

In it Together: A Shared Obedience

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Date: 16 October 2022

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[0 : 00] Exodus 16, beginning to read at verse 1. They set out from Elam, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elam and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.

And the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. And the people of Israel said to them, Would that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full.

For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. Philippians chapter 2, and we're starting to read at verse 12.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that 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, holding 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 labour in vain.

[2 : 06] Even 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.

Likewise, you also should be glad and rejoice with me. Well, thanks very much for reading. Let me add my warm welcome.

My name is Benji, as Bruce mentioned, and I'm on the staff here. But why don't I lead us in a prayer as we begin. Dear Lord, we know that at our core there is nothing good in us, and that we love the darkness, were it not for you bringing light to us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so please, would you work a supernatural miracle this morning by your Spirit to soften our hearts to hear what it is that you have to say, and that it wouldn't just be something that flies in, and that we intellectually think on for a moment and then leave.

But Father, please speak so that we might change, and honour and worship you better. Amen. How do I become a better Christian?

[3 : 20] I wonder if you've ever stopped to think about that question at all. How do I become a better Christian? I hope it's something that you've thought about. I don't really like the term maybe better or improve, but it's something that we should all be regularly thinking on.

What might it look like to follow the Lord Jesus Christ more faithfully? Pray more? Well, that always seems to be the answer in growth group and in Bible studies. Sure, fine. Give more money?

Perhaps. Perhaps. Do I go on pilgrimage? Take communion? Attend church on Sunday? I mean, I suppose these are all good things. But if I was to try and find a BuzzFeed article or an equivalent of what are the five-step plan there is to be a good Christian, what would it be?

What might the ideal Christian morning routine look like? Up at 5 a.m., three hours of prayer with one hour Bible reading? Maybe. Maybe. How do I actually become a better Christian?

What might that actually mean and look like? Now, our friends, if they're anything like mine, they're obsessed with self-improvement. Live your best life now.

[4 : 25] This strange term that I keep hearing since arriving at Grace Church. Continual professional development. Best work routine for your star sign, which was a conversation that we had at my NCT class.

I had to ask them to explain what a star sign was. Life hacks or reading seven daily habits of effective people, how to win friends and influence people. And lockdown, well, it really brought that kind of self-hatred and of self-improvement to the fore, didn't it?

That crippling guilt that we all felt during lockdown that we didn't learn the four languages that we set out to, start a side hustle, get those six-pack abs, and grow our YouTube channel by 100K subscribers.

The guilt was immense. I myself, I have to confess, had an existential crisis that my chess.com rating didn't improve by the 200 points that I had planned for during lockdown. We're obsessed with improvement.

We're obsessed with it. That qualification, that book, that diet, that coach, that routine. But what about our faith? What about our faith? How do we become a better Christian?

[5 : 31] How do I follow the Lord Jesus Christ better? And Philippians is in many ways, and I suppose this is probably slightly cheeky, and I'm not sure that Paul would necessarily approve of me calling it this, but it's an improvement guide to the Christian life.

This is a cracking church. It's a wonderfully gifted and faithful church. Have a look with me at chapter 1, verse 3. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, Philippian church, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy.

Why? Verse 5. Because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I'm sure of this, that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ.

Or 4, verse 14. Right at the end of the letter, we hear the same thing again. 4, verse 14. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble, and you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only.

This is a wonderful church. This is a faithful church. And yet, for some reason, the central command that Paul gives them, the key idea that he wants them to take away in his prayer, in chapter 1, which is a great place to see what Paul wants in his letters, is improve.

[6 : 55] Get better. Have a look with me at chapter 1, verse 9. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent.

In other words, you are a brilliant church, church in Philippi. You're doing so, so well. Keep going. Do more. Paul is in prison.

He's about to die, potentially. And he's passing the baton on to his super church, I suppose, for want of a better term. And his command is not, keep doing what you've always been doing. Keep knuckle down and hold on.

No, his command is, improve. Improve. And that leads me on to my first point. And there's only going to be, it's one sentence, my two points today.

So apologies, it's not on your handout on the back of the sheet. The first point is this, come and die even more. Come and die even more. We come in our reading to the, I suppose in many ways, this is the key verse of Philippians, chapter two, verse 12.

[8 : 04] And it's the key command of how to improve, how to be more faithful, continue to go on in the Christian life, verse 12. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, as we've been hearing about, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

Do you see? Just as you've always obeyed, just as you've always been doing, so now, more, obey, more. And notice that key word, obey, that we're seeing here.

What is it that they are called to obey? And we have a massive therefore at verse 12, and the classic adage that we have to ask what the therefore is therefore, when we see a therefore.

And the therefore is here, reminding us of the mind that Simon helped us to see last week in chapter two, verse five, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Christ's mind that led him to obedience. Do you see that in verse eight? And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[9 : 19] In other words, you, Philippian church, you have Christ's mind. You've been obedient. And now, Paul is calling you to be obedient even more. Verse 12.

Obedient to what? Even unto death. So Paul is saying that Philippian church, you're doing so very well. You're an amazing church.

You are my star church. I remember when I was with you, he was saying how obedient you were. And so now that I am not with you, come and die more. More obedience.

More and more. Pastor Yusuf Nadakani, and I'm probably butchering my brother's name, is an Iranian pastor.

He was initially arrested in 2006 for preaching the gospel in Iran. And then he was later released in 2007. He then went on preaching the gospel and was arrested again in 2010.

[10:19] He was arrested again. And he was sentenced to death this time for preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. But wonderfully, because of pressure from the international community, he was released in 2012.

So what did Pastor Yusuf continue to do? Well, he continued to die. He preached again and was arrested again in 2013. And he is currently in prison and is due to be released in 2024.

And I wonder what Pastor Yusuf is going to do when he leaves prison in 2024. But here we see an example, a picture of the obedience that Paul is calling for.

Pastor Yusuf could have stopped at any point, maybe after 2006, maybe after 2012. What about after 2013? No. Obedient to the point of death, more and more.

And I can imagine, as we hear this, many of us are sitting here thinking that's too much, Benji, what you're saying. That is too much.

[11:21] I give so much already. I already serve and seek to glorify Christ where I am. And I think that is true, actually. That probably is true.

This church, Lynn and I have only been here for a year or so, and we've seen so many wonderful examples of how sacrificial and loving and servant-hearted you are.

And yet still, still the command of Paul is, come and die more. Come and die more. And I think the only thing that will not cause utter despair and anger and frustration at Jesus when we hear this command, that really, Jesus, are you going to ask more of me?

Really, Jesus, how can you ask more of me? I'm trying to give so much already. I think the only thing that will keep us from that frustration is realizing that Jesus is never going to ask us to give anything more than what he himself has given, which was what we saw last week.

And specifically, what he's done for us. Do you notice in verse 12, it's very careful wording that Paul uses. Therefore, my beloved, as you've always obeyed, so now not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

[12:41] Salvation, what the Lord Jesus Christ has won for us by his obedience. So yes, this is a mammoth call on the Christian life. I was kind of scared, actually, when I was preparing this passage as I was trying to think about the snowball effects that applying this verse to our lives might actually mean to come and die more and more and more.

But it is working from the place of the Lord Jesus Christ who, though he was in the form of God, came and died, died on a cross. Think what he gave up to serve us. And so yes, the extent of what this verse asks of us is breathtaking, but I hope you see that Jesus is never asking you to do anything that he himself has not done for you.

And if you're not a Christian here this morning and you're looking in on the Christian faith, well, can you see how radically different the Lord Jesus Christ's claim on our lives is compared to the self-help gurus of our age that we're obsessed with?

Those self-help gurus, they tell you to do better, be thinner, up your discipline, do more, do more, and King Jesus says, I died for you.

It's done. Your salvation is already yours. I will never ask you to earn it, but I will ask you to follow in my footsteps. Come and die more.

[14:03] Now I was trying to think about how this might play itself out to give us some kind of application about what this might look like and I was thinking in particular of JAM. So I want to tell you about one of our JAM members.

So Tim, Tim is here this morning. Now Tim, Tim loves K-pop. Now Tim doesn't know that he loves K-pop, but I'm telling you that Tim loves K-pop. And for those who don't know, K-pop is Korean music.

It's Korean popular music. Tim's obsessed. It's a bit strange to be honest with you. He's obsessed with K-pop. So much so, he comes into JAM talking about Korean music all the time. He's like, have you heard of BTS?

No. But he's obsessed. He's obsessed. So much so though, that when he heard this verse taught, this is hypothetical by the way, just so that we're, anyway, when he heard this verse taught, he thought, gosh, what might it look like for me to come and die more?

And Tim was thinking about studying law at university, which I won't make a comment on that at all. But then he decided to change to Korean. Decided he wanted to learn Korean because he'd heard that there's lots and lots of cults in South Korea teaching false doctrine.

[15:07] So he decided he's going to learn Korean. So Tim went off to university, very excited to learn Korean, and sing all of his favorite K-pop songs in its original language. He was so very excited. And then he went to university and then he found that he loved reading the Bible with Korean speakers at university.

He went to the International Cafe. He used his Korean to read with them. It was very exciting. So much so that he saw some of them come to faith. And then he realized that, well, okay, fine, there's a few Korean speakers here, but surely if I'm going to come and die more, then I probably need to go to Korea.

That's probably the next logical step. So Tim decided to get on a plane on a mission trip to go to Korea with some university friends. And he went off to Korea and he saw the immense need that they had in South Korea for the gospel.

But then he heard whilst he was in South Korea doing his mission work that the North Korean Christian church is the most persecuted church in the world. And he thought about this verse and he thought about this sermon and he thought, oh gosh, what might it mean to come and die more now?

I've already given up law to study Korean. I've already studied Korean at university and come on this mission trip in South Korea. Do I really have to go even further? And then he thought, yes, of course, because of how far the Lord Jesus Christ has gone.

[16:24] So Tim decided to drop out of university, much of his parents' chagrin. He dropped out of university and joined a charity in China that works with helping refugees from North Korea get into Christian homes.

He was very valuable because he spoke Korean and English. But then he realized that this still wasn't enough and he still wasn't reaching the North Koreans as much as he wanted to. He decided that he needed to come and die more.

So he set about making sure that he got himself arrested because that was the only way he could end up in a North Korean prison so that he could tell all the North Koreans he could ever want from jail about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, Tim, I'm not saying that that has to be the way that you decide to live out your life, but I hope that we see, although in a slightly silly way, but maybe not, how this verse might play itself out. Come and die more.

Come and die more. That's my first point. And my second and final point, willingly. Willingly. Come and die more willingly.

[17:26] And so we've had the great command in verse 12, but now we have the great warning. Verse 14 to 16, have a look with me. Do all things without grumbling or disputing that 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 holding 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.

Do not grumble. Now, we might think that's a slightly strange warning. We're Brits. We absolutely love to grumble. How can Paul really be taking this away from us? It's a national pastime.

And we might be thinking of all the warnings that Paul could have chosen with this command, come and die more, why on earth would we be talking about grumbling? Perhaps we might have expected something on the cost or the pain of this command, but here we have a warning about gratitude and willingness.

And these words, they're a quote or an allusion to the passage that we had read from Exodus back in the book in the Old Testament where God's people were saved from slavery in the most miraculous way, separating the Red Sea.

And as soon as the waters are closed behind them, as soon as they have been saved, they immediately, like that, the very next chapter began grumbling, saying, man, I wish I was back in slavery.

[18:55] Man, I wish I was still under Egyptian occupation. I really wish I was back there. And Paul is using that failure to warn his church today, do not make the same mistake as them.

The people in the wilderness, they were saved by God's mighty work. They grumbled, so they died in the wilderness. We are saved by God's works. Are we going to grumble is the question that Paul is asking us here.

We are in the wilderness. We're not yet glorified. We're citizens of a different country. We need to follow the pattern of King Jesus to come and die now more and to do so willingly.

And the thing that stopped that generation in the desert from making it into the promised land was their ingratitude at what God was asking for them. And that's the same for the Philippian church and that's the same for us.

Christ says to us this morning here come and die more because of the great salvation we have in him and if we think this morning that that salvation what Jesus Christ has done for us if we think this morning that that salvation is not worth very much if we think that it's not worth very much at all then we're not going to be willing to die for it to die more for it.

[20 : 19] In gratitude in gratitude for the death and resurrection of Jesus for us and what it asks of us is the greatest danger for the saints running the race faithfully.

Now I found this really hard to come up with an illustration for this. I spent ages racking my brain and looking up all of these different examples about when students were ungrateful to their teacher and then they had an epiphany moment later in life and realised they were for me all along but I thought it was a little bit too cheesy so I decided to ditch it but then I had the excellent idea of asking my wife and she was able to help me with it within 30 seconds which was a lesson in humility.

She told me why don't you talk about Jesus which was a great thing to suggest that Jesus actually is an incredible example of how dangerous ingratitude could have been because I want us to imagine and we've seen last week haven't we the Lord Jesus Christ going from an eternity with God to death on a cross imagine if the Lord Jesus Christ had decided at any point in that trajectory from being like God to death on a cross to let ingratitude and grumbling get the best of him I want us to imagine specifically Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane that famous moment where he's asking the Lord please if there's any other way for me to escape dying on the cross please take this cup away from me what would have happened if Jesus had walked away what would have happened if Jesus thought you know what why am I doing this why am I doing this giving myself for sinful people who don't deserve it why am I obeying in this way why would I serve them in this way imagine if the Lord Jesus Christ had decided to turn around at that point and say enough I'm not going to serve anymore could you imagine the temptation for that and can you imagine the consequences why why should I why should I serve in that way in other words ingratitude actually is the ultimate thing that will take us from the serving of others mindset that we saw last week in the Lord Jesus Christ and have us focus on ourselves it is impossible to serve others with a mindset of ingratitude it's impossible so that is our two points come and die more willingly and we were answering the question what might it look like to improve or to get better in the Christian life and these are in many ways Paul's last words to the church that he hopes will continue his gospel work and he leaves them with that central command if you want to improve if you want to be faithful come and die more willingly but for us here this morning we're not

Christians in Iran we're not under the threat of persecution of being imprisoned necessarily what might this look like for us and I want to say I think there's lots of similarities between us and the Philippian church this is a wonderful church people come to eternal life here people are loved here people are served here and yet the command is still come and die more well what might that look like well perhaps in our giving perhaps it might look like that you might be thinking wow what am I I'm giving so much already well what might this command come and die more look like with our giving or with our gifts and that we use to serve the church and our family what might it look like to identify our gifts in the Lord Jesus Christ and say time for me to die even more or perhaps you speak foreign languages perhaps you could reach an area of the world that other people aren't set up to reach what might it look like for you to use your languages to say time for me to come and die even more but the great danger as we die more and more to ourselves in the service of other people is that we will grumble that's the great danger the more and more

[24 : 33] I give the greater and greater the temptation to then begrudge how much I'm giving for me as I was thinking about this in staff meeting we have a wonderful practice where Simon encourages us to share with the rest of the staff about how our week is going we do a highlight and a low light and the highlight is meant to be what's been good about the week and the low light is meant to be what is not and the point being and it's a good point is that ministry is hard and we

shouldn't always be pretending but I found myself reflecting that I used the opportunity of the low light pretty much exclusively to complain and it's pretty much how I use the low light in our staff meetings what would it look like for me to not use that as an opportunity to grumble but instead to use it as an opportunity to die more to myself and for us as the Lord Jesus Christ calls us through Paul to come and die more and more with the gifts that we've been given in the places that we've been given what might it look like for us to do that joyfully and willingly that would be an excellent question for us to be thinking about as we close

I'm thrilled that so many of you have come and spoken to me about how Lynn is doing and how baby Noah is doing but can I encourage you can the first thing that you ask me about is not how my daughter and my wife are doing but how I am seeking to die more and more to myself willingly and wouldn't that be wonderful for us to be doing that for each other rather than talking about the football or whatever else why don't I lead us in a final prayer dear Lord we thank you so much for the Lord Jesus Christ that though he was in the very form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be used to his own advantage but becoming obedient he took the likeness of human form and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross father please help us work out from our own salvation to come and die more for the sake of your glorious gospel and to do so with joy knowing that we will never be asked to give more than you have for us amen