

“Our Sufficiency in The All-Sufficient One”
“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
Philippians 4:13

Martin Luther said: “The Bible is alive. It speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me, it has hands, it lays hold of me.” The very most significant legacy of the Protestant Reformation is the prominent position of the Bible in Christians’ everyday lives ever since.

Having, last night, noted this biblical importance in several ministries over the centuries since Luther, today and tomorrow we’ll look into this same biblical influence in our time, through what, evidently, are *our day’s three most popular* Bible verses.

In the spring, *Christianity Today* published a report, “Scripture as Spam”. We were told that, “of the 200 billion messages sent on Twitter in 2015, 40 million featured Bible verses.” Who knew that, out there in the Twittersverse, there were also Twitter *verses*?

Every generation of this weekend’s honorees – back to the 16th-century – was familiar with birds that were said to “twitter”. They also knew that *nervous* people were said to be “all atwitter”. But none of them ever heard of the “Twitter” that comes to our minds when *we* hear that word. Even *I* know more about Twitter than they did, and I’ve never ever twittered or tweeted or whatever. Even in the *late 20th*-century, Eugenia Price did not use an *electric* typewriter. She hammered out all of her letters, her many devotional books and her over-700-page best-selling novels on her *manual* Underwood. And just in case the manufacturing of new manuals might be discontinued, Genie had bought herself an *extra* manual.

Earlier generations probably were more familiar with Bible verses than many Twitter aficionados are today. Of course, many probably *misunderstood* what they read, but to *misunderstand* something, one has to *know* at least *something* about it, even if only to *recite* it. The biblically *illiterate* can’t even *misunderstand* what they’ve never ever heard or read.

The *most frequently tweeted* Bible verses were found to be, from first place to third: Philippians 4:13, John 3:16, and Jeremiah 29:11. Maybe you can quote John 3:16, but can you quote the Philippian and Jeremiah verses?

It also was found that, of 1.6 billion *page-views* of searchable online Bibles at BibleGateway.com, with more than 160 million visitors, these *very same three* Bible verses were the *top three* searched, though they ranked in a different order. At BibleGateway.com, John 3:16 *led* as the *most frequently* searched, followed by Jeremiah 29:11 with Philippians 4:13 ranking third.

There’s no doubt that “Post-Christian” Americans can’t quote these verses, though even *they* might make a stab at John 3:16. Sadly, many have never even *heard* these verses, or could easily *understand* them *if* they heard them. They’d have no reasonable context for understanding them. However, none of this means that the biblically illiterate don’t have *know-it-all opinions* on all they know *nothing* about – a common symptom of ignorance complicated by self-serving self-righteousness, especially on anything about the Bible.

Still, it can be surprising to us who live in the isolation of a secular center of elitists such as New York City, that Barna Research finds that twenty-five percent of American teenagers read the Bible at least once a week and ten percent spend 45 minutes or longer reading the Bible at one sitting. Thirty-five percent of teenagers believe that the Bible “contains everything a person needs to know, to live a meaningful life”. Sadly, though, this “is a statistically significant drop in six percentage points” from a year ago.

This weekend, we'll look into these three most tweeted and most searched verses from Philippians, John and Jeremiah and we'll learn what the *original writers* meant and *original readers* would likely have understood. As we've learned, the *original* doesn't always match today's typical takeaways.

This is especially true of *popular* Bible verses that, by robotic recitation and inattentive interpretation, get stuck with extraneous notions, reinforced by rote repetition. For example, verses allegedly about today's "gay" issues – unknown in the biblical world – typify many other anachronistic readings and common misapplications of Bible verses. The "gay" content has been smuggled into the Bible by both antigay and pro-gay apologists. And again, as always, it's all been symptomatic of ignorance complicated by self-serving self-righteousness!

Whatever now accounts for the *popularity* of the three verses on which we'll focus this weekend, *our* questions *should* be and *will* be: What did the texts *originally mean* and what is their *application* to us today?

The first of these two questions tends to be of a kind that, nowadays, is out of style, even sneered at, in postmodernist, so-called, "progressive", circles of shortsighted chronological snobbery. But, it very much matters what texts meant in *their* day. They may or may not mean what some today think they meant then or mean now and they may or may not mean what *we* think they meant then or mean now. So, let's look into it, so that, if we're willing, we might *honestly* and *responsibly apply* their *original sense* today.

This morning, we look into the *most tweeted* verse. It's in a letter from the apostle Paul to Christians at Philippi. He writes: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Phil 4:13)

Nowadays, preachers of "Positive Thinking", "Possibility Thinking" and "Health & Wealth" Prosperity gospels have abused this teaching of Paul's. And they thereby abuse their own adherents who so eagerly lap up what they preach.

Here's what *Paul* wrote: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Here's Norman Vincent Peale's appalling distortion of Paul's words: "Your unconscious mind has a power that turns wishes into realities when the wishes are strong enough." Here's Oral Roberts on Philippians 4:13: "Whatever you can conceive and believe, you can do." Here's Robert Schuller on Paul's words (and, by the way, also on behalf of Amway): "You can make your world into whatever you want it to be." And here's T. D. Jakes' takeaway: "We often overlook that Paul believes in himself!" Believe in yourself, hmm? With so many shepherds so stuck in their very own obsessions, is it any wonder that so many sheep stumble?

Tragically, over the last four decades, Philippians 4:13 was also pushed at conflicted same-sex oriented Christians by "ex-gay"-obsessed preachers who, in spite of all the cover-ups of the backstage evidence to the contrary, refused to see that Paul's *settled sufficiency* was *in Christ* alone, and not in "ex-gay" *frauds* or even in *heterosexuality per se*.

Secular media scorn Christian sports stars who, as Tim Tebow does, cite Philippians 4:13 and otherwise reveal their serious Christian faith. But a savvy sports columnist recognizes that, "It is part of the Tim Tebow canon that criticism will shadow him and stalk him, wherever he goes, whatever he says, whatever the year, whatever the subject, whatever the sport." The columnist concludes: "That says more about a cynical time and a skeptical society than it does about Tebow." (Mike Vaccaro)

"Phil 4:13" appears in white letters and numbers in Tebow's eyeblack and he, himself, gives an *accurately biblical* reason for calling Philippians 4:13 a favorite Bible verse – along with his favoring John 3:16, and displaying that verse, too, in his eyeblack.

In an interview a few years ago, Tebow granted that even pastors *misuse* this Philippian verse. He rightly said that Paul's words *don't* superficially boast, "I can do a lot of things". Yet, amazingly, just last week, this 2007 Heisman Trophy winning quarterback hit a home run on the first pitch in his first time at bat for the New York Mets.

Here's Tebow's paraphrase of Paul's *point*, years before he joined the Mets, and with no reference to any talent on either a football or a baseball field: "Whatever position God has put me in ... God's gonna give me the strength to handle that." No professional exegete could put it more plainly.

Evander Holyfield, professional boxing's one and only four-time World Heavyweight champion, also takes note of "Phil 4:13". He adds it to his autograph on everything from his photos to boxing gloves.

But we've seen "Philippians 4:13" *misused*, too. One picture that comes to mind showed a little kid in a superhero cape, about to fly off a high cliff since *he* can "do all things". In this case, some *self-doubt* would be better.

The basic difference between *popular* uses and the *biblical* use of Philippians 4:13 is that, in popular use, it's about *our own efforts* at some sort of *self-willed, self-confident, self-esteemed, self-sufficiency*, whereas, in the biblical, it's about *God's free gift of God-willed sufficiency in God's sovereign sufficiency*. And, *that* difference makes *all* the difference in this fallen world and beyond it. Of course, the way some popular uses put it, there's a *nod* to God's part in the deal, but it's still all about getting *my* way.

In Paul's day, Stoic philosophers expressed a *self-willed* self-sufficiency of their own. They had a major circle in Paul's hometown of Tarsus and this well-educated apostle knew of their views. They held that equanimity was available by a deliberately *rational* – or, to put it with more psychological precision, a deliberately *rationalized* – resignation to fate, given that fate could not be controlled. So, if you can't *beat* fate, *go* with it, hmm?

Paul did not have to come to terms with *fate*. Paul came to terms with *faith* – *faith in Christ*. Paul did not have to *rationalize* his way around a loving God that *needed* to be controlled but *couldn't* be controlled. And that made – and makes – all the difference between being gifted with the wise and powerful love of God and having to grin and bear with utter indifference.

Nonetheless, when Paul reached out to preach to *pagans*, and even in his ministering to *former* pagans, he often borrowed from popular Stoicism to gain some common ground for helping them to cross over to the *eternally founded equanimity* in the *real and true sovereignty* of God and God's deep *love* in Christ. Paul confided to Corinthian Christians that his approach was to become "all things to all people" in order that, by tactful adaptations, "he might win some of them to the Lord". (I Cor 9:22)

So here, in these words to Philippians, and as he did at Athens, Paul "plunders the Egyptians" as it were, to take some typically Stoic terms, and even some lingo from the mystery religions, to continue the movement of these former pagans from their familiarly flimsy, self-centered and supposed self-sufficiency to becoming more and more familiar with the firm foundation of a Christ-centered sufficiency for steadily handling *every circumstance* of life, no matter how hard or easy, wanted or unwanted the *circumstance* itself might be.

Paul knows, as Stoics did, that our *experience* of any circumstance is not dependent on the circumstance, as such, but on our *interpretation* of the circumstance, our *perspective*, what we're *thinking* and *believing* about it.

Buying into our interpretation, we unavoidably *feel* according to our interpretation. But the feeling doesn't indicate whether or not our interpretation is true or false. Feelings depend on thoughts, whether the thoughts are true or false.

But Paul is going *far beyond* mere rationality. He knows that God gives so much more than the simple dispassion or apathy Stoics settled for. Paul is going far deeper than mere cognitive reassessment of circumstances can provide, though, I'm an advocate of cognitively rational psychotherapy. You've heard me say: "Flexibility is a hallmark of mental health." It is. Yet, as realistic as it is to avoid holding yourself hostage to fantasy scenarios, it's a whole other level of reality to rely on God's love. Paul looks to God for deepest confidence, contentment and joy. He's not settling for only some level-headedness when he can experience, through faith, level grounding on the Solid Rock.

Let's catch this text's *immediate* context. Paul writes: "I have *learned* to be content, whatever the circumstances. I have *learned* the secret of being content in any and all situations, whether I'm well fed or hungry, whether with or without" *whatever*. (Phil 4:11f) As Stoics and other pagans said *they'd learned* from what *they'd* seen of life, Paul says *he's learned* from what *he's* seen of life. But Stoic and mystery cult "secrets" were *stuck* in *self-serving* summaries of "life" while Paul was *liberated* by having met Life Himself, Jesus the Christ, gloriously risen from the dead and ascended, and from his *living* relationship with Life Himself, *experiencing* all the ups and downs of circumstances to which he's called in Christ – and that involved lots of painful persecution. But the foundations of Stoic equanimity and the equanimity that Paul knew in Christ couldn't be more different.

As he shares with the Romans, *nothing in this world can separate* us from God's love. (Rom 8:38f) This assurance makes all the difference. And as he shares, too, with the Corinthians: "God is able to bless you abundantly, so that you'll always have all that you really do need in order to abound in doing what's good and what's right." (II Cor 9:8)

Did you notice that? Both the *source* of what we *need* and the *purpose* for which we *need* to use it, are brought together in that statement: "God is *able* to bless you *abundantly*, so that you'll always have *all that you really do need* in order to abound in *doing* what's good and what's right."

One's insufficiency in self *shows up* as *selfishness*; sufficiency in Christ *shows up* in *sharing*. It can't be otherwise. Insufficiency can afford only to be stingy; sufficiency in Christ can afford to love from being loved to the uttermost. It can't be otherwise. You can't *grunt it up*. You can't *fake it up*. It can only be *received* and then *recycled* for the welfare of others.

As the contented and confident Paul tells fellow Christians, Christ assured *him* – and *them*, too – their weakness notwithstanding, in fact, their weakness as prerequisite: " 'My grace is *sufficient* for you, for My *power* comes through *to you in your weakness*. ' " That's the way it works. If we try, on our own, to turn our weakness into so-called "power", our so-called "power" is powerlessness itself. If we, in our weakness, receive God's real power, God's real power accomplishes God's will. "Therefore", in God's gift of such generous sufficiency, Paul can, with fullest confidence, say, "I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me." (II Cor 12:9)

Here's what the Stoic, Epictetus, claimed, yet with *nothing at all* more reassuring in his mind than the pagan gods' *cold indifference* to humanity: "I am always *content* with what happens, for I know that what the gods choose is better than what I choose". On what *basis* did he conclude this? It was his rationalized resignation to fate.

How is it, then, that *we* who *say* we worship the all-loving God who's *anything but indifferent*

to humanity, who “chose us in Christ before the creation of the world” (Eph 1:4), who, in Christ, suffered and died to save us from sin and eternal death – how is it that we so miserably fail to affirm that, we are *content with whatever happens*, knowing that (paraphrasing Epictetus): God chooses what’s better than what we can choose? How is it that we’re so quick to complain about our circumstances, our embarrassingly First-World problems? Why do we whine? Why are we so slow to get serious with what the writer to Hebrews reminds us: “Be fine with whatever you have, for you’ll never be abandoned by God.”? (Heb 13:5)

For Paul, deeper than any forms he may borrow from pagans to preach to pagans, is his own Hebrew heritage. From the Psalms: “The Lord is my *strength and refuge*” (46:1); “the Lord is my *shepherd*, I have *all that I need*” in Him. (23:1ff) From Jeremiah: “The Lord is my *righteousness*”, *Jehovah Tsidkenu* (Jer 23:6).

In contrast to the caprice of fate so evident in the utter indifference of the pagan gods, the Lord God reveals the heart of a *loving father* from Genesis to Revelation. He’s *deeply moved* in personally providing for humanity’s *deepest needs*. And, in contrast to the apathy of pagan gods, the Lord God, Creator and Redeemer of the universe, is *nonetheless*, “the Man of Sorrows, [so personally] acquainted with grief”, as Isaiah prophesied of Christ Jesus. (Isa 53)

In Jesus of Nazareth, God in flesh and blood was repeatedly *moved with compassion* for all in need. (Mark 1:4; Matt 9:36; 14:14) “Jesus wept.” (John 11:35) That’s the *shortest* verse in the Bible, but it reveals the *deepest depths of his love*, for he’d very soon revive his dead friend, Lazarus, but even so, *he wept* over the death.

And what’s called, with good reason, the *Passion* of the Christ, depicts the disgrace and nakedness of God’s enfleshed presence, suffering and dying on Golgotha’s cruel cross, that we might not *perish* but have *everlasting life*.

Why did He do it? He did it because He *longed* for deepest *intimacy* with those He’d *created* in *His* image, and for “the joy set before him” – we his bride – who without His love, would be lost. (cf. Heb 12:2) Of such a unique relationship, *ancient* pagans *knew* nothing and *postmodern* pagans *know* nothing and all *religionists* who try to put their god or gods and goddesses in their debt *know* nothing.

J. I. Packer observes the profound truth when he writes: “What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of His hands [Isa 49:16]; I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me and continues to know me.”

John explains: “We love him because *he first loved us*.” (1 John 4:19) “In this, is love”, says John, “not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10)

God’s desire is a *loving relationship* between Himself and *human* beings whose desire for loving relationship so shortsightedly settles for something so far less. It’s in that loving relationship with our Creator and Redeemer that we find the *contentment* that we *sense* we need and that we truly *do* need. It’s God’s gift of desire.

But Stoics tried to *will* themselves into *their* notion of *contentment*. Buddhists try to *achieve* their *desired contentment* by contradictorily trying to *deny desire* itself! Self-centered consumerists try to find *contentment* through fantasies of quick-fix facials and immediate gratification in materialism, sure bet financial investment, celebrity, sexual promiscuity and even in lethal intoxicants and other dead ends. But every *fantasy* is *false* for it promises only what *faulty imagination imagines but cannot bring into being*.

Our God-given thirst for the Water of Life is far too deep a thirst to be quenched by anything less than the Water of Life Himself. “Drinking from one’s own well”, as some so-called “spirituality” coaches camouflage the cesspools of self, one cannot quench the thirst for the Water of Life.

Worshipping one’s *self* instead of one’s *Creator*, worshipping even *another creature* instead of one’s *Creator*, one stays stuck in the isolating isolation of one’s isolated *self*. *Will-powered pursuit* of a fantasized contentment, self-contradictory desire to *deny* desire, or gazing into mirrors of our own reflections, our eyes glaze over in moribund self-absorption and we miss the gift of our creation and re-creation in God’s own image.

Without Him, we *bind* ourselves as hostages to the narrow distractions of what *we* desperately *define* as what we’re missing and thus we’re *blind* to all we’re *truly* missing.

In contrast to the anxiety, frustration and hostile rebellion of those who don’t know God’s love, Paul was given true and real contentment in the Almighty and Merciful Father, who *loved* him and *loves* him and will never *leave* him to manage the unmanageable on his own. And so he’s content.

This *fallen* world is always a *mixed-bag* experience. Get used to it. Yet, a *fallen* world’s *fantasies* are always *delusional expectations* of an *unmixed* experience. So, they’re bound to be disappointing and to drain us away into depression, despair and death.

Yet it was *entirely sufficient contentment* that Paul knew in Christ as he sang God’s praises in prison, in spite of the pain of having been beaten severely on that first trip to Philippi. And now, as he writes to Philippians from imprisonment in Rome, awaiting trial and a verdict that will mean, in the meantime, more life in Christ *here* or, forever, the *gain* of more life in Christ *beyond*, it’s sufficient contentment for Paul to know that, in Christ, no matter the *circumstances*, he’s anchored in *God’s* world, redeemed and renewed in the risen Christ, here and hereafter.

Paul writes, therefore: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I repeat, Rejoice! (Phil 4:4ff) His repeated reminder to “rejoice in the Lord”, literally with *enthusiasm*, i.e. “in God”, is no rallying cry for a mere *self-motivated* optimism. He points to the reassuring recognition that “the Lord is at hand” so, they can *afford* “not to be anxious about anything, but in every situation”, and with “thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace – the *shalom* – of God that transcends all mere understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:4ff)

And this fact can afford them *anxiety-free gentleness* with everyone and with all situations. In such peace, says Paul, we’re *free to focus on* and *to do whatever’s* true, *whatever’s* honorable, *whatever’s* just, *whatever’s* pure, *whatever’s* admirable, *whatever’s* gracious. (Phil 4:8) See again, the purpose here and now of such *shalom*? In Christ, there’s truly *sufficient security* and therefore *sufficient serenity* with no need for anxiety about anything, *whatever* the circumstances.

Now, it’s helpful to remember that even Paul failed at times to remember all this. As he, himself, was free in Christ to admit to other Christians, there are times when, as he put it, “I don’t do the good I want to do, but the evil I don’t want to do – that’s what I keep on doing.” (Rom 7:19)

Greek and classics scholar Sarah Ruden, who was so delightfully surprised when she first began to translate Paul, nonetheless writes in Christianity Today’s *Books & Culture* periodical that she thinks that Paul’s rather common “tendency to fly off the handle was the ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2 Cor 12:7)” of which he wrote with candor. She notes: “To read whole letters of Paul in Greek is to experience a whip-sawing such as not even the ancient satirists and epigrammatic wags subject you to.”

Still, the *fuller* self-awareness that Paul *experienced* in not taking fullest advantage of the

Lord's presence and peace, was that, during such failure, the Lord was *nonetheless still at hand*. This sovereign, all-loving God, is and will forever be God. Therefore, we are and will ever be God's beloved.

Genie Price summed it up so well: "No one who really knows God in Jesus Christ expects all of life to 'come up roses'. We don't expect this because Jesus said it wouldn't. The continuing discovery of what God is really like insulates us and gives us courage and humor and inner strength for living adequately in the midst of whatever life hands us."

Indeed, we can learn that we can handle all things through Christ who gives us strength!

(Presented by Ralph Blair at the Evangelicals Concerned weekend at Ocean Grove, NJ, Saturday morning, October 8, 2016)