



PHILIPPIANS

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Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content:
Philippians 4:11

Paul, having noted that the care of him by the Philippians had “flourished again,” now notes that what was given to him was a blessing beyond basic needs. He states this by saying, “Not that I speak in regard to need.” The “I” here is emphatic. It is his way of saying that his needs were always met, and that what they gave to care for him brought him above that basic state. If he did not receive their care, he would still make do.

He conveys this in the words, “for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.” The word for “content” here is *autárkēs*. It is an adjective found only here in the Bible and which means, “self-sufficient, content in the sense of being satisfied because living in God’s content (fulness). This inward sufficiency is as valid in ‘low times’ (suffering) as in ‘high times’ (temporal prosperity)” (HELPS Word Studies).

The word was used by the stoics to show that they were capable of handling all situations that they were in. Paul uses it, not as a source of pride, but rather as his way of showing that in Christ, he was made capable of meeting all necessities without burdening others. This can be inferred from countless other passages where he demonstrates his total reliance on the Lord in all ways and at all times.

His life experiences had brought him to this state, and he was able to put his trust in the Lord no matter what situation he found himself in. This is seen elsewhere, such as in Acts 20 –

“I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴Yes, you yourselves know that these hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me.”

-Acts 20:33, 34

Life application: The Bible conveys to us the importance of not relying on others, but self-sufficiency. It even goes on to show that we are to care for others who cannot care for themselves. However, it never teaches that loafers should be cared for so that they can continue to loaf.

I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. Philippians 4:12

The words of this verse explain what he just said. Taken together, they read –

“Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: ¹²I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.”

Saying, “I know how to be abased,” indicates that in a state of deprivation, he could still properly function. The word used indicates “being brought low,” or “being humbled.”

Next he says, “and I know how to abound.” This is in contrast to being abased. It indicates “to exceed the ordinary,” and thus a state of surplus. When things were going exceptionally well, he took it in stride. Such times of abundance did not change him into a prideful soul, nor did he learn to rely on that abundance. Instead, when things abounded for him, he understood that it was simply a gift from the Lord.

Following this, he says, “Everywhere and in all things.” It is an absolute statement concerning every facet of his life. Wherever he walked, and whatever came his way, it was included in the attitude he now possessed.

And this attitude was that, “I have learned.” The word used more fully means, “I have learned the secret.” It is a metaphor which comes from the rites of initiation in pagan mysteries, and so it signifies something like, “I have been initiated.” From his past life, he had been initiated into this attitude which he now possessed. The secret of contentment was learned. This contentment was “both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.” His contrasting words show the totality of his life experiences. To him, he could get along with any extreme without demonstrating the negative qualities which normally surround someone when faced with the same. In times of being full, there was no need to boast; in times of

famine, there was no need to worry. To Paul, life was lived for Christ. This carnal, temporary world was not the only hope he possessed, and so whatever the state, it was nothing more than another step on the way to final glory.

Life application: Paul's attitude in this verse is one which we should strive to emulate. If we can truly acknowledge that whatever we are facing now is the Lord's will, then we can trust that it is the proper place to be, even if it is a place of deprivation or total loss. Glory lies ahead. This temporary life is not the totality of our existence.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13

This verse is not merely a stand-alone thought, but is given as a result of the previous verse. Taken together, they read –

“I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

This is important to consider, because we cannot really “do all things” through Christ. We can only do those things which Christ allows us to do, and which He provides for us to do. Paul did not heal Trophimus when he was sick (2 Timothy 4:20). There are many things which Paul “could not do” which are recorded in the Bible. And so, to use this verse as a means of claiming stuff in Jesus' name is wholly inappropriate.

Rather, his thought is that he can endure all things; he can suffer through all things; and he has been given strength in all things concerning his situation – whatever that may be. It is Christ who gives him the ability to do this.

Understanding this, we can apply his words to our own walk, knowing that he is setting the example for us. We can endure through any and all trials that come our way. We can be strengthened through times of temptation, thus not yielding to its pressure. We can stand calmly as the world spins out of control around us, not fearing what others will fear. We can do these things because our hope is an eternal one. Yes, we may suffer, and suffer greatly. However, we have a hope which transcends the suffering because Christ has gone before us.

As a side note, the word “Christ” is not in many manuscripts. It may have been a later addition. Those other sources state something like, “I can do all things through Him...” The intent is not changed, but if your version says this, that is the reason why.

Life application: Context matters. To take a verse out of context will inevitably result in the formation of a pretext. Keep things in context, and know that verses like this one are intended to strengthen us for our walk filled with trials, not pave the way for a walk without them.

Nevertheless you have done well that you shared in my distress. Philippians 4:14

The words of the previous verses spoke of Paul's ability to be content in any and every situation without the need of external help. His reliance was on the Lord, and he therefore was satisfied in whatever state he was in. However, this was not intended to mean that he was not grateful for the gift which was sent to him.

It is for this reason that he states what he does now. "Nevertheless" is given to show that despite his ability to handle any situation, no matter how negative, it didn't mean that he wanted to have such situations. Nor did it mean that a helping hand in one of them was unappreciated. Because of their help, he says, "you have done well." It was no small thing to him that they had tended to his needs. Rather, it was of great blessing to him. This then goes back to his words of verse 1:7 –

“...just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace.” Philippians 1:7

Their gift made them partakers with him in the grace of defending and confirming the gospel. Though he was the one in chains, they “shared in” his distress. Together, they were workers for Christ. Each had their assigned role, and their help was a part of the process. As he noted, he could have done without the gift, but because of it they were a help to him, and it was also a proof of their love for him.

In Acts 20, he had told the Ephesian church the words of the Lord, that “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (20:35). Without saying that to the church at Philippi directly, he still conveys the thought. They are the more blessed because they have given. He is the recipient of their gift, and he is also blessed because of it.

Life application: Do you help support any missionaries? They may have struggles that we don't even know about, and yet they continue to do their jobs. Most are entirely dependent on funding from others. In sending something to them, you will certainly be blessed. And they will be blessed as well. Be sure to remember to send something along to them so that they know they are not out in the world all alone.

Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.

Philippians 4:15

Up to now, Paul has spoken of the church at Philippi as having shared in his time of distress, meaning the time he was writing. In this verse, he looks back over the past years and commends them for having done so previously as well. What is believed to be a full twelve years earlier, he says, “Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel...” The proper name “Philippians” is in the emphatic position here. He is highlighting what they have done.

The term Paul uses indicates the beginning of their hearing and receiving the gospel. When Paul came to preach it among them, and when they received his words, is the “beginning of the gospel” for them. It was during this period, and as he notes, “when I departed from Macedonia.” This is recorded in Acts 17.

When first in Philippi (Acts 16) he moved on to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1). From there he moved on again to Berea (Acts 17:10). Due to trouble there, he decided to leave Macedonia and head into Greece (Acts 17:14). It was probably at this time that he received assistance from them. Or, it could be shortly after in Acts 18:5 when Silas and Timothy met up with him in Corinth that they brought a gift from Philippi.

As he notes, “no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only.” Those in Philippi heard of his fleeing from Macedonia, and they determined to not only pray for him, but to send along a gift to help with the expenses of his travels. This was obviously unsolicited, and he is reminding them of their generosity these many years later.

The idea of “giving and receiving” that he speaks of is a metaphor connected to a commercial transaction where one pays for something and there is then an exchange with the goods which were paid for. Charles Ellicott notes that they “...opened (so to speak) an account with me,’ not of debit and credit, but ‘of free giving and receiving.’” Paul was the recipient of their gracious giving. It would be like having a monthly charge taken out of one’s credit card to pay the expenses of a missionary.

Some even think of it as an allusion to 1 Corinthians 9:11 where the sowing of spiritual things by Paul would, in return, find them giving of their earthly wealth to support him. However, Paul never asked for this, and so it is an unlikely stretch of his words. He is simply grateful that someone saw fit to send him a gift as he continued to minister to others. They, a young and poor church, saw the need for Paul’s mission not only among them, but also among any to whom he would be led to.

Life application: How willing are we to give of our worldly possessions in order to ensure that the message of Christ Jesus will continue to be proclaimed. This includes both missionary work being funded in order for the word to go out for the first time, and also for the maintenance of the church where the word is explained and fellowship is found. The amount you give may be directly connected to the value your heart places on the message which is being conveyed.