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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**I Can Do All Things Through Christ**

**Philippians 4:11-13**

**Prayer:** *Father, we just again come before you this morning to thank you for the gift of your word, to thank you for the gift of yourself, to just pray, Lord, once again we are opening up your book, this letter to the Philippians, we just continue to pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, come alongside us as we open your book. Give us the ability to take it in and to make it of permanent value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we've had our Easter break, it's been a few weeks since we've looked at the book of Philippians and we're basically now in the epilogue. Last time out if you remember we looked at the battlefield of the mind and Paul's response in *Philippians 4:8*, he said: *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* And we talked about that computer phrase, GIGO, G-I-G-O, it means garbage in yields garbage out, and so that this world is especially good at garbage

in producing garbage out but that God's word is especially good at producing goodness in and goodness out, and that's why Paul gave us that directive. Finally Paul says in *Philippians 4:10-13*, he says: *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

You have to remember Paul's finishing up this letter to the Philippians and he's writing from a jail cell and he's writing to tell them how pleased he is that his circumstances are now enabling them to now demonstrate their ability to put their love into action. Well, the opportunity of course is lousy, I mean, he's sitting in a jail cell; but the effect, the effect is absolute joy in Paul when he sees the Philippian church doing exactly what the church is supposed to do. There's one thing that Paul doesn't want to get confused here and that's the reason for his joy, it's not that he's received some kind of a gift, it's that he's the beneficiary of a church that understands how to be Christ's church particularly to those who are in need. Paul says I'm not speaking

of being in need because even though he's sitting in a jail cell, he still is perfectly content. In fact Paul says: *"I have learned how to be content no matter what my circumstances."*

I don't know if you could find a person who has a broader spectrum of circumstance than Paul, I mean, he's gone from being in the presence of kings to now sitting in a jail cell and he's had just about everything in between. He goes on to say he's learned the secret of contentment no matter what his circumstances. And you would think that this piece of information is the most valuable information anyone on earth could ever possess. I mean you'd think that people would be willing to spend whatever it would cost to be able to find the one thing that seems to have alluded people regardless their station in life, it's contentment. Paul says, it makes no difference whether it's in plenty or hunger, abundance or need, I have learned to be content no matter what. So what's Paul's secret? *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,"* says Paul. What a marvelous statement, but it's also a mysterious statement. This morning I want to look at some how-to's.

Paul says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him, but just how does that work? I mean, certainly Christ isn't some kind of mantra, it's not some kind of magic word that somehow

supplies instantaneous strength for those who need it, but just stop and think for yourself how would you translate Paul's statement into a practical reality for how you live your life? I mean just how does Christ strengthen you? Well, I think I can break it down by examining what Paul was saying previously, we described as GIGO, garbage in, garbage out. Paul tells us to fill our minds with whatever is true, whatever is honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, worthy of praise, all of those qualities that we looked at last time. If you remember all of these qualities, we looked at them, we found that they found their greatest expression in what? Actually it's not what, it's who. It's Jesus Christ. So how was Paul able to specifically draw strength from Christ? Well I want to look this morning at three different areas that define our own existence in terms of strength and that's the physical, the mental, and the spiritual.

So first let's look at the obvious one, let's look at the physical. How does Christ strengthen you physically? Well, first and probably the most obvious way that Christ can strengthen us physically is by eliminating a whole host of bad habits. When I first came to Christ at age 23, I was smoking tobacco and marijuana heavily and I was drinking to get high or drunk. By God's grace those habits, they just disappeared. They fell away. I'm pretty sure that made me physically healthier. I mean I still get sick

like everybody else and I plan on eventually dying like everybody else, unless the Lord returns. We don't ascribe to the view that if you have enough faith you're not going to get sick, because I don't believe that that's biblical. Folks quote *Isaiah 53* as proof that Christ died so that we could be healed, saying that: *But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.* But that ignores the very next verse which specifically identifies what those stripes were designed to heal and it's not disease, it's sin, it's iniquity. Verse 6 says: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* God didn't lay sickness on Jesus to be healed. He laid our iniquity, he laid our sin on him and that's what we've been healed of completely. That doesn't mean that if you have enough faith you should be free from sickness. I mean for the last 2,000 years Christian believers excepting Enoch and Elijah, they've all gone to heaven the same way, by dying, and the vast percentage of these folks got to that state through some kind of sickness. I mean if perfect faith kept me from getting sick then there should've been people routinely living thousands of years but they don't. And like most of us we have a life span that even the psalmist understood to be limited. *Psalms 90* says: *The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span*

*is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away, as the song says. The good news is that we believers in Christ have a blessed hope that we are flying to. But the fact is belief in Christ in general is physically strengthening, and that's just my opinion that's a stated fact.*

The *Christian Post* filed an article stating: "Report, Christians Live Healthier, Longer" by Ariel Rey. She wrote: The report, "Health Benefits of Christian Faith" by Drs. Alex Bunn and David Randall, drew its evidence from over 1,200 studies and 400 reviews. It reads, "In contrast to the popular myth that Christian faith is bad for health, on balance, and despite its limitations, the published research suggests that faith is associated with longer life and a wide range of health benefits. In particular, faith is associated with improved mental health." ...One of the studies, where more than 20,000 American adults participated, shows that income and education had little impact but those who went to church regularly had seven years added to their life expectancy. It highlights that life expectancy doubled for African Americans with an extra 14 years. The report concludes that although faith has positive physical benefits on each person, "The Christian faith is not to be judged by its material benefits, but by whether it is true," especially when ironically, "suffering helps Christians to trust not in themselves but in God."

Well those are just statistical facts, but you know opinions line up the exact same way. The *Pew Research Center* reports: Actively religious people are more likely than their less-religious peers to describe themselves as very happy in about half of the countries surveyed. Sometimes the gaps are striking: In the U.S., for instance, 36% of the actively religious describe themselves as "very happy," compared with 25% of the inactively religious and 25% of the unaffiliated. Notable happiness gaps among these groups also exist in Japan, Australia and Germany.

So it's statistics, it's opinion but there's even historical evidence that points to the fact that Christians, according to Rodney Stark -- quote -- "Live Longer, Healthier, & Better." This is what Stark wrote, he said: Constantine, the first Christian to rule Rome, governed for 31 years and died in bed of natural causes at a time when the average imperial reign was short and emperors' lives usually came to violent ends. That he lived to old age illustrates a more general, if not widely known, early Christian achievement: Christians in the ancient world had longer life expectancies than did their pagan neighbors. Modern demographers regard life expectancy as the best indicator of quality of life, so in all likelihood, Christians simply lived better lives than just about everyone else. In fact, many pagans were attracted to the Christian faith because the church produced tangible (not only

"spiritual") blessings for its adherents. ...Chief among these tangibles was that, in a world entirely lacking social services, Christians were their brothers' keepers. At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote that while pagan temples spent their donations "on feasts and drinking bouts," Christians spent theirs "to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined to the house."

It's easy to simply take for granted the fact that being a believer in Jesus Christ has physical benefits, but when you think about the ongoing battle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, it makes perfect sense that embracing the darkness that this world offers would be anything but healthy. So you can genuinely say that embracing Christ strengthens you physically.

Well the next category is mental. Knowing Christ Jesus as Lord and savior strengthens you mentally. And again, that's statistically provable. That *Christian Post* article went on to say: People with mental health problems, such as psychosis, also proved to cope better when religion was involved. They also showed to be more compliant with their medication. The report notes that the mental health benefits for believers include: "Well-being, happiness and life satisfaction; hope and optimism; purpose and meaning in life;



higher self-esteem; better adaptation to bereavement; greater social support and less loneliness; lower rates of depression and faster recovery from depression; lower rates of suicide and fewer positive attitudes towards suicide; less anxiety; less psychosis and fewer psychotic tendencies; lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse; less delinquency and criminal activity; greater marital stability and satisfaction."

That's just the benefits mentally of putting your faith and strength in Christ. Now in my opinion there's three basic reasons why belief in Christ strengthens us mentally and they all have to do with big questions that our faith has answers for. Questions that ask who we are, why the world is like it is, and what's going to happen to us in the end. You know, today most people answer the question of who we are by believing that we're simply the products of vast amounts of time and chance and that we were created by nobody and no thing. Most people believe that we are simply the most highly evolved of the animals that came out of that primordial soup hundreds of millions of years ago. Well believers believe something quite different. We believe that everything in creation came into being through the actions of a God who created all things and to whom all things owe allegiance. I've often said the world looks at Christians as being profoundly silly for actually believing that this world came about because an all powerful

creator spoke it into existence. Well on the other side, you know, we see the world as profoundly silly for believing that all creation came about by chance from absolutely nothing. I mean all of it supposedly started from a big bang in which infinitesimally small matter expanded forming the entire known universe. But no one's yet given an adequate answer for where that infinitesimally small stuff came from in the first place. It's pretty basic question, who or what created that stuff?

Stephen Hawking is probably the most famous astrophysicist commenting on things like the big bang, and he says: "Asking what was before the big bang is like asking what is south of the south pole." See, according to Hawking, the big bang was a time when time and space did not exist. And since there was no time, there was no space before and asking where it will stuff of the universe came from is meaningless. It's also highly convenient. I mean I tell my Christian friends that we have a stalemate, you can either believe in a creator God or the random chance birth of an uncreated nonexistent existence, but please don't think that only the God answer requires faith. Again we look for explanations for who we are, who the gospel claims we are. That makes perfect sense because it dovetails with what we observe, that we are the crown of God's creation who fell into a rebellious state that required God himself to become one of us in order to ransom and rescue us by

paying the price of our sins on the cross. The gospel says there are four main things that define our existence. There's God's creation, there's man's fall, there's Christ incarnation, and there's man's response.

And the reason why it's Christ who strengthens us mentally is because the gospel also gives us the answer to our second question. The question is: Why is the world like it is? Why is it that people insist on inflicting misery on one another? Why does it matter what endeavor mankind undertakes? It is always accompanied by sin. You know, fifty years ago nobody really understood what the idea of a personal computer or an iPhone was. I mean it didn't even exist but you know what else didn't exist back then? Malware didn't exist, phishing with a P-H didn't exist, identity theft didn't exist, hacking didn't exist, deep fakes didn't exist. These are all brand new technologies that are based on lies that inflict misery. Why is it that with every new discovery comes a new set of sins that just attach itself to it like parasites? Why is that? When you wonder why, the materialist naturalist will tell you well, that's simply the competitive nature that we've inherited from evolution, but that doesn't explain the gratuitously evil that man is so famous for. It doesn't explain why 100 million people were slaughtered over the last century simply so that a manmade system set specifically against God such as Marxism or communism could be

established, and why in spite of that awful track record people are still once again putting their hope in it. The gospel explains that perfectly. The gospel tells us that we're rebels, that every single one of us is born with an unconscious hatred toward our creator. That's why Jesus told his disciples to expect a hostile response from the gospel. When they got that very response, he said in *John 15*: *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you."* And Jesus goes on to explain the binary nature of the two kingdoms that define that very existence: There's the kingdom of God and there's the kingdom of this world. Folks, you're in one or you are in the other. And Jesus said: *"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."*

See, our strength in Christ mentally comes from knowing which kingdom we are in and why, and that gives us enormous strength in answering the third aspect of why knowing Christ strengthens us mentally, and it answers the question, the big question: What's going to happen to us in the end? You know, I'm 71 years old. There's at least five or six mirrors in my house which tell me something every time I look in them. They tell me that I'm further along the line that's going to end in me growing old and dying. I mean I've seen that reflection for 71 years, I've seen how it's

changed. I also know by experience what it feels like to see your strength and abilities diminish with age. I mean this is something that every single person my age has to wrestle with, but my wrestling is far different than the wrestling of those who don't have Christ. I know where this is going. I also know this body which is not working nearly as well as it used to is going to be replaced by one that works not just well but perfectly. I don't have to go any farther than Paul's letter to the Philippians that we're looking at to see where my hope lies when I look at my failing flesh. This is what Paul said just back one chapter in *Philippians 3*. He says: *For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.* Paul goes on to say in *1 Corinthians 15*: *So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.* What God is saying is this body, this stuff, this stuff that makes us up, we're going to all have one and it's going to work perfectly. We're not going to be like, you know, ethereal angels floating on clouds, we're going to be real flesh and blood people with bodies that are perfect. That's amazing. That's what we get to look forward to.

Paul says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him, and we can see just how he does so physically by giving us new appetites that now want what Christ wants. And what he wants is a body free of addiction, a body that has all those things gone that rob it of its strength. Mentally it's Christ who strengthens us by giving us an understanding of who we are and why the world is like it is. I mean we know we're rebels. We know we had no taste for God until God swooped in and rescued us. And knowing who we are gives us the ability to know why this world is the way it is because we're a part of it; we remember what that was like. Paul tells us exactly what he's talking about when he says in *Titus 3: For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior. So because we've been rescued from out of this world, we have no means to brag or see ourselves other than sinners who've been saved by grace. So knowing this and knowing how this is all going to end goes a long way towards strengthening us mentally. I have friends who are my age and older who are not Christians. And I have to say, I admire their ability to stay*

strong in light of overwhelming evidence that their time on earth is slowly but surely drawing to a close. And the only thing that they have to look forward to is the grave and this vague mistaken notion that at death everything is just going to draw a black curtain and go blank. That's a vastly different future than the one that we're looking forward to, and there's no doubt that that vision gives us enormous strength.

So physically and mentally we are strengthened by a relationship with Jesus Christ. You know all of that doesn't amount to much if it doesn't include the most important part where our strength comes from, and that's the spiritual part. When Paul says, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*" he's talking about far more than simply assuring us that we have a place in heaven. He's talking about the strength and the power we need to get through this life. Paul of all people was an absolute realist when it came to assessing what life was all about. When Paul says, "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,*" just what do you think he means by that phrase "all things"? I mean we've already pointed out that "all things" include physical and mental strength, but what do you suppose Paul is addressing here? Let me give you a hint. There's another phrase, there's another place where we use that phrase "all things" all the time and it figures quite prominently in that biblical phrase that was uttered by Paul in

*Romans 8:28: And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. See the "things" that Paul is referring to in both of these scriptures are actually things that make a big difference when we are striving, when we are struggling, when we are in difficulty. The grace that Paul is referring to here as the source of strength is the grace that comes specifically as the result of our weakness. When Paul was struggling with his own weakness due to a direct attack by Satan, he cried out to God three times, three times would you remove this thorn, and God's response was, no. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. Weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecution, and calamity, that's talk of war. I mean we surely gain strength physically and mentally from our relationship with Christ and all that that entails, but the strength that Paul is referring to here is the strength we need for warfare. And no one understood better than Paul the high stakes battle that he was in, and it's the same one that all of us were drafted into when we became citizens of the kingdom of God. And if you don't realize every single day that this life you are in is a battleground and*



that you are in war, then there's an awful lot of what happens in your life that's going to be puzzling and potentially faith damaging.

Jesus once uttered a phrase about the battles going on all around us in the spirit realm. He said this in *Matthew 11*. He said: "*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force.*" That's Jesus, that's Jesus speaking, Jesus is speaking and it's war talk that he's speaking. And there's a whole world right outside that door that's quite content to lull you into thinking that God and the kingdom and the spirit and his church and all of those other things, they're all right in their place, just don't overdo it. Please just don't get fanatical about that stuff. I mean this world would love to have you think that you can sleepwalk your way into the kingdom of God, but that's not the way this life works. God's kingdom advances forcibly against the enemy of our souls who just happens to be the prince of this world, who just happens to detest everything and anything about God and his kingdom. And Jesus warns us if you love him, this world is going to hate you because it hated him first. So yes, we do forcibly advance the kingdom, but understand, we also suffer violence in the process.

After the Pharisees claimed that Jesus was able to cast out demons

because Satan himself was his Lord, Jesus responded this way, he said: *"And if Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they will be your judges. But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can someone enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? Then indeed he may plunder his house."* Well, Jesus at the cross bound up that strong man by paying the price his own justice demand for our sins. But understand something, having bound up the strong man, he has left us to plunder his house. That's now our job. Every time you share the good news with somebody, you are in the act of plundering his house. Every time for Christ's sake you advance justice or mercy or love or care or concern in this world, you are plundering his house. And trust me, he hates you for it. And he will do everything in his power to make you pay a price for that plunder. You just look around at our little church. You're going to find a disproportionate amount of people who have struggled and have suffered mightily. Don't think that's by chance; don't think that's by accident. I've said it before, we're in a war, and you and I don't get the chance to guess whether or not we're participants. We by virtue of our birth are in one camp or another and we all started out in the enemy's camp as children of wrath.

But those of us who have been rescued, we are truly the plunder, the plunder that was taken out of the strong man's house and now we hopefully are involved in plundering his house ourselves. Because of that we have a target on our back. The enemy takes great pleasure in disrupting our lives by throwing every single thing that he can in our pathway including sickness and strife and struggle along with all the other things that the rest of the world struggles with. We find them delivered to our door by an enemy that wants nothing more than for us to shake our fist at God and join him. That's what this battle is all about. That's what this war is all about. And if you don't understand the terms of this war, you will be completely befuddled by the enemy's tactics. You'll think that God has abandoned you, that God doesn't love you, that God doesn't care for you when in fact God is placing you in the middle of a battle insisting that he will strengthen you and give you the strength you need for his glory. Listen to what Peter says in *1 Peter 4*. He said: *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.* And we have Paul here, Paul's a perfect example, Paul knew exactly what was going on and he also knew that his own personal weakness was the very source of his strength. I mean it's an absolutely amazing thing to realize like Paul did,

that your strength comes not from yourself, not from within but from without from a source that is literally inexhaustible, from a strength that is utterly unstoppable. So our task is to recognize that God is there waiting to give us that strength when we need it. I mean just look at how Paul describes life itself in terms of battle in *Ephesians 6*, he says: *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.* Don't over spiritualize what he's saying here. This verse is not just for when you're praying and fasting, it's for when the car won't start, when the kids are sick again, it's for when the MRI does not look good, when you begin to see all of life as the battle that it really is and God telling us that it is not our strength he's expecting us to walk in but his. Well it's reasonable then to wonder yourself, okay, I get it. How am I supposed to do that?

Listen to what God tells us through Peter in *1 Peter 1*. He says: *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith -- more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire -- may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him,*

*you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory.* Do you hear what Peter's saying here? Twice he mentions the fact that right in the middle of your trial, you can't seem to find God. It says *but you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him.* Now historically that was exactly true for Peter's people, but practically it's exactly true for us. I mean how many times have you had that experience where you're going through a trial, first there's this sense that God has been absent right from the start of the trial, as Peter says, *you have not seen him.* Then there's this terrible awful feeling that right in the middle of this present day trial, he's still nowhere to be found, *though you do not now see him.* Okay, what do you do? Verse 8: *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him.* Okay. How do I do that? How do I love him and how do I believe in him? You just grit your teeth and will yourself into loving and believing him? No. Here's how, here's what you do. Again and again and again, you go to the cross again and again and again. You see, the ultimate answer that Jesus has for all the times that we feel he doesn't love us, he's not there for us, he has abandoned us, the ultimate answer to that is the cross. And the more time you spend wrapping your head around the notion of God himself taking on flesh, living life flawlessly and then being stripped naked and nailed to a cross, the accompaniment of mocking

sneers, the more you're going to understand what Paul meant when he said: *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

We spent a good deal of time the last few weeks looking at Jesus' emotional response to Palm Sunday and Easter. We pointed out how upset he was with the disciples' crippled faith. It was a faith that refused to believe Mary Magdalene when she exclaims she had seen the risen Christ. It was a faith like Thomas had that demanded visible proof before he would ever believe or the disciples on the road to Emmaus who despaired that Christ was dead and gone, those were extremely disappointing to Christ. But as we look at Christ's life we see a few times where Christ was actually exhilarated and genuinely thrilled at someone's response, and inevitably it was someone at war. It was the response of someone in dire circumstances placing their trust in Christ. I mean there was a centurion, this guy's an outsider, he's a soldier. He's got a servant who's dying, he tells Jesus he isn't worthy to have him come into his home but if he just says the word, his servant would be healed. It says: *When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith."*

And Jesus told another outsider, this is a syrophenician woman

whose daughter was demon-possessed that he can't take what belongs first to Israel and feed it to dogs. I mean clearly an insult at best. *"Lord," she replied, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."* Then he told her, *"For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter."* See, it was the disciples' crippled faith that got them rebuked by the Lord while these two outsiders who simply trusted and believed in awful circumstances, they're the ones who received Christ's praise. And the reason why they received Christ's praise was because they offered him the only thing that we pardoned sinners can give back to God that can truly thrill God. It's what this battle that we are in the middle of is all about. It's trusting him and loving him when circumstances call for the exact opposite response. It is then and only then that we are offering to God something truly of value, something that he cherishes. It's also the very response that hands Satan a mouthful of gravel instead of the bitter faithlessness he was hoping for. That's the battle that Paul has been talking about. That's also why trying circumstances are also the only opportunity we have to literally give back to God. This is the reason why Paul can say: *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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

He says my strength comes physically through Christ because his spirit growing within me grows the very appetites that are Christ-honoring. My strength comes to me mentally through Christ by grounding me in the knowledge of who I am, of what this world is all about and what is going to happen to me at the very end; and my strength comes to me spiritually through Christ when I look at the cross and I realize the height and the breath and depth and width of the love of God in Christ Jesus. When I'm in the midst of a trial I may not feel his presence in the past or in the present, but I trust and I know that he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for all of us is right there with me walking me through this. This is what I ground myself on. This is where my contentment lies. It lies in knowing faith is the one thing that I can offer God that truly thrills him, that God himself describes as -- quote -- "*more precious than gold.*" It's the one thing that all of us can aim our lives up by saying along with Paul: *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* Let's pray.

*Father, we just pray for a contentment based on the understanding of the war that we are in, of the understanding what role we play in that war. And yes, Lord, your kingdom advances violently and the violent take it by force. And Lord, it's tough business, it's not for the faint of heart. Lord, we are actively doing war, we*



*are plundering the strong man's house, and we understand that he is not going to take that easily. So we pray for grace and strength and courage along with the wisdom we need to effectively plunder that house, to give us the contentment of knowing who we are, why we're here, and what we're headed for. I pray you would give us that grace and that insight, and I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*