

August 15, 2021

A Letter from Paul – Philippians
XIII. All . . . Full . . . Every
Philippians 4:10-23

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Paul, remember, is in prison in Rome, uncertain as to whether he will go free or be put to death. Remember, too, how he began this letter to the Philippians by telling them not to worry about him, because he was not even worried about himself, not even in his present circumstances. Now Paul has taught us a lot of important lessons since then – but this very last lesson we read this morning may be the most important of them all. This morning he reveals to us the secret behind his inner peace, the source of his anxiety-free contentment, the reason underlying his constant refrain of “Rejoice” even from out of the bowels of a Roman prison. Three words in our passage encapsulate this secret: all, full, and every.¹ We will take them in turn.

Paul begins by thanking the Philippians for the gift of financial support they have sent to him by way of Epaphroditus. But no sooner does he say “thank you”, then he goes darting off in another direction. “*Not that I am speaking of being in need,*” he tells them. Because, the truth is, “*I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.*” And what is that secret? Here’s our first word: “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” All.

This is the voice of deep experience testifying to us, the voice of maturity, the voice of someone who has been around the block more than a few times – and who, therefore, knows what is real and what is not, what can be counted on and what proves useless. This is the testimony of one who has, in his life, plumbed the depths and climbed the heights of God’s promises to us. And what has he learned? “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” This is no pie in the sky idealism, no pretty platitude, no sweet little thought for the day. Paul is telling us the great truth his life has revealed to him: “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*”

Just think back over what we know of Paul’s life. He boasts of his resume of hardship in one of his letters to the Corinthians:

[I’ve been] *beaten up more times than I can count, and at death’s door time after time. I’ve been flogged five times with the Jews’ thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Romans rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I’ve been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I’ve had to ford rivers, fend off robbers,*

struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

And that's not the half of it, when you throw in the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches.²

It's almost as if Paul is saying, "I just dare you to compare your resume of trouble to mine!"

But what he really means by all this, as he writes to us this morning, is simply that he knows what he is talking about, that what he has learned he has learned in real-life testing and that it is therefore tried and true: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" "*Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything [all things] in the One who makes me who I am.*"³ The promise of Jesus that He will be with us always, the promise of Jesus that nothing shall ever be able to snatch us from out of His hands – says Paul this morning, "It's all true. It's all for real. I have lived it; I have learned it the hard way – and what I have learned I now pass on to you." "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" Paul has become, through his experience of the ceaseless and sustaining grace of Christ toward him in all things, the Psalmist's man planted like a tree beside a stream of living water. Bearing fruit in season, never withering even when the season is harsh, deeply rooted in a God who is as good as His Word: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" All things.

Then comes our second word, "full". Paul returns to saying "thank you" to the Philippians for their gift of money, which is helping ease his time in that Roman prison: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble.*" But, once again, he quickly departs from that theme of thanksgiving by reminding the Philippians of the work he did among them, bringing them the Gospel of grace, building up their church. And he acknowledges as well that this is not the first time their collection plates have gone to fund his work. Which means, with the addition of this latest financial gift sent along with Epaphroditus, that the books have now been balanced, whatever debt they felt they owed him for his work among them is now paid off: "*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.*"

"*I have received full payment, and more.*" And what that word "full" here is pointing us toward is another real-world truth Paul has learned. Namely, that the way God so often enables us to get through all things is by placing us within the care of the communion of the saints, within the care of His church – whose ministrations become the very means by which Christ strengthens in and through all things. "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me*" – that is the great truth, the great witness, the great reality of Paul's life experience. But here follows the means, the method, the practical how-to by which Christ makes this happen: He envelops us with a community that is kind enough to share our troubles and help bear our burdens. And He then supplies our needs through this people who care enough about us to give, to help, until we have all that we need to make it through – until, indeed, we are made "full" in response to our needs by those whom Christ has given to us as brothers and sisters in the household of God, in the Body of

Christ. As Eugene Peterson puts it, “*Named persons who know my name. People I can serve and who will serve me when I am in need.*”⁴ Full. “*I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied . . .*”

After the sermon one Sunday, the young pastor, as was the custom in that congregation, asked if there were any special prayer requests before he gave the pastoral prayer. A young woman toward the back stood up. She was already sobbing as she stood. When she could finally speak, she said, “*I don’t know what’s going to become of us.*” A quiet gasp rippled through the congregation – this was just not the sort of thing that ever happened during the prayer request time. You might ask for prayer for Jim’s surgery, or Margaret’s arthritis, or the coming visit of the kids and grandkids – you know, the dignified, self-contained, somewhat non-specific sort of prayer request. But now here was this young woman standing before the whole church sobbing and saying, “*I don’t know what’s to become of us.*” And then she added, “*Steve left us last week. I don’t know what the girls and I are going to do.*”

There was a long, awkward silence after that. No one knew quite what to say, and so the worship service had come to a complete halt. The silence was at last broken by one of the older members of the congregation. She stood up and faced this young woman and said to her, “*I know what you’ll do. You’ll reach out to the rest of us for help. When my husband left me, I felt just like you did. But I recovered and made it through. And so will you.*” And then someone else spoke up: “*I can help. I’ve been looking for someone to help out at the office, if you’re interested.*” And then an older couple: “*And we’d be happy to help with those precious girls.*” And then one of the church officers: “*The church’s Deacons Fund can help with expenses, until you get back on your feet.*” The young pastor, now struggling to regain his own composure, finally said, “*Well, I don’t think we need to pray for Mary now. It seems the Lord has already answered her prayers.*” And I have seen it – brothers and sisters in Christ, I have seen it happen in our midst time and again.

“*Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble . . . I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent . . .*” Paul was made full by the concern, care, and financial gifts of the Philippian church. That’s a major part of how Christ was getting him through this latest thing, his imprisonment in Rome. And this is also a big part of how Christ gets us through all our things – by filling us up with the love, concern, kindness, and sometimes even the money given to us by our brothers and sisters in Christ. Church – just plain old wonderful church, the Body of Christ. And all these things, this fullness of all the gifts we give to one another in Christ’s name, nothing less than “*a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.*” Full.

Which brings us to our third word, “every”: “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” Every. Here Paul is drawing it all together. What I have learned, Paul is saying to us, is that “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*” What I have found, Paul is saying to us, is that often He strengthens us through the kindness and compassionate care of our brothers and sisters in the church: “*Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble . . . I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied . . .*” And now, the conclusion: What I, therefore, can promise you, Paul is saying to us, based on my own experience of Christ strengthening me through all things, often through the care of the people of God, is that

you now can be completely assured that God is going to do exactly the same for you. He will strengthen you in all things, He will surround you with help when you need it most. In fact, “*My God,*” Paul assures us, “*And my God will supply every need of yours*” – just as He has done for me, He will now do for you. “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*” We, like Paul, can trust Jesus to get us through all things, meeting in full our every need. He has done it for me, says Paul, and therefore I know He will do it for you also.

The Instagram post was a meme, a screen capture of the cartoon villain Cruella de Vil, bloodshot eyes staring straight ahead, hands clutching the wheel of her infamous coupe, black-and-white hair waving wildly in the wind, oversized fur coat flapping behind. In a word – crazed. And over the image the poster of the meme had typed: “*Me trying to excel in my career, maintain a social life, drink enough water, exercise, text everyone back, stay sane, survive and be happy.*” And in the comments below, one after another offering some form of the same basic response: “*Amen,*” “*Yep,*” “*That’s me, too,*” “*Like lookin’ in a mirror,*” and so on.⁵ That’s one picture of how we can make our way through this world, live these lives of ours – crazed.

But, here at the end, Paul is offering us a different picture, a very different picture. Picture a man sitting alone in a prison cell in Rome, waiting to find out whether he will live or die. And yet, there is no fear upon his face, no panic in his eyes. Instead, we see that he is genuinely rejoicing: “*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!*”⁶ And instead of constant complaint, instead of sorrow or stress, instead of agony and anguish, his countenance, his very body seems to breathe out a deep and abiding presence of peace: “*And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”⁷ Just look at that picture. How can this man, in such dire straits, speak of joy and reflect such peace? He tells us: “[Because] *I can do all things through him who strengthens me . . . [Because] I have received full payment, and more. [Because] I am well supplied.*”

And now picture him turning his head towards us, in order to look back at us even as we look at him. Looking us straight in the eye, a contented smile upon his face. And then he says to us, “*And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever.*” Is that not the picture we would prefer, the life we would rather be living? What Paul is saying to us is that it really can be ours. That it already is ours through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. All . . . Full . . . Every . . . Amen.

¹ Reading this passage in terms of “All, Full, and Every” was inspired by Eugene H Peterson’s sermon on this text, “In Him Who Strengthens Me”, in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, 2017), pp. 300-305.

² II Corinthians 11:23-28, Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2109.

³ Philippians 4:13, Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2142.

⁴ Peterson, “In Him Who Strengthens Me”, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, p. 303.

⁵ David Zahl, *Seculosity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), p. 1.

⁶ Philippians 4:4.

⁷ Philippians 4:7.