

There are some things in life that we would rather not learn firsthand. We'd rather read about them in a book or hear about them from someone else than experience them ourselves. In particular, we'd rather learn about the hardships of life from the comfort of our own homes, than have to endure those hardships ourselves. Financial troubles. Illness. Grief. We don't wish these things on anyone else, certainly. But we also don't have any desire to deal with them personally.

But there are some things that you simply can't learn without experience. You can read all the books you want about riding a bicycle, but eventually you have to get on one. And you can hear all sorts of advice about enduring the hardships of life, but eventually you have to endure them yourself.

The apostle Paul knew something about this. He had experienced more than his fair share of hardships. He had been beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, threatened with death. He had known hunger and thirst, danger and deprivation. But he had also known the joys of Christian fellowship, the encouragement of faithful congregations, and the satisfaction of seeing the Gospel bear fruit in the lives of others. Paul had experienced a little of everything, both good and bad. And he had learned something through all of it.

In our Epistle lesson, he lets us in on a secret. He writes in verse 12, *"I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need."*

Paul has learned a secret. He knows how to face every circumstance of life, whether good or bad, without being overcome by it. And he wants the Philippians, and us, to know that secret, too. He tells us what it is in the very next verse: *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

Now, we need to be careful here. Because this verse is sometimes treated as though it were a promise that, with enough faith, we can accomplish anything we set our minds to. We can overcome any obstacle, achieve any goal, and turn every dream into reality because Christ gives us strength.

But that isn't what Paul means. This isn't the power of positive thinking or manifesting our future. Paul isn't promising that Christ will make us successful at whatever we attempt. He is telling us that Christ strengthens us to endure every circumstance in which we find ourselves. Whether we have plenty or little, whether we are healthy or sick, whether life is going well or falling apart. We can endure because Christ strengthens us.

But how does He do that? How does Christ strengthen us? It turns out that Paul has already been giving us the answer in the verses leading up to this. Throughout this reading, Paul has been showing us how the Lord equips us to face the good and the bad, the joys and the sorrows, the abundance and the need of this life.

It starts from that very first verse: *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."* Now, we've been talking in our Thursday morning Bible study about how a command to rejoice can be a really difficult thing to someone who's going through suffering or grief.

But Paul doesn't tell us to rejoice in our circumstances. He doesn't tell us to be happy about everything that happens to us. There are things in this world that should make us grieve. There are evils that should make us angry, losses that should make us weep, and sins that should bring us to repentance. Christians don't pretend that evil is good or that suffering doesn't hurt. Instead, Paul tells us to rejoice in the Lord.

Our circumstances change, but the Lord doesn't. Our health may fail, our possessions may disappear, our plans may fall apart, and our loved ones may be taken from us. But Jesus Christ remains the same. He is the Savior who took our sins upon Himself, who suffered our punishment, and who died our death on the cross. He is the risen Lord who has conquered death and opened the kingdom of heaven to all who believe in Him. And He continues to come to us with His gifts.

And so we rejoice in something quite tangible: the Lord's gifts of Word and Sacrament to us. We witnessed one of those gifts this morning already. The Lord gave little Adeline the gift of Holy Baptism and made her his own, gave the promise of eternal life. That is something to rejoice about, no matter our circumstances.

And there others. In Holy Absolution, He speaks His forgiveness to us when our consciences accuse us. In the Lord's Supper, He gives us the very body and blood that He sacrificed for our salvation. Through the preaching of His Word, He continually reminds us of His promises and strengthens our faith in them.

These gifts don't depend on whether our lives are going well. They remain ours even in the darkest valleys of life. And so we rejoice, not because every circumstance is good, but because the Lord who saves us is good.

Paul continues, "*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.*" The word translated as "reasonableness" describes a spirit of gentleness, moderation, and self-control. It is the opposite of being ruled by the sinful impulses of our flesh. And that's an important part of learning to face every circumstance of life.

When things are going well, the world tempts us to believe that we need more. More possessions, more pleasures, more entertainment, more of whatever promises to make us happy. When things are going poorly, the world offers other temptations. We can numb our pain, lash out at those around us, indulge our anger, or give ourselves over to despair. In either case, our circumstances become an excuse to pursue whatever our sinful hearts desire.

But Christ calls us to a different way of life. He teaches us self-control, not by telling us that the things of this world are necessarily evil, but by teaching us that they are not our god. We can enjoy His earthly gifts without worshiping them. And if they are taken away, our lives are not ruined. We are content with what the Lord gives us because we have something far better than the world can offer.

Because "*the Lord is at hand.*" He is near to us now through His Word and Sacraments, and He is coming again to bring us into the fullness of His kingdom. Our present circumstances aren't the final word. Christ is. And because He is coming soon, we don't have to grasp desperately at every pleasure or panic at every loss. We belong to Him. And our future is secure in His hands.

That brings Paul to another essential part of the secret: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*" The Lord has given us the gift of prayer. And so we don't have to carry our burdens alone. We don't have to pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. We can bring our fears, our worries, our disappointments, and our needs before our heavenly Father, trusting that He hears us for the sake of His Son.

And with that, "*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" Now, don't get me wrong: the peace of God isn't simply a feeling that everything will turn out the way we want. Because sometimes... it doesn't.

Sometimes our prayers are answered in ways we don't understand. Sometimes the Lord calls us to endure crosses that we would never have chosen for ourselves. But the peace of God rests on something more certain than our circumstances. It rests on the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

By nature, we were enemies of God, deserving His judgment because of our sin. But Christ has made peace through the blood of His cross. Our sins are forgiven. We are reconciled to the Father. And nothing in this world can undo what Jesus has accomplished for us. That peace guards our hearts and minds against the chaos of a sinful world. It doesn't mean that we'll never be troubled. But it does mean that chaos can't ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, Paul tells us to direct our minds toward what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. He piles on the adjectives, encouraging us to think about these things. And to put into practice what we have learned and received and heard and seen in him.

The world is constantly telling us what to fear, what to desire, what to value, and what to believe if we want to be happy. And if we continually fill our minds with its anxieties, its bitterness, and its endless pursuit of worldly success, it's no surprise when we find ourselves constantly anxious and bitter and dissatisfied. But God's Word teaches us to see our lives in the light of His promises. It directs our attention away from the fleeting things of this world and toward the things that endure.

And we have countless examples of that kind of faith among the saints who have gone before us. St Paul, of course, foremost among them. But other Christians too. Men and women who endured persecution without abandoning their confession. Believers who bore suffering while clinging to the promises of God. Faithful saints who faced death, trusting that Christ had prepared a place for them. Their lives don't teach us to trust in our own strength. They teach us to trust in the same Savior who sustained them.

And so we come back to Paul's secret: "*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*" Which is ultimately a promise that Christ will sustain His people through every circumstance of life. The secret Paul learned is not that life becomes easy when you are a Christian. It's that you are never left to face life on your own.

Christ has redeemed you, Christ is with you, and Christ will bring you safely into His eternal kingdom. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord always. Pray in every circumstance. Rest in His peace. And whatever comes, trust the promise that sustains you through it all: you can endure all things through Christ who strengthens you. Amen.