

Working Out Salvation

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] If you would take your Bibles and open them to Philippians chapter 2 on page 185. I want to begin by saying this as much for my own benefit as yours.

This church, as every Christian church, belongs to God. It is God the Father who brought us into being. It is Jesus Christ who has brought us with his blood. And it is God the Holy Spirit who indwells us. It is the fact that we are gods where we begin. And the job of each of the ministers is to be a shepherd. And it is the job of the shepherd to draw the sheep into the pasture. But the shepherd doesn't feed the sheep. The shepherd takes the sheep into the pasture where they feed themselves. And the shepherd fends off wolves so that they won't draw the sheep after them. And the reason I say that is because I have wanted very much for a long time to look together at the letter of Philippians.

[1 : 11] I've wanted to look at Ephesians too, but particularly Philippians. The reason is because it's not an ordinary pasture. It's not a little flat meadow.

It is the happiest book in the New Testament. And it is a rich valley with two mountain ranges running through it. And I hope you will take time over the next week to read the book of Philippians on your own and feed yourself as we go through it.

And when you do, you can see that there are two realities that dominate the book. The first is a deep and abiding and remarkable joy.

The whole book breathes this atmosphere of joy. Fourteen times the apostle refers to his joy and their joy and the fact that we should be rejoicing more than any other book in the Bible.

And it's quite remarkable when you consider that he was writing in a prison, chained to a guard, likely to be executed. And it is even more remarkable when you realise that the church that had begun so promisingly had now stalled in problems.

[2 : 29] See, when the gospel came to Philippi, it came to a rich and influential city. And it had taken root there and they had grown around the apostles' teaching and they had demonstrated their love for one another.

They had even reached out in care to the apostle and they had been very practical in their care. They had offered him financial help. But now they had begun to suffer for their faith at the hands of those who were outside the church.

And perhaps more troubling, there were a number of teachers who had come into the congregation who were offering a new gospel. Well, that's not quite true.

What they were offering was not a wholesale rejection of the old gospel, but as in many of the other New Testament churches, they were trying to make the gospel more palatable to their current culture.

And there had been genuine conflict within the congregation. Harsh things had been said. There had been disagreement over how to handle the new teaching.

[3 : 37] And old friends had fallen out. And there was danger of disunity in the church at Philippi. And the apostle goes so far as to mention two women by name. And he urges them to demonstrate the humility that they need for one another.

Because in the conflict and in the anxiety, they were in danger of losing that fundamental joy that belongs to those who are in Christ Jesus.

But there is a second dominant theme and it is the gospel, the message of Christ. It was the gospel by which God had created the church.

It was the gospel through which Jesus had revealed himself. It was the gospel by which the Spirit had opened their eyes. So, if you look in chapter 1 in verse 7, Paul says that he wishes to defend

and confirm the gospel.

Or if you look in verse 12, he wants to advance the gospel. Or in verse 16, he wants again to defend the gospel. Or in verse 27, he says to us, he commands us to live lives worthy of the gospel and to strive side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[4 : 51] And the reason is simple. It is because there is no joy apart from the gospel. There is no peace. There is no forgiveness of sins.

There is no life in the Spirit without the gospel. The natural question to ask is, what is the gospel? If you've spent any time in church land, you will know that everyone from John Spong to Jerry Falwell claims to teach the gospel, even though they may be preaching and teaching radically opposing views of Jesus.

And it is the same in Philippi. So, if we are supposed to strive for the gospel and live by the gospel and advance the gospel, what is it? Well, that brings us to our passage this morning, chapter 2, verses 5 to 11, which is one of the most stunning and most remarkable statements of the gospel in all the New Testament.

And what makes it so remarkable is not its beauty and its simplicity or its profound depth, but the fact that it is told from a unique perspective.

We are allowed to enter into the mind of Jesus Christ and into the mind of God the Father. If you go to London, you can go and visit a museum under Whitehall, which was the underground war bunker used by Churchill in the final years of World War II.

[6 : 19] And you know that on the day the war ended, the bunker was sealed and it's only been unsealed just a couple of years ago. You can go down and you can visit the rooms and you can see the daily troop numbers are still on the wall and there's the central table where the command maps are.

And you get a picture of the uncertainty of everything and it's remarkable to be inside the fragility of those final moments. And in these words in chapter 2, we have the stunning privilege of being able to move inside the mind of Jesus Christ to know what he was thinking.

And the apostle begins in heaven and ends in heaven and he speaks about two decisions Jesus made downward and two decisions that God made upward and so that the gospel is this large U-shape from heaven to heaven.

Let's look at this together. Verses 5 to 8 we see what's in the mind of Jesus. Verse 5 Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.

Here's step one. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, here is the second step.

[7 : 42] He humbled himself, became obedient unto death, even death on the cross. So where does the gospel begin? It begins before Bethlehem, before even the world was made.

Jesus is in the form of God and he is equal with God. And the language here is deep and strong and clear. And it speaks of what is rightfully and essentially belonging to Jesus Christ.

In other words, he possesses inwardly and he demonstrates outwardly that he is essentially God. His very nature is God. But here's the point.

Jesus refuses to make a selfish choice. He refuses to take advantage of his divinity, to grasp and hold on to what is rightfully his.

Instead, he chooses to empty himself into the form of a human being. He counts us more important than his own interests.

[8 : 50] It is an act of mind-numbing humility that he takes all the glory and eternity that is rightfully his and gives it away and enters our world.

And you may know that theologians have stumbled on this word emptied himself and you can go to a theological library and you can read books and articles and what exactly Jesus emptied himself of.

And I think most of them, it's a little bit arrogant to say this, and most of them miss the point actually. Because the issue in the passage is not of what did Jesus empty himself, but into what did he empty himself?

I noticed last week in that wonderful hymn by Wesley, we sing that line, emptied himself of all but grace. That is not true. He emptied himself into the form of a servant.

At the moment the Virgin Mary conceived Jesus in her womb, the eternal Son of God emptied himself into the form of a servant to be born in the likeness of men.

[10:05] He does not leave his divinity in heaven, he leaves his position of heaven and his prerogatives that belong to him in heaven and he brings his whole divine nature undiminished to be born a helpless human baby.

The maker of all the worlds, the Son of God, in the form of a fragile baby. Actually, in the form of a fragile embryo.

And if that is not enough to stagger our imagination, there is more. What does the divine Son of God do now that he is a human? How will he use his power as an occasion for himself?

I mean, here is one human being who finally never has to die. He alone is immortal. He possesses life within himself and he has no sin. What will he do with his pristine and peerless life?

He gives it away. He subjects his immortality, his eternity to death. He does not need to die in our place. There is nothing to compare with that humility.

[11:16] He does not need to leave the security of heaven. He does not need to die in our place. He doesn't need to serve us. Particularly, he does not need to die the humiliating death under the curse of God on a cross.

But that is what the gospel looks like from the inside. It's not about me getting my way. It's not about me standing on my rights.

It's not about me expressing myself or finding myself. It is about self-renunciation. It is about the kind of humility that leads to humiliation for the salvation of others.

It's the humility of Jesus giving himself to death for us, even death on a cross. And what is God's response? Well, we enter the mind of God in verses 9 to 11 and we read, I've said this before, but the resurrection of Jesus from the dead and the ascension of Jesus to heaven is not just a happy ending to a difficult story.

It's not as though God rescues his son who is in trouble. The resurrection is a massive value judgment by God the Father.

[12:55] It is God's specific response to Jesus' emptying and humbling of himself. That's the point of therefore in verse 9. It is a statement from the depths of God's heart about who he is, about what God loves, about what it is to live in his world.

Because the work of God from creation to new creation is to humble the arrogant and the proud and to lift up and exalt the humble and the weak.

I'm sorry, he is to humble the arrogant and the proud. That's what I said. And when God exalts the humble, we're not talking about those who have quiet personalities and are inoffensive.

The humble who are those who surrender what is theirs by right, who submit to the obedience of faith and who serve God extravagantly. If we ever want to know the work of God in our lives, we need to empty ourselves.

We need to humble ourselves for the sake of other people. For it is God's delight to exalt us and lift us up. That is the way of life that God honours.

[14:11] And sometimes his honouring and sometimes his lifting up happens in this life, as it did with Abraham and Moses and David, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it waits for the life to come, as with Jesus.

But always God will lift up the humble. And that is why the greatest act of service, here it is, Jesus' self-giving, receives the greatest and highest honour from God the Father.

God's exaltation of Jesus to the highest place comes because it is Jesus' humility and his self-emptying which pleases his heart.

And in that moment when God raised him up, God the Father gave to Jesus Christ what was his very own, his name, Lord, that now Jesus Christ is Lord of all.

I wonder if you would turn back in your Bibles for a moment. Keep your finger in Philippians 2 and turn back to Isaiah chapter 45. This is a very good moment to wake up.

[15:18] On page 641. Isaiah 45, the last part of verse 21.

I want to begin in verse 21. In the last part, God says, there is no other God besides me, a righteous God and a saviour.

There is none besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth. For I am God, there is no other. By myself I have sworn.

From my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return to me. Every knee, every knee shall bow. One of the most powerful statements of the uniqueness of God in the work of salvation and at the day of resurrection, God takes this promise and applies it to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is now Lord of all. Jesus Christ is the centre of God's dealing. Jesus Christ is the pivot of eternity. That's why it's not enough for us to believe in God.

[16:38] Believing in God is not what makes someone a Christian. What makes someone a Christian is that we bow the knee and confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

It's the personal acknowledgement that he is my Lord. And that's why there's absolutely no contradiction between worshipping God the Father and worshipping Jesus Christ our Lord. Do you remember when Jesus was on earth? In John chapter 5 he said this, that God has given all judgment to me that all may honour the Son even as they honour the Father, equally as they honour the Father.

In fact he says, he who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father who sent him. It is impossible to worship God and to live the Christian life and a life that pleases him except as we honour and serve Jesus Christ as Lord.

God has appointed him the centre and the heart of all things and if he is not the centre of our lives and if he is not the centre of our church then what we are doing here is worthless.

[17:51] God is absolutely committed to the honour of his Son and there will come a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess even those who do not wish to.

Satan and those who oppose Christ will not bow in cheerful submission but they will bow. And the obvious question to ask at this point is is this the Jesus whom we worship?

Where does Jesus come in the scheme of things for you? And what do you believe about him? Is he someone to whom you have bowed the knee and confessed with your lips that he is Lord?

And you might think that this is a very good point on which to end the sermon but I need to tell you this is a very bad point and the reason is this that the Apostle Paul tells us the Gospel in this place, in this way for a particular reason and if we miss the point we miss everything.

Last year I read a very grim story it's a fictional story about a Russian scientist and he tries to sell some weapons grade plutonium powder on the black market.

[19:14] He is dying of radiation poisoning he thinks and he wants to make money fast. It's a very grim tale. And so he sells this powder this white powder to a mafia thug and the mafia thug is an awful figure who we come to hate and the mafia thug kills the scientist before he hears what the powder is.

And you know where this is going. Thinking that it's cocaine in one of the pieces of great revenge he takes the powder and sniffs it.

It's fiction. So don't be distressed. Now I tell you that story because it is the same with the gospel. It's like a radioactive core in the book of Philippians and if we take it and do not understand the use and do not understand the point of it it will be positively dangerous for us.

See if you go back to Philippians the statement of the gospel in chapter 2 comes in this section from chapter 127 to chapter 2 verse 18 and it is placed here for two reasons.

It makes two demands on us and the first demand means that we must strive for this gospel. Look at verse 27 of chapter 1.

[20:43] Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that whether I come and see you or am absent I may hear of you and that you stand firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

Those who have most benefited from Christ's emptying and humbling are those who are meant to defend and strive for and advance the gospel.

Whether we like or not like anything that the world stands for and if you believe the gospel it will bring you into conflict. Ever since the church was created by this same gospel the church has been engaged in a battle for the faith of the gospel and I want to say it again this is an essential part of the Christian life.

There is not one single book in the New Testament that does not call upon us to struggle for to war with to battle for to fight for the gospel both inside and outside the church.

Here in Philippi there are enemies and opponents of the gospel and we fool ourselves to think we might be any different. It is Jesus himself who said the world hates me it will hate every single

person who follows me.

[22 : 11] It was the apostle who says everyone all who wish to lead a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted and we can test our understanding of the gospel about how we feel about this exhortation to strive for the gospel.

If that does not fit with your picture of the Christian life I urge you go back into the pasture I think you will find all who love Jesus will suffer persecution and what the apostle is doing here is that he's not just trying to get them to see that there is a fight going on he wants them to make it their own fight and he wants us to make it ours.

It's very interesting isn't it? He doesn't say look you Philippians you go and enjoy your worship you go and enjoy your church life and your music and your stimulation and I the apostle I will do the fighting for you leave it to me if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

Nor does he say your clergy and your leaders they will strive and contend for the gospel you just enjoy your church life no he doesn't. He urges all of them to strive side by side for the faith of the gospel to exert ourselves in the fray.

There is such a thing as the faith of the gospel and we are very fortunate that those who lived in previous Christians strove for the gospel.

[23 : 39] will those who come after us say the same? This is the first reason why it's spelled out in these terms we are to strive for the gospel. But the second reason is perhaps even more difficult and it has to do with humility.

The apostle is not making an abstract theological statement about the nature of Christ. His aim is not to tickle our theological curiosity humility. It is to reveal to us the pattern of true humility which is meant to be the principal mark of every person who follows Jesus Christ.

That's what it is to lead a life worthy of the gospel. Look at chapter 2 verse 2 he says complete my joy by having by being of the same mind having the same love being full accord in one mind do nothing from selfishness or conceit but in humility count others better than yourselves just as Jesus did.

Let each of you look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus. We are meant to treat one another in the same way that Jesus treated us.

The real problem for unity in a congregation is not different opinions it is self-centeredness it is a lack of humility it is holding on to my pain but the gospel is both the power and the pattern for our humility and Jesus' humility is a very specific kind of humility he empties himself and he humbles himself for our salvation and if you are someone who wishes to follow Jesus Christ as your Lord it means that you and I will seek to serve others for their salvation.

[25 : 44] Christian service is not some vague end in itself you'll hear today in the culture that the reason you should volunteer is that you'll do good for others and feel good about yourself that is not what Jesus did and the heart of his humility was obedience to God for the spiritual transformation of other people he gave his life so that we might live he became poor so that we might become rich he willingly and voluntarily stepped under the curse of God so that we might receive his blessing and that is the pattern that you and I are to follow you and I are to be responsible for being engaged with one another we are meant to spiritually care to give spiritual serving to one another the obvious question to ask is what have you done

I mean what downward steps are you taking for the spiritual well-being of the other people in this congregation do you remember when Jesus rose from the dead and he said all authority has been given to me therefore you make disciples of one another baptize each other teach one another everything that I have left with you that is why the church exists and we exist in a world where the one who was crucified is now Lord of all all power and all sovereignty and all rule and authority belongs in his hands they are wielded by the crucified hands by the one who emptied himself and humbled himself to death for us that is our gospel and it is very much worth striving for and it is very much worth living for therefore have unity of spirit sympathy love of one another a tender heart and a humble mind humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that in due time he may exalt you now I can finish

Amen Amen Amen Tú G y en Amen Amen Thank you.