

Philippians CH2 v 12-13

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[0 : 0 0] So now, not only as 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.

There absolutely has to be a connection between the death of Jesus, which we remembered last week, and the way or the manner in which Christians live their lives.

Otherwise, the death of Jesus has no bearing on the reality of the life that you and I live. And otherwise, we are simply left to live our lives as best we can. But the Bible has brought the two together, and the Apostle Paul is absolutely insistent that theology, if you forgive me for using that word, but that means that simply the facts of the death of Jesus has to have a bearing on the everyday way in which I live my life.

And it is hugely important that we know what that connection is. If we lose sight of it, then things go terribly wrong with our Christian lives, both personally and as a fellowship of God's people. Our life is like a window. Window is something that you can look out of or look into. A shop window is created in order to look in. It's usually large, and it's always kept clean.

Have you ever noticed, if you go to these big shops in Inverness, for example, the windows are kept clean every single day. They're cleaned. And that's for a good reason. It's because they are a reflection on what the shop is selling. And if the window is dirty, then it's not a good message.

[3 : 0 0] It means that those who are inside the shop, they don't take things very seriously at all, and they're not very welcoming, and they don't really want you to buy what they want you to buy. But if the window is clean, then we see clearly into the shop. The same applies for the church. We're not trying to sell anything. We're not trying to make any money, but we are trying to bring people to see the greatness, the wonder of Jesus Christ. And so, if they are to see anything of the gospel, then they must be able to see clearly. And there are certain things that obscure the window.

If we don't live lives which are consistent with what we believe, people are looking for a life that is consistent. Their first contact with the gospel is you. They may not know anything about the Bible, but they're looking at you. They know you're a Christian, and they're looking to see a behavior, conversation, a personality which draws them and which gives them an undeniable vision of Jesus Christ. That's what it means to be a witness. I know that we all go wrong. So do I often go wrong in doing this, but yet we've got to keep our eyes upon. Now, this is what was happening in the church, perhaps not so much personally as corporately in their relationships with one another. And we discover at the beginning of this chapter how things were beginning to go wrong, and how the window was beginning to get clouded over, and how the dirt was beginning to appear, darkness was beginning to appear in the window, so that people were having difficulty seeing what the church was all about. And this is what was happening. There was rivalry. There was conceit.

There was pride. That's clear from what Paul says in verse 2. Verse 3, do nothing from rivalry. One person was competing against another, seeing the other person only in terms of, I'm better than him.

He is the competition to me. It can happen very, very easily. Our conceit is when we think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We think in terms of our greatness, and of course comparing ourselves to others, we're greater than someone else. We're better than someone else. But Paul's answer is in humility. The first mark of any Christian is humility. Count yourselves more significant than—count others, rather, more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interest, which is what they were doing, but also to the interests of others. What a challenge these words are, not only to the first century church in Philippi, but to the church in every age, because wherever you get human beings living together, relating to one another, fellowshiping and worshipping together, you get the possibility of rivalry and conceit and pride creeping in. And once that comes to light, then the fellowship is destroyed, and the love is threatened between one and another, and the window gets clouded more and more, and the danger is of things disintegrating altogether.

That's what was happening in Philippi. Philippi started off as a great church, a real thriving community of believers, and Paul is quite clear in his concern that they should continue that way.

[6 : 45] That's what Christ is concerned for in every age. He loves his church. He loves the fellowship of his people. He loves the individuals that make up the church, who he has redeemed and bought with the price of his own blood, and he is determined to see through his church building and extending it all over the world. Now, Paul does something which is so powerful. It's one of the most powerful chapters of the Bible, and it's because of these problems that he does it. He says, stop for a moment. I am going to give you an account of something which ought to rock you to the very core, and it ought to set your life as never before, and it ought to stay in the forefront of your minds from this day onwards.

I am going to tell you what Jesus has done for you, and I'm going to tell you it in terms of how he came into this world from heaven itself, the rights that he had, which were ultimate rights.

Having this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, he was in the very form of God, God himself. He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, because he was already equal with God. It wasn't something that he needed to reach out for. He was already equal with God, but he chose, verse 7, he chose, look at how it puts it, he chose to make himself nothing. Now, that's a form of expression. That didn't literally happen. Jesus didn't become nothing. The second person of the Trinity didn't disappear and become nothing. It's a form, it's an expression that the apostle is using to describe the humility with which Jesus came into this world.

God himself, without beginning and without end, glorious, ultimately glorious in the heavens. He became a fetus in his mother's womb and was born a helpless baby into the world in the manger, in the stable in Bethlehem. But it didn't end there, because he grew up as a servant. He wasn't born as a king with people paying homage to him and giving obedience to him. He was born as the lowest of the low, the servant. He made himself a servant, because he came into this world to do the will of his father in heaven, which was to give his life in all its agony and suffering on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin.

Found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Now, Paul's point is this. What right do you have to be fighting amongst yourselves? What right do you have?

[9 : 57] Having, when you see what Jesus did, when you perceive how Jesus, the very Son of God himself, chose to come into the lowest place on earth and to be a servant, how can you possibly think of yourself more highly than someone else? How can you possibly resort to fighting and competing amongst yourselves, demanding your rights? When Jesus himself left his rights behind and came into this world to give, to give everything, to give it painfully, and to hand himself into the hands of cruel men who nailed him to a cross. That's what he did, and that's our example as to how to live the Christian life, even when things are unjust and cruel and wrong. Then, Paul says, so be it.

The Christian life is often one of suffering, wrong, for the sake of who we are as God's people. Therefore, he says, God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, so that the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Now, that's where, that's the basis of life as a Christian. Therefore, he says, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but much more in my absence, here's how to live the Christian life.

And this is one of these glorious summaries of how to live as God's people. And here it is, work out, he says, your own salvation with fear and trembling. But he doesn't stop there. He goes on and he says, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. I want us to see three things. I don't know if you're a great fan of alliteration, three words beginning with M, but I'm going to do that tonight anyway. Don't always do it, but sometimes it helps us to understand or to rather to remember what we've been thinking about this evening, three words that begin with M.

First of all, there's the mandate. A mandate, of course, is simply an order, a command. And here's the command, work out your own salvation. What does that mean, to work out your own salvation?

That's what we'll be asking. And then the second thing is the manner, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. That's the manner in which Paul expects the church in Philippi to work out their own salvation, fear and trembling. Very different to what they were doing, demanding their rights, exerting their own authority and their own gifts and their own personalities. Didn't matter what other people thought. They were better than other people. They were more gifted than other people.

[13 : 11] They were more important than other people. They saw a pecking order within the church. I'm not quite sure how it worked, but Paul says, however it works, it's wrong. None of us have any rights. The only right that we have is God's punishment because of our sin. None of us have any right to be here. God has done more for us than we could ever have imagined Him to do. And therefore, we have no rights as far as that is concerned, because what should govern our living is fear and trembling instead of the pride with which many of you are living your lives. So, that's the manner. But then the motive in verse 13, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure. That's what the motive is.

And if we thought more about the pleasure of God and the glory of God and the way we live our lives, then we wouldn't be thinking in terms of where we were in relation to other people, whether we're better or worse or where along the pecking order, as far as living the Christian life is concerned.

Every one of us is a servant. Do we think of ourselves basically as servants? What did Jesus do? In John chapter 13, He said, He took the towel, He wrapped it round Himself. He went round the disciples, and He washed their feet. That was the work that was given to the very lowest slave in the household.

He washed their feet. It was so outrageous that Peter said to Him, You'll never wash my feet. So, Jesus said to Him, If I don't wash you, you have no part with me. But then He said, I have done this to you, but you must do it to others. That's the way that you must live your life.

I've set you an example. And the example is that I must live my life not thinking, going about from day to day wondering what other people think of me and whether they respect me or not.

[15 : 18] Instead, to ask, What can I do for that person? Even that person I find difficult to get along with, or that in a natural, sinful way of thinking, I wouldn't choose that person as my best friend. God says, Feet washing. That's God's way.

So, first of all then, what's the mandate? The mandate is to work out your own salvation. Now, we have to stop here and be very careful with what this means, because it does not mean to work for your salvation. There are millions of people in the world tonight who are working for their salvation.

Of all kinds of religion, there are people in other religions who are very dedicated, faithful, diligent, devout people, religious people, but where they're going wrong is they are working for their salvation, and you can't work for your salvation. There are so-called Christian people tonight, and I say that they're Christian in that they have attached themselves to the Christian faith, but sadly and tragically for them, it's only an outside attachment in which they try and work for.

They try to pay a certain amount of money, or they dress a certain way, or they come to church a certain way. They've been baptized, so they're trusting in all of these things. Trusting in the church, trusting in their baptism, trusting in their Christian upbringing. My parents were Christians, so therefore I must be a Christian. I was brought up a Christian, therefore I must be a Christian. No, you are not, because God works on the inside. There's only one way in which a person can be saved, and that is by God's grace on the inside, as God works in a person's heart and transforms that person's heart. And as that person comes by hearing the gospel and the invitation in the gospel to surrender freely and to confess that I am a lost, hopeless, helpless sinner, and there's no other way that I can be saved except through the death of Jesus Christ. That's how a person comes to Christ.

That's how a person becomes a Christian. It is not by trying to earn points with God. You can't do it. So when Paul says, work out your own salvation, he does not mean work for your salvation.

[18 : 09] You have to be very careful when thinking about this. He is saying, you've already got your salvation in Jesus. He's talking to Christians already, people who have already come to surrender to Jesus.

They live by faith already. And he's saying, now you have to start working. You're at the beginning of your Christian life. And just in case you think that you don't have to work it, work out what, how you're going to live your Christian life, you're wrong. I have, I have some news for you. You have to now start knowing how to live the life of a child of God.

So what does working out mean? Well, let me give you some examples of what I believe the apostle is talking about here. He's basically saying, you have your salvation.

You're in Christ. You've come to a relationship with God in Jesus. You've accepted by faith what he does, he's done for you in Jesus. Now, Paul is saying, I want you to think of this in terms of it being a gift. But it's a gift that is given to you in order to be used, to be put to work.

Imagine somebody gave you a brand new car as a gift, free. And you said to that person, well, thank you very much for that car. That is so fantastic. Thank you.

[19 : 49] And then you put it in the garage. And you never, you may look at it from time to time. You may go and look at it every day and say, well, that's the gift. Isn't that a great gift? But if you don't drive it, it's of no use. You haven't put it to work. It's given to you, not for you to put in the garage and look at every so often. It's given to you so that you drive it and use it. Imagine somebody gave you a kit house. Empty piece of land. The kit house come with a lorry and all the timber frames and the bricks and all the materials and the cement and the foundational materials and the slates and the windows and all this kind of thing. And it's all piled up.

You just left it. You could say to somebody, well, I've got my kit house.

But if you haven't built the house, then having the kit house is ridiculous, isn't it?

Christ has given us our salvation to be put to work. It's like a gift. And it has to be spread, put to work in every area of our lives. Everything. Your objective and my objective with the salvation that Jesus Christ has given me is to make sure it reaches every single part of my being, my brain, my heart, my body, my activities, my whole life. Nothing is to be left out. There is no such thing in the Christian life as my time and God's time. There's no such thing as my possessions and God's possessions. There's no such thing as my talents and God's talents. If you're a Christian, everything belongs to God. You've yielded it all to God. You're his slave, his servant, his son, his daughter. You're beloved by him. You're in his service. You belong to him. Your whole life is tied up with Christ, with God in Jesus Christ. And it's important to hear that so that we know and so that we're ready, so that we're prepared and motivated in order to live the kind of life. Because I think sometimes there's a danger of people being converted and, where do I go from here? And they genuinely don't know where they go from here. And it's important to read the Bible because it's only in the pages of the Bible, as we're led by the Holy Spirit, that we discover the kind of life that God wants us to live. And here it is, to work out. He wants the Christian, the gospel to reach every area of our life. So working out our own salvation, a bit like changing a duvet, a cover of a duvet. I can bring you down to a very mundane example. When you change a duvet and cover, it's a nightmare of a job, isn't it? You take the old one off, you go and wash, you take the new one there, and you're trying to stuff this duvet into the cover. And once you've eventually managed to get it in in the right kind of shape, which is incredibly difficult, what you have to do then is you have to shake the whole thing so that the duvet reaches the four ends of the cover.

I'm sure you've all done it. Or it's like making bread. I know I can't make bread, but I'm told that when you make bread, you have to knead the dough so that the yeast, which is essential for it to be bread, it reaches every part of the dough. And you have to knead it and knead it and knead it and fold it and twist it and turn it so that the yeast gets into every part of the dough in order for the bread.

[23 : 53] That's what it means to work out your own salvation, to make sure that what I have reaches every part of my being, to put it to work every part of my being. Now here's the manner, with fear and trembling, you might be surprised that Paul doesn't use the word joy when he's describing how they're to work out their own salvation, especially in the letter to the Philippians, because joy is used extensively throughout this letter. And it's all the more surprising, of course, because if you know anything about Philippians, you'll know that it was written in jail. Paul was in prison when he wrote this, and yet the word that arises time and time again is the word joy. I rejoice. I rejoice. How can you rejoice when you're in a dirty, dingy prison cell? You can if you're a Christian. Not only did Paul rejoice in his prison cell, but he also said in chapter 4, he said, rejoice in the Lord. Doesn't matter where you are, if you're a Christian, if you're a Christian, you're able to rejoice in the Lord. You're not necessarily rejoicing in your circumstances, but he says that there is at root, at the root of your life, a Savior in whom we rejoice no matter what.

And perhaps for some of us, that is really difficult to understand. Well, God doesn't ask us to understand it. He simply tells us that when we belong to the Lord, we are able to rejoice in him somehow. Somehow. And I hope I never talk about these things in any glib way, because I know that there are deep sadnesses. At times when, naturally speaking, it would be utterly impossible impossible to rejoice in anything. And yet, somehow or other, the Lord is able to draw us in his love and to reveal himself to us, his unique love towards us and his care for us in such a way that we're able to rejoice. But that's not the word he uses. He uses fear and trembling.

It's perhaps the very opposite to what you and I would expect him to say at this time. Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling. And yet, if you know the New Testament, you will know how many times that fear and trembling are used. We come across places and people and occasions when there was fear and trembling amongst God's people at something he was doing. I'm not talking about the kind of natural fear that you and I might experience when we're in danger, but I'm talking about a particular fear in which you're struck with awe and wonder at what God is doing. I mean, times like when the angel came to Mary and told her that she was going to have a son, Jesus. We're told that she was afraid, so afraid that the angel had to say, do not fear. Like the shepherds outside Bethlehem, when the night that Jesus was born, they're looking after their sheep, and all of a sudden, this myriad of angels appears suddenly with dazzling, blinding light and starts singing, announcing that the birth of Jesus had taken place. They were terrified. This wasn't a natural fear. This was the fear that they had seen God. This was a natural reaction to their having witnessed something divine. It was the same throughout the life of Jesus. When Jesus walked on the water, the disciples were in the boat. They were terrified when they saw him. They thought it was a ghost. Why?

Because they were confronted by Jesus in his majesty and his power. It was the same when the disciples went to visit the tomb of Jesus, when the angel told them that he wasn't there. They ran away. They fled, Mark tells us, not knowing what to think, and fear. It's the same in Revelation. When John, on the island of Patmos, he met with a glorified Jesus. He said, I fell as one dead. It's not the kind of fear in which you're paralyzed by dread. I think I told you this before. I remember many years ago. The first experience I ever had of a real thunderstorm was way back almost 30 years ago when I went to Utah. I was staying in a hotel in Utah. Of course, they've got extreme weather systems over there. I was woken up in the middle of the night with this incredible noise. I honestly thought that a war had started. These were war planes. And I thought that a missile was going to hit the hotel.

That would be me finished. And I could not move. There was flashing outside. I thought it was explosions taking place. I didn't know what it was. I remember, I'll never forget it. I could not move.

[29 : 19] Frozen to the spot. That's dread. That's not the kind of fear that Paul is talking about here. The fear that Paul is talking about here is the kind of fear that John must have had when the more he saw of what God was and what he was doing, the more conscious he was of the reality of God, the closeness of God, the majesty of God, the love of God, should not produce within us some kind of complacent, casual, some kind of happy feeling.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't rejoice. Paul rejoiced in the Lord. Paul knew what it was to be happy. But notice, this is not what he's saying. Fear and happiness go together. They're not incompatible. Psalm 100 talks about fear and mirth. That's the way that we should be worshiping God.

Are these two elements present in our worship? Joy and fear, hand in hand, one with the other.

I'm not talking about dread. I'm talking about the fear in which God is awesome to us. And we're filled with a sense of the glory and the wonder of what Jesus did for us at Calvary. And as we come in here and we sing his praises, do we stop? Do I stop to take stock? What am I doing? I'm meeting with God, with God's people. It's like the Israelites in the wilderness and the cloud.

If you had been an Israelite and if you had every day you got up and the first thing you saw from your tent was this massive, great, awesome cloud of glory. You knew that was God.

[31 : 15] It must have had an effect upon them. Sadly, I think that it kind of tapered off after a while. They got so used to it. Have we got so used to the gospel that we've lost our sense of healthy fear?

Kind of fear that doesn't drive us away, but the kind of fear that draws us to Jesus. Perhaps we should be asking tonight the Lord to replace that fear, that godly fear within us, because that's what Paul says. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. But lastly, and with this, I'm going to close, for it is God. This is the motive. It's God that works within us.

Perhaps there are two extremes. For some of us, the danger is to think that as a Christian I have to do everything, and I have to earn points with the Lord. No, says Paul, it's not like that at all. It's God that is working within you. It's not just you.

It's God. There's another extreme, another danger in which we might say, well, if it's God, then I don't need to do anything. I don't need to worry about the way I live my life. No, says Paul, that's not right either. You have to work out your own salvation. You have to put the gospel to work in your life. You have to obey. You have to grow in your knowledge of the Bible. You have to ask that the Lord will make himself more and more precious to you, that he will reveal himself to you more and more and more as you live your Christian life and lead you by the hand from day to day. That's what it means to make you a witness to other people. That's why he goes on to talk about, to tell us that our function in this world is to shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of light.

And that goes along with what Jesus said. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hid. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. That's our function, the light of the world. God is not asking us to light up the universe. But he is asking us to be a light, a star. That's what he says, lights in the world.

[33 : 40] Have you ever looked up on a dark, still night where there's no clouds and you see the stars and all their vastness? Sometimes so many of them, they look like a kind of mist, millions of light years away. It's unbelievable, isn't it? It's quite extraordinary. Who can understand it? And yet, it's still dark, isn't it? The night is still dark. And yet, one by one, somehow or other, each individual star is a light and a testimony to the Creator. Well, that's what we have to be, one by one, congregation by congregation, individual by congregation, because it is God who works within us to will and to do. What does it mean that he works within us? It means that God in the Holy Spirit, did you know that if you're a Christian tonight, the Holy Spirit dwells within you? You are indwelt by God, the Holy Spirit, and he's there for a purpose. He's there. His work is to bring us to be more and more like Jesus. So, we're not alone. We're not required. We're not left to do all this by ourselves. We know that the Holy Spirit has taken up residence in each of us to work, to bring to completion what he has started when we came to faith in Jesus Christ, for it is God who works. But look at how he works within us. He works by changing our desires and our dreams and our hopes and our likes and our dislikes. God works within us. And that's why tonight, if you are not a Christian and you feel that you can't let go of something, means so much to you, you feel, well, I'm just afraid that if I become a Christian, I'm going to have to let go of this, can I suggest something to you that you pray about that and ask the Lord to show you how to let go and to change your desires and your sense of priorities, what's important to you, so that he becomes the top priority.

Pray that the Lord will do that because that's the way he works. He changes us to will and to do. He changes the way that our minds work, our motivations, what drives us, what attracts us.

But he also gives us the determination to carry out his will so that at the end of the day, the number one priority for a Christian is this, show me your way.

That's what I want. Not because I think it's my duty to ask you that, but because that's what I want more than anything else in all the world. Please show me your way. Lead me in your path.

Father in heaven, we pray now that you will bring your word to us very powerfully and meaningfully and personally. We ask, Lord, that you will open up our hearts as always to receive your word and faith. Bless it to us, we pray. And as we go out into a world that does not understand us and that is perhaps hostile or indifferent to what we are as Christians, a world in which we are going to have to face testings and challenges. Show us how to meet these, O Lord. Show us how to behave as Christ would have done. In Jesus' name, amen.

[37 : 54] Psalm 25, on page 231, that's the scripture,

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