

## Philippians 4:10-23

### The Strengthening Power of Christ

*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me – v. 13*

As we enter into this last section of this epistle to the Philippians we discover what arguably is the very specific purpose behind the entire epistle. Following the rich doctrine and the emphasis on joy and rejoicing and the various exhortations some of which are aimed at specific church problems, we now come to the closing postscript, so to speak, which could best be described as a “thank you” note.

*But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again* Paul writes in v. 10. He’s making reference to a donation that had been sent to him by the Philippian church. Look at v. 18: *But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.*

This is why I say that we see the specific occasion for this letter. Paul had received a generous donation from the Philippian church which was intended to encourage and comfort him in his imprisonment. And so he does the appropriate thing and sends them back probably through Epaphroditus a “thank you” note. He cannot, however, merely send a thank you note. He must first speak to them on the theme of Christian joy and admonish them to be of the same mind and to gain the mind of Christ and call on them to stand fast in the Lord. And then at the very end, not merely as an afterthought, but in a very deliberate and intentional way he thanks them for their care for him.

This last paragraph of the epistle, therefore, takes on a very warm and personal tone and enables the reader of Philippians to detect what is a true and genuine and strong bond of love between Paul and the Philippians. It’s not hard to picture the great Apostle opening a package and perhaps welling up in tears as he holds up and displays for his prison guards to see one article of clothing after another. I don’t know whether or not perishable items could have been sent in those days but if they could you could picture Paul setting out a container of cookies and offering them to the guards.

And what a testimony such affection would demonstrate to those Roman guards. They would see most definitely that the Philippians were not ashamed of Paul or of the gospel he preached. There’s a challenge for us here, isn’t there, as Christians. How our care and concern for each other and for other Christians ought to be manifested in very practical ways.

Now in the course of thanking the Philippians for their donation Paul says some very unusual things. He says to them in effect that while he’s grateful for their donation he’s not grateful in the usual sense in which a person might think of being grateful. In fact he’s saying to them in a polite sort of way that he didn’t really need their donation. *Not that I speak in respect of want* he says in v. 11. He’s not speaking from the vantage point in other words of one who was in desperate need. And the reason he’s not speaking from that

vantage point was because from his point of view there was no such thing as desperate need. *I have learned* he goes on to say in v. 11 *in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*. And then he elaborates on the matter in the next verse *I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need* (v. 12).

And then in another one of those well known statements that every Christian who knows his Bible even a little bit is familiar with, Paul then goes on to explain how he has learned to be content and how he knows how to be based and how to abound and how to be full and how to be hungry. How had he learned these things? Verse 13 *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*.

Now in v. 14 we see how his “thank you” note takes a strange twist. He’s said to them up to this point – I’m grateful for your donation, even though, in a very real sense I didn’t need it because I have Christ and if I have Christ I have everything I need. But notice now what he says in v. 14 *Notwithstanding ye have well done, that ye did communicate with my affliction*. He goes on to explain that their well-doing was not in helping a man in desperation during a time of imprisonment. *Not because I desire a gift*, he says in v. 17 *but I desire fruit that may abound to your account*.

It may be worth revisiting this passage some time to study it from the vantage point of giving and receiving. In case we don’t revisit the passage with that aim let me just point out that when it comes to giving and receiving there should be a common aim – in other words the giver has the same aim as the receiver. Both should have the aim expressed in v. 20 *Now unto God and our Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen*.

Could I pause here long enough to say that I have known Christians that have been generous givers but have not been generous receivers. Oh they are happy to minister to others. They take pleasure in that and they recognize how God is glorified in that and how in ministering to others there is a certain fruit bearing on the part of the person who ministers. But then if someone attempts to do them good or someone sees a need in their life that they want to help with in some small way their pride interferes and rather than being blessed and feeling blessed they instead in their pride act as if they’ve been insulted. *I don’t need welfare* they say in their hearts. *Why don’t you find someone who is in real need*.

What these verses teach us most clearly is that real need is not the real issue. The glory of God is the real issue and whether you think you need anything or not you should never deprive another Christian of the opportunity to bear fruit to his account by ministering to you. We must be spiritual in our giving and in our receiving. And this donation from the Philippians to Paul demonstrates that.

What I want to call your attention to this morning, however, is how Paul arrived at this state of being content – how he learned how to be abased and how to abound. How did he learn to be full or to be hungry to abound or to suffer need? It is in this specific context that he gives the well known key of v. 13:

## I Can Do All Things Through Christ Which Strengtheneth Me

Let's consider first of all:

### I. The Need for Christ's Strengthening Power

When Paul speaks in v. 12 of being abased and abounding and of being full and being hungry, abounding at one point and suffering need at another point, you could say that he's addressing a matter of life Christian knows in his experience. Who among us that has been on the scene of time for any period of time doesn't know that there's an ebb and flow to life. There are periods of high tide, so to speak, and there are other periods of low tide.

We love those times when everything is going according to our plans. You have an income level that enables you to live comfortably within your means. Everybody in the family is healthy; Everything that has to function mechanically works. And for a period that you wish would last indefinitely life is operating smoothly. There are no disruptions to the plan. Your investments are all sound and your nest egg for retirement is growing at a steady rate. And outside of occasional colds and flues everyone is healthy. You're training your children and their ability to grasp what they're being taught impresses you to the point that you reason that few if any children are as intelligent or wise as your children.

This is the high tide of life. You are abounding; you are full. Like the rich man in the parable of Lk. 12 you're able to say *Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry*. The contrast couldn't be greater to the other end of the spectrum which is being abased. The word *abased* means to be reduced or to be humbled. The term speaks of a circumstantial demotion so to speak. All of a sudden there are unexpected expenses; Someone in the family becomes seriously ill or your income is seriously reduced. You discover quite unexpectedly that you're not as valuable as you may have thought you were in the place of your employment. In fact your companies real loyalty to you is driven by a bottom line and if that bottom line isn't being met then your talents and skills, notwithstanding, you are let go.

If there is any nest egg to begin with that nest egg is now used to fix the car which is broken down and seems to need repairs all the time. Or it's used just to cover the ordinary expenses of life. You have to tighten your belt maybe like never before and you find that petition in the Lord's prayer *Give us this day our daily bread* now taking on a whole new meaning in your life.

There is an ebb and flow to life and if the apostle Paul's example teaches us anything it certainly teaches us that this ebb and flow to life is perfectly normal for the Christian. You would think that one so near to Christ as the Apostle Paul would never know what it meant to suffer hunger or to suffer need of any kind. Indeed don't we have to admit that throughout much of Christendom especially in affluent America there is a mindset that says you ought to be prospering and flourishing all of the time. And if you're not then there must be something wrong with you spiritually. What's happened to your faith? – you may ask yourself. What have I done wrong to bring these hardships on myself?

And you begin to second guess yourself or worse yet you begin to question God or to doubt God. And where the pain of life becomes particularly acute is when you're forced to observe that at the same time the tide has gone out for you it's come in for some other Christian. Why does he get special treatment from God, you ask. How is he any better than I am? Indeed, I can think of several ways in which I'm quite sure he's worse than I am. Why is he abounding while I'm being abased? And if you're not careful you find yourself all of a sudden being covetous toward others.

I'm glad this morning that Paul is honest enough to admit that he had to learn how to be abound and how to be abased. Even the great Apostle had to learn how to suffer need. He stands in marked contrast to the "prosperity gospel" mentality that suggests that the Christian ought "to be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease." But Paul's example teaches something else. He teaches us the need we face to learn how to live no matter where we are on the spectrum of abounding or being abased.

In other words – when Paul says *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me* he is indicating that we need Christ when we are abased and we need Christ when we are abounding. We need him for all things. There is no point on the spectrum where we don't need the strength that Christ provides. This, of course, isn't hard to realize when we're on the low end of the spectrum. When the tide is out and you're being humbled to the point of humiliation and you're suffering need, it isn't too hard in those circumstances to see your need for Christ.

The challenge you face in those circumstances very often is the challenge to your patience. Lord, how long must I endure this condition? That's a question, you know, that you see again and again in the Psalms. Spurgeon calls Psalm 13 the "how long" Psalm or the "howling Psalm" *How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily?* (Psalm 13:1,2). Why won't you move for me and change these abysmal circumstances?

The problem we sometimes face in such circumstances is that we tend to think of our needs only in terms of our circumstances. My need is for this bill to be paid, or my need is for the car to work, or my need is for the test results from the doctor to come back and assign me a clean bill of health. God, however, doesn't view our needs in quite the same shallow way that we may view them. *For ye have need of patience, the Lord says to you in Heb. 10:36 that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. 37 For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. 38 Now the just shall live by faith.*

Oh how we need the strengthening power of Christ when the tide is low. We need patience; we need an increase to our faith; we need deliverance from a grumbling spirit; and we need deliverance from our particular adverse circumstances. And our needs are usually in that order. But if we need Christ in our adverse circumstances, which it doesn't take any great spiritual discernment to figure out, how much more do we need him when

we're on the other end of the spectrum and we're full and abounding. *I am instructed to be full* Paul says in v. 12: *I am instructed to abound*. You wouldn't think you would need instruction to be full, would you? Do you really need to be instructed on how to abound? Don't you simply take in these circumstances and indulge in the pleasure of them?

We're tempted to think that but the truth is that we need the strengthening power of Christ in those circumstances too. And the reason we need his strengthening power is the high tide times is because it's in those times especially that you are tempted toward a sense of self-sufficiency. You are tempted to harbor the notion that you don't need Christ during those times.

Spiritual habits become optional and when they become optional they also become sloppy. I don't really need to worship God today. I don't really need to be in church. It's no big deal if I miss my time in prayer and time in the word. Missing that time will not be a matter of serious consequence. And our need becomes all the greater because we deceive ourselves into thinking that we don't really have any need at all.

Listen to the warning that the Lord gave to the Israelites through Moses in Deut. 6:10-12 *And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he swore unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, 11 And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; 12 Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage.*

Oh we need to learn how to abound every bit as much as we need to learn how to be abased. We need to be strengthened by Christ for both sets of circumstances. Some of you may recall quite some time ago when we studied the book of Job in Sunday School that I pointed out how in the very first chapter of Job, before the time of Job being abased took place that we read of the consistent devotional habit of Job in Job 1:5 *And it was so, when the days of [their] feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings [according] to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.* This continual practice of Job was taking place during the days of his prosperity. It is after Job is described as being among the richest men of the East that this statement about his consistent devotional life is mentioned.

When Paul says, then, *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me* he is making reference to both kinds of seasons in life. When you are abased you need Christ's strengthening power and when you are abounding in life you need Christ's strengthening power. You need him in all things. You need him for any and every kind of circumstance in life. Knowing that you need him, then, don't you think you should seek him? Don't you think you should seek him daily in his word? Don't you think you should seek him more frequently in his house?

We see, then, our need of his strengthening power. Let's think next for a moment on:

## II. The Fruit of His Strengthening Power

What happens when a man is strengthened for all things by Christ? What does such a Christian look like? I think sometimes that we may have a tendency to think in very ideal but impractical terms when we think of a man strengthened by Christ. Perhaps we see him only as a man like the Apostle Paul who is engaged in the same activities of Paul.

So when I envision a man strengthened by Christ I see a church planter and I see a soul winner. I see someone who can speak for Christ and when he speaks he has great sway over the souls of men. Men are brought under conviction by every word you drop. Souls are getting saved all the time where ever you go and whatever you do.

And while that is perhaps something of an ideal picture, it certainly is a lovely picture. And we've been told by Paul to think on whatsoever things are true and honest and just and pure and lovely. And having greater sway over men for Christ is something that we should desire and seek. Jacob, in the book of Genesis, had his name changed to Israel because he was able to prevail with God in prayer and then to prevail over his brother Esau and thus avoid being wiped out by Esau and his band. So certainly a mark of the strengthening power of Christ is greater sway with God in prayer and thus greater sway with men on behalf of Christ.

But while that's true, I don't believe that that is the picture the Apostle Paul has in mind when he writes *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me*. I think there's a very close connection between this saying of Paul in v. 13 with what Paul says in v. 11 *Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*.

Remember what I said in my introduction. This section of Philippians is Paul's thank you note. He's grateful for the donation of the Philippians to his needs while in prison not because he suffers from a desperate sense of need but because he rejoices to see the kind of fruit in their lives that indicates that they have hearts for Christ and for the servants of Christ. So far as his personal circumstances are concerned, Paul regards their donation as nice but not as something essential.

And the reason their donation was not essential was because Paul had learned contentment in whatever condition he faced. *I have learned, in whatever state I am, therewith to be content*. I would suggest to you that this is the fruit of the strengthening power of Christ – contentment.

And the reason Paul could be content was because of his assurance that no matter what else he didn't have, he was absolutely sure that he did have Christ. If you take, as many do, Paul to be the author of Hebrews, then you find him expressing this idea very clearly in Heb. 13:5,6 *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. 6 So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.*

Do you see his meaning? You need not be envious at what others have because you have Christ. You have the promise of his presence. *I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.* There is a sense, then, in which you have everything. I've said this before and I'm going to make it a point of emphasis in the closing message that I give at our Conference this week. The point is this – everything you seek God for is less than what God has already given you. You can't possibly seek God for something greater than what he's already given you because he's given you his Son.

Those of us from Greenville can recall many instances in which Dr. Cairns would tell us that when God gave you his Son, he gave you the very richest treasure that heaven possessed. He couldn't give you anything more valuable and he couldn't give you anything more durable. In giving you Christ he's given you life, and he's given you heaven, and he's given you all that you need to qualify you for heaven and he's given you deliverance from the hell you deserve and he's given you cleansing and forgiveness for your sins.

Do you begin to see, then, how Paul could say that he had learned in whatsoever state he was in to be content? To live is Christ, to die is gain. I have the presence of Christ and the assurance from Christ that he'll always be with me and that he'll never forsake me. What else could I possibly need? What else could I possibly desire? Everything else pales into insignificance in comparison to what I already have. And because I have him I have the assurance that everything I experience is ministered to me by him. *All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose* (Rom. 8:28).

I have the freedom for interpreting every circumstance of life as being ministered to me by him. This is why I can be content when I'm abased and suffering need. These circumstances don't come upon you by accident. They're dealt to you by Christ. And they're dealt to you because of the needs he sees in you. He's advancing your sanctification. He's preparing you for glory. He personally, according to Peter, views the trial of your faith as being much more precious than gold that perishes. Listen to the way Peter expresses it in 1Pe 1:7 *That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.*

Where does discontentment come from, then? I would suggest to you that it comes from taking the broad and expansive and far reaching perspective of everlasting salvation and glory and finding a way to scrunch it down and compact it and reduce it all that to the tiny and insignificant moment of time in this present evil world.

The fruit of the strengthening power of Christ is contentment. *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.* And when Christ strengthens me I will know both how to be abased and how to abound; how to be full and how to be hungry; how to abound and how to suffer need.

Let me say a word, briefly in closing on:

### III. The Means for Gaining This Strengthening Power

*I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me* Paul says. And there's something in that statement that causes you perhaps to sigh because you don't feel very strong in Christ. You certainly see your need for such strength and when you gain that strength you will have also gained contentment.

Notice, if you will, that Paul says *I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*. It's not something that comes natural, not even for the Christian. It's something that's learned. And when Paul speaks of learning in this instance I don't believe he's talking about book learning. He didn't read a self-help book and then master the discipline of contentment. He's speaking about the learning of experience.

Christians gain this experience in their communion with Christ and they gain this experience in their communion with each other. I said earlier that Paul did not ultimately need the donation of the Philippians but while that's true it would not be true to say that Paul had no need of the Philippians themselves. And what effect do you suppose the communication of the Philippians had upon Paul? Maybe they sent him, among other things, a sweater to help him stay warm. Do you suppose Paul spent hours thinking about that sweater? Do you suppose he would gaze at that sweater and hold it and try it on and then take it off and try it on again.

No – he would not be dominated by their gifts but he would certainly have been strengthened in Christ to see how he was being taken to heart by other Christians. This is how we gain strength in Christ through our ministries to each other. This is why you need church. Your familiar with that text in Hebrews says *let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.*

We're to assemble that we may worship Christ and draw strength from Christ and draw the strength of Christ from each other. It's sad and ironic, isn't it, that even as far back as the days of this letter to the Hebrews it was the manner of some to forsake the assembling of believers. The irony of such a forsaking is that the reasons cited for it are usually the very reasons you need it. I'm too weak to come to church; I'm too burdened to come to church; I'm too oppressed to come to church. My heart needs are too deep to come to church.

All the very reasons you ought to be in church and you ought to be in church as often as you can be in church. Show me a man that doesn't have a good church attendance habit and I'll show you a man who is weak and discontented. And so long as he forsakes the very way God has ordained his strength he won't go from faith to faith or from strength to strength, he'll go instead from weak to weaker and his level of discontentment will rise.

Oh that we as the Lord's people, then, would see our need for Christ's strength and appropriate the proper means for gaining that strength. If you'll do so you'll certainly gain the fruit of such strength which will be contentment in any and every circumstance of life.