

“I Don’t Know How”

I remember this experience just like it was yesterday. Melinda was driving as we were making our way back home. We had been in Scottsdale, Arizona, for a visit with family and friends. While we were there, we were introduced to a delightful group of believers. These saints were assembled for a time of corporate fellowship to which Melinda and I were invited. It was in that time of fellowship that this brother made some very poignant remarks in reference to the text of scripture found in Philippians 4:11-13. Here is the text from the King James Version of the bible:

Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. ¹² -- I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

What was spoken about this passage of Scripture gripped me and even after our departure it was still ringing in my ears. In those days I was going through a particularly difficult time of transition. Without a doubt, the Lord was doing some deep things in me during those times—much of which I was struggling to understand. We had left a church plant in northeast Texas, of which I was one of the primary leaders, and we had moved to Bossier City, Louisiana. Our departure was fraught with interpersonal conflict. I had been moving along a trajectory for a decade and a half continuing to feel that I was on the track that the Lord had put me on. But in 1990 things started to unravel. I vividly remember that in those days the Lord spoke a very clear word that completely indicated an eminent and monumental transition. I was the only one in our existing leadership team that heard that word. I determined to set myself to seek and to walk in obedience to the word that I had heard.

After some months of attempting to clearly understand what the practical implications were of what the Lord was saying about that transition, relationships began to fracture. The eventual result was an implosion. The enemy was fast at work sowing distrust and chaos. But, the Lord was also at work pressing those who were willing into a new season. Those were days of extreme turmoil and anguish. Uncertainty abounded. Darkness loomed over the relationships in our lives, and eventually, the Lord spoke clearly to me and Melinda that we were to leave East Texas and move to Bossier City, Louisiana.

All of that put us into a search mode. What exactly was God doing? What was He saying about us and our future. I never questioned the call of God on my life. Melinda and I made all of the adjustments necessary to begin a new chapter for ourselves and our six children. Those were days of wonder—we wondered what the heck had happened! We wondered what the heck was going to happen! We were starting over with almost nothing in the way of finances. No job, no income, no real plan. Almost all of the people in our lives had pulled back from us as a result of a smear campaign and a publicly announced instruction specifically about us that could only be explained as we had been “blacklisted.” In fact, we were told that the leadership told the congregation explicitly not to have anything to do with us. So as you can imagine, it was a very difficult time for us.

It was during this time that we made the trip to Scottsdale, Arizona. I knew that we were supposed to make that trip, and I felt that during the trip the Lord was going to say some things to us and show us some things. During that trip the man of God I referred to earlier preached a message from Philippians 4:11-13 (which was, generally speaking, a very familiar passage to us). However, he emphasized and expounded on some of the text in ways that were new to me/us.

“I can do all things”

I was 42 years old at that time and had been saved for 22 years. I had been active in ministry for most of those 22 years, so I had been around the block quite a few times. At the age of 20, I was born again. My experience with the Lord was incredibly profound, and I was immediately put on a fast track. I was learning and growing like crazy. Very early on in my experience with the Lord, I had the clearest sense that there was a calling on my life. In those days I did not even have words to articulate what I was sensing, but it was undoubtedly gripping. It was real! I was growing in the knowledge of the scriptures and generally in my relationship with the Lord.

One of the verses of New Testament scripture that I call a “refrigerator verse” is Philippians 4:13. You know what I mean, don’t you, when I say a “refrigerator verse”? It’s that class of scripture that includes the all-time favorites from the Bible. Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me” is certainly one of the scriptures in that category. I read in many times; I could quote it word for word. I had it stuck on my refrigerator as a daily reminder. It was great! It was true! And, I believed it, but there was so much more that I didn’t know. Of course, you know that we don’t know what we don’t know right? So, I knew what this portion of scripture said, and I believed it. But what I didn’t know was that I didn’t know the rest of what the text was saying. I knew a portion of the content, but I certainly did not know the broader context. I had not considered the whole thought—only the portion that was most quoted and most spoken about. I was familiar with the portion of the thought that says, “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” But, I was unfamiliar with the whole thought. I had taken as my own a portion of the thought contained in the passage of scripture, and as a result, my application of verse 13 was not anchored to verses 11 and 12.

Without realizing it, I needed more understanding about what the “all things” that Paul was speaking about meant. It was in Scottsdale, Arizona, when I heard the man of God expound on the entire text that clarity began to come to me. From that moment I knew that I needed to take the time to consider what the lead in to verse 13 was. So, there we were driving on the Interstate headed east making our way back home. I was meditating on the Philippians 4:11-13 passage. I knew that there were things in it that I needed. And then it hit me! The portion that I was pulled into was, “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.”

I sat there in the passenger seat of the car as Melinda drove us, and I began to cry. Melinda noticed that I had become very quiet. She looked at my face and realized that I was crying. She asked me, “Are you ok?” I said, “No, I’m not ok.” She asked, “What is going on with you?” I said, “I don’t know how.” She said, “What do you mean that you don’t know how?” I said, “I don’t know how to be abased, and I don’t know how to abound.”

That encounter with the Lord and with Philippians 4:11-13 shifted me. The days and weeks following that day were days of intense reflection; they were days of repentance and seeking the Lord. They were days of crying out to God from a place of sincere inquiry. I wanted to “know how.” The day on the interstate was a day of revelation for me. It was a revelation of the truth of the scripture, but it was also a revelation of the truth of my condition. I so very desperately needed to learn “how to be abased and how to abound.” Beginning on that day, my prayer and my pursuit was that I would come to a place where I too could say that “I have learned” and that “I know how.”

Proof texts and portions

When we are born again, our human spirit is energized with the zoë life of God by the Spirit of God. Our human spirit is the primary interface with the eternal. Anyone who is truly in Christ has become a new creature (See 2 Corinthians 5:17). That experience is typically referred to as the new birth or being born again. We must also note that everyone who is born again is born again as a “babe” (See Hebrews 5:12-14 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-3). There are clearly various kinds of spiritual food spoken about in the scriptures. These various kinds of spiritual food correlate to the various levels of spiritual maturity that are clearly taught in the Bible. The types of spiritual food, or nutrition, in the scriptures include milk, bread, meat, and strong meat. In the 1 Corinthians 3 passage cited above, Paul reproves the Corinthian believers for their apparent divisiveness. This divisiveness is linked to the immaturity of the Corinthian believers. Paul reminds them that he has fed them with milk and not with meat. Paul also tells them that they were not at a place or in a condition to receive the meat of the word of God. So, their diet continued to consist of milk. Paul reproves them for their willful immaturity. Paul is saying to the Corinthian believers that they should have been further along in the maturity continuum. The evidence that they were not further along was their sectarian mindsets and divisive behavior.

A similar narrative is found in Hebrews 5:12-14. Verse 12 begins by saying, “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers.” Here the writer is not addressing those newly born again. Clearly, the ones being addressed were expected to be meat eaters and not milk drinkers. The ones being addressed, at the time of this letter, were expected to be teachers and have no ongoing need to be taught things that would be routinely taught to spiritual babies. These passages in no way imply to us that spiritual milk is not useful. Every spiritual babe needs spiritual milk. The case in Hebrews 5:12-14 is one that warranted correction, because those particular believers were expected to be much further along in maturity than they were. They should have been meat-eating teachers rather than milk-drinking consumers. The commentary in the passage seems very clear—they had advanced in their maturity to the stage in which they were eating meat but had fallen back into a condition that prevented them from being teachers, and that regression put them back on baby food.

We learn spiritual things by revelation. When we are young, the Holy Spirit arranges milk for our food. This is the appropriate nourishment for the young, and it is good food for our progress in the time of our spiritual youth. However, we learn spiritual truth in layers. As we mature, the Lord unveils additional layers of truth to us. When I was young, I needed to learn about God’s faithfulness and how He would care for and provide for me. I also needed to learn how I was to walk out my faith in obedience to the Lord. I needed to know that “I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” That was fundamental for me in those days and benefited me greatly then and now. The knowledge of those things has become part of my foundation in Christ.

I should also point out that the scripture in Philippians 4 says, “I can do all things,” but it does not say that “I can do everything.” The all things that are referred to are the things that God arranges to come into our lives. I am not trained to fly passenger jet airplanes. But if on a particular occasion I were to be on an airplane and circumstances set up in which all of those piloting the plane were incapacitated, and my Father’s will was that I pilot the plane—I can do all things. That being true, dear friend, my analogy by no means should be taken to imply to any of us that I can do everything. If I slipped into the captain’s seat in the cockpit of a passenger jet and piloted it safely to a landing, that would be a miracle. If I safely piloted the airplane on one day (in the will of the Lord) and then decided (for whatever reason, but apart

from the direction and leading of the Lord) the very next day to repeat perform—to pilot a passenger jet—my message to you is that you should not get on board! Too often, we see the people of God take a portion of scripture, misapply the text, and fall on their faces. Unfortunately, it is a common response for the same person who misapplied the scripture to claim that God has in some way let them down or been unfaithful to them because of their failed expectation. This is a proverbial one-two punch used by the enemy to discourage and confuse the saints.

We have an enemy who seeks to seize upon the things we are hearing and learning in order to twist them and make them appear to mean what was never intended by the Lord. Nothing about God's faithfulness has changed as I have continued to mature. But, the Holy Spirit has retrofitted my doctrine to include the new layers of revelation that I have been given over time. As this work has continued in me, my doctrine has become more sound and clean. So, it is still true today that "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me." But, I now know, as a result of the new layers of revelation that I received on that interstate highway 31 years ago, that the "all things" of Philippians 4:11-13 includes knowing how to be abased as well as knowing how to abound. I can do all things. I have learned—and now I know how.

To be abased and to abound

Every one of us will go through times of being abased, and every one of us will go through times of abounding. Paul did not say, "I have been abased and I have abounded." Everyone has been and will be abased and also will abound at times. This message is not about that. This message is about learning **how** to be abased and learning **how** to abound. My hope is that this message will serve to awaken those that actually **don't know how** to be abased and **don't know how** to abound to their need to come to a new place in the Lord. There will be times that you will be abased and there will be times that you will abound. This message is intended to alert you to the fact that all of us have a critical need to come to a place of maturity so that in times of abasement and also in times of abounding, we "know how." The state of knowing how only comes as a result of learning. Learning is the amalgamation of knowledge, understanding, and experience. If you do not learn, understand, and experience a thing, you are not entitled to make the claim that you "know how." Kenneth S. Wuest in his Word Studies in the Greek New Testament says this about Philippians 4:11, "The words 'have learned' are in a construction in the Greek which speaks of entrance into a new condition. It is, 'I have come to learn'." So, I am saying to us all that it is only when we come to this new condition that we are authorized to say, "I know how."

We can no longer afford to miss the larger truth communicated by the complete thought of Philippians 4:11-13. To detach verse 13 from verses 11 and 12 is irresponsible. It also sets up the people of God to be deceived and manipulated by the enemy. I have heard verse 13 quoted all of my Christian life. I have almost never heard it quoted in context—even by those who are fairly or very mature in the Lord.

The word abased in this passage is the Greek word *tapeinoō* and it means: to depress; figuratively, to humiliate (in condition or heart). Paul further elaborates on the condition he is referring to in verse 12 by saying that everywhere and in all things, I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. So concerning the condition of being depressed and humiliated, Paul says everywhere and in all things that he had been "instructed." That means Paul was initiated into and had learned the secret of knowing how to be full and knowing how to be hungry. Paul knew how to keep himself low.

It is important at this point that I say that I am not suggesting, nor do I believe that the scriptures teach us that God, who is our Father, will intentionally go about to depress us and humiliate us. It is our

Father's good pleasure to give us the kingdom (See Luke 12:32). Our Father knows what we need before we ask Him for anything (See Matthew 6:8). Here I am not saying that the Father takes pleasure in depressing us or humiliating us. Frankly, what actually happens is that our skewed expectations, coupled with the adherence to doctrines that have grown out of the roots of humanism fail us leaving us depressed and humiliated. God didn't do that beloved; we did that. It is the human condition that motivates the people of God through lusts to "heap to themselves teachers" that proffer doctrine that is not sound and that is not representative of truth (See 2 Timothy 4:3-4 KJV). This message rests squarely upon the foundation of the sons of God trusting their Father for every need that they have. However, these simple truths have been hijacked and re-branded in doctrine that promises a BMW in every driveway, a mansion on a hill, and material wealth of every kind. When those things fall down, and the people of God have not "learned," and have not come to the place of "knowing how," people are left depressed and humiliated.

Also, let's not make the mistake of relegating abasing and abounding only to natural or material things. Certainly, being hungry is a reference to food, but the natural realm is not the only context that we need to consider. For instance, I have been through seasons of abasement in relationships, and I have been through seasons of abounding in relationships. I have also been betrayed by those closest to me and with whom I had spent many years working together. I have not always been in a place in which I could claim to know how to manage those times of abasement. I have matured now, and though I am certain I need to continue to grow spiritually, I am satisfied that I do know how to walk through seasons of abasement and seasons of abounding both in the natural context as well as the relational context.

In whatsoever state I am therewith to be content

In order to truly know how to be abased and how to abound, the obvious prerequisite that Paul lays out is that of contentment. If a person does not have a habit of being content, they are frankly open to be manipulated by their enemy. The word translated content in verse 11 is akin to a word that means "to raise a barrier; to ward off." Genuine contentment raises a barrier and sets a boundary between the believer and their enemy. This barrier is a critical layer of protection for the emotions of the soul.

The three primary imperatives of the culture of the orphan are: the imperative of provision, the imperative of protection, and the imperative of place. When Adam sinned through disobedience by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the eyes of his soul were opened. It was in that instant that Adam "knew that he was naked" (See Genesis 3:7). In response to the eyes of his soul being opened, Adam attempted to mitigate his condition by covering himself and hiding. Only a moment before, Adam and Eve enjoyed seamless fellowship with their Father. A moment after, fear gripped them, and they were motivated by their soul to cover themselves and hide. These reactions were linked to their sense of desperation generated by their need for provision and protection.

Contentment in the Lord is impossible without a deep trust in the Lord. Trusting God will eventually lead us into a life of contentment. The experience of contentment is connected to our sonship. Growing in sonship is essential if we are ever to come to a place of genuine contentment. It was this place, a place of contentment, that Paul had come to and was living in. Living in that place resulted in a barrier and a boundary around his soul. It was in that place that Paul could not be bullied, threatened, or manipulated by fear regarding his provision, protection, and place. Paul, just like you and me, had to learn how to come to and stay in the place of contentment. Contentment is a place we are invited to enter into. True contentment actually immunizes us against fear and dread associated with our circumstances. Paul had learned, so Paul could say "I know how."

The home test for diagnosing our condition

There is a very quick home test to determine whether or not you know how. But, it requires honesty with yourself. I am not suggesting that you recklessly dive into morbid introspection. However, if you know that the Holy Spirit is speaking to you through this message, you need to be honest with yourself. You need to be honest with the Lord.

The last time you were abased, the last time you experienced being brought low by circumstances, how did you respond? Can you say with certainty that you were in, and remained in, a state of spiritual rest? Were you able to be in and remain in a peace that passes understanding? Were you genuinely in a place of contentment? Did you have the assurance that there was a barrier and a boundary between your soul and your circumstance? Were you insulated from the imperatives of the culture of the orphan while you were going through that particular circumstance? See, this is where being honest with yourself is critical. I must also add that this has absolutely nothing to do with condemnation. Whoever believes in Jesus can never be condemned (See John 3:18). So whether you passed the test or failed the test, you cannot be condemned if you are in Christ. The purpose of this message is to encourage all of us to come to the place (more and more) that we can say as Paul said, “I know how.”

The sons of God must no longer spend their days hiding out behind the thin veneer of pseudo-faith positions while making the claim of “knowing how” when they have clearly not “learned how”! This is a wakeup call, beloved. I believe there is a door of grace open now for many to come into a new level of experience. There is a call in this message for many to come into the place that Paul occupied—the place of contentment. When we have come to that place and because we have learned how, we will be able to say, “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound.” When we have learned, we then have a claim to the place of contentment that Paul speaks of.

“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me” should now take on a whole new meaning to you. This “all things” actually includes all things, but certainly includes those things specified by Paul in the passage. If you are one who has routinely quoted Philippians 4:13, I want to urge you to quote it in context. Please include the 11th and 12th verses with the 13th verse when you quote. And by all means, remember that the “all things” that you “can do” include the things mentioned in verses 11 and 12.

Another powerful component of the text

It is also very important that we note the first phrase in this passage. Paul said, “Not that I speak in respect of want.” Paul was making sure to the best of his ability that we didn’t get the wrong idea about what he was saying. One of the primary themes and purposes of the letter to the Philippians has to do with the way that the saints in Philippi supported the gospel ministry—more particularly the ministry of Paul. From the very beginning of the letter, Paul sets forth this theme. Continuing in this theme, he insists that the letter is not about his need by saying, “Not that I speak in respect of want.” In fact, in the NIV this verse is translated, “I am not saying this because I am in need.”

Paul was very careful to maintain a reputation regarding support that was above reproach. Paul worked with his own hands for self-support as a habit. On occasion when the needs of the saints required it, Paul asked for offerings. But, he was always very careful to do what he could to not give occasion for the name of Christ and his own name to be disparaged.

Paul sets up verses 11-13 by stating that his comments are not about his own need or want. He did not want his comments to appear to be self-serving. He was not attempting to manipulate the brothers and sisters in Philippi, so he underscores his motivation by saying, “Not that I speak in respect of want.” Paul is saying that he does not need anything. He could say this, because he had learned how to live in base circumstances as well as in lavish circumstances. He had found the secret of being content.

Godliness with contentment

Paul also states in 1 Timothy 6:6 that “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” He further elaborates by saying in verse 8 that if we have food and clothing, we should be content. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread” (See Matthew 6:11). Bread for the day is the promised provision for the people of God. Unfortunately, many have preached a gospel (which is not representative of the whole counsel of the scriptures) of “a BMW in every driveway.” The kingdom of God is not life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (See Romans 14:17).

All too often the soul of men lays hold of portions of scripture in an attempt to satisfy fleshly lusts. This is often the fruit of doctrines that have been built to answer the wants, the desires, and the lusts of the human soul. People end up living in a swirl of human expectations rather than living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (See Matthew 4:4). Disappointment generally results when believers expect God to provide for them, do things for them, and meet them in ways that the Lord has never promised. **Dis-appoint-ment.** Who made the appointment? If the Lord actually made the appointment, you can rest assured that He will keep it. However, if the Lord did not make the appointment, He will likely not keep it.

At this point I must also say that disillusionment is always foundationed upon an illusion. If any of us have an illusion about God or about the will of God, we will always end in disillusionment. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines illusion as: a misleading image presented to the vision; something that deceives or misleads intellectually. The enemy of men’s souls traffics in darkness, and his primary operational model is deception.

The habitual posture that will quash discontentment, disillusionment, and disappointment is godliness with contentment! Remember, contentment raises a barrier and sets a boundary that will stay the hand of the enemy. Within this barrier and boundary, the believer can experience the rest of God. This rest frees the soul from anxious fretting by having a view of life’s circumstances that is a view from heaven rather than a view from the earth. The eternal perspective will always be the correct perspective.

Summary

There is always a way out. In fact, there is always a God ordained way out of the entrapment of the enemy. That way out is referred to in the scripture as “a way of escape.” Here is the promise: “There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (See 1 Corinthians 10:13).

However, almost always, the way of escape is accessed through the door of honesty and humility. It is essential that we submit to God first, and then, resist the devil (See James 4:7). The way of escape will

only be actuated when we truly put our trust in the living God. The Lord is your high tower; your refuge and fortress (See Psalms 61:3). When we truly trust our Father, we will be able to enter His rest.

If by hearing this message, it has become clear to you that you have fallen into a trap of your own making, repent. Earlier in this message I spoke about self-made expectations creating illusions and how those illusions always set us up for disillusionment and disappointment. I remember on one occasion that I was counseling a middle-aged man who, in frustration, kept saying that he did not understand why his life had been so hard. He repeatedly spoke about his hard life. Being prompted by the Holy Spirit, I asked him to talk to me more about his hard life. I asked him to tell me about the time that he did not have anything to eat. He said, "Oh, there has never been a time that I didn't have anything to eat." I then asked him to tell me about the time that he did not have clothes to wear. He said, "Oh, there has never been a time that I did not have clothes to wear." I asked him to tell me about the time that he did not have a place to sleep or a roof over his head. He said, "There has never been a time that I did not have a place to sleep or a roof over my head." At that exact moment he threw up his hands and said, "OK. OK. I get it! My life really has not been that hard, has it?" I said, "No, it has not."

This man, like so many, is born again, filled with the Holy Spirit, and been in the Lord for decades. But, he had, like so many have, created a god in his own image. He had designed a god in his imagination that he expected would function like a divine bellboy. He thought whatever came into his mind that his god would be bound to produce and bring to him. He was troubled by the fact that his god was not producing what he wanted and expected.

I told the story in the beginning of this message about the time that I came to a place of revelation about Philippians 4:11-13. I could quote Philippians 4:13 right alongside the best of them. I knew that verse, taught it, and preached it often. But, my understanding of the "all things" of Philippians 4:13 was completely out of context. My view of the verse doctrinally was way off. The result left me in the place of "not knowing how." That day, in that car, I came face to face with my need for a major upgrade in my understanding. I knew that I did not know how to be abased and I did not know how to abound.

That day I committed my life to my Father and asked him sincerely to teach me His ways. I wanted to know how. I wanted to know what Paul knew, and I wanted to learn how to walk out my life in God that way. I knew that I could not get there on my own, so I repented, I prayed, and I asked the Lord to teach me. And so, it began: this new chapter of my life, my learning, and my experience walking with my Father at a new level all began that day.

That day was in the decade of the 1990s. I am still learning, but much has changed about the way I go through times of abasing and times of abounding. I have learned some things about contentment. I have learned some things about how to enter into and abide in the rest of God. I am not perfect at these things yet, but I am way down the road. I am so much better equipped now for all of the things that the Lord sends me to and the circumstances that He puts me in.

This grace is available to you just like it was (and is) available to me. If this message brings you to a place of realizing that you don't know how, please do not believe that you are stuck there. The realization that you do not know how is not a life sentence; it is an invitation. The invitation into this grace, met with your willing obedience, will position you for updated understanding. This will open a door for you, which when stepped through, will position you to walk in and build new history in God. This new walk will become new foundation for you upon which you can build a life that will endure.

My prayer and hope for you is that you will come to the place where you too can say, “I know how.” I trust that this message will strengthen you and help you take the steps that you need to take in this season. So now, I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified (See Acts 20:32). May grace, mercy, and peace be with you always. Blessings to you as you continue to seek God and His kingdom.

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