Verses

“I can do all things because of Christ who strengthens me.”

Paul’s bold declaration in Philippians 4:13 is one of the most commonly quoted passages in the New Testament. We find the verse on everything—from clothing to tattoos and even eye makeup worn by professional athletes. A friend of mine recently quoted this verse to support her belief that God would help her achieve an exercise-related goal.

The assumption is that Paul’s statement promises that we can accomplish any task in our lives because Christ will strengthen us. We invoke this verse to comfort ourselves and others in difficult circumstances. While the Bible affirms God’s ability to do anything he pleases (Matt 19:26, Mark 9:23, compare Job 42:2, Jer. 32:17), this is not Paul’s point in Philippians 4:13.

Context of Philippians 4:13

If we look at the surrounding context of this passage, we find that Paul’s primary concern is the Philippian church’s financial support of his ministry. Philippians 4:13 is part of a side note to his main point. In 4:10, Paul begins to thank the Philippians for their financial contribution to his ministry; he resumes his thanksgiving in 4:14–20. In between those sections, in 4:11–13, Paul pauses to tell his readers that he was *already* content before they gave him a single denarius.

These verses may seem odd in this context. I used to think Paul was being somewhat impertinent by implying that the Philippians’ support was unappreciated or unnecessary. Or

perhaps Paul was downplaying the gift, to avoid creating the impression that the Philippians were his financial patrons (compare 1 Cor 9:3–18; 2 Cor 11:7–11). But both of these explanations fail to explain why Paul lets us see into his heart in these verses. It seems that Paul's motivation lies elsewhere.

Contentment in All Circumstances through Christ

We can grasp the meaning of Philippians 4:13 by reading the verse as the conclusion to the digression in 4:11–13. In this brief passage, Paul tells the Philippians that he has figured out the key to being content in the Christian life, though he does not immediately reveal it. He first states that his contentment does not depend on his present situation. He can be content whether he is full or hungry, rich or poor (4:11–12). Earlier in the letter, Paul gives an example of a time during his imprisonment when he was in need (1:12–26). He later describes how the Philippians' gift "filled" him up; he even speaks of their financial contribution as a "fragrant offering" and a sacrifice to God (4:18, ESV). While Paul recognizes the highs (financial abundance) and lows (imprisonment) in his life, he does not derive his contentment from them.

According to Paul, the source of contentment runs much deeper—"I can do all things because of Christ who strengthens me" (4:13). Thus Philippians 4:13 both concludes Paul's digression and provides the key to Christian contentment: Christ himself. For Paul, to be content is to know Christ and be strengthened by him. He declares, "to live is Christ" and explains that everything else is meaningless in comparison to knowing Christ (1:21; see also 3:7–9). Paul does not press on in his faith because circumstances are favorable or convenient, but because Christ Jesus made him his own (3:12; compare Gal 4:9). The contentment of knowing Christ brings joy, a theme Paul returns to more than 16 times in this short letter. Contentment in Christ also gives believers a peace

that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7).

The Secret to Being Content

Philippians 4:13 does not promise that God will empower us in everything we wish to accomplish. It assumes that we, like Paul, will experience both success and failure, both prosperity and great need. Even so, the verse applies to us today and has implications for life beyond finances. We can have true contentment in Christ because we need only Christ to be satisfied. If we know this “secret,” we are immune to the ups and downs of life. The verse is not a promise of future success, but one of present sufficiency in Christ.

Philippians 4:13 is one of the most powerful verses in the Bible. We should turn to this verse for encouragement when life’s ever-changing circumstances bring stress and uncertainty. Let Paul’s words remind you of the gift of Christ’s presence and strength whether you are in need or abundance. May we learn this truth—just as Paul did (Phil. 4:11, 12)—and be empowered by Christ to face all circumstances. {eo}

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