

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Being a Servant of God: I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me

Because this is the 1,000th broadcast by Truth for Today, our title today is most appropriate! *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* is the truthful testimony of every one of the *Truth for Today* speakers. Every one of us started with no broadcasting experience at all; and each of us readily admits any success is only through the Lord's help. So, like Samuel in 1 Samuel 7:12, who set up Israel's Ebenezer stone, we exclaim, *"Till now the LORD has helped us"*. Thomas Kelly (1769-1854) captures this sentiment in one of his hymns:

*Sing aloud to God our strength;
He has brought us hitherto:
He will bring us home at length;
This the Lord our God will do:
Doubt not, for His word is stable;
Fear not, for His arm is able.*

*Sing aloud to God our strength;
Sing with wonder of His love;
Who can tell its breadth or length,
Who below, or who above?
Who its depth and height can measure?
'Tis a rich unbounded treasure!*

*Sing aloud to God our strength;
He is with us where we go;
Fear we not the journey's length,
Fear we not the mighty foe:
All our foes shall be defeated,
And our journey safe completed.*

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" was a statement made by the Apostle Paul in Philippians 4:13. I'll read Philippians 4:10-13 from the New King James Version for the context in which he made this claim: *"I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again. Though you did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things, I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Since those first days of Christianity, *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"* (Philippians 4:13) has been the testimony of many a Christian. Some use it as their motto for Christian living. For example, I recently read about a famous American sportsman, who has the words "Philippians 4:13" displayed on the soles of his sports shoes. Evidently he wants everyone to know that his success is entirely due to the Lord's help. But it's not just apostles and famous Christian people who are able to give such a testimony - potentially every believer can receive help from the Lord for whatever he or she does in life.

Let's now look at Philippians 4:13 in its three component parts:

1. *"I can do all things"*;
2. *"Through Christ"*;
3. *"Who strengthens me"*; and then
4. The complete statement *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

1. ***"I can do all things"***

Paul claimed that there was nothing he could not do. More accurately we would say that there was nothing that God could not do through His servant to achieve His will. And, because our series is entitled 'Being a servant of God' we must ask, "What were these things that Paul accomplished in his service for Christ?"

But first, notice that he was chosen servant by the Lord Himself. The Lord said to Ananias, "...he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16, English Standard Version). Although chosen, it was also necessary for Paul to commit himself to serve the One who had called him. When Paul said, "What shall I do, Lord?" the Lord replied, "Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do" (Acts 22:10). Then the Lord told him of his special task - he was to be the apostle of the Gentiles, "to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place amongst those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). Paul wasn't disobedient to the heavenly vision of Christ he saw on the Damascus road (Acts 26:19), "but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance" (Acts 26:20). Furthermore, the Lord promised to protect Paul throughout his service from his fellow-Jews, and from the Gentiles.

Second, notice the difficult things that Paul suffered as He served God. Some of those things he lists in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. He said that he had far greater labours, far more imprisonments, far more beatings (countless, in fact) and far more near-death experiences than the so-called 'super apostles', who the Corinthians rated to be better than Paul.

Five times he had received thirty-nine lashes from the Jews.

- Three times he was beaten with rods;
- Once he was stoned;
- Three times he was shipwrecked;
- For a night and a day he drifted helplessly at sea;
- On his frequent journeys he encountered dangers:
 - from rivers;
 - from robbers;
 - from his own people, the Jews;
 - from Gentiles;
 - in cities;
 - in the wilderness;
 - when at sea; and
 - from false Christians.
- He experienced much toil and hardship in his service;
- He had many a sleepless night;
- He was often without food and, therefore, both hungry and thirsty;
- He suffered from cold and exposure;
- These things apart, he also had daily anxiety for all of the churches of God, including those he hadn't planted.

Third, notice that he honestly meant all things were achievable, but only if they were the Lord's will. That is, if the Lord permitted them. For example, Paul knew he could have escaped from prison in Philippi when the earthquake occurred (see Acts 16:25-40). It would have been natural for him to have jumped to that conclusion. But God's will was for him and Silas to remain so that they could preach the Gospel to the jailor (see Acts 16:3-31). Paul was acutely aware that he needed to act within God's will as he shows in Philippians 1. He requested the Philippians to pray for his release from prison so that he could travel to Philippi and serve them again - but only because it was more advantageous for them rather than for himself (Philippians 1:26). So he willingly left all in God's hands because he knew, and he wanted them also to know, that his continued detention in Rome was actually advancing the Gospel - people were being saved through his witness in the prison (see Philippians 1:12-18).

2. ***"Through Christ"***

Adding this next phrase onto "*I can do all things*" serves to emphasise that Paul actually meant all things could be achieved through Christ's help. "*Through Christ*" qualifies his claim, "*I can do all things*". As the Lord said, in John 15:5, "*I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*" As human beings we're extremely resourceful. We can set ourselves way-out

targets and we can achieve all sorts of difficult things when we apply our minds to such. In the world, a positive “I can do it” attitude is often seen to bring success, even with the most extreme of challenges. But Paul knew that human efforts are in vain when it comes to the service of God. He had learned the weakness of the human flesh as he stated in Romans 7. He expressed what every true believer also desires, his innermost wish to obey all God’s law. But he found that was impossible for he discovered that there was nothing good within himself - that is, within his flesh (see Romans 7:18).

He said: *“For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin”* (Romans 7:19-25).

We can sum up his argument and his conclusion as “Not I but Christ”! As this is the subject of a *Truth for Today* talk in April 2018, in more detail, DV, I will leave further discussion about it until then. But in the meantime, I would recommend that you also study talk T0974 by Ian Britton entitled “The I’s of Romans 7” which explains Paul’s musings on himself.

One final point of the necessity to understand that God’s service must only be “through Christ”. It’s about the folly of self confidence. At the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus warned His disciples that He was going to leave them and that every one of them would deny Him. *“Simon Peter [asked], ‘Lord, where are you going?’ Jesus answered, ‘Where I am going you cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterward’*. Peter retorted that might be true of the others, but not of him. Peter boasted that he was ready to go both to prison and to death with his Lord. He emphatically said, *‘If I must die with you, I will not deny you.’* All of the disciples said the same. But Jesus replied to Peter, *‘Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the rooster will not crow till you have denied me three times’*” (see John 13:36-38).

3. **“Who strengthens me”**

Paul received his strength for Christian service from a Source completely outside of himself - it came from the Lord upon the throne of grace. *“Who strengthens me”* means “Who gives me power” or “Who enables me”. It was Christ who enabled Paul to accomplish all of the tasks He assigned him by giving him inner strength. Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 1:11 that his primary task was to spread *“the gospel of the glory of the blessed God”*. How did Paul fulfill this wonderful commission from the Lord? By relying completely upon Christ for everything. Paul continued in 1 Timothy 1:12-14: *“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”*

The Lord enabled Paul to preach the gospel by His exceedingly abundant grace, that is, the Lord supplied all the power for Paul’s ministry. And Paul knew by experience that the Lord would always provide what was necessary whatever circumstance he found himself in. That’s why he commented in Philippians 4:11: *“Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”* However, he did genuinely appreciate the practical support that the Philippian church had sent him. *“I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God”* (Philippians 4:18). But even in this gift, Paul discerned the Lord’s grace. *“I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel”* (Philippians 1:7).

4. **The complete statement “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”**

Now let’s consider the complete statement that: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* Paul knew the grace of the Lord to be a living reality to him. But he wanted other believers to know and experience its power for themselves. For example, in Ephesians 1:18-20 he prayed that we might have our hearts enlightened to *“know what is ... the immeasurable greatness of power toward us who believe, according to the working of [God’s] great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places.”* And what greater power can there ever be than that which raised Christ out of death to God’s right hand in heaven? The God who has this power is capable of everything - nothing’s impossible with Him! (see Luke 1:37).

Such grace is necessary because God’s service is also a spiritual battle. *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against*

the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm" (Ephesians 6:12-13). In Ephesians 6:10, Paul had advised: *"Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might."*

"Finally" because he had exhorted his readers to live and serve God in ways which are in keeping with their heavenly calling. Satan and his forces will make every attempt to thwart God's work in and through us; but God gives more grace. Ephesians 6:10 reminds me of Joshua when he took Israel across the Jordan into enemy territory and saw the imposing city of Jericho. As he contemplated the task before him, he saw a Man between himself and Jericho and he was strengthened by realisation that this person was *"the commander of the LORD'S army"* (Joshua 5:14).

In 2 Timothy 4, Paul relates an incident in which he encountered great opposition to his preaching. As he comes to the end of this letter to his *"son in the faith"* (see 1 Timothy 1:2), he warns him to look out for Alexander the coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14-15). Paul recalls an occasion when Alexander did him much harm and greatly obstructed the gospel message. *"At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen"* (2 Timothy 4:16-18). This is an extreme example of what he means in Philippians 4:10-13: *"I have learned in whatsoever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low [therefore] ... I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

We saw some of the difficulties Paul encountered in his service for God in 2 Corinthians 11. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul wrote of another way in which he learned the grace of the Lord. He described an affliction that he had received called *"a thorn in the flesh"* (2 Corinthians 12:7). He identified it as *"a messenger of Satan"* to harass him, but he recognised that it was allowed of the Lord to keep him from becoming conceited about himself because of the heavenly visions he'd experienced. Paul regarded the *"thorn in the flesh"* to be a great obstruction in his service. He thought that he would achieve more without it and prayed to this effect. Listen to his remarkable discovery: *"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). Yes, it's an amazing paradox that whenever we feel within ourselves we cannot do the work of the Lord, because of our inherent weakness, it's then that we become strong! But strong in *"the Lord and in the power of His might"*! (see Ephesians 6:10).

So we finish this 1,000th talk on Philippians 4:13 *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"*, with a hymn, which becomes a closing prayer for us for today and for the rest of our responsible life of service for our glorious risen Lord; and until He comes again:

*"We rest on Thee," our shield and our defender;
We go not forth alone against the foe;
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,
"We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go."*

*Yea, "in Thy name", O Captain of salvation!
In Thy dear name, all other names above;
Jesus our righteousness, our sure foundation,
Our Prince of glory and our King of love.*

*"We go" in faith, our own great weakness feeling,
And needing more each day Thy grace to know:
Yet from our hearts a song of triumph pealing;
"We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go."*

*"We rest on Thee", our Shield and our Defender;
Thine is the battle; Thine shall be the praise;
When passing through the gates of pearly splendour,
Victors, we rest, with Thee, through endless days.*

Edith Gilling Cherry (1872-1897)

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