

It is easily one of the most popular Bible passages among American Christians. It is also, I believe, one of the most misused and misunderstood Bible passages in American Christianity.

Philippians 4:13

The older NIV (the one most here might be familiar with) translated it this way: **I can do everything through him who gives me strength.**

It's the passage the high school Christian athlete writes on a sticky note and put on the mirror in the locker room before the big game.

It's the meme that is shared on Facebook by the 20-something who is gearing up for a big job interview.

It's the inspirational sharpie message the Christian marathon runner writes on her forearm before the big race.

It's the motivational whisper the aging Christian uses to push through another session of physical therapy after that big surgery.

I can do all things through him who gives me strength – it's the cherry-picked passage that has become a go-to inspirational boost for many an American Christian who has some obstacle that needs conquering.

It's one of the most popular, and one of the most misunderstood passages today. Allow me to explain...

It's a passage that seems to say, and is often understood as saying there is nothing I can't do, no mountain I can't tackle, no problem I can't solve, no difficulty I can't overcome if only I remember that I have the Lord on my side making me strong. I can do, I can accomplish, I can overcome anything and everything because my God will give me strength.

Only, that is not at all what the passage is actually saying...

The older NIV is kind of a bad translation, the newer NIV does a better job of reminding us that this passage has a context (that's what is printed in your service folder): **I can do all this through him who gives me strength.**

Or allow my own translation: I am able to deal with anything through my relationship with the one who strengthens me.

Can you see the subtle but important difference?

God *is not* promising you that he will give you the strength to win your high school basketball game.

God *is not* promising you that he will give you the strength to nail your job interview.

God *is not* promising you that he will give you the strength to run 26.2 miles for a new personal best.

God *is not* promising you that he will give you the strength to bounce back from a knee replacement or open heart surgery in record time.

God *is* promising you that there is a way for you to be content, to cope, to deal, whether you win or lose your basketball game.

God *is* promising that there is a way to be strong whether you nail or bomb your job interview.

God *is* promising that there is a way to be happy whether you run the marathon of your life or end up wheezing in a medic's tent after only a few miles.

God *is* promising there is a way to learn how to find contentment even when it takes you a whole lot longer to bounce back from that surgery than you expected or the doctors promised.

Why am I making such a big deal about this? Why do I care so much? Why is this a hermeneutical pet-peeve of mine (hermeneutics is the study of how to properly read your Bible)?

Well, I look around at America and I see that we as society have a contentment problem (contentment, being happy with what you have). We are not very good at being happy with what we have right now. And this quick survey of American society starts right here in this heart of mine.

America is the land of opportunity – which essentially means that America is a land full of people who are convinced that what they have right now isn't good enough, and in America they have the right and opportunity to get more – not exactly contentment fostering soil.

We are celebrating Thanksgiving, an American holiday ostensibly to remember to be content with what we have, thankful for what we already possess, only we can't even make it a whole day before we start itching to get our grubby little fingers on *more* as the Black Friday deals draw us out in droves. "Thank you God for everything we have. Let's go get some more!"

Now, I'm not some curmudgeonly scrooge who wags my finger at the Black Friday crowds, refuses to buy my kids presents, and thinks we should all live like the Amish in order to prove our Christian contentment.

But, I do think that if we are honest with ourselves, and we allow God's word to shed its light on the deep dark corners of our hearts, we will all agree that we have a contentment problem. We have this tendency to assess our external circumstances (how much money we have, the toys we own, our health, careers, reputation, our family), finding them lacking in some way, and refuse to be content until that self-identified need has been met.

I get on my soapbox about Philippians 4:3 because as it is unfortunately misunderstood by many, it turns God into nothing more than a motivational boost as we strive for bigger and better things – essentially, God quickly becomes a tool for us to use to satisfy and feed our discontentment. He can give us the strength to get for ourselves what we are lacking right now. But that is the exact opposite of what Paul is telling us in Philippians chapter 4.

The American celebration of Thanksgiving gives us a great opportunity to be reminded of what the Bible has to say on the topic of what we can and should be thankful for. Philippians chapter 4 gives us a prime opportunity to go back to school and

get a refresher course in contentment 101 – how do we find that ever-elusive feeling of contentment, and then, once we have found it, how do we keep it?

Philippians chapter 4 is not about God giving you the strength to gain, win, achieve, prosper, and get more. Philippians 4 is about God who teaches us to be content and thankful whether we are winning *or* losing, achieving *or* failing, prospering *or* suffering.

So let's get back to school – contentment 101

If I made a list of people in the Bible (other than Jesus) with whom I would love to spend an hour or two over a cup of coffee picking their brain on what it means to be a Christian, Paul would be right near or at the top of that list. Paul was a pastor and missionary extraordinaire. After God brought him to faith in Jesus as his Savior, Paul went all in. He traveled the world boldly telling anyone who would listen (and a lot of people who didn't want to listen) what Jesus had done for them. He planted over a dozen churches in some environments that were incredibly hostile to Christianity.

The Bible records three missionary trips that Paul took in the book of Acts. Each of the three trips was a bit longer and further reaching than the last. He would go to some cities and tell people about Jesus, then on the next trip he would stop at those cities, teach those churches some more and then move on to new cities.

One of his intentional tactics when he was starting a new church further and further out was refusing pay from the city he was trying to plant a church in. He wanted to make clear to the people he was preaching to that he was not in this for the money. He wasn't peddling a feel-good religion that would keep food on his table and coins in his purse. He was sharing the life-saving Gospel which was free of charge.

He didn't accept pay from the city he was in, but he *did* accept financial support from cities he had left behind. Paul had started a church in the Macedonian city of Philippi. Apparently, the Christians Paul left behind decided they wanted to financially support him at his next church plant so they sent a gift of money with this guy named Epaphroditus. Paul wrote the letter we call Philippians in response to this gift, a letter Epaphroditus would take back to the Philippians.

It is a letter profuse with praise for the Philippians who were living out their faith in Jesus in real and tangible ways. In the section we heard just a bit ago Paul takes a minute to thank them for the financial support they sent and in the process he teaches us about contentment.

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. – verse 15-18 make clear that this concern was more than just happy thoughts, this was concern and love for the man who had shared Jesus with them that lead to action. It was tangible, financial support of Paul's mission to share Jesus with more people who needed to know about him. The Philippians realized that while they may not have had the skills or abilities to go share the gospel in new places themselves, they could financially support a man who was doing that. Paul is thankful for that.

Then Paul gets into his lesson on contentment:

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. (And now my soapbox verse) I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Paul had learned the secret to being content, and what is that secret? How do we find that ever-elusive feeling of contentment? How do we look at our lives and start being thankful for what we have and not assessing what we don't have?

Well, it's that little soapbox verse that gives us the answer. Philippians 4:13 isn't the secret to success, it is the secret to contentment. **I can do all this through him who gives me strength** – God is the one who taught Paul contentment. God's strength taught Paul to be content regardless of his external circumstances.

Contentment 101 this Thanksgiving: Christian contentment is not based on changing external circumstances, but on an unchanging relationship with the Lord.

Allow me to say that again: Christian contentment is not based on changing external circumstances, but on an unchanging relationship with the Lord.

Do you want to be happy? Do you want to have a joy in your heart that never goes away no matter what is going on in your life? Do you want to know how you can keep a level head and a panic free heart during the crazy holiday season? Do you want to know how you can be content whether your life is going great or seems like it couldn't get any worse?

Stop focusing on your changing external circumstances and start focusing on your God, because unlike everything else in your life he will not rot, die, break, fail, hurt, or change. There is only one constant in this world, one thing that will not change and never fail you and that is the love of your God.

Contentment 101 – let go of this world and focus on God – the God who will not stop loving you, ever! Focus on God whose love for you is spelled out in the pages of the his Bible. Focus on God who promises that when you are weak, he will be strong; that you are free to fail because he has won for you; that you can be poor because he has secured for you the riches of heaven. That, my friends, is a life-changing lesson on contentment.

Christian contentment is not based on your changing external circumstances but on your relationship with a God who promises never will he leave you, never will he forsake you. His strength is the key to your contentment.

Amen.