

Is Philippians 4:19 a Promise to Supply ALL Believers' Needs?

INTRODUCTION

A. Mentioning this Bible promise – This verse is perhaps quoted as much as or more than any other apparent Bible promise. Many people say to someone “in need” something like “Well, remember, God will supply all you need.”

B. Misusing this Bible promise – Back in 1886 Russell Carter composed the hymn (music and lyrics) “Standing on the Promises.” Depending on the way they are defined, there are between 3,573 and 8,810 promises in the Bible. The question each Bible believer needs to ask about each promise is this: “Was this promise intended for me?” Too many people reading the Bible come across a promise and – without considering to whom it was given and under what circumstances – think they can personally “claim” it for themselves.

C. Meaning of this Bible promise – In order to properly understand Philippians 4:19, one needs to consider some important factors:

1. The meaning of the word “need” – including the great variety of opinions or levels of human “need” (e.g., food, finances, freedom, “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness”)

For example, how does one decide when a bigger apartment, condo, or house is needed? Have you seen what IKEA stores used (maybe still do) offer? A few years ago IKEA had displays of adequate living space of under 300 square feet (I recall one for 297 sq ft) – SMALL, of course, kitchen, eating area, bedroom, and sitting area. How many of us would be willing (able?) to fit into one of those spaces?

When is a residence too small? A friend of my wife grew up in a home with 13 kids – and 1 bathroom. The children lined up and waited their turns, and each child had 5 minutes to use it to get ready for church or school.

2. What the passage and its context actually say and also what the rest of Scripture says on the subject.

3. The personal experience of believers (i.e., Is each need of every believer in this age of grace always met?)

I. The concept of needs

Before getting too far into the subject it may be worth noting two interesting truths in Scripture – one, that God needs nothing (Ac 17:25), and, second, that 1st-century Laodicean believers thought *they* had need of nothing (Rev 3:17).

A. Needs according to the world

1. Basic physical needs to live – air, water, food, exercise, rest/sleep, shelter (in many places clothes, house)

2. Other needs – economic, medical, mental, psychological/emotional, social, legal/political (liberty, pursuit of happiness, no taxation without representation, a voice in government)

B. Needs according to the Word

 – passages that use the word “need,” “necessary,” or “necessity”

1. Physical – eat & drink (Mk 2:25& Lk 11:5-8; 12:29-30; Jn 13:29), body parts (1Co 12:21,24), healing (Lk 9:11), physician (Mt 9:12; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:31), sun & moon (Rev 21:23) ass & colt (Mt 21:2-3; Mk 11:3; Lk 19:31,34)

2. Economic (Ac 2:45; 4:35; Eph 4:28; 1Jn 3:17)

3. Legal – witnesses (Mt 26:65; Mk 14:63; Lk 22:71 – not needed Jn 2:25), letters of commendation (2Co 3:1), speak for the Thessalonians (1Th 1:8)

4. Social – marriage (1Co 7:36), brotherly love (1Th 4:9)

5. Theological – to be taught (Heb 5:12 – cf. no need to be taught 1Th 5:1; 1Jn 2:27)

6. Spiritual – patience (Heb 10:36), repentance (Lk 15:7), many trials (1Pt 1:6)
unspecified (Heb 4:16)

7. General (non-specific) need (Ac 2:45; 4:35; Rom 16:2; Eph 4:28; 1Jn 3:17)

8. Other (isolated) NT needs – need that offences will occur (Mt 18:7), need for a Bible passage to be fulfilled (Ac 1:16), need for wars & rumors of wars to occur (Mk 13:7), need to see purchased land (Lk 14:18), need for Jesus to suffer & rise (Ac 17:3), need to be subject to government (Rom 13:5)

C. Needs according to the word

 – define NEED – can’t live without

1. Demonstration of a “liberal” view – When you drive by a Starbucks at 1:30 in the afternoon and see many cars in the parking lot, you realize that some people define “need” for coffee more broadly – unless (maybe they’ve been driving since 4 a.m. and truly need something to keep them awake till they stop at a motel a few hours later.

2. Definition from a literature view

a. The English word (**need**) – *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (p. 781) = "necessary duty, obligation; a lack of something requisite, desirable, or useful; a physiological or psychological requirement for the well-being of an organism; a condition requiring supply or relief; lack of the means of subsistence, poverty"

b. The Greek word (*chreia*) – W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (p.

105) = “denotes a need, in such expressions as ‘there is a need;’ or ‘to have need of’ something.”

II. The context of the passage

A. Subjects of the letter

(1) Not

- (a) all humans
- (b) all churches
- (c) all believers

(2) But

- (a) 1 group of believers
- (b) in NE Greece (Macedonia)
- (c) in a church Paul had begun
- (d) a church that had generously supported Paul’s ministry

B. Substance of the chapter (Php 4:1-18 – the concept of concerns)

1. Two women were concerned about getting their own way > they should seek harmony.
2. Some were evidently over-concerned about some matters > they should commit it to God in prayer.
3. All the believers should be concerned enough about the best virtues to concentrate their thoughts on them.
4. The church had been concerned enough about Paul to send donation to meet his needs.
5. Paul had learned to be content – not concerned – no matter what his circumstances were.
6. Paul had all he needed, especially in light of the church’s recent gift sent with Epaphroditus.

III. The content of the passage – Can you think of any other passage that seems to have such a sweeping promise?

A. The Person (my God) – “my” is emphatic (as in 1:3)

1. Why doesn’t Paul just say “God” here?

a. Compared to the hundreds of times Paul refers simply to “God,” he uses the term “my God” – found only 7 times throughout his Epistles – most often (5x) in thanking God for something or some ones.

b. It may be that he is overwhelmed in his contentedness with how wonderfully God has met his personal needs – so that he is content no matter what conditions and circumstances his sovereign and gracious God has for him, a contentedness he clearly stated in the previous verses.

2. What he implies

- a. Paul is personally depending on God in his own life.
- b. The Philippians can also depend on God for life in this world, since they are already trusting Him for something even bigger (eternal life).

B. The privation (all your need)

1. The truth of the need

- a. This rendering (“all your need”) grammatically implies a big lump need.
- b. The Greek wording is actually “each need of yours” (each individual need on its own).

2. The time of the need – It is unclear what time frame Paul had in mind:

- (a) Present need (They had so liberally given that they were presently in need.)
- (b) Future need (Any and all subsequent needs in the future would be met.)

C. The provision – the verb used (shall supply) – No supply is promised before the need – just for the need.

1. The meaning (Gr. *plēōō*)

- a. Translations elsewhere (in KJV)
 - 1) Usually “fulfill” (51x).
 - 2) Next most common are “fill” (19x) and “be full” (7x – including the previous verse).
 - 3) Others = “complete” 2x, “ended” 2x, “accomplished” 1x, “after” 1x, “expired” 1x, “perfect” 1x
- b. Translation here – It could very reasonably be translated “fill” (i.e., “fill your need”).

2. The mood (& tense) in Greek – There is some variation among the Greek manuscripts we now have.

- (a) Indicative future = a promise > “God shall supply.” (Alexandrian and Majority Texts)
- (b) Optative aorist = a prayer > “May God supply.” (Western text and minuscules 33 and 1739)

This variation among the Greek manuscripts of the Epistle to the Philippians is another reason to be very cautious about claiming that this is a Bible promise for believers today.

D. The proportion (according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus)

1. The declaration of the proportion (according to)

- a. Not proportionate to the need, merit, trust, obedience, desire, or good motives of the Philippians
- b. But appropriate to or commensurate with God's riches

2. The description of the proportion (His riches in glory by Christ Jesus)

- (a) NOT description of His riches ("glorious riches") OR of His supply ("gloriously/splendidly")
- (b) BUT location of His riches (literally, "in glory in Christ Jesus" [stored in heaven for those who

are in or belong to Christ Jesus])

IV. The history and experience of believers' need

A. True believers are not exempt from human needs that sometimes are not met.

1. In fact, many believers have had to live miserable lives in poverty or slavery – and may have had to suffer persecution, incarceration, or painful execution – just for being bold believers. Their "need" for health and life was not met.

2. God has not kept all believers from experiencing sadness, sickness, slavery, headaches, heartaches, hip aches, hoof aches, and even husband aches.

3. Actually, Paul had already written a verse that declares ahead of time what believers are to expect: "There hath no temptation (or test or trial) taken you – but such as is common to man" (1Co 10:13). In other words, believers should not think that they will be exempt from what unbelievers have to experience on this earth (including being in need).

B. Good churches and truly Christian organizations have had to go through tough times – and even close. There are a number I could name, and you probably know of some as well.

CONCLUSIONS – So, how should we view this passage? Specifically, what needs are in view?

A. Possibilities (various ways this passage has been viewed and can be viewed) – God will provide

- (1) All physical needs
- (2) All spiritual needs
- (3) All needs in all areas
- (4) All needs in all areas for those who trust God enough or give generously enough to Christian work
- (5) All needs in glory, not now
- (6) All needs as **God** sees need (what humans need and what needs to occur as part of God's plan)
- (7) All needs of only the Philippians

B. Probabilities – There are a number of factors we should keep in mind in deciding exactly what this verse says.

1. The promise – Assuming (according to the majority of textual evidence) that it is indeed a promise (and, thus, not Paul's prayer or wish), at least it must be remembered that it was given only to the Philippian church, NOT repeated elsewhere for any other believers. This may be due to the fact that the Philippians were THE generous church, and God would reward their generosity by meeting their current or future needs.

2. Our portion – We all have various degrees of need in various areas and at various times in life.

3. God's power – He is always able to more than supply all believers' needs.

4. God's plan – Scripture and history make it clear that God's will includes needs supplied as well as needs denied. God is under no obligation to meet all believers' needs. Far from it, many believers have had to (and many still do) live lives of deprivation (even starvation) and die unbelievably agonizing, undeserved deaths (see *Foxe's Books of Martyrs*).

5. Our perception – Many times we **think** we have a need (we perceive it that way), but it turns out in reality to be something we can very easily get along without.

6. The passage

a. The first 3 possibilities are clearly not true in the lives of all believers – past or present.

b. The 4th idea not only adds to the passage (adds to Scripture) but also has not been true for all believers.

c. The 5th idea seems to stretch the grammatical structure of the passage beyond reason.

d. The 6th idea is certainly true – and could very well be what Paul (and the Holy Spirit, who was supervising all that Paul wrote) meant. God sovereignly supervises everything – including the lives and needs of believers during this age of grace – and He makes sure that things occur in accordance with what needs to take place to accomplish all that He has planned, especially for the growth and maturity of those whom He has saved.

e. The last idea has much to commend itself as well. Many believers may shy away from it, since it then eliminates any application for today's believers. Scripture and secular history do not record the subsequent experience of the Philippian church, so we cannot be sure how – and how completely – God supplied their needs.

Either of the last two probabilities would sufficiently explain the passage and also would agree with the rest of Scripture. In point of fact, we do not need to decide one way or the other – since neither one is a universal promise that God will meet all our needs – that, at least, it would seem that we will not go on in need for long (that we will never lack necessities). So we should refrain from trying to encourage a fellow believer by saying “Just trust the Lord; He’ll meet all your needs.”

Perhaps we need to think more of – and sing more – the good old hymn “God hath Not Promised” (by Annie Johnson Flint):

1. God hath not promised skies always blue, flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;
God hath not promised sun without rain, joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
2. God hath not promised we shall not know toil and temptation, trouble and woe;
He hath not told us we shall not bear many a burden, many a care.

