

Some Miracles Come in Cans

A Message Offered by
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September 20, 2009

In our Thursday morning Bible Study we're looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians. One of the things that makes his letter so powerful is that he wrote it while he was in prison. In the section of the letter that is our second lesson this morning it sounds like Paul once thought his friends had forgotten him, but now they are reaching out, and Paul gives them the benefit of the doubt. Then he shares some life-changing wisdom with them:

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:10 -13 NRSV

Paul knows the secret to being content in all circumstances and overcoming overwhelming adversity. Ten little words: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

If you have never memorized a Bible verse, this would be a great one to start with. In the next few minutes we're going to look at it a little at a time. By the time we're done I hope that you can say from memory, with me and St. Paul, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

This verse is very personal. Who can do all things through Christ? I can. You can. Not that person over there with all the faith. You can do all things through him who strengthens you. There's no room for a pity party in this verse. "Oh, I wish I could handle all my problems." "I wish I had my act together." "I wish I were more like him or her." Paul is telling his friends that they can have the same power he says. Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me;" that means you can too.

Repeat it with me:

I can do all things in him who strengthens me.

Christians need to get "can't" out of their working vocabulary. When we are faced with obstacles it's not that we "can't" overcome them it's usually that we don't really want to, we're not willing to pay the price, or we're too proud to ask for God's help. In God's mind nothing is impossible. It just takes longer, costs more than we are prepared to pay, or requires more help than we have at the moment. For Christians the question isn't "*can* I" get through this, but "what am I willing to do to get through this." Will I be humble enough to ask for God's help?

I'm not saying that overcoming is easy, pain free, or without setbacks and disappointments. Far from it. Faith makes things *possible*...not *easy*. But just because overcoming is difficult doesn't mean it can't be done. Jim Fleming, of the Biblical Resource Center, has pointed out: "Sometimes the Lord gives us *faith* to move mountains. Sometimes he gives us a *shovel*." Either way, that mountain is going to move. Robert Schuller puts it a different way. He encourages every Christian to affirm:

"When faced with a mountain, I will not quit! I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath, or simply stay and turn the mountain into a gold mine, with God's help."

Isn't this just another way of saying, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me"?

The first step toward overcoming is believing that it can be done. Victory begins in the mind. It's been said a million times: the largest obstacles we have to overcome are the ones in our heads. When my parents

gave me a Bible in fifth grade, the first one I ever owned, my Dad wrote inside: “It is seldom the difficulty that defeats us, but the lack of confidence.” The enemy doesn’t have to work very hard to stop us if he can just convince us that “it can’t be done,” “There’s no way out of this mess,” “I’m doomed to fail anyway.”

Fifty-five years ago the world record for women in the marathon was 3:40. Now it is 2:15. How did women cut 85 minutes off that record? (That’s enough time to see a full-length movie!) They stopped believing the lie that they were not made to run such distances. Some running analysts have even predicted that in our lifetimes the fastest women marathoners will pass the fastest men. When that day comes it will be because some woman refused to believe that it couldn’t be done.

Fifty-six years ago we were still trying to climb Mount Everest for the first time. When Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay finally did it, it was a massive effort involving hundreds of porters, pre-fixed ropes, and all kinds of supplemental oxygen. A few years ago Goron Kropp rode alone on his bike 7,000 miles from his native Sweden to Nepal, hauling nearly 300 pounds of food and equipment on a trailer behind him. Then he climbed, solo, 29,000’ to the top of Mount Everest without the help of porters, pre-fixed rope, or supplemental oxygen. Then he turned around and biked home. George Mallory famously wanted to climb Everest “because it was there,” and he failed. Kropp climbed it because he knew he could, and he succeeded.

It’s amazing what becomes possible when we say, “I can.” Anything great that has ever been accomplished began with the words, “I can.” I can make it out of this prison camp. I can deal with this diagnosis. I can survive this divorce. I can endure this betrayal. Too often we look for miracles in fancy places. Some miracles come in cans. They start with two simple words, “I can.”

I can **do** all things through him who strengthens me.

“Do” is an active word. Christians don’t sit around waiting for life to happen. We’re not just hearers of the word, but *doers* of the word (James 1:22). But sometimes we act as if we think Jesus is going to do all the heavy lifting. News flash: Jesus hasn’t wiped away a tear in 2000 years.

Hasn't lifted a hammer to build a house in 2000 years. Hasn't fed a hungry crowd in 2000 years. Who's been doing it in the meantime? People like you and me.

We are our own super heroes (because of Christ at work within us). Jesus doesn't have to sweep in to save the day. Instead he strengthens, empowers, equips, and inspires us to be "*more* than conquerors." We've got to stop waiting around for something to happen and for someone else to do something. God's deal is this: if we'll be the tools, he'll give us the power. Power to change lives, even our own. Power to endure. Power to overcome anything that comes our way.

I can do **all things** through him who strengthens me.

What things? *All* things. What's left out? What obstacle can't you and God get through together? Nothing. The Bible tells us, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

I don't mean we can accomplish stupid about things—you're not going to grow three heads or broad jump across the Grand Canyon no matter how hard you pray. Faith isn't necessarily going to help you make a million dollars or score a date with the girl next door. Tim Tebow is the Heisman trophy winning quarterback for the #1 ranked Florida Gators football team; he's also a devout Christian. If you look carefully at the small black strips he wears under his eyes you'll see "Phil 4:13" written on them. He wants to remind himself and his teammates that "He can do all things through Christ who strengthens him." Tebow is a smart enough Christian to know that God isn't necessarily going to strengthen him to throw a game-winning touchdown; that's not the kind of strength that Tebow is looking for. He's looking for strength to be a leader, to set a positive example, and to share his faith through football. He knows that God's strength is not at our beck and call.

God's strength gets applied to God's will. Not every business is going to succeed; not every relationship is going to be saved; not every disease is going to be cured. That's not God's promise. Paul is saying, however, that we can survive, thrive, and prevail, even if the worst happens, through Christ who strengthens us, when that is God's will.

Ask your faithful friends how God has helped them. Listen to their stories. Or read about it in the Bible. God has a lot of experience in problem-solving. God has rescued his people from the belly of whale and the den of a lion. He has walked on water and turned water into wine. He has cured people of every kind of disease and infirmity. He got Paul out of prison. God can handle whatever you're facing today. Nothing is too hard for God. James Hudson Taylor, the English missionary, put it this way, "There are three stages in the work of God: impossible, difficult, done."

I can do all things **through him who strengthens me.**

I going to say something that's contrary to almost everything taught on the athletic field, in the counseling room, and in corporate motivational conferences. The key to victory in life isn't believing in yourself. It's not self-confidence. Sometimes I am quite confident that I'm tired, weak, and worn. Fixating on that is only going to get me in trouble. It leads to discouragement. The truth is, of course, that we are no match for some of the things life throws our way. The other truth is that we can be confident of prevailing, overcoming, and conquering not because of who we are, but because of who God is.

Zig Ziglar is one of the most confident and optimistic people on earth. Each year he speaks to hundreds of thousands of people about faith and overcoming obstacles. Someone once asked him why he was so confident. He said, "Remember the story of David and Goliath? No one was willing to take on the giant. Goliath looked so big and they looked so small. When David stepped forward people laughed. Goliath looked so big and David looked so small. But David knew the secret of victory. Compared to *us*, problems look big. Compared to God, problems look small." David knew that with God on his side Goliath was going down in Round One.

So why do we try to take on Goliath on our own? Again: Why do we try to take on Goliath on our own? I'm not sure of all the secrets of *success* in life, but I know one of the secrets of *failure*. Try to do life on your own, with only your own power, wisdom, and resources, and life is going to break you—if it hasn't already.

When we think we have only our own power, we barely dare. If you knew you had all of God's strength to back you up, what great thing would

you attempt to accomplish for God? Forgive someone? Adopt a child? Deal with an addiction? Confront a gossip? Leave a bad relationship? Whatever God calls you to do – and sometimes simple survival is God’s will for us – whatever God calls you to do: you can do it through him who strengthens you.

Just look at God’s track record:

- We are children of the Creator—we’ve seen what God can do with chaos. Imagine what God can do with the chaos in our lives.
- We are people of the Exodus—we’ve been caught between Pharaoh and the Red Sea and we’ve come out high and dry. No matter what you’re in the middle of today, God can find a way out.
- We are people of the Resurrection—we know the grave is only a rest stop; it’s not a destination.

Some of you are facing some pretty horrific problems right now. You know you can’t make it through on own brains, power, worthiness, energy, or goodness. You know you need God’s strength. That’s one of the reasons we read this book – to be reminded that “We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.” Read it and be fed and strengthened by the only one through whom you can do all things. Amen.

Note: today’s sermon title comes from a c. 2000 sermon of the same title by Rev. James Hagee. I never heard the sermon, but I loved the title.

Dear Friend,

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