

EXEGETICAL BRIEF: Philippians 4:13 – “As to every circumstance I am strong”

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“I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13, NIV 1984). That’s the athlete’s testimony as he trains for an elusive championship ring. That’s the CEO’s letterhead as he juggles the responsibilities of a multimillion dollar corporation. That’s the cancer patient’s announcement as she responds to an unfavorable prognosis.

One wonders whether this assertion isn’t merely mimicking the Little Engine’s “I think I can, I think I can, I think I can.” Add the power of God, in other words, and the believer can accomplish whatever he sets his sights on. Is that what Saint Paul is claiming in this popular verse? That appears to be what several popular English Bible translations have him saying.¹

The setting of this famous passage indicates otherwise. Paul is writing his epistle of joy. He is giving thanks for the Philippians’ fellowship with Jesus, with one another, and with himself. As evidence of the last, the brothers and sisters had sent Epaphroditus to Rome bearing gifts for the apostle. Paul commends them. “You did well to share with me in my distress” (Php 4:14), he writes. At the same time Paul acknowledges that even before the arrival of their gifts, he was lacking for nothing. He says he has learned to be “content” (or “self-sufficient,” *αὐτάρκης*) in whatever circumstances he finds himself. “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 (*ἐν παντὶ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν*), whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Php 4:12, NIV).

The apostle is not writing about something he can do with God’s help. He is not chugging up a steep grade, intent on making it to the summit. In fact, Paul himself is wondering: Would his earthly accomplishments continue to be hampered by chains? Might he never again be allowed to preach in Macedonia or set out on a long hoped-for mission junket to Spain? Or might he soon depart this life “and be with Christ” (Php 1:23)? Whatever the Lord Jesus grants, Paul’s frame of mind is joyfully *αὐτάρκης*. This being “content” *ἐν παντὶ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν* (“in every circumstance and in all situations”) comes entirely apart from his own achievements. It is the attitude into which Paul has been initiated by his Savior’s gracious promises and by his own experiences as Jesus’ ambassador for several decades.

This is the setting for Paul’s assertion of Philippians 4:13, *πάντα ἰσχύω ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με*. The controlling verb, *ἰσχύω*, appears 28 times in the New Testament. On rare occasion it is captured by the English verb “prevail.” Otherwise the meaning is “I am able” or “I am strong.” Without exception *ἰσχύω* is an intransitive verb; it does not take a direct object. In order for a sentence controlled by this verb to have a direct object, the writer or speaker must complement *ἰσχύω* with an infinitive.

One of the modifiers of *ἰσχύω* is the prepositional phrase *ἐν τῷ ἐνδυναμοῦντί με*. Here is a present tense attributive participle functioning as a substantive. In his customary emphatic manner Paul is explaining that he is strong “in the one who keeps strengthening me,” that is, in the Lord (*ἐν κυρίῳ*), the very one about whom he “rejoiced greatly” back in Philippians 4:10.² Once again it is evident that the apostle is not claiming something that he can do. Rather Paul is strong in his joyful contentment,

¹ Renditions of Philippians 4:13 nearly identical to the NIV 1984 appear in the King James Version, the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, God’s Word, and the NIV 2011.

² Numerous early manuscripts, including the writings of several of the church fathers, append *Χριστῷ* to the end of verse 13.

“whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want” (Php 4:12). How so? Because his mighty Lord keeps giving him the strength he needs.

The accusative plural substantive πάντα (“all things,” or “everything”) leads off the verse. In view of the setting of this passage as well as the consistent function of the verb, πάντα is not the direct object of ἰσχύω. Instead the preferred interpretation is to take πάντα as an accusative of respect.³ The translation of πάντα here: “in respect to all things,” or “as to everything.”

Perhaps the apostle is stating a general principle in verse 13. “In regard to everything” -- and the reader might identify any number of things as the antecedent to πάντα -- “I am strong in the one who keeps strengthening me.” Much more likely, however, the word πάντα is picking up on the phrase ἐν παντὶ καὶ ἐν πάσιν in the preceding verse 12. “In respect to all these circumstances and situations,” whether I have more than enough or am barely getting by, Paul says, “I am strong” in the Lord.⁴

This is the faith Paul expresses elsewhere in his epistles. On some occasions the apostle speaks about himself. “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength,” he writes, “that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” (1 Tim 1:12). Or in his final epistle: “The Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it” (2 Tim 4:17). Elsewhere Paul desires the same blessing for his readers. “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being” (Eph 3:16). And later: “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Eph 6:10, NIV).

Perhaps nowhere is the attitude expressed in Philippians 4:13 more evident than in Second Corinthians, chapter 12. There Paul is far from insisting, “I can do everything.” Instead he boasts exclusively in his own weaknesses. Though Paul has brought several heartfelt petitions, he explains that the Lord has decided not to remove his “thorn in the flesh.” Instead he told Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you (Ἀρκεῖ σοι ἡ χάρις μου), for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:8). Paul’s conclusion: “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:10, NIV).

On Thanksgiving Day many of the gathered saints have come face-to-face with their own limitations on athletic fields and in classrooms, in the workaday world and in their homes. On New Year’s Eve more than a few will view the upcoming twelve months with trepidation, anticipating financial difficulties, physical illnesses, setbacks of various kinds. Their pastor might well consider preaching on Philippians 4:11b-14. Weaknesses abound in us all, he will say, and the Lord does not promise to take them all away in this life. Yet the evangelical preacher will also remind his hearers that they are sharers with Christ not only in his sufferings and also in his resurrection (Php 3:10-11). Consequently everyone who has been joined to their Savior can voice a joyful contentment in plenty and in poverty, in good times and in bad, in their successes and in their failures, even when they have tried and tried but were unable to reach the summit. Yes, each of us can boast in the Lord Jesus, “As to every circumstance I am strong in the one who keeps strengthening me.”

³ Philippians 4:13 isn’t the only occasion when πάντα is an accusative of respect. The New Testament grammarian Daniel Wallace cites eleven possible illustrations of this function of the accusative case. In two of them the accusative of respect is this same substantive πάντα. Cf. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (pp 203-204). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.

⁴ The NIV 2011 acknowledges this: “I can do all *this* through him who gives me strength (*italics mine*).” Nevertheless, like other popular translations, the NIV 2011 rendition of πάντα ἰσχύω leaves room for misunderstanding.