

I Can Do All Things Through Christ

Philippians 4

Wayne Eberly
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I was sitting in the living room of my parents' house in my little hometown of Hanford, California. It was the last Christmas my dad was alive. He couldn't talk by that point. He couldn't walk. He couldn't even eat. He had a feeding tube. But he was comfortable. And he was cared for. My mom was his caregiver, and she was a woman who knew how to give care. The days that Christmas passed pretty slowly. I didn't have much to do except sit with them. One day my mom set a basket before me. It was a basket with Christmas cards my parents had received that year. She said, "Read the one on the top." Then she disappeared into the kitchen. While she was out of the room I read that Christmas card. I held the card after I was done reading it and words from this morning's passage of scripture came to mind. The Apostle Paul is writing to his dear friends in Philippi, ones who have stood with him through thick and thin, ones whom he loved and longed for. The verse I thought of that morning during the last Christmas my dad was alive is Philippians 4:14. "It was good of you to share in my sorrows."

The card I read that morning was signed, "From Earl and Carol." When my mom came back into the room I asked who Earl and Carol were. She told me they had been fellow mission workers on the Navajo Indian Reservation where my parents met. This was way back in 1950 or 1951. In fact, Carol had told my mom that she shouldn't ignore the interest my father was showing, because "Carl is a diamond in the rough."

So I read a Christmas card an old and dear friend wrote to my mother. It was sweet and ever so tender.

"Christmas is not all cheer and happiness. It's hard not to get zapped by the ghosts of Christmas past...that's what faith is...trusting him...past showing us the present...this presence sustains us.

In a kind and loving way, Carol was telling my mom that she was sharing in her sorrows. The sadness of my dad's failing health was a sadness that was shared, and my mom was not alone in her sorrow. Then Carol enclosed a prayer that she said was from a 1935 prayer book.

“O God, who hath exalted the Crucified, thy Son, by a triumphant resurrection and ascension into heaven, may his triumph and glories so shine in our hearts and minds, that we may more clearly comprehend his sufferings, and more courageously pass through our own, for his sake who with thee and the Holy Ghost liveth and reigneth, one God, forever and ever, Amen.”

I folded up Carol’s card and closed my eyes for several minutes. Carol was not famous. She had no pulpit. She published no books. She was featured on no television show as a superstar in the Christian faith. But Carol was salt of the earth. Her kind of deep and abiding faith gave strength and sustenance to all with whom she came in contact. In the midst of the difficult situation our family was facing, it brought me great comfort and confidence to know that God had given my parents a person like Carol. Her words of comfort made me think immediately of the Apostle Paul. He was in prison. He was separated from his loved ones. He was suffering for the sake of the gospel. But he had some dearly beloved friends in Philippi. It was to them he wrote, “It was good of you to share in my sorrows.”

I wrote about Carol in a newsletter article for our church in Houston. After we moved to Westerly, I wrote about Carol in a newsletter article for this church. I have written many newsletter articles. Something about this one seemed to strike a chord. Maybe it is because many of you have received a letter that was just what you needed. Maybe it is because many of you have received a letter that let you know someone was sharing with you in your troubles, sharing with you in your sorrows. What has made me so grateful is hearing from many of you that in response to this story about Carol, you took time to write to someone you care about. You wrote to them to let them know you are sharing in their troubles. You let them know you are sharing in their sorrows.

Philippians 4:14 has one word in it that I left out. It is the word that begins the verse, and the word is just a short word. It is the word, yet. “Yet it was good of you to share in all my sorrows.” Yet is important, because it sets the verse apart from what the Apostle had just been focusing on. What he had been focusing on is one of the most powerful statements of faith we have in the whole of the Bible. It is certainly one of the most concise and emphatic statements of faith we have. He writes, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” The powerful statement of faith Paul is making is intended to let the church in Philippi know that if we have Christ, we have all we need. The passage begins in verse ten of chapter four as the Apostle offers thanks to his friends in Philippi. Although the church had

always been concerned for Paul, apparently they were prevented for some reason from conveying that concern. Now they found a way to show concern, and so he tells them thanks. And then he says, “But I didn’t really need anything.” That strikes me as a little strange. Thanks, but I didn’t need it.

Why didn’t he need it? He didn’t need it because he had Christ, and Christ was all he needed. This is a statement of faith that affirms the centrality of who Jesus Christ is. Because of Christ Paul is able to write that he has learned to be content in all situations, in any and every situation. If he is well fed or if he is hungry...if he has plenty or if he has nothing...he is content. He is content because he has all he needs. He has Jesus Christ. And as he says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

When you have Christ, you really do have all you need. When Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd...” you can envision he was telling us he makes true on every hope and promise of that beautiful psalm that says, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. The Good Shepherd gives us plenty, he gives us abundance, he gives us safety, he gives us shelter, he gives us rest. The Good Shepherd gives green pastures and still waters and he leads us in paths of righteousness. And there is more. He is with us when the road gets difficult, when life throws us curveballs, when the bottom drops out. He is with us when we walk even through the valley of the shadow of death. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and if you have him you have all you need. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

You will rarely if ever hear me criticize a young person who is part of our church. I was not a model teenager in church. I had a terrible problem with the giggles. The smallest thing would get me laughing and I couldn’t stop. I eventually outgrew it, by about the time I was nineteen. Even at nineteen my dad felt the pew start shaking, tried to look away, finally glanced down the aisle and saw me and my older brother rocking back and forth trying to hold in our laughter. He knew it was a lost cause. He yanked his thumb as if to say, “Get out of here.” So holding our sides and covering our mouths we snuck outside. I was not a model teenager in church. In fact, I can hardly remember any sermons I ever heard. Except for one. Except for one. Our pastor, a wonderful man who deserved better kids than me sitting in the pew, one Sunday he read a poem. It was about some footprints in the sand.

Footprints in the Sand

One night a man had a dream. He dreamed
he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of
footprints in the sand: one belonging
to him, and the other to the LORD.
When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
he looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of
his life there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very
lowest and saddest times in his life.
This really bothered him and he
questioned the LORD about it:
"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow
you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most
troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when
I needed you most you would leave me."
The LORD replied:
"My son, my precious child,
I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you."

That sermon I remembered. That poem I remembered. It was meaningful to me because it was telling me I could do all things through Christ. No matter what, no matter where, no matter when, no matter who, no matter why, he would be there. He would hold me. He would lift me. Christ was all I needed. That poem helped me say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Today I hope you hear that message loud and clear. Christ alone is our hope, our confidence, our strength, and our salvation. Through Christ Jesus we can do all things.

Paul says that to his friends in Philippi. But then he says something else. Christ is all we need, so why not stop there? Here is how it goes in the letter. After telling the church in Philippi that he has learned to be content in all things, that he really needs nothing because he has Christ, and Christ is all he needs, after writing that incredible affirmation of faith that says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” the Apostle then uses that one little word, the word, yet. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. It was good of you to share in my sorrows. Christ is all Paul needs, but in the grace and mercy of God, Christ is not all Paul has. He also has friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, he has a church family that shares with him in his troubles, that shares with him in his sorrows.

I wonder if God gives us this extra gift of community, this extra gift of family, this extra gift of friends and loved ones, so that we don't stand in pride and say, “I can do it alone.” It is not a huge step to go from saying, “I can do all things in Christ” to saying, “I can do it alone.” The Apostle never says that. Jesus is there for us personally, but he is also always there for us as community. That same Apostle who said I can do all things through Christ calls the church to be a community over and over again. It is Paul who said, “You are the Body of Christ.” He said we need each other. He said the Body is important because each one has a part to play, a purpose to serve. He warns us about thinking what we do is better than what others do. I guess in the same way he warns us against thinking what we do is less than what others do. We are linked together, bone on bone, tendon on tendon, joint on joint, flesh on flesh. Isn't it amazing that he follows on the affirmation of the all sufficiency of Christ, that he follows on saying, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me...” he follows on that by saying, “Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles, to share in my sorrows.”

One of the treasures we find in Philippians is this joining together of the all sufficiency of Christ, the Lordship of Christ and Christ alone, with the beauty and preciousness of the community of faith. The fact that Christ is all sufficient does not take away from the importance of being together as the Body of Christ. It enriches our relationships and gives them added importance. Philippians 4:4 has well known words that say, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” These words are followed by words about how we treat others and words about Christ. Paul wants us to know the Lord is near. The Lord is near seems to have two meanings. Paul and the early church held out the hope that Christ would return soon. They lived in the expectation that any day, like a thief in the night, Jesus would appear. They lived watching and waiting. In a very real sense, they believed the coming of the Lord was near.

They also knew that the Spirit of Christ was present even when he had not returned in his full glory. They knew that in any and every situation, the Lord really was near. Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near. And there is another piece to that. Rejoice in the Lord always. The Lord is near. So let your gentleness be evident to all. If the Lord is near and the Lord is all we need, maybe our whole focus is on the Lord. Well, yes. But the way we focus on the Lord is lived out by the way we focus on others. The Lord is near, so let your gentleness be evident to all. Again, the all sufficiency of Christ does not pull us away from community or lessen our appreciation for the precious relationships around us. Because the Lord is near we let our gentleness be evident to all. That is a timely word for us in a world where the actions and behaviors of people toward one another often seem to be anything but gentle. We who can do all things through Christ, we who so deeply appreciate the goodness of having people in our lives who share in our troubles and sorrows, we are called to let our gentleness be evident to all. And I think by all Jesus means all. As in everyone. As in all people everywhere.

I had something happen one day when it seemed the Lord was near, and thankfully, at that moment, I was able to let there be some gentleness. I was visiting a hospital. I got on the elevator. A doctor got on. It was just the two of us. He was on his phone. I looked away. Typical elevator protocol. I looked at the ceiling. I looked at the floor. But I definitely did not look at him. Until I heard him say to the person on the phone, “We lost him. He didn’t make it.” And as he said it, this doctor was overwhelmed with sadness. He was in the business of saving lives, and this day he couldn’t do it. He ended his call and there we were, two human beings in a tiny elevator, one of us being a doctor whose heart was heavy with the loss of a patient. For whatever reason, I was attentive that day. I knew the Lord was near. I simply reached out my hand to the doctor, and we held hands for a few moments. The elevator dinged, we arrived at his floor, he let go of my hand and he walked out. That was it.

I don’t tell you that to pat myself on the back, although it was a very profound moment of connection. But in looking back, it makes me sad for the many times I am in an elevator, or a line at a store, or sitting in a group, or even with people I know, and I’m not listening, I’m not paying attention, I’m not aware that the Lord is near. He is always near. Let your gentleness be evident to all because everywhere, in every situation, the Lord is near. You might not hear someone saying on the phone, “He didn’t make it,” but I am absolutely certain the people we are surrounded with are carrying the burdens of life, the brokenness of life, the sadness of life, and a little touch of gentleness would be so appreciated. And it isn’t always sadness. Sometimes, hopefully often, there is joy. Your gentle smile, your joyful smile, your affirmation of life and love, can mean so much. The Lord is near every day and in every way.

Years ago I read a book about a man whose life was marked by gentleness. In many ways he might have seemed silly. This man wrote of walking carefully on a path to avoid stepping on bugs and plants, of bending down to move a worm from the road to soft ground so that it could live, and of using a small hook to rescue an insect from drowning. He was aware that others often thought him ridiculous. But this man held a deep reverence for life. This reverence for life led him, a man who was a famous theologian, pastor, concert organist and medical doctor, to go to a poor African village hospital and spend most of his life as a missionary. His name was Albert Schweitzer, and his seeming foolishness was recognized as profound greatness when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952. He tried to treat all life with reverence, even in its smallest forms. He lived his life as literally a gentle man. He wrote:

“Do not go after spectacular displays of love—it is likely that in your whole life you won’t experience them—but, rather, build from the bottom up. Do the insignificant and the hidden things that are much more difficult than the acknowledgedly grand gesture. Then you will do the grand gesture as it ought to be done and is done in the spirit of Jesus: unconsciously.”¹

A reverence for life can lead us to find beauty and tenderness in insignificant and hidden things. The book I read about Albert Schweitzer had a story that has always stayed with me. It was a story he heard, he who practiced such gentleness in all he said and did. This is a story that touched his heart.

“A Parisian trolley conductor was asked by a passenger of his car why he looked so sad. To that this response: ‘You are the first person with heart whom I have encountered today. The whole day long I have discharged my service and not been able to master the pain. I have a child dying at home. You are the first who has seen that I am sad and who has said a comforting word to me. For the others I was not a person, but only a man who had a service to perform.’²

The Lord is near. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me...yet it was good of you to share in my troubles, to share in my sorrows.

O, people, Christ Jesus is all we need. He is all sufficient. Through Christ we can do all things. But never let that keep you from knowing the wonderful gift and blessing that comes from knowing Christ is near in all things, and knowing that, to share his gentleness in ways that are evident to all.

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *A Reverence for Life*, 42.

² Schweitzer, 109.