

“I CAN DO ANYTHING?” PHILIPPIANS 4:13: MISINTERPRETED AND MISUNDERSTOOD

Jeremiah J. E. Wierwille

Last Updated: 05/12/2014

Copyright © 2014

Abstract — Philippians 4:13 is one of the most misinterpreted and misused verses in the NT. It has been wrongly applied to various life situations for those who deem it consoling, encouraging, or affirming of triumph during whatever obstacle, trial, or difficulty they are encountering. When properly interpreted, the passage is Paul’s testimony that speaks of the confidence and faith he had in Christ, who gave him strength to endure untold affliction and tribulation while in prison.

General Research Topic(s) — The Letter to the Philippians, Biblical Interpretation, Exegesis and Hermeneutics.

I. TEXT

Philippians 4:10-13 ESV

¹⁰I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹²I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me

II. BACKGROUND

Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians in the latter years of his life while in prison, most likely in the capital of Rome in the late 50’s or early 60’s AD (1:7, 13-14, 17). Roman imprisonment was a tough ordeal and Paul had spent a significant amount of time in custody by the time he wrote this letter (at least 3 years). The letter to the Philippians is a letter of thanks and encouragement to the church in Philippi because the Philippian believers had given financial support and other aid to Paul while he was in prison when no other church did (4:15). Thus, in the letter Paul expresses his gratitude for their gifts and for the help he was receiving from one of their own members, Epaphroditus, who had come to minister unto him for a period of time while he was in prison (2:25-30).

One of the major themes of the letter is Paul’s “secret for being content.” As Paul describes, he realized a major key to a brighter future is breaking with the past and pressing toward the true heavenly goal that believers have been called to (3:7-16). He also encouraged the Philippian believers to see themselves where they truly belong, as citizens in

heaven (3:17-4:1). After a brief note urging two prominent female leaders in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, to resolve the conflict between them and that the Philippian church should continue to pursue all the virtues of the Christian life that they had seen in Paul while he was with them (4:2-9), Paul reveals the ultimate advantage of the Christian in coping with all circumstances and being content in any situation. He says, “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*” (4:13). Throughout history (and especially in recent times) this verse has not been well understood and has been easy prey for misinterpretation and misuse (as has been done by countless well-meaning Christians).

III. INTERPRETIVE ISSUE

Many Christians have used Philippians 4:13 as an inspirational and motivational maxim as though it is affirming they are supposed to be able to accomplish anything, attain anything, and do anything with the help of Christ. It has become a favorite axiom for athletes as though if they believe and look to Christ, he will help them win in their game, match, or competition. The interpretive problem with such an assertion is its complete disregard for the surrounding context of the passage and it perverts the meaning of Paul’s statement into something entirely different than what he intended. Whenever a verse is dislocated from its context, it is almost guaranteed to be wrongly interpreted and misapplied. Such negligence butchers the Scriptures and sanctions them to perform whatever tune the reader wants them to play.

The failure to grasp the context and properly understand 4:13 accordingly misleads people in

their faith by pointing them toward false realities and untrue biblical conclusions. By examining the immediate context of 4:13, we find that Paul is acknowledging and thanking the Philippian church for the gracious gift that they have given him to support ministry work. However, he makes a deliberate effort clarify that his ministry and well-being is not dependent upon them but solely on Christ (4:10-14). So then what exactly is Paul referring to verses 10-12 that culminates in his resolute statement in verse 13?

IV. INTERPRETATION

Paul is writing while awaiting trial in prison and during his imprisonment he had experienced a wide variety of conditions, circumstances, and challenges that range from being well-fed and comfortable to being hungry and in distress. He speaks up about how he is glad the Philippians have revived their concern for him and have now found an opportunity to show it (4:10). However, Paul immediately clarifies that he really was not in a state of need requiring a gift from them because he has learned how to be content with whatever he has (4:11). He has experienced times of plenty and times of little; he has “learned the secret” (Gk. *mueō*) to being content when well-fed and when hungry and when he is satisfied and when he is in need (4:12). *Mueō* refers to Paul’s knowledge of how to cope with his ever-changing and never-certain living conditions. It is in this context and during this time of fluctuating experiences in prison that Paul declares the “secret” he has learned is that he can do “all things, through him who strengthens him” (4:13).

Thus, we see that in Paul's argument the phrase, "I can do all things" refers to his confidence to endure all the circumstances (mostly, if not all, undesirable) that he found himself experiencing while in prison. Paul was facing a trial of managing and coping with often harsh and grim surroundings and treatment while being detained in prison. He had times when he was in need and times when he had plenty. These trials that Paul were going through were because he had been imprisoned on account of his faith and testimony of Christ (1:13). However, even in all the predicaments that Paul finds himself, he confesses that whether he prospers or is impoverished, hungry or well-fed, he knows he can be content in whatever conditions are given him because of the strength he receives in Christ.

Paul lays claim to no ability of his own. He points to the one who empowers him — that is, to Christ! Paul declares he is able to bear the challenges and burdens of imprisonment because of "him who strengthens me" (Gk. *en tō endunamounti me* - lit. "through the one who is strengthening me"). Paul's reference is clearly pointing to Christ and the use of the preposition *en* is reminiscent of Paul's common designation of being "in Christ" (Gk. *en Christō*). However, according to the context *en* could be seen as denoting agency ("through"), instrumentality ("by"), or association ("with"). In all likelihood, Paul has a semblance of each of these meanings in mind as he is professing that he is made stronger through the accomplished work of Christ, by coming to know Christ, and in his ongoing relationship with Christ. The intimate communion Paul has with Christ is the source of his strength to withstand the ever-changing and unpredictable conditions he was experiencing.

Paul did not see himself as being great or even capable of doing great things. He saw Christ as being great and because of the strength he received from Christ, he was not assuaged from his mission by whatever he encountered. Whether it was being weak, being in chains, being humiliated, or being famished, Paul looked to Christ in all things and he saw the "one who gives him strength" that he might become like him.

Paul's contentment in all his circumstances was not some "whatever happens, happens" sort of placid attitude. He was not just passively accepting his lot in life and rolling with the punches. Rather, Paul was aggressively proclaiming his reliance on and trust in Christ in order to enable him to pursue Christ and preach Christ. He was meeting his circumstances with Christ-confidence and knew that he would have the strength to make it through no matter what may come his way.

The reality that Paul clung to was victory over adversity. But, it was not an "I always win" mindset, it was not a "life will be easy, and things will go my way" ego parade, and it was not an "I am going to get everything I believe for" delusion. Paul entertained no false conceptions about his circumstances. What he did deliberate on what that he would not succumb to them and let them rule his heart because he was being strengthened by a Christ that knows his heartaches, knows his weaknesses, and knows his sufferings.

V. CONCLUSION

Therefore, it is both a misinterpretation and misapplication to use Philippians 4:13 as a pretext for claiming that a believer is able to achieve whatever they set their mind to as though they have

some sort of divine assistance for succeeding in whatever they are engaged in. “Any use of this verse to support a claim or goal of a triumphant, victorious Christian life without weaknesses or limitations conflicts with the immediate context and the wider teaching of Paul.”¹ Take for example, the notion that a believer should be able to climb Mt. Everest, or perform twice the amount of work at their job, or defeat the opposing team in an upcoming sporting match. Philippians 4:13 has long been used in defense of attaining selfish ambitions, counteracting lackadaisical tendencies, and thwarting unwanted thoughts of failure. Reciting 4:13 under these premises is not biblically accurate and is a wrong dividing of the scripture. This incorrect practice does not yield fruit but only confuses believers into thinking that they are promised something that Paul never meant.

What can be properly said and applied from 4:13 is that Paul’s message relates to Christians going through a series of trials in their life that stem from their faith in Christ and that Christ will give the believer strength to endure the circumstances no matter what they may be and no matter how long they may last. To those who rejoice in Christ, he gives the believer power to be sustained in persecution, oppression, and affliction, during all the ups and down that come with standing for him, with rest, freedom from anxiety, and the peace of God guarding their heart and mind in Christ Jesus (4:6-7).

To recap, Paul is glad and thankful for the gift from the believers at Philippi but he will not allow

the provision of their gift to supplant the place of Christ. Paul’s passion to know Christ and to live for him surpasses all the claims of power, money, prestige, comfortability, and leisure the world could offer. And no gift, no matter how great, could ever encroach on and compare to what Christ provides. Paul’s ultimate point in this passage is that the strength and power of Christ provides more ability and sufficiency to withstand hardship and misfortune than any benefaction his friends and acquaintances could possibly supply.

VI. REFERENCES

Hansen, G. Walter. *The Letter to the Philippians*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

CORRESPONDENCE

Author:	Jeremiah Wierwille
Affiliation:	N/A
Street:	06573 Southland Rd.
City/State:	New Knoxville, OH 45871
Country:	U.S.A.
Email:	contact@jerrywierwille.com

¹ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians* (PNTC; ed. D.A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 314.