

“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”

It's Not About Winning a Conflict; it's About Surviving One

You have probably said the verse from Philippians 4:13 several times. Maybe you have written it where you could see it on hard days, or handed it to someone who needed it. That instinct is not wrong. The verse holds. But the man who wrote it was chained to a Roman guard. He was hungry; he was writing a thank-you note to friends who had sent him food. The verse on your wall promises power to perform. What Paul wrote promises power to endure whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. And the difference matters most when performance fails.

To understand, we must answer these four questions:

- Why did the church teach the achievement version for four hundred years if that is not what the Greek text says?
- What Stoic term, borrowed from Greek philosophy, did Paul use to describe the contentment he found while he was in chains?
- What pagan initiation verb did he then use for the process of arriving there? and
- Why does the name Christ not appear in any of the oldest surviving manuscripts of this letter, even in the version you have memorized?

These are four different questions, yet they have only one answer. And it all starts in a cell. The letter to the Philippians ends with a financial receipt. In 4:18, Paul writes: "But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God." The Greek word behind I am full is *πεπλήρωμαι* (*peplārōmai*), from *πληροω* (*plāroō*), meaning “to fill, to make full, to be filled.”

Paul is acknowledging a delivery. He is writing a receipt for provisions friends sent him while he was in Roman custody. This is not a theological summation; it is a man writing to confirm that the food had arrived.

The verse you have memorized appears four verses earlier. It is neither the opening of the letter nor a standalone doctrinal declaration. It is the closing line of a thank-you note from a man who, without the gift from Philippi, would have been very hungry, because Roman prisoners in the first century had no institutional food supply. The jailer was not responsible for your meals. You ate what your friends brought. If they could not come or had no money, you did not eat.

Paul writes in verse fourteen: “Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my difficulty.” The Greek word translated as either “difficulty” or “affliction” is *θλιψις* (*thlipsis*), meaning “trouble, oppression, distress, tribulation.” He is thanking them for participating in his actual circumstances, not metaphorically. He is in chains and hungry, and he relies on his friends to keep him alive. In that letter, written under those conditions, he placed the most-quoted

performance verse in the Bible. What kind of word did Paul use when he said he had found contentment even though he was suffering those conditions? And what does the oldest manuscript evidence say about the name you have been saying all your life?

In verse eleven, Paul writes: “Not that I speak from need, for I have learned to be content in whatever *circumstances* I am.” We often read the English word “content” as “mildly settled, at peace.” This is how you might describe someone who has stopped complaining about their circumstances. The Greek word Paul uses is αὐτάρκης (*autarkās*). This adjective appears only once in the entire New Testament, and that is right here.

In the Greek-speaking world of Paul's time, *autarkās* was not a mild term; it was a philosophical one. Aristotle used it to define the highest form of human flourishing, a state of complete self-sufficiency in which a person needs nothing beyond themselves to be fully human. Epictetus, the Stoic philosopher writing within decades of Paul, used it to describe the ideal sage, the person who has so thoroughly mastered every internal desire that no external circumstance, whether wealth, poverty, illness, or imprisonment, can touch the core of who they are.

The Thayer lexicon defines *autarkās* as: “sufficient for oneself, strong enough or possessing enough to need no aid or support, independent of external circumstances.” Paul took that word, meaning needing nothing and no one, and planted it in a sentence about finding contentment in Roman chains.

Then, two verses later, he told the reader exactly where his *autarkās* came from. It did not come from self-mastery or from eliminating desire. It came from the One who continually empowers him. He borrowed Stoicism's highest term for human independence and rewired its power source from self to something entirely outside the self. He used their vocabulary to describe the opposite of their achievement. That is one layer.

But there is something else you need to know about this verse: a bit of textual criticism. There is something about the name in it. The oldest surviving copy of Paul's letter to the Philippians is a papyrus manuscript dated around 175–225 A.D. Unfortunately, the bottom of the leaf containing chapter four is damaged, and verse thirteen falls within a gap in the text. For this specific verse, our earliest surviving witnesses are the great codices: Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century, Codex Vaticanus also from the fourth century, and Codex Alexandrinus from the fifth. All three, in their original hands, read the same.

“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Not Christ or Jesus, but a pronoun. The word Christ does not appear in any of them. We will return to this. The investigation concerns who added it, when, and what Paul trusted instead. But first, if *autarkās* names the state Paul arrived at, what verb did he use to describe the process of getting there?

The traditional reading of verse twelve treats the phrase “I am instructed” as a simple idiom for wisdom gained through experience. The King James Version renders it plainly. The New American Standard gives it more weight: “I have learned the secret.” The NASB translation is closer to what the Greek actually conveys. Those who have leaned on this verse through

something they could not escape have always read it correctly. Paul's word is μεμύημαι (memuāmai, meaning “to learn the secret” of something), derived from the verb μθεω (mueō). In the form Paul uses in verse twelve, it means: “I have been initiated; the action is complete, the effects are permanent.” The verb mueō appears in the New Testament exactly once. Here.

Before Paul, in Greek literature, mueō was technical vocabulary. It was the verb for initiation into mystery traditions. Herodotus, Aristophanes, and Plato used it. In those traditions, initiation was not primarily a transfer of information from a teacher to a student. You were not told the secret from across a room. You were put through conditions that produced an inner change you could not have arrived at through reasoning or study. You came out on the other side knowing something the conditions themselves had created in you. That knowledge was sealed in you by the process. This is similar to the difference between reading about what a roller coaster ride feels like and actually experiencing it.

The Thayer lexicon defines mueō as: “to initiate into the mysteries, to give one an intimate acquaintance with a thing.” Here, the traditional reading has served real people through real hardship. If you have lived through seasons of genuine poverty and genuine abundance, if you have known what it means to have too much and to have nothing, and if you have found something stable beneath both, Paul is describing what happened to you. He has a word for it: mueō. An initiation. The conditions were the instructions. What they produced in you is permanent. Paul then listed those conditions in pairs.

I know both how to be abased and how to abound. Everywhere and in all things, I am instructed to be full and to be hungry, to abound and to suffer need. Recognize these three contradictions: (1) Abased and abounding, (2) Full and hungry, (3) Abundance and bare need. These are not spiritual metaphors for an abstract inner journey. They are the actual lived conditions of a man in Roman custody. Roman prisoners had no guaranteed food supply; you ate what your friends brought you. If they were unable to come, you didn't eat.

The hunger in verse twelve is real hunger. The need is real. A hungry prisoner wrote this; his situation was real. The word he chose for the process was one his world associated with entering the inner knowledge of a tradition through ordeal. His ordeal was living in jail. Now consider this. Since the initiation was real and the situation used a Stoic word rewired toward something outside the self, what does the Greek actually say where the English reads “I can do all things”?

This is where the translation becomes problematic, and it is not a minor issue. The Greek word translated “I can do” in verse 13 is ισχύω (ischyō). Thayer's definition: “to be strong in body, to have power, to be of force, avail, to be able.” By contrast, the English phrase “I can do” carries an achievement frame. When you say “I can do anything,” you mean you have the capability to accomplish things, to perform, and to execute plans.

When someone writes this verse on their shoes before a championship, they read it as an unlimited capacity flowing from a divine source. The Greek does not convey that idea. Ischyō means having sufficient strength for something, force adequate to the demand. The word

encompasses endurance, the ability to hold ground under pressure, and the capacity to bear weight. Bible Hub translates the phrase in verse 13 as: “all things I am strong for in the one.” Not “I can accomplish all things, I am strong for all things, Strong enough, Adequate to carry what is required.”

Then verse 14 becomes a trap that permanently closes the reading. This verse reads: “Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.” As noted above, the Greek word translated as affliction is *thlipsis*. The standard lexicon defines it as: “pressure, constriction, oppression, distress.” Paul uses this word in his very next sentence to describe what he is thanking the Philippians for sharing with him.

And the “all things” of verse 13 point directly back to the list in verse twelve: Abased, Hungry, Suffering, and Need. Those are the conditions Paul says he has sufficient strength for. The “all things” was never “ambition.” It was a list of the conditions he was experiencing. He is not writing a motivational statement; he is writing a survival recipe: in hunger, chains, and need, he has sufficient strength because of the One who continually pours it into him. Two verses after the most-quoted performance verse in the Bible, Paul calls what he is enduring his *thlipsis* and thanks his friends for sharing it. The context was there the entire time. But it only works if you let verse 14 read verse 13.

Now we return to the name. The question is no longer just what Paul wrote; it is what someone else added, when, and what Paul trusted enough to leave out. The oldest surviving complete codices of Paul's letter to the Philippians, including Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus from the fourth century, Codex Alexandrinus from the fifth, and Codex Claromontanus in its original scribal hand, all read verse 13 the same way: “I can do all things through the one who strengthens me.” The word “Christ” is absent from all of them. The sentence ends with a present-tense participle, indicating one who is actively, continually, presently empowering me. This is a relational description, not a proper name.

The word “Christ” appears in the manuscript tradition much later. Later scribes in the Byzantine tradition expanded the pronoun by adding the name Christ. That tradition became the dominant text type from approximately the ninth century onward. The Textus Receptus, compiled in the sixteenth century, followed the Byzantine text. The King James Version, completed in 1611, followed the Textus Receptus. The “tattoo, the poster, the stadium chant, and the locker-room whiteboards” followed the King James Version.

Metzger's Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament treats the shorter reading as the committee's strong preference. His reasoning is that if the word had been in the original text, there would have been no reason to omit it. Scribes filled gaps, but they did not delete proper names from Christological statements. The direction of scribal change runs from pronoun to proper name, not the other way. Every major modern critical translation renders the pronoun him. Only the King James tradition, following the Textus Receptus, reads Christ. Paul wrote a pronoun. He trusted his readers to know who the One was. He assumed the relationship was

obvious enough that naming it would be unnecessary. The corrector who came after him did not trust the pronoun. He supplied the name. And the name became the verse.

Here is what this investigation resolves into. There are two ways this verse has been used:

1. The first: as a verse about survival. As something you say when you are in conditions you cannot escape and need enough strength to keep moving through them. Not to win, not to achieve, but to endure what is required today. That is precisely what Paul intended. The Greek verb *ischyō* means “to have sufficient strength for conditions.” The conditions he named were hunger, need, and the pressure of imprisonment. If this verse has ever carried you through something that felt like a cell, you were using it as the prisoner wrote it.
2. The second way: as a verse about performance. As a mechanism for accomplishing goals, winning competitions, and closing things. That use was never in the text. It was in the King James rendering of a verb meaning “strength to endure.” And it was in the addition of a proper name that Paul left as a pronoun.

The cost of the performance reading is not a question about what God can or cannot do. The question is what Paul was actually promising. He was promising that the conditions that initiate you through *mueō*, the seasons of hunger, chains, and bare need, need not lead to bitterness or collapse.

There is an *autarkās* available under those conditions. Not a sufficiency you manufacture by mastering your desires, but one that flows from the One who is actively, right now, continuously empowering you. Endurance does not end; Achievement does. When the game is over, the verse no longer applies.

When the hospital stay extends into years, *autarkās* still exists. Sit with the phrase Paul wrote in its original form, the words before the proper name was added: in the One continually empowering you. Not asking for the chain to break, not requesting an outcome, but asking for strength adequate to carry this today, in these conditions. That is *autarkās* as Paul meant it. That is *mueō* as he experienced it. That is *ischyō*, strength sufficient for all things, from a man who could not feed himself.