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The “All Things” of Philippians 4:13

by Dan Starr

This term, “all things,” is used quite often in scripture, roughly 180 instances depending on translation, but this particular instance may be the most well-known and likely the most misused and misapplied. If we were to survey the collection, we would find that in most passages “all” is actually referring not to “everything under the sun,” but a very specific set of things that have been under consideration. That is context. We can always know what, exactly, the limits of the phrase are by looking carefully at what is being discussed. I’ll reference Ps 57:2 as an illustration here because it bears such similarity to Philippians 4:13.

“Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You; And in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge, Until these calamities have passed by. I will cry out to God Most High, To God who performs all things for me. 3 He shall send from heaven and save me; He reproaches the one who would swallow me up. Selah.” Psalm 57:1-2

Taken without any concern for context, as is definitely the custom of some, verse 2 would seem to be saying that God might be employed as a divine concierge, attending to our perceived needs and wants whenever we become aware of them. “Doesn’t the Bible say that God does whatever we want him to?” one might ask of this verse, when context is completely ignored. Placed back in context, however, the intent is clear. It is a psalm of David and most likely written very precisely in reference to David’s fear of Saul during the period in which Saul sought to take David’s life. He is praying for safety and deliverance and acknowledging that if he does survive it will be God that provides his salvation. He seeks God’s help and protection but does so in a way that honors God’s sovereignty. He is actually saying the opposite of what some might try to make the passage mean by ignoring the context.

Philippians 4:13 works exactly the same way, and is abused in much the same way. Here are vs 10-13. But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. 11 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 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.

Many take this to mean that, with the occasional caveat that we must at least be faithful for this to work, through Christ, God empowers us to accomplish whatever we set our minds to. That is what it says, right? I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I have often heard well-intentioned efforts to credit God with some success that a person achieves by holding up this statement as proof. “I only accomplished this because God gave me the strength to do it”.

My intent is not to argue that we do not have God to thank for our lives, our health, our strength, and or ability to do whatever it is we feel we have accomplished. My question here is this- Is that what Paul is saying? We can do whatever we set our minds to through faith in Christ? Paul is discussing the physical challenges that accompany the very specific work that he has been tasked with. He is expressing his gratitude for the desire of these Christians to help him despite the lack of opportunity to do so, and he hopes to reassure them that despite the difficulties he has encountered, he will be able to accomplish the work he has been given. He has an unshakeable confidence that God would not give him work that he is not capable of doing and that he will always find the strength, in Christ, to do what God expects of him.

Paul has something very specific in mind when he uses the term “all things.” It is “all things” that God has tasked him with. The work tests him, and he makes no secret of the difficulty of it. He often seeks the prayers of the faithful on his behalf (Eph 6:19-20) because of how hard it is, but he doesn’t want them to feel pity or sadness for him, so he confidently asserts that God gives the strength to accomplish the task when God gives the task.

This point is critical, and the distinction between what Paul is actually saying and what is often asserted about his statement here is also critical.

We “water down” an important truth when we suggest that God empowers Christians to do whatever it is they set their minds to. We also create a disconnect between actual experience and what we claim the Bible tells us. It is, in fact, a false doctrine. God does not give us the strength to do “whatever” we decide is important. He gives us the strength to do what HE decides is important. We, whether we would want to admit it or not, are often on fool’s errands. We often discover that we have been wasting our time on things that we thought were important. We are sometimes misled and misguided, and sometimes we succeed in what we were trying to do despite that fact. If we imagine that God is empowering us in every difficult situation to press on and overcome, we may very well find ourselves disillusioned, kicking against the goads, and wondering why we have failed despite what we assumed to be God’s blessing. Perhaps even worse, we might assume that any “hard” thing we have done is obviously what God wanted us to do because we could only have accomplished it with His help, and therefore, His blessing. This is an extremely dangerous, backward way to approach our understanding of God’s will in our lives. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” fails, as a practical matter, in so many instances if we don’t respect the context. We will fail. Our best efforts will fail. Our strength will fail, and ultimately our health will fail. But the things that God desires for us to accomplish? In Christ, these will not fail, if we desire them for ourselves as God does. This was Paul’s confidence, and it certainly can be ours as well. 1/31/21

In Hope of Eternal Life

By Jonathan L. Perz

Delaying or avoiding death is the quintessential hope of most, if not all, of mankind. Thus the hope of everlasting life has an appeal to all. While many seek to obtain some form of everlasting life, not all will find true life (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 15:19). The reason for this is that most are looking in the wrong places. As the apostle Paul wrote... “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.” ~ 1 Corinthians 15:19

You will not find everlasting life in a bottle or a pill. Medical science may certainly improve your quality of life in a limited sense and even extend life to a degree, but it is a well-documented fact that most will only see seventy to eighty years of life. As the psalmist wrote, “The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, their boast is only labor and sorry; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away” (Psa. 90:10). There is only One Physician that has forever solved the problem of death for man (find a Bible and read Luke 4:32; 5:31; 8:43 and 1 Cor. 15:50-57).

You certainly cannot buy everlasting life. The amount of time we will spend during our limited lives in the pursuit of wealth and riches is amazing. Yet, all of the silver and gold in this world cannot pay the price required for eternal life. As Peter points out, “...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold . . . But with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The added irony is that all those who desire to be rich only detract from the hope of eternal life, instead of enhancing it (read 1 Tim. 6:6-10).

Until we acknowledge that we all have an appointment with death, we cannot even begin to appreciate the “hope of everlasting life” (Tit. 1:2; 3:7). According to passages such as Hebrews 9:27, 1 Corinthians 15:51 and Ecclesiastes 12:7, we all will die physically (i.e., our spirits will be separated from our bodies). Yet, only those who are willing to “die to sin” through repentance from sin and baptism into Christ’s death will realize the hope of eternal life through His resurrection (read Rom. 6:1-7). Thus, in order to live, we must first die.

Would you like to have eternal life? Are you without that hope in your life right now (read Eph. 2:12 and 1 Thess. 4:13-14)? Perhaps it is time to turn your life over to and believe in the only ONE who has the words of eternal life, Jesus Christ, the Son of God (read John 6:68-69).