

The Strength of Trust
Philippians 4:4-13

Brothers and sisters, this morning we are going to change analogies in this sermon series on divine strength, and we're going to shift from super-heroes to sports heroes – from Captain Marvel to Team captain.

Now if you are a big sports fan, April through June is probably a wonderful time of year for you – because both the NHL and NBA playoffs are going on.

And I have to confess that I haven't been following the NHL playoffs too closely because the Calgary Flames didn't make it to the final round. So I will just watch the headlines over the next couple of weeks and to see if St. Louis can beat Boston and win their first ever Stanley Cup or not.

And speaking of sport's firsts - the Toronto Raptors, are one game away from their first ever opportunity to play in the NBA championship finals – and perhaps possibly win their first Larry O'Brian Trophy.

But if the Raptors make it to the finals they will have their work cut out for them because they will face the Golden State Warriors, who have made the NBA finals for the past 4 years and won the NBA championship 3 times – thanks to their superstar team captain Stephen (Stefan) Curry.

Now Stephen Curry is an impressive basketball player – in his ten years in the NBA he is a six-time NBA all-star, has been named the League MVP twice and is considered one of the best three-point shooters in NBA history.

But Stephen Curry has also become famous for his sponsorship deal with Under Armor clothing and shoes and having Philippians 4:13 - which we read this morning – inscribed on all his signature shoes and clothing.

Stephen says that as he began his first year at Davidson College, his mother challenged him to find something that he could count on to give him strength, focus, and belief in himself as he embarked on this new challenge - and it was Philippians 4:13 translated in most English bibles as *"I can do*

all things through Christ who strengthens me" which became that inspiration for him.

So he began to write "*I can do all things*" on his shoes, and being able to print this scripture verse on his signature items was a big part of his sponsorship deal with Under Armor.

Now Curry has never tried to hide the fact that this phrase comes from a verse in the bible or the fact that he is a Christian, and even though his slogan seems to focus on the "I" part of this verse – and leaves off the "Christ" part - Steph is quite clear that it is not about him.

Rather he states "*The Lord has blessed me with these talents to do something special. But it's not about me. Winning games, losing games, missing shots, making shots, it doesn't matter. It's all about giving glory to God.*" (Liberty University 2018 Convocation speech)

So, it would seem that being able to do "all things" for Stephen Curry ALSO includes being able to stay humble and

modest, which if you know anything about the bombastic image and ego of NBA superstars, is even more impressive than his athletic accomplishments.

Truly Christ is making a difference in his life – and that's an inspiration and encouragement that Christ can do so for us.

Now as we know Curry's slogan is part of a longer bible verse and that bible verse is part of a letter written to the early church in the Roman city of Philippi by the Apostle Paul.

So let's take a closer at the passage of scripture, which we read this morning from Philippians 4, where the Apostle Paul first inscribed these now famous words "*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*" So please turn to this passage in your bibles with me.

Now as it turns out, the "all things" which Paul refers to are found in vs. 12. Paul states that he has been able to "*learn the secret of being content in any and all circumstances,*

whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”

And we know this because Paul uses the same Greek words for “Any and All” in vs 12 as he does for “All” in vs 13. So this connects the “all” in vs. 13 to vs 12 - and that’s why the NIV version which we read this morning translates it a bit differently and it reads *“I can do all this through Him who gives me strength”*

Which may also have you wondering – wait a minute, isn’t it supposed to be through “Christ” who gives me strength? And to be sure that is who Paul is referring to here – but the earliest and most reliable manuscript copies that we have of this letter do not say Christ – it is just implied by the grammar.

Now that’s interesting but it’s just a side note – and perhaps scholarly justification for Stephan Curry to say that he’s just being faithful to the original manuscripts by not mentioning Christ in his inscriptions. 😊

But the real issue in this passage for us... is how Jesus Christ strengthened the Apostle Paul and taught him as he says in vs. 11 *“to be content in any and all circumstances.”*

That’s a pretty significant development and one that I’m sure we would all be interested in because who doesn’t find themselves in challenging circumstances from time to time.

And that’s the whole point of this series – learning about God’s divine strength so that we can be strengthened for whatever circumstance we may be facing or will face.

So what are your circumstances? What kind of circumstances could you face?

The Apostle Paul faced the following circumstances in being obedient to Jesus’ call on his life to preach the good news to the gentile nations – listen to how he describes them in another letter he wrote; in 2 Corinthians 11:23-29.

He writes *“I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”*

So Paul definitely knew challenging circumstances and was no stranger to hardship – there is some life experience and credibility and depth to his statement that *“I can do all this through Christ who strengthens him”*

He truly knows what challenging circumstance are, he’s not fretting about “first-world problems” like losing our phone chargers, or having spotty or slow Wi-Fi service.

But speaking of first-world problems – Paul’s statement includes the ability to be content in good circumstances, and there were good times in Paul’s missionary life as well.

In Acts 18:11 we discover that Paul was able to stay and teach in Corinth for a year and a half, without any persecution or trouble, and in Acts 28:30 we learn that when Paul went to Rome for his trial before Caesar – he lived in his own rented house for two years and had the freedom to teach and minister boldly.

Now brothers and sisters, we can understand how we need strength to face challenging circumstances that push us to our limits, but why would we need strength to face good circumstances? Well consider what Proverbs 30:7-9 says

⁷ *“Two things I ask of you, Lord; do not refuse me before I die:*

⁸ *Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty*

nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. ⁹ Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

Now brothers and sisters – this is not a biblical pronouncement on whether it is good to have riches or not, it merely points out to us that how we respond to our circumstances, when they are bad or good, can have a negative impact on our relationship with God and it all centers around trust.

Bad circumstances present the danger that we will not trust in God enough and good circumstances present the danger that we begin to trust in ourselves too much. So brothers and sisters – which set of circumstances and dangers are you facing?

Now the good news is that Jesus Christ is able to strengthen us to be able to be content – to be full of trust if you will – in all these circumstances, He is able to help us learn to keep our

trust in God in good times and in bad times, whether we are in need or whether we have plenty.

Now I know it sounds cliché but there are three ways in this passage that Paul teaches us to be strengthened by Christ so that we can trust God in all circumstances.

But before we get to that one of the things we need to realize about the strength of trust - is that while it comes from Jesus Christ and He gives it to us, it requires some cooperation and response on our part.

Now I don't want anyone who might be feeling completely drained by their circumstances to feel overwhelmed because I'm telling you that you to find the energy and make the effort in order to make yourself strong in trust - that's not what I'm saying.

Scripture teaches us that it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to respond and cooperate with God and so you don't need to conjure it up out of yourself, you can just ask God in prayer to

give you that ability and energy to respond – or you can ask someone else to pray for you to receive that as well – so that we are enabled respond and cooperate with what Jesus is doing to strengthen us with trust.

And the other thing we need to learn about the strength of trust is that it can't happen unless circumstances require it.

Think about it for a moment – if a group of people who need to learn to trust each other are going to learn how to do that, some sort of circumstances must occur for that to take place.

You can explain what trust is, you can give examples of what trust is, you can even demonstrate what trust is – but for someone to learn to trust they will need to do the exercise where they close their eyes and fall back and trust that the other people in the group will catch them, and it works the same way with Christ making us strong in our circumstances.

We kind of know this pragmatically but Paul reinforces this grammatically by using a very specific Greek word in vs. 12 to

describe this process of “learning the secret.” The word is “Myeo” and this is the only time it is used in the New Testament.

And this word that is more typically used to describe the initiation rituals by which new members were accepted into the pagan mystery cults – and Paul uses it here to emphasize how there “ain't no way to do it except to go through it”

Brothers and sisters being strengthened in trust by Jesus to face your circumstances requires you to go through your circumstances – does that make sense?

Because we need to learn to respond IN the midst of our circumstance, responding OUT of our circumstances doesn't do anything to build trust and have it strengthen us – because if we're not being challenged it doesn't require trust – make sense?

Now again I know it sounds cliché but when we are in challenging circumstances (good or bad) we need to Praise,

we need to Pray and we need to Ponder – its right here in the scripture passage.

We see that we are to Praise in vs. 4-5 where Paul says *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”* What does Paul mean by this?

Well when I think of *“rejoicing in the Lord always”* it brings to mind how Paul and Silas were locked up in prison, after they had been beaten and flogged, and they were singing hymns!

And then let’s jump down to vs. 9 where Paul says *“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.”*

Now – where did this prison hymn-sing praise session take place? You guessed it – in the city of Philippi – so Paul is reminding the church in Philippi of this incident and encouraging them to do likewise in whatever circumstance they may face. And many of them would have witnessed it

first hand – because if you remember the story, the Lord brought about an earthquake which opened the prison doors and caused their chains to come loose.

Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners could have easily escaped but they did not, and when the jailer saw what had happened he and his whole family because Christians, and Paul and Silas welcome their former captors and torturers into the family of God gladly! So this is very much what Paul means when he says *“let your gentleness be evident to all”*

Brothers and sisters – it’s hard to go wrong with singing songs of praise to Jesus when you need to be strengthened by Him in whatever circumstances you are facing... but when we do this, as Paul says *“the Lord is near”* and we are remind of Jesus word’s to us in Matthew 28:20 *“And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”*

Celebrating who Jesus is and what He has done by singing, or speaking praise to Him will cause you to trust Jesus more and be strengthened by that trust.

Now you might say – that’s great... but the truth is that my circumstances have me just too wound up to praise, and if that’s the case brothers and sisters – you need to take special note of Paul’s next set of instructions about praying in vs. 6 where he says *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. “*

Now even if you are not wound up – it’s important to pray because it helps to prevent us from becoming wound up about our circumstances.

But this is really straightforward – whatever is making you anxious or worried or wound up, you can bring it to God in prayer – and I can say, as a minister, I do this often!

But what struck me this time around in this verse is that we are supposed to do this *“with thanksgiving”* and that got me thinking if my prayers and petitions are simply me whining to God about my circumstances and what I find difficult in them?

Am I praying about my worry and anxiety from a place of thankfulness?

Remember - Paul who instructed us on this knows what it’s like to go through some intense circumstances where you would certainly wonder how he could pray to God about those things, in thanksgiving???

Now this could easily become a bad example of “how to find the silver lining in a tragedy” but brothers and sisters by this point in our sermon series I pray that we have been strengthened by wisdom.. so that we are able to discern when we need to seek the strength of comfort in the face of a tragedy which we learned about last week - and to know when we need to seek the strength of trust in praying about our anxieties and worries with an attitude of thanksgiving.

Do you understand the difference?

And perhaps the best way to bring our worries and anxieties to God in prayer in thanksgiving is to thank God that a) He

hears our prayers in Jesus name b) that He is able to do something about our worries and anxieties and c) that this is now an opportunity for us to experience Jesus strengthening us in trust.

Praying in this way we can be genuinely thankful in our petitions and needs without being disingenuous about how we really feel because of our circumstances.

And this thanksgiving becomes the key to having Christ strengthen us and it is an expression of trust that strengthens us as well.

Then, last but not least Paul would have us Ponder – in vs. 8 he says *“whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—**think** about such things.”*

Brothers and sisters, when our circumstances are challenging – what we allow our minds to think about and ponder over...

what we continually allow to circulate in our thoughts and imagination and to a certain extent our feelings – plays a big part in whether we will end up trusting ourselves too much in good times or not trusting God enough in the bad times.

And let’s be clear that nurturing our trust in God, and being strengthened by Jesus Christ in that trust, in whatever circumstances we find ourselves is the goal of this exhortation.

And in part pondering on these things is also a reminder to continue to Praise and Pray, and that praise, prayer and pondering are often all mixed together and we don’t need to treat them as separate and distinct activities.

So are you in good circumstances? Don’t fall prey to the lie that you are a self-made person who has everything because you’ve worked so hard and earned it.

Ponder the truth that you’ve received benefits and blessings and opportunities from God which has allowed you work hard and earn things...

Are you in bad circumstances? Don't allow thoughts of victimhood or revenge to gain a foothold – that is not noble or admirable. Reflect about what is right instead - perhaps it is forgiveness, perhaps it is turning the other cheek – it depends on what you are going through but you see how this works right?

Intentionally spending time thinking on the things that are true, and noble and right and pure and lovely and admirable and excellent and praiseworthy in your circumstances, or from the scriptures, is an intentional way to show that you trust Jesus and in turn He will strengthen you with even more trust!

So brothers and sisters to learn the secret of being content in any and all circumstance like Paul did requires that us to praise, prayer and ponder in those circumstances.

There are three ways that we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to respond to Jesus in our circumstances in order that we might receive more strength so that we can trust Him regardless of what we are going through.

I know that it might sound challenging and it can even seem overwhelming for us to think about responding in this way – but remember how Paul finishes this off... and make it your personal like Stephen Curry has.

Brothers and sisters *“You **can** do all this through Him who gives you strength!”*

Amen.