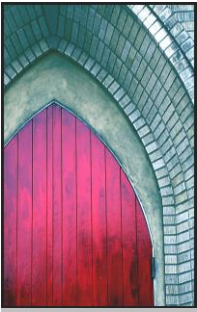


Work Out Your Salvation

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 2.12-18



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September 26, 2010

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BIRD BY BIRD

A favorite author of mine tells the story of her older brother, who as a 10 year-old, had put off writing a report about birds for school. He had the assignment for 3 months; the day before it was due he sat at the kitchen table with pencils, paper, and a stack of books on birds he hadn't yet cracked open. As she watched her brother sit on the verge of tears she knew he was overwhelmed with the task at hand, paralyzed by the size of the task and the lack of time to complete it. Their dad sat

down next to his son, put his arm around him and said, "Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird."

There is a discipline in learning to face large projects piece by piece. Whether it's from poor timing or not, how often can we relate to that sense of being overwhelmed by a task before us? Are there not times in our lives when that very paralysis affects our pursuit of godly living? We face doubts, fears, and sins that have been true about us for so long that we wonder if life will ever be different. Our struggle can be so pervasive that we wouldn't know where to begin facing it.

This is where Paul meets us in Philippians 2.12-18. The theme of this letter thus far is this: God has been, is, and will be at work in the midst of His people. This urges Paul to pray for the Philippians that their love would abound. It gives him the hope that he has to speak of the progress of the Gospel. It is the confidence with which Paul calls this church to unity, to ministry, and even to suffering. The display of God's work in His world is then most clearly seen in the humble obedience and exalted glory of Jesus in His death and resurrection.

PHILIPPIANS 2.12-18

¹²Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without grumbling or questioning, ¹⁵that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. ¹⁷Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. ¹⁸Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.

WORK OUT

The single most important word in these seven verses is the very first one: "Therefore." As we saw and heard last Sunday,

Paul summarizes the grace and truth of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. ^{Phil 2.5-11} In one of the most doctrinally-dense passages of Scripture, we can see no fewer than eight themes that are vital for our understanding of who Jesus is and what He has done. Paul follows this statement with "Therefore" as if to say "if I'm going to talk about what Jesus has done, I have no choice but to talk about how we as believers respond to that work every day of their lives." We can't talk about Jesus without talking about our response to who He is and what He has done.

And so when Paul calls us to "work out your own salvation," he is saying something profound to the Christian about salvation itself. God's salvation is His loving rebellious people before time began, re-shaping them into the perfect image of His Son, and preparing them for eternity in His presence. ^{Rom 8.28-30; cf. Eph 1} Salvation is past, present, and future, and it is from this vantage point that Paul gives this call. What is true about how salvation includes our response: without a response from us, what Jesus accomplished will always be outside of us. John Calvin says it this way: "It is God who calls us and offers us salvation; it is our part to embrace by faith what He gives, and by obedience to respond to His calling. But we have neither from ourselves." As these verses unfold, Paul helps us understand what this "working out" entails. And we need to know that here our doctrine is vital; for how we live has everything to do with the truth we embrace.

KNOW GOD'S WORK

The foundation to our taking up this work is to know that God is at work in us. What we've already said in general regarding salvation including the present work of God in us, here becomes explicit through the flow of thought from verse 12 to verse 13. We can work out our salvation with confidence because God is at work within us. While many wrestle with a conflict between where God's sovereign work 'ends' and human responsibility begins, Paul's point is that human responsibility depends on the faithfulness of God's sovereignty to have true significance. God has not left us to figure this out on our own; He is working in us to complete what He started.

Notice in particular what it is that God is doing: "to will and to work for His good pleasure."^{2.13} God is changing both our will—the purposeful desire within us—and our ability to live out what we purpose. In other words, knowing that God is working on the order of both our desire and our ability gives credibility to Paul's command to work out our own salvation. We will know the progress of the Gospel in our lives even as Paul knew its progress in His ministry. ^{cf. Phil 1.12-26}

LIVE BEFORE GOD

If the foundation of our working out our salvation is that we would know that God is at work within us, the stance we take is to live always and only before God. We see this most directly in we are called to work out salvation "with fear and

trembling.”^{2.12} This is the fear and trembling that is rightfully due God alone—in contrast to the ways that we often live with fear towards men and our circumstances. Paul is all too aware of our tendency to live by the fear of men, and to live only to impress men.^{2.12} He dismisses such hypocrisy. It is the human response to living consciously under the gaze of the Divine. It is the fear that is due Him alone who loves us and forgives us, who extends grace and mercy only out of such love.^{Dt 6.10-13, 7.7-11, 18; 1 Ki 8.39-40; Ps 130.4; Jer 33.8-9}

Not only does working out our own salvation mean that we fear God and not men, Paul gives this “working out” the highest value he could. Look also at verse 17. Here Paul speaks of the “sacrificial offering” of the Philippians faith. He’s using traditional religious language to describe the faith of the Philippian church. The giving of their very lives to Christ in everything is what constitutes their worship.

PURSUE OBEDIENCE

With the foundation of the ever-present work of God, and the ongoing awareness of living before God, we rightly hear the call in these words to pursue obedience. Paul alludes to this call in verse 12 as he speaks about the proven obedience of the Philippian church, but we see it more clearly in what follows verses 12 and 13. Again the salvation which God is working out in his people is both inward and outward—and both are vital. First, notice the inward components: a faithful response to God’s work is “without grumbling or questioning.” Paul’s language here invokes the scenes of rebellion by the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness^{Nu 11.1-15; 12; 14.1-12; 16; 20.2-9}

From there, however, Paul keeps in front of us a call toward outward obedience as well. He talks about being “blameless and innocent ... without blemish” but adds that we do this before a world that will see us, and will not understand.^{2.15} On the one hand, we can’t help but stand out, for the world around us is “crooked and twisted,” but on the other hand, this is call to live knowing that we are putting the Gospel on display. It is uncomfortable for us, and we are rightfully scared of distorting the truth of this call, but we must talk about obedience.

REJOICE!

The fourth component to our working out our salvation is that we would proceed with joy. Paul does not hesitate to speak about his own longing for joy in knowing that he “did not run in vain or labor in vain” as he served the spread of the Gospel in this church.^{2.16} Nor does he hesitate to call the Philippian church to rejoice over what God will do in them—even if it should cost Paul his very life.^{2.17-18} Would the working out of our salvation—no matter what the cost to us—would this fuel the response of joy in us?

Some time not long after WWII, as England was still recovering from the devastation of two world wars, pastor David Martin Lloyd-Jones began a series of sermons that would later be printed as a book titled *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and its Cure*. In the very first sermon, he makes the observation that “there are large numbers of Christian people who give the impression of being unhappy” and goes on to say, “in a sense a depressed Christian is a contradiction in terms, and he is a very poor recommendation for the gospel.” As we work out our own salvation, would this be said of us? Are we okay with that? The call of the Lord Jesus, through Paul, is that we might know God’s work in our lives, live before Him, pursue obedience, and even rejoice as we work out our own salvation.

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