

Sermon on Philippians 4:11-13

by pastor Dirk M. Boersma

Preached at: Emmanuel Church, Denver on July 15, 2007

Title: Jesus is your strength

- find contentment
- discover a new passion

Goal:

Liturgy (from the 'Book of Praise' of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches)

Call to worship: Ps 104,24.31-34

opening: Ps 29

declaration of mercy: Ps 62,5-8

response to law & grace: Ps 60

before sermon: Ps 18,1.10.11

after sermon: Hymn 47, 7-10

thanksgiving: Hymn 2, 1.2.4

I hope this sermon will serve to make your love for God grow and lead you to a deeper dedication to our Lord Jesus Christ. Praise him for his grace!



Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”
That’s the favorite passage of many Christians. And maybe yours, too.

It is appealing to anyone who knows Jesus: it expresses an enormous trust in him.

I can do everything with the power of Jesus!
now I’ll go ahead and do what he calls me to do with courage!

And doesn’t it express great humility?
the things I do I can do because of the power of Jesus in me.
It’s the same as saying: ‘don’t praise me – praise him!’

(Theme: Jesus is your strength)

1. Find contentment

When was the last time you met someone who said: ‘I’m totally content with who I am and where I’m at. I don’t need anything else.’

That’s pretty unique, isn’t it?

When are you content? When you get what you want.

What do you want in life? I think we all know that it’s quite limited and selfish to want to be rich and famous. Oh, how empty is that! You can think that every time you watch celebrities on TV. What a life... It’s so shallow. When the public turns their head and they are not popular any more, they disappear and they are nobodies.

No, we need to go for more important things. True happiness, loving each other, enjoying your family life. That's really important, isn't it?

Joy, security, good relationships, a peaceful life – what's wrong with that?

Well, the question is this: what role does God play in it?

What do you think about this girl, member of a Reformed church: her elder asks her: 'who is God for you, what does he mean to you?'

She answers: God helps me stay healthy, gives me a great job, and I hope he will give me a good marriage later.'

And then he asks: 'What if God doesn't give you any of these things?'

'Well', she says, 'what good is my faith then? It doesn't help me.'

Have you never felt like this?

This is how religion works. Millions of people have religion. They do something to please their god or gods so that he helps them. Religion is: God solves my problems. That's why he's there.

Our culture helps us to think that way and churches have gone along with it. Many Christians are excited and tell you: look at what God did for me! When you are in trouble you ask him to get you out, and he always does!

Our culture makes us demanding: the way it should be is that everything serves our happiness. With more technology we get more control, and we expect more and more.

Therefore we have a hard time dealing with disappointments.

Maybe you think 'that's not what I think. This is wrong!'

However, look at your response when trouble knocks on your door. Do you never ask this question: 'Why does this happen to me?' And is your first response not 'please God, take this illness or pain away. I can't cope with it, I just want to be happy.'

How do you respond to adversity? When things are beyond your control? When you have pain, when you worry how you can go on, when you are in financial trouble?

If we don't get what we want and we can't change anything about it – we often respond in one of two ways: either we are resentful and close ourselves off. We demand a reason from God and we blame him if he doesn't help us.

Or we give up all hope and are devastated.

That's the result of religion: if it doesn't work you give up. God doesn't deliver.

Faith in Jesus does not work that way.

He tells us that our own happiness is not the highest goal.

He opens our eyes for something more, something higher, immensely more beautiful.

God works on your heart, your expectations, and your desires.

He changes you by showing you Jesus Christ and uniting you to him.

God tells us that we can and should be content, whatever happens.

But this is not easy. It's not like a mask you just put on: you smile and act as if everything is OK.

No, it doesn't work like that.

Paul's perspective

Paul says: "I am content."

Why? How? Does he have everything?

He lived in a different time, but in the same world that is ravaged by sin. He openly acknowledges that many things did not go as he wanted.

He experienced his share of trouble. He was on a good career path: respected by the Jews, probably a good income, he had a good position and he had a reputation as the persecutor of that sect, the Christians. If that life had continued he would have been a happy man.

However, Jesus met him on way of Damascus. He stopped him dead in his tracks. He turned him around and made him realize that his life was a highway to hell: he was persecuting the Lord of the universe, the Son of God!

His life changed. His priorities were turned upside down. And to the world it seemed as if he was a loser now: he was wanted, on top of the hit list of the Jewish leaders. He faced opposition wherever he went, he was in prison many times, always under pressure and on the road; he survived several attempts on his life.

That's his life now, when he writes this.

Judge for yourself: did he gain anything? Was he better off?

What drove Paul? What motivated him to keep going?

How could he deal with all this suffering and survive?

Well, what does he say?

I am content:

"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.

¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

In want: he is not talking about coming \$50 short for his groceries or not having a car. His trials went much deeper: he had given up everything in order to follow and serve Christ.

Paul served Jesus now, but unlike many modern Christians, he could not point to his life and say: look how Jesus has blessed me: I've got a great family, beautiful house, stable job, money in the bank, I'm healthy, and I've got a good pension.'

What is Paul's reason to be content, if it is not for all these visible blessings we pursue and like to have?

Paul's contentment comes from Christ: He is everything

Here is Paul's secret. He is content whatever the circumstances because he knows Jesus Christ. He has found him and discovered that Jesus is the greatest treasure.

Focus on Jesus

The letter he writes to the Philippians is special in that Paul constantly speaks about Jesus and expresses a heartfelt and deep relationship with him.

He describes in chapter 3 how he discovered that Christ is everything and the rest is rubbish. Even the things he used to treasure and put his heart into, things the thought God liked, he regards as trash.

Instead of 'religion', trying to please God so that he helps him, using God as a wheelbarrow to reach his own goals, Paul discovers that Jesus is everything.

Why?

Because the sacrifice Jesus brought shows us that all our attempts to please God are useless and self-centered.

Useless, because they will never earn us God's favor.

Self-centered, because if we practice 'religion', we are just as sinful as all the other people who don't believe in God at all. We just make it worse: instead of ignoring God we are trying to use him to serve us. It's rebellion with a different mask, but it's rebellion all the same: you want to be in control.

Jesus shows us that our attempts to please God are useless and self-centered.

And he shows us how deep God bows down in order to save us: he carries the punishment we deserved. He suffers the death we earned for our rebellion and selfishness. God reconciles us to himself by giving up his only Son. He pays dearly to get us, rebellious sinners, back.

Once Paul discovered this, he knew how important and beautiful the relationship with Jesus was. That's all you need! If you are in Jesus, if you have his righteousness and wear his white cloths, if you are God's child because of his death, anything can happen, but you are unmoved. Jesus is everything to you and he trumps everything in life.

No longer is your happiness your goal in life.

You no longer live for yourself. You are not driven by a passion to have a comfortable and prosperous life in this world. And God does not serve your purposes.

Everything changes because Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for your sins.

When you have discovered his love you begin to live with a passion for Jesus. He gave his life for you. Now he is your life – everything.

2. discover a new passion

Now listen to Paul's words again:

"I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

What is 'everything'?

Is it your career? The camping trip you are planning? The wonderful family life you have or desire?

The match your baseball team is going to play?

If this was what Paul was talking about, we would end up with 'religion', wouldn't we? God would be there just to help us succeed.

Look at Jesus. Listen to Paul's discovery.

When you get to know Jesus – not just his name, but his love, his holy strength, his purpose (obeying the Father) – when you know him personally through faith, you begin to look at life differently.

You discover that your desires and plans were what brought Jesus to the cross in the first place. All that selfishness, you being in the center, that's what's wrong with you!

Jesus is not going to help you with selfish goals!

He did not come all the way from heaven and humble himself in death on the cross to make your life comfortable!

Everyone who suggests anything like that and tries to turn Jesus into the genie in the lamp that fulfills all your wishes, is gravely mistaken. It's blasphemy.

Jesus is the servant of the Lord.

He came to bring people back under God's reign, in his kingdom.
He obeyed God in everything so that we would be accepted by him and begin to obey him, too.
He showed God's love, a love that is willing to go to the deepest depths of hell to sanctify a people for himself that would once again glorify him and find their deepest joy in him.

That's contentment:

when your deepest desire is: to live in God's presence, receive his love, and praise him forever. That's eternal life. It's not a lazyboy that we prepare for now by having the best life possible. It is a wedding feast you prepare for by becoming more and more committed to Jesus, your Lord. You learn to find your joy and contentment in him, you discover that your life revolves around him and serves to make him great. And you rejoice in his love every day.

When we discover this we can begin to see how this contentment will change our lives.

Somebody described the following situation that helps us to see the difference:

If an angel from heaven would tell you: 'you can ask whatever you want in prayer and you will receive it.' And you would start thinking, first quite modest 'please let my grandma get better', help me with my exams, give me good marriage, and then more boldly, thinking 'well, I do need a better car.' And would my life not be much easier if I never had to worry about money? How much good could I do if everybody knew me? 'I haven't had a vacation for a while...' And the list continues. Then the angels says: 'you can have all that, but you will never see the Lord.'

Well, what would you say?

I hope you begin to become uneasy, shuffling back and forth in your seat, thinking: 'well, if that's that choice...'

The other things you can wish for are not necessarily bad. You may feel you need them. They may make your life much easier. The illness you have really hurts and limits you so much! Would it not be great to be strong and healthy again?

What counts is how important the relationship with God is.

When you have found Christ and discovered that he is everything, you find a contentment in him that you can keep even if you lose the health and strength and other blessings you have right now.

If our goal is to glorify God and find our joy in him, the thing we need most is learning to put that goal first in our lives and let everything else come second. We need to learn to see and say that the love of Jesus is everything. And when you get to know his love you begin to trust that he will give you what you need AND that he will carry you through the times when you suffer, when you have to let go of the control of your life, when your strength and health fail.

Who can fathom the pain of a mother who loses her child? Who can feel what it means that the heart of loving husband breaks when he buries his wife?

How do you deal with such pain, and what do you say to those who suffer it?

The prophet Habakuk expressed this at the end of his book:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Hab 3,17-19)

That's a profound message.

He writes it after he looks around at the devastation in Israel. The enemy can do whatever he wants and destroy at liberty. Why does God let this happen? And now we are without fruit, olives, sheep – we can't live if the basic necessities are not there! God, helps us!

After his lament and prayer for deliverance he rejoices in God himself.

Do you see that? God himself.

Somebody said: God is the gospel. That's it.

The gospel is not that we are delivered, that we are safe, not even that we receive eternal life.

The gospel is God himself: he gives himself to us through Jesus Christ. His love, his presence – that's everything.

When you know him and his love, you can say:

yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights. (Hab3,17-19)

Habakuk expressed what Paul later said:

'the sovereign Lord is my strength' – is the same as: 'I can do everything through Jesus who gives me strength.'

Everything: that covers your whole life.

Your illness remains.

You feel weak. The pain does not go away.

And yet... you have discovered something special, eternal, beautiful in the relationship with Jesus.

You can remain full of hope because his love holds and his promises carry you into the beautiful endless future which he will bring.

I can serve him, keep going, continue with hope in my heart because Jesus means everything for me.

I live by his grace. His grace has no limits. His love never stops.

When we make our own religion to serve ourselves we deny God his place and we ruin our lives.

If, however, we belong to Christ and see him for the greatest treasure he is, we discover that glorifying God is the highest goal for our lives.

and if this is the goal it is not good enough if we just want to have a carefree life. Instead, we need to trust that God will provide us with the strength we need when we fall ill, when we grow weaker, or when we face death.

Then we don't run away from reality but we face it in the light of God's presence.

Jesus gives us a place in God's kingdom which is so much greater and more glorious than any plan we can make.

When you trust in Jesus' strength and see that you can do everything in his strength, you know that your life, with its ups and downs, serves God's glory and is a showcase of his grace.

Jesus shines on your life and makes it the most beautiful life you can ever have. And you can say 'I have enough. I am satisfied in Jesus.'

Amen