



THE BIBLE TOP
5

What do the five most searched, highlighted and shared Bible verses really mean? Are they sometimes misunderstood? These five famous Bible verses may not mean what many people think they mean, but like all of God's Word, what they truly tell us is so much more!

THE BIBLE TOP 5 • Philippians 4:10–13 • Tim McConnell • July 12, 2020

What is your superpower? Abigail has the superpower of smell. She can smell bad trash from a block away. That trash is bad. Mine is hearing, although it seems to be fading. I used to be able to hear if lights were left on in the other room just from the sound of the lightbulbs. What is your superpower and where does it come from? Is it the power of the yellow sun, juice from a flower that only grows in Wakanda, or a bite from a genetically modified spider? What if God were your superpower, a superpower to be used at your disposal? Well, then you could do anything! Anything at all! God gives me superpowers, now I can do anything. Is that really what Philippians 4:13 means? "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13) or, as it is popularly quoted: "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength." Is God my superpower? Then I can do anything.

Here's what we're doing in this series we call **The Bible Top 5**. Depending on where you search online for the most popular Bible verses, you get different results, but there is this family of verses that get most searched for, most quoted in social media, most shared, most clicked. Among those I have picked five to teach about. What are people looking for in the Bible? What are they searching for? I have a theory that the most popular verses are also most popularly misunderstood. In fact, not to be a pessimist, but I think the reason these verses are popular is that the misunderstanding is actually what they're interested in. Who doesn't want to be all-powerful? "I can do all things" sounds pretty good. Does the Bible really say that? No. But what it does say is even better. It's even better.

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 NKJV). Awesome. Whatever I try, I will succeed. I am the captain of my fate. There is nothing in the world I cannot do; God will back me up. Imagine God as your butler, or your personal genie, or your tool to use, like your iPhone. God does what I want to make my goals come to fruition. That sounds great, but it's obviously false. Getting the Bible right is critical. It will impact your whole life when you have the Word of God confused or upside down. There is nothing, even today, even now in post-Christendom increasingly

secular America, there is nothing so critical as a right understanding of the Word of God. Think about it. When the Bible is abused, well, slavery gets defended, interracial marriage is outlawed, women get diminished, children get abused, creation gets misused, native people get dominated and deculturated. Get the rules wrong at school and you wind up in the principal's office. Get your HOA guidelines wrong, you'll get letters. Get the U.S. Constitution wrong, there are problems. Get the Bible wrong, souls are in jeopardy.

So let's look at Philippians 4:13 a little more carefully. Philippians is sometimes called "The Joy Letter." The word "joy" appears five times and the verb "to rejoice" shows up nine times in this little letter. The Bible promises tears, struggle, pain and suffering. Jesus, our model and picture of the godly life—the embodiment of the godly life—Jesus wept. But the Bible also promises joy. How does this work, this joy and pain? One of the best pictures is the tree in Psalm 1: "Blessed (Happy) is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers" (Psalm 1:1–3). The tree goes through its seasons. It has spring, it has summer. It has fall and it has winter when all its branches are empty. But the tap root of that tree is deep, and situated next to the streams of the Lord, and it is never without contact, connection, nourishment, of the waters of life—His law, His Word, His Spirit. The taproot is connected to the Word of God and never loses contact with deep happiness and deep joy and deep contentment in the Lord. Philippians, the Joy letter, was written by Paul while he sat in prison, in chains.

We think Paul wrote this letter in 61 AD. What did Paul have to be joyful about? Was Paul a success? Paul knew nothing of success. He didn't know what his writings would become, or of who he would become in the history of the church. His first career as a Pharisee ended abruptly. In his career of ministry for Christ he was rarely fully trusted. He did little in

Jerusalem. His preaching gathered few. Peter would preach and thousands would gather—3,000 baptized after one message! Paul never saw anything like that. Paul traveled from town to town establishing small house churches, constantly chased by false teachers who would confuse these little groups as soon as he left. He was arrested, beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, snakebit, thrown in prison for years waiting to get a hearing, then sent to Rome just to go before an unjust, horrid emperor named Nero, who would eventually take his head. That's the life of Paul. And he writes, from prison, the joy letter.

By the time we come to chapter 4, we read: "I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:10–11). So, what happened? Paul, imprisoned, received a gift, some money, from this church. Paul only knew these folks for a short while, maybe a year and a half, but they, more than any other church, seemed to keep up with him and keep track of where he was and what was going on, and even sent money to help him along. Paul is grateful. Not only for the money, but for the relationship—and that they, the Philippian church, get to participate in the mission of God through giving. But Paul wanted them to know, they never have to give out of guilt for what Paul is suffering because at the core of his being, Paul is fine.

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12). "I have learned the secret," says Paul, "of being content always." The dominant philosophy of the day was Stoicism. For the Stoic, the great goal was to never let anything get to you. Let it go. You can't get to me, buddy. I can sit in line at the DMV. I can sit in my basement with a mask on. I can log-in to six different learning platforms to produce two hours total of at-home learning for my 9-year old kid while simultaneously keeping up with work email, ordering out to support small business, washing my hands six times per hour and cutting

my own hair—I'm cool. Doesn't phase me. That's the Stoic. Paul is actually quoting a well-used Stoic slogan, "I have learned the secret to be content in all things." Paul's been through a lot. Where does he get this superpower? How does he stay so cool? How does he keep himself centered? The Stoic is self-sufficient. Paul is Christ-sufficient.

We get our famous verse: "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13) How can you do all this, Paul? What's your superpower and where does it come from? You seem more self-sufficient, more undisturbed, more stoic than the Stoics, more zen than the Zen Masters. How do you stay so centered? It's not me, says Paul. I'm not centered on myself. I'm not self-sufficient; I'm Christ-sufficient. My life hangs from Jesus' own hands. He's got me. It isn't, "I've got this." Or even less, "I can do anything because God's gonna back me up." It's, "God's got this." That's peace. That's overcoming power. That's the good news. Jesus. Paul may mention joy 14 times in this Joy Letter, but he mentions Jesus 51 times. In a total of 104 verses in this letter, Jesus shows up 51 times. How can you do it, Paul? I can't. Jesus can. My life is hidden in Him.

The true meaning of this verse is even better than the misunderstood meaning. "I can do all things." That's a nice, energetic self-talk. That's self-motivating. Optimistic. But God doesn't operate like an app on your smartphone. God isn't a secret source of a superpower for you to use however you wish. The even better news is that when you give up your agenda, and follow God's agenda, and do what God has called you to do, and walk with God in Jesus Christ through life, there is no obstacle that can keep you from the life God has for you, there is no evil powerful enough to wrench you from His hands. The tap root touches the water of life no matter what's going on on the surface. The true meaning is much better than the supposed meaning. I don't know about you, but if I had unlimited power to do exactly what I wanted at any moment—I'm not sure that would work out all that great! I know myself too well. That sounds like good news, sounds like an empowering thought, sounds like something to meme or retweet or fire off in a note to a friend, but the actual meaning is even better. If God calls

you to something, no matter how hard it gets, He will never, never, let you face it alone. You are not self-sufficient. You are Christ-sufficient.

There is no way to control everything that comes at you in this world, no way to keep from experiencing hard things, struggles, even failures. But you are not the center. Jesus is the center. Risk a relationship with Jesus, center your life on Him, and see the better promise of Philippians 4:13. Eugene Peterson wrote, "There are a great many things we can do little or nothing about. The weather is out of our hands. Other people's emotions are out of our hands. The economy is out of our hands. Mostly we have to live with what families or our bodies or our government hands to us. But there is one enormous difference that is in our hands: we can offer up the center of our lives to the great revealed action of God's love for us. We can discover that each of us is an absolutely unique individual. We can cultivate the vitality and centering of life that develops out of risking our lives in a relationship with God." We don't need to be in control of every, single thing. We need to belong to God.

Jesus gave up control. Jesus allowed the world to work on Him. Being God, being the center of the universe and the core of all things, Jesus relinquished control and allowed the world to arrest, shame, beat and kill Him on a cross. Where is the power in that? Where is the "I always succeed at everything I try" kind of attitude in that? Where's the secret superpower in that? Jesus gave up control and power. Jesus took on our powerlessness. He took our place of suffering, and now, in Him, we can have our lives centered on an unshakable power, an unperturbable life, a peace that passes understanding—our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. No, I can't do whatever I want and succeed at whatever I want. But when I succeed, and when I fail, when I laugh and when I cry, when I have joy or when I have pain, when I am free or when I'm in chains, I am still a child of God in Jesus, and I can make it through all things in Christ who gives me strength. That's the promise of Philippians 4:13.

STUDY GUIDE

THE BIBLE TOP 5 • "I Can Do Anything"

Philippians 4:10–13

UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Slowly, we are learning how to walk in a new atmosphere. Grace is the word. Grace. John opens his gospel saying, "For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." Of all the peoples of the world, the children of God must walk in the grace of God if we are to reflect this core attribute of God. This summer the word is grace. In exactly the pace at which the Lord is leading you through Covid-19, may his grace abound to you.

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Philippians 4:10–13.

- 1) What has Paul learned in verse 11?
- 2) What range of human experience is Paul painting in verse 12?
- 3) What is the "all this" Paul mentions in verse 13?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

From our Scripture this week, Pastor Tim exhorts us to be "Christ-sufficient" instead of "self-sufficient." Describe what needs to take place in your heart to become more "Christ-sufficient" and less "self-sufficient."

- 4) How does living a "Christ-sufficient" life impact your witness of God's love to the yet-believing community around you? Who are you praying for this week for God to rescue?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Close your time in thanksgiving-soaked prayer. God, thank you that you have given me the opportunity to open your Word with other sisters and brothers. Thank you for continuing to transform me into the image of Jesus! May your kingdom come and your will be done, amen!