

## Getting Philippians 4:13 Right

By [Dr. J. R. Norwood](#)

*Philippians 4:13 (ESV); I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

There seems to be a tendency among many people to take Bible verses, and portions of verses, out of context in order to lift themselves, praise themselves, or claim power and material prosperity for themselves. This is quite common among prosperity preachers and those who follow them. However, such misinterpretations and misapplications tend to violate the principle of “Soli Deo Gloria” – To God Alone Be Glory! Moreover, many who misuse such verses have no problem doing so because they really don’t understand the Gospel or how to rightly interpret Scripture.

Philippians 4:13 is yet another passage that is often misunderstood and misapplied. The verse comes from the letter of the apostle Paul to the Christian church in the city of Philippi. The 16th chapter of Acts informs us that the church in Philippi was the first church established by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the apostle Paul on European soil. Paul had been directed there by the Holy Spirit at the beginning of his second missionary journey. Among the first converts in Philippi was Lydia, a businesswoman who became a sponsor of the apostle’s ministry. It was in Philippi that Paul had cast the demons out of a young woman who was an enslaved fortuneteller, prompting her owners to bring Paul before the local magistrates who tore Paul and Silas’s clothes, beat them, and locked them in the innermost section of the prison. It was in that Philippian prison that Paul and Silas were praying at midnight and singing songs of praise and the dungeon shook and their chains flew off and even the prison doors flew open. It was their Philippian jailer who was about to commit suicide when he mistakenly presumed that all the prisoners had escaped but was assured by the apostle and his missionary companion Silas that all was well and that all of the prisoners remained inside the prison walls. This same jailer heard the gospel proclaimed by this apostle and he and his household believed and were baptized.

Now Paul writes to the Philippians, having been imprisoned, yet again, for preaching the gospel. While some scholars debate the location of Paul’s imprisonment on the occasion of writing this letter to the Philippians, many theologians agree is most likely his first imprisonment in the imperial capital of Rome as described in the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. When considering the backdrop of the letter to the Philippians, those who do not understand our faith would see it as a letter filled with irony. Even though the apostle is in this state of incarceration, this letter is filled with praise and thanksgiving. It is a letter of exuberant joy and filled with confident hope. The Philippians had initially written a

letter of concern and encouragement to the imprisoned apostle and, surprisingly, what they received in return was even greater encouragement and exhortation from the apostle.

The Philippians were justified in their concern for the well-being of the apostle, because Paul's execution was within the realm of possibility. Yet, with confidence in his Savior and the promise of eternal life and resurrection, Paul makes it clear that he is ready to live and preach or to die and be with Christ as he writes "... it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:20–21 ESV). Earlier, in the second chapter, the apostle encourages the Philippians to "[Hold] fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me" (Philippians 2:16–18 ESV).

Out of this concern for the apostles' well-being and state of mind due to his incarceration, the Philippians had sent gifts of encouragement and support to him. They were apparently fretful that he was languishing and remorseful that they were unable to get their gift to him sooner. They worried that the delay would leave Paul feeling abandoned and forgotten by them. The apostle acknowledges their gifts of concern, writing, "I 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" (Philippians 4:10 ESV). It is shortly after that acknowledgment that the apostle Paul continues his bold claims of assurance of salvation in Christ Jesus and confidence in the Lord's power. Paul writes the powerful words of Philippians 4:13; "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:13 is just about as famous as John 3:16; "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son..." For many - if not most - Christians, simply seeing the reference "Philippians 4:13" is enough to trigger our biblical memory. These are truly powerful and inspiring words! The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write them so that we would be encouraged and strengthened by them. The problem is that, far too often, the encouragement and strength we are supposed to get from them is completely missed because this verse is often misinterpreted and misapplied. These words are so often repeated out of context that even true believers and preachers stumble over their accurate application.

In the way it is commonly used, many people have been misled to presume that the focus of Philippians 4:13 is about what an individual believer can do, with a focus on personal achievement: being a winner; being a success story; acquiring whatever is desired; living one's best life now (which upon even a cursory reflection should never be what a true believer wants, as we are promised so

much more in the life to come). Inspirational speakers and prosperity-gospel preachers proclaim that this verse means that Jesus Christ gives you the strength to reach any goal, achieve any dream, accomplish any aspiration that you set for yourself. Well intentioned Christian athletes have displayed Philippians 4:13 by marking it on their bodies or on their team uniforms to inspire their best competitive performance and ultimate victory in competition. It is a way of testifying to their faith in Jesus Christ by stating to all who see the reference that they are “Christ empowered” and they are limitless in their potential to achieve any of their objectives because they can do all things through Christ who strengthens them.

But this is not what this verse of scripture means. This is not the proper interpretation of this text. This is actually taking the verse out of its original context in order to suit our own fancies and miss the powerful message it is actually meant to convey. Even though many true believers quote this passage with the best intentions, when taking it out of its context, not only do they misunderstand what Paul is actually saying but they misapply it in ways it was never meant to be used. We need to Get Philippians 4:13 Right!

When Paul stated that he could “do all things,” to what was he referring? Philippians 4:13, in its original context, is not about Paul achieving his dreams. It is his testimony about faithfully enduring any situation. It was about keeping the faith no matter what the circumstances. It was about having inner contentment against all odds. The apostle Paul was not referring to worldly success or achievement. Paul was writing from prison and not even sure if he was going to be released or be executed. He was in a life-or-death situation. He was in dire straits. Paul was living through difficult days. Out of great concern for him, the Philippians had sent a gift, a care package, a love offering of sorts to Paul to help in meeting whatever need he may have had. While Paul was encouraged and blessed by their expression of care, he also assured them that his material situation should cause them no alarm, as he writes in verse eleven “...for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

Paul was saying that his desperate situation did not leave him in desperation. His frightening circumstances did not leave him full of fear. No matter what was going on, in some way, Paul was able to be content in the midst of anything. We must not get this confused. Paul is not saying that he has achieved a state of being that, by sheer force of his own will, he has taught himself to undergo any situation with a sense of inner harmony. He is not saying that by developing the power of his own personal resolve, he has come to a place of serenity. Nor is Paul saying that he has learned to deny the reality of his situation and create an alternate “safe place” in his own mind to which he could retreat. Paul is not in some form of denial. He knows the stakes are high. Rather, Paul is echoing here to the Philippians what is also written in his second letter to the Corinthians, “.... [W]e have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed,

but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies “ (2 Corinthians 4:7–10 ESV).

Paul knows from personal experience that serving the Lord does not necessarily lead to personal worldly success. In fact, for Paul, it has led to prison and suffering and even potential execution. But Paul has learned from his walking with his risen and exalted Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, that he does not walk alone. He has learned that his Lord and Savior shall never forsake him. He has learned that everything proceeds under the sovereign providence of the Almighty God. Paul has learned to rest in the grace of the Lord in all circumstances.

Philippians 4:13 is not about reaching our own dreams. It is not about achieving personal goals and successes. It is about having a calm assurance that, as we follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, he is with us in each and every situation and is ultimately in control over each and every situation. No matter what comes, we are not abandoned. The Lord of life is our Lord. The King of kings is our Redeemer. Philippians 4:13 is not about climbing a ladder of personal achievement. It is about enduring any situation that may come our way as we live our lives in service to our Savior.

Before verse thirteen, verses eleven and twelve give even more insight into the proper interpretation and application of the thirteenth verse. In verse eleven, Paul testifies of having learned to be content in every situation. In verse twelve, we are given insight into the types of situations to which Paul was referring; and, the details given are a bit surprising. It is easy to think that learning contentment was something that had to be applied in his current desperate situation. Certainly being imprisoned is a lowly state where learning contentment in spite of the situation is a blessing. But Paul is not merely talking about learning contentment in the midst of difficulty. The Apostle Paul writes in verse twelve, "I 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." Paul is saying that his walk of faith has shown him that not only are there challenges when things are hard, but that there are challenges even when things are easy. Not only is spiritual growth and maturity needed in staying faithful in the midst of struggle, but they are also needed when enjoying great material blessings, whether being "brought low" or "abounding," whether "having plenty" or "facing hunger."

Spiritual warfare not only refers to times when things seem to be going against you and the “ends aren't meeting” and instead struggle meets you every morning and haunts you through the night. Spiritual warfare is also occurring when things are going so well that you could begin to think more highly of yourself than you ought or begin to worship the blessings instead of the blesser, or think that the ease of your day is the measure of your faith or the manifestation of the Lord's pleasure with you. All of this can be a stumbling-block. All of it can cause you to

backslide. All of this is the “all things” which must be overcome in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul testifies that he has "learned the secret" of dealing with all of this. Paul is not saying he has invented a “secret method,” like some “do it yourself,” self-help steps. He is not claiming to have discovered some secret knowledge on his own. The original Greek text brings to light what can be lost in English; Paul is saying that he has been "initiated into a mystery." He has been instructed and taught. He has been trained and disciplined to understand a profound truth. The blessing of contentment is not tied to your circumstances. Rather, it is only found in Jesus Christ. It is in the salvation that Jesus Christ brings. In Christ, there is a blessed assurance that is within which is not tied to the circumstances of this life. This assurance abides no matter what circumstances life may bring. James the Just, the half-brother of Christ and first bishop of Jerusalem, put it this way, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4 ESV).

Philippians 4:13 is not about our ability to do what we want. It's about trusting that the Lord Jesus Christ will achieve what he wants in us, no matter what the circumstances. After the apostle Paul speaks of how he has learned the secret of enduring in any situation and circumstance, only then does he proclaim, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” The message is clear. He is writing about trusting in the presence and power of Jesus Christ in any situation... in each and every situation. It is about Christ enabling believers to endure and walk faithfully upon the narrow way of discipleship. It is about the grace of the Lord enabling us to persevere in difficulty and maintain a holy focus in the midst of ease and in the midst of travail. It is not even about us having our own power because we are Christian. It is about trusting that Christ's power and Christ's will be manifested in us, no matter what is happening to us or around us. Before verse twelve or thirteen, Paul wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4–7 ESV).

Within its context, when properly interpreted and applied, Philippians 4:13 is far more powerful than most people realize. It is about the inner assurance, joy, peace, focus, and strength Christ instills in us, preserving us so that by his grace we will endure to the end. It is about the assurance we have of our salvation in Him because of his love and mercy. It is about being able to undergo anything because of the blessing of his abiding presence with us and the sure and certain promise of our eternal life with him. It is about our secured victory because we belong to the victorious, almighty, and eternal King. It is grounded in the

assurance that this divine King, who came to earth and died for the forgiveness of the sins of his people and rose to grant eternal life, will not abandon his own in circumstances of joy or pain, loss or gain, prosperity or poverty. Rather, he abides, preserves, comforts, and strengthens. That is why we can affirm that we can endure because his Spirit preserves those who trust in him!

“I can do all things,” within context speaks of endurance, perseverance, being strengthened and sustained by our Lord’s grace and power. It speaks of the wondrous abiding presence of Christ, upholding and sustaining his own in all situations. This was never meant to be a word of personal achievement, rather it echoes the praise stated in the words of the apostle Paul to the Ephesians, as he writes, “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20–21 ESV).

... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:11-13)

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