

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Can We Really Do All Things Through Christ?

Scripture: Philippians 4:13

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Tim Tebow was featured on the cover of the July 27, 2009 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, decked out in his Florida Gators uniform. But what made the image so striking was the message written in Tebow's eye black—under his right eye was the word “Phil,” and under his left the numbers “4:13.”

That inscription may have been meaningless to the average football fanatic, but Tebow's large evangelical constituency certainly recognized it as Bible reference. As he explained years later in an interview, he chose Philippians 4:13 because “‘There's not a better verse for an athlete.’ It reads, ‘I can do all this [*sic*] through Him who gives me strength.’” [1] <http://www.christianpost.com/news/tim-tebow-explains-why-he-tebows-uses-bible-verses-70824/#96Qczp0O7LZR8jsT.99>

It's not hard to understand the gravitational pull a verse like that could have on an athlete. No doubt countless men and women invoke God's power for their various feats of strength and stamina. Even Jon Jones—a notorious MMA fighter who pummels people for a living—has it tattooed across his chest.

And in this era of unbridled self-esteem, who wouldn't want the power of God enabling and animating the fulfilment of his hopes and dreams? Celebrity pastor, Joel Osteen, does nothing to quench such optimism and enthusiasm.

It is possible to see your dreams fulfilled. It is possible to overcome that obstacle. It is possible to climb to new heights. It is possible to embrace your destiny. You may not know how it will all take place. You may not have a plan, but all you have to know is that if God said you can . . . you can! Today, why don't you begin to open yourself up to possibilities in your future by simply declaring this verse, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength?” [2]

<http://devotion.wedaretobelieve.com/2013/01/i-can-joel-osteen-ministries-daily.html>

Osteen's interpretation begs an important question about Philippians 4:13. When Paul wrote that he—and by extension, *we*—can “do all things” through Christ's strength, was he promising victory and success in all our personal endeavors? Does “all things” essentially mean *anything* we want? And if so, why does any Christian ever fail at anything?

The preceding verses make Paul's true intent quite clear:

Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11–13).

Christ's strength wasn't just a vague force enabling Paul to whatever ends he desired. It strengthened Paul to be content in spite of the harsh difficulties he faced. He wasn't talking about hypothetical goals, but about the very real adversity he faced on a daily basis.

Specifically, he was talking about his unfair imprisonment at the time of his writing to the Philippian believers. Here's how he described it at the beginning of his epistle:

Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. (Philippians 1:12–14)

Paul wrote that he could do all things through Christ strengthening him when he was confined to the squalor and oppression of a Roman prison cell. And through his divine strengthening, He was able to look beyond his own suffering and rejoice in the gospel's furtherance as a result of his imprisonment.

Paul never “discovered the champion” in himself, nor did he long for the fulfillment of his personal dreams. His delight was in extending the reach and influence of the gospel, and he labored to that end whether he was free or incarcerated. He was the benchmark of suffering for the sake of the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:23–33), and he rejoiced in the strength Christ gave him to endure all of it. John MacArthur elaborates:

No matter how difficult his struggles may have been, Paul had a spiritual undergirding, an invisible means of support. His adequacy and sufficiency came from his union with the adequate and sufficient Christ: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Galatians 2:20). . . . Paul was strong enough to endure anything through Him who strengthen[ed] him. . . . What he is saying is that when he reached the limit of his resources and strength, even to the point of death, he was infused with the strength of Christ. He could overcome the most dire physical difficulties because of the inner, spiritual strength God had given him. [3] John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Philippians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001) 303.

Philippians 4:13 doesn't lose any relevance just because we're not allowed to define “all things” as everything we want to do. On the contrary, Paul's example of suffering has the broadest possible application for Christians: “*All* who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12 NKJV, emphasis added). Suffering shouldn't come as a surprise to the Christian. Whether or not we end up in a prison cell like Paul, we can embrace Philippians 4:13 as he did—the promise of Christ's strength to endure all suffering for His sake.

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