

DO YOU HAVE  
A CHOICE?

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## DO YOU HAVE A CHOICE?

*I can do all things in him who strengthens me.*  
Philippians 4:13

Do you really have a choice? Maybe you've been wondering about that yourself lately. Many people are. They feel boxed in— as if they have painted themselves into a corner. They are trapped. Choice? They laugh. Of course they don't have a choice. They are slaves of themselves, slaves of others, slaves of circumstances. They might as well be in jail. The fact of the matter is, they are in several jails at the same time. One of them is their home, one of them is their place of work, and there are others, too.

When people are fairly young, though, they tend to feel that they have many, many choices. Maybe you are young now, and that's the way you feel. Or maybe you can remember when you were young and you will admit that yes, you did feel that way then.

When young people are in school, their counselors come to them and say, "You had better decide what you want to be." And they give the impression that you could choose any number of about a hundred occupations. What shall it be— doctor, a computer programmer, a businessman, a police officer? Come on. Make up your mind. Look at all the possibilities. Pick an occupation— any occupation. And so, young people feel as if they have all kinds of choices.

When it comes to who they are going to marry they feel this way, too. At least the fortunate ones do—the ones who have many opportunities for dating and parties. Who will I marry— Bill or Jack or Jonathan? Who will I marry— Mary, Helen, or Linda? There are choices galore. It seems that way at least.

Some young people feel this way about religion, too. They say, "Couple more years, and I am going to change. I'm going to quit swearing and smoking and drinking and sleeping around, and I'm going to be good. You just wait and see. It's a little early, but one of these days, I am going to become very religious."

Choices—it seems as if we have so many when we are young. But then something happens, rather early on in life, as a matter of fact. Obligations start building up. There's marriage. There's work to do. There are bills to pay. There are children to raise. And then do you know what happens?

Why, when a person gets up in the morning, he knows just exactly what he will be doing all day long: shave, dress, eat, go to work, come home, read the paper, watch television, go to bed, shave, dress and on and on and on. A woman will describe her schedule a bit differently. But whatever the details, the fact is that most of us have a fairly rigid schedule. You do, don't you? How many real choices do you make during the course of a day?

Not many, isn't that right? And that's not all bad ... when things are going well. But when things are going very unwell ... that's another story. For example, when a person gets involved in a job that he discovers he hates, but he cannot break away from it. Or when a marriage goes sour—that's another very depressing situation to be trapped in.

Oh, obviously, there are many little choices that we can make every day. We can decide to buy a blue shirt or a green one. We can decide to take a walk or take a nap. We can decide whether to put mustard on our hamburger or leave it off. But when it comes to the big choices, once we get locked in on a course in our life, it's hard to break out. For example, could you really choose to be a better person than you are?

There comes a time when we feel rather helpless, as if we are being driven along by a strong wind at our back, or tossed around by some pretty violent waves, and there isn't much we can do. And those who have the "misfortune" of having a university education or who read a lot, know that scientists and philosophers tell us that, "Yes, it's true, we don't really have a choice. Choice is an illusion. Actually we are all being carried along by a process that is a lot bigger than we are. Evolution, they call it. We are products of something that is happening that is beyond our control. And when that knowledge is added to the normal experience of life, some people throw up their hands in dismay and they say, "Stop the world I want to get off."

Others react differently. They turn to the Christian faith. They wonder if it might be true that Jesus, who we are told cares for us, could help them in this problem. Perhaps He could come into their lives, and give them some new choices—some new options. Sometimes their ~~call~~ Jesus assumes an almost plaintive quality, "Sit down in the simple and moving old hymn "Pass Me Not, O Gentle Savior." Jesus, while you make your rounds of mercy, please don't overlook me.

But the question is whether or not the Christian religion justifies such a call on Jesus Christ. Are there really resources within the Christian faith that can give us the ability to rise above the humdrum routine of our ordinary existence and that can infuse our life experience with a note of joy and the quality of victory?

Well, there are various places in the Bible that could be referred to in this connection, I suppose, but one that strikes me first of all as important is a brief paragraph in the book of Philippians in the New Testament. In the fourth chapter of this book, the apostle Paul who wrote it tells of his victory

over the circumstances of his life through the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. He says, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (vv. 11-13).

Wouldn't you agree that what the apostle says here is applicable to our problem? We often feel hemmed in by events over which we have no control. We often feel forced into various courses of action because things have happened that were unexpected and uninvited. We feel helpless. We are victims of events, not shapers and movers of events. Evidently the apostle had the same experiences. He describes a very hectic life, with peaks and valleys, sickness and health, want and plenty. But through it all, he announces that he was fortified by a power that came from Jesus Christ.

Thus, when the apostle declares, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me," he is saying isn't he, that he was always able to stay on top of the situations of his life. The circumstances of his life did not depress him or get him down. They did not even destroy his calm. He says that he was able to maintain his contentment through everything.

Apparently, this was in fact the experience of this great Christian, the apostle Paul. Throughout the course of his active Christian life, he was able to stay on top of the situations that occasionally reached extremities of danger that threatened his destruction. In the second letter that he wrote to the Corinthians, Paul described some of the things he went through. He talked about the severity of his labor, the frequency of his beatings, and about how often he nearly died. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes

less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods, once I was stoned. Three times I have been beaten; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the doily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak?" (II Corinthians 11:24-29).

This man had a very rigorous life, wouldn't you agree? How often have you been beaten, flogged, or whipped? Well, this happened to Paul often. And with all of this, he had some kind of physical infirmity which he called his "thorn in the flesh." He wanted to get rid of it in the worst way. He said, "Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' So Paul said, "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. When I am weak, then I am strong" (II Corinthians 12:8-10).

This man evidently experienced that precisely when he was being inundated by problems and overwhelmed by opposition the power of Christ rested upon him. It was Christ evidently, who enabled the apostle Paul to stay on top of circumstances and not be crushed by them.

This is extremely helpful for us, isn't it? Don't you want to be able to rise above the pressure of the events that crowd in on you? And don't what you have gone through—maybe your marriage is on the rocks, or it broke up long ago.

Maybe you are in a bind at work and the future is very uncertain for you. Maybe you are the victim of bad habits that you cannot break. May we not conclude from the experience of the apostle Paul that Christ can help us? Must we not conclude that if we turn to Him, He will enable us to remain calm and content in spite of the awkward, distressing quality of so much of our lives?

Indeed. But we must understand this properly. We must not conclude that a simple naming of the name of Christ will help, or a turning to Him much as a primitive man would turn to some spirit for protection will help. Before Christ can give us the ability to rise above the circumstances of our lives and experience a sense of victory, we must see how He fits into things. Christ does not give us the ability to be the masters of their lives because of the psychic vibrations that come from the name Jesus. No, He does this by working some kind of psychological trickery inside people's heads that makes them think positive thoughts.

The apostle Paul was able to experience victory over the circumstances of his life because he knew certain things were true about Jesus Christ. He knew who Jesus Christ was. He knew this about Him: he knew that Jesus Christ is the Son of the Living God. Jesus Christ is God. When we get the feeling that we are boxed in by vicious events and are the helpless victims of circumstances we cannot control, part of our sense of futility and despair is the feeling that God must have abandoned us. Maybe there is no God. Maybe all there is, is this topsy-turvy, mixed up world we are living in. No. That's not true. There is a God. And when we talk about Jesus Christ, we are talking about God. So, when a person says as Paul did, "I can do all things through (Christ) who strengthens me," he means that the power of God enables him to meet whatever of whatever circumstances he faces.

Paul also knew that Jesus Christ was stronger than the power of evil. We get a desperate feeling, don't we, when we sense that we are being forced to do things we don't want to do by powers that are evil and sinful. When a person gets into a bad situation at work for example, a situation in which conflict builds up and he feels forced to fight back even if he doesn't want to, he gets the feeling that evil has taken charge of his life.

Or to take another very common example when a person becomes the victim of catastrophic illness. When the various systems of the body begin to break down and a person feels helpless and he feels mortality gripping him, he cannot escape the feeling that evil has got the upper hand. The decay and dissolution of the body are part of the curse that has fallen upon mankind.

Jesus Christ conquered evil. He did that at Calvary's cross, where He became the sacrifice that took away the sin of the world. I cannot explain this to you. Nobody can. But Jesus' cross did something that made it possible for those who believe in Jesus Christ to be saved from the ruin sin brings, and it did something that has brought restoration into the universe itself.

When a person knows this about Christ, he can stay on top of what is happening to him. He's not hemmed in by darkness anymore. He lives in the circle of new light. He believes in Jesus Christ in Christ, he is able to conquer the odds often experience.

I don't know about you, but I still feel that there is something unrealistic in Paul's statement "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." All things? And he says "When I am weak, then I am strong ..." and he implies that this is true for him because of Christ.

What we must understand is that the Bible's message is about victory that you and I can have

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over the despair that is so often a part of life. What seems unrealistic to us is realistic in the Bible's terms. The Bible is about His victory because it reveals that there is a real connection between those who believe in Christ and Christ Himself. Christ strengthens me Paul says...

Christianity is so very attractive for us because Christ did everything He did so that changes would occur in the lives of those who believe in Him. He did what He did so that they would not have to feel like victims of unyielding circumstances, but they could know that Christ would help them through each day and that He will ultimately give them the victory over everything.

Now, obviously, such feelings of confidence are out of the question for people who have never experienced the reality of Christ. What has to happen if a person is going to stay on top of his life through the power of Christ?

Everything begins with faith. We must start with this. The Bible says that faith comes from hearing the message of Jesus proclaimed. You have to put yourself in a position where you will learn more and more about the facts of Jesus Christ, and as you do that you will have to pray that God will come into your life with His Holy Spirit so that your faith will grow and become stronger and stronger.

The faith that we must have is nourished and grows within the fellowship of Christ's church. I want to stress this because I wouldn't want anybody to think that when Paul says, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," he was expressing a formula for simple personal success. No. Paul was an apostle. He was one of those men who were especially chosen to be the foundation of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul viewed himself as a member of that church. So far as that church was concerned, he described it more than

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once as an organism of which Jesus was the head and the church was the body. Thus Jesus controls His church. Those who are faithful, living members of Christ's church are able to receive the strength and the power Jesus gives to His church. They are nourished by the preaching of the Word. They are fortified, too, as they receive the church's sacramental ministry. And they are encouraged as they benefit from the fellowship of their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Those who enjoy the excitement of living within the true church of Christ receive the strength of Jesus that enables them to stay on top of their lives.

Another thing. In order to have the strength of Christ in your life, you must find a way to know Jesus-Word, the Bible. And I am not talking about knowing it now in order to become very intelligent about the Bible. I am talking about the Bible as a special world in which a Christian may live.

When we take time daily to read the Bible, and when we realize that the world of the Bible is the most important world there is, we are able to remain content and calm. A person who lives in the world of such marvelous Bible books as Genesis, Isaiah, Psalms, Matthew, Romans, and Philippians is not going to be intimidated by enemies, devastated by disease, and shattered by failure. Those who live in that world, can see this world with an objectivity that enables them to keep their cool, to stay calm, and to know that ultimately the word *victory* applies to their life experience.

People who call themselves Christians but who know nothing about the world of the Bible, shouldn't be surprised if they know nothing about the strength that Christ gives. They shouldn't be surprised if their lives seem pointless and they seem helpless. You have to "live in the world of the Bible if you want to receive the strength Jesus gives.

And prayer. This is necessary, too. One of the

most astonishing elements of the Bible's message that you and I, following the example of Jesus Christ, can pray to His Father and our Father because of the cross. When Jesus died there He made it possible for the words and thoughts that are formed in your heart to rise to the throne of heaven. And the Bible assures us that God's eyes are on His people and His ears are open to their cries (Psalm 34: 15).

The question we started with was this: do you have a choice in life? Or is your life being carried along by forces outside your control? According to the Bible, you don't have very much choice. You are caught in the power of uncontrollable events that will drag you down to destruction eventually. I don't want to be cruel, but this is the way the Bible views those outside Jesus Christ. But in Christ, you can be a real person. He will lift you out of the bleak inevitability that is so much a part of the human experience, and He will enable you to do things in His power and in His strength.

I am not offering you an easy solution to your problems and your needs. I don't want to be simplistic. But I know from personal experience and from my study of the Bible, that those who turn to Jesus Christ and believe that He has redeemed them, receive strength that enables them to live meaningfully, even in today's world.

• If you are struggling, if you feel like a drowning man ready to go down for the third time, turn your eyes upon Jesus Christ. He can save you. He has the strength that can make it possible for you to say, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

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