

Philippians 2:12-18

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight we're looking at the letters of the Philippians, chapter 2. If you want to turn in a Bible, you can feel free to do that. It'll also be up on the screen if you're looking in one of the Pew Bibles, page 981, Philippians chapter 2, beginning at verse 12.

As we go through this passage tonight, if you have questions, you can save them in your mind or jot them down because we'll have a time, as we usually do at the end of our evening service, for you to ask any questions that come to your mind about the sermon passage tonight.

Tonight we're looking at Philippians chapter 2, verses 12 through 18, as we continue through this letter of Paul to his dear friends. So let's read together.

Philippians chapter 2, beginning at verse 12. Paul says this,

Well, if you do any driving around the New Haven area, one of the most striking changes that is going on right now is the construction of the new Pearl Harbor Memorial Bridge, also known as the Q Bridge.

[2 : 07] It's where Route 95 crosses the Quinnipiac River. The bridge is the centerpiece of a massive construction project, which includes widening Route 95 for 13 miles in each total in two directions and redesigning the intersection of Route 95 and Route 91.

Now, even if you don't drive, let me say this to you. This is a project that has needed to happen for a long time. The old Q Bridge was constructed 60 years ago, almost.

It was designed for 90,000 vehicles a day. Now it has to deal with 150,000 vehicles crossing it each day. The intersection between 95 and 91 has been ranked at times one of the 10 worst bottlenecks in the entire country, causing numerous accidents, traffic delays, and frustrations.

But while this project has been needed, it has not always been easy. It started back in 1989, 25 years ago. The Connecticut Department of Transportation initiated a study because they realized that the bridge and the highway would need a major overhaul.

It took 12 years and over 100 alternative proposals being considered and rejected until in 2001 a plan was finally approved. The cost was estimated at \$800 million.

[3 : 27] Well, preparations began for construction in 2001, but then the New Haven City government and the Connecticut Department of Transportation couldn't agree on what to do with two historic buildings that stood in the path of the new bridge.

Well, they figured that one out, finally put the project out to bid, and for six months, nobody bid on it. Because construction companies didn't like the structure of the project and how it was put out to bid.

So then they had to redesign it and cut it up into different pieces. Now the total cost is estimated to be over \$2 billion, more than twice the original estimate.

Now, despite all these complications, when the project will be finally finished next fall, hopefully, it will be pretty amazing, I think.

The new bridge will accommodate five lanes of traffic in each direction. Thirteen miles of Route 95 from Brantford to West Haven, a big bottleneck, a big traffic problem, will be significantly widened.

[4 : 26] And the whole downtown New Haven intersection and exits and on-ramps will be totally redesigned. Instead of a rickety, overcrowded, rusty bridge that as you drive over it, you wonder, will it just start falling into the river as I'm driving over it?

The new bridge will be elegant, solid, and enduring. According to some architects, it's one of the first bridges of its kind in the United States. It's called an extra-dose bridge.

You can go on Wikipedia and find out what that means. It will be the centerpiece of the highway restoration project, facilitating traffic going from north to south and east to west.

Now, even now, though the project... So, some of you are... I don't know, maybe some of you are... You live on campus and you never get more than three blocks off, and you haven't even seen this bridge.

I guess I'll just have to admit this taps into my childhood fantasy of being a civil engineer, which I've never totally lost. And fascination with civil engineering.

[5 : 26] But, anyway, someday you can see it. So, though the project is still unfinished, you can get a glimpse of how amazing it will be. If you're going on 95 North, you take the 34 ramp to New Haven, you get this really neat view of the whole New Haven skyline as you come into the downtown, which you never had before.

Or if you go to the top of East Rock, the new bridge now stands out as a thing of beauty, spanning the water. Or if you look from below at the orange-red steel girders that hold up the bridge, you can see their strength and enduring nature.

Now, tonight in Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul gives a vision of the church as God's new construction project, as a thing of beauty, shining in the midst of darkness, as a solid pathway in a crooked and twisted world.

So, tonight I want to look at three questions that our passage answers. First, why is God's church desperately needed? Second, if it's needed, why is it so hard to build?

And third, why is it worth it, after all? So, first, why is God's church desperately needed? Well, the answer Paul gives is that the church is the visible demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 57] Now, last week we looked at verses 5 through 11, and if you have a Bible open, look up at those verses. There may be the most important verses in this whole book of Philippians, because they summarize the gospel message.

In other words, the basic, central, Christian message from which everything else flows out. It says in verse 6, Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

In other words, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, humbled himself and became a human being. He entered into this world. And then verse 8 goes on to say, he didn't just enter into this world, he humbled himself to the point of dying on a cross.

He poured himself out in obedience to God and in sacrificial love for flawed and sinful people like us. And then, God looked upon what Jesus had done and said, that is true humility.

That is faithful obedience. That is sacrificial love more than anyone else has ever demonstrated or would ever demonstrate.

[8 : 12] That is a sacrifice perfect and sufficient to cover every sin, even the worst. And that is faithful, complete obedience to God worthy of the highest praise.

And so verses 9 through 11 says that God raised Jesus from death to life and he exalted Jesus as the Lord over all. And one day, this Jesus who died on the cross and rose again will rule over everything and all creation will acknowledge his rightful rule.

Every knee will bow and every tongue confess. That's the basic, that's the heart of the Christian message. Now maybe you've heard it before, but let me ask you, it raises a question.

Have you bowed your knee before Jesus? Have you acknowledged him as the rightful Lord over everything, including you? A few years ago, a friend of mine became a Christian in college and he was talking with his dad about faith and his dad was in the military and his dad wasn't very religious. And his dad said, what's the deal with all this Christian stuff? I mean, what are you saying I need to do to become a Christian? I mean, I've heard people talk about accepting Jesus into your heart.

[9 : 30] I just don't get what that means. His son said, Dad, let me put it this way. If you want to become a Christian, you need to swear allegiance to Jesus.

In other words, bow your knee before him and confess that he is Lord. And it made sense. Maybe that's what you need to do tonight to acknowledge Jesus as the rightful Lord and the Savior.

You know, the wonderful promise in the Bible is that anyone who does swear allegiance to Jesus as Lord and Savior is forgiven of their sins and filled with the Holy Spirit and called to be a part of God's mission to restore and renew the world under Jesus' Lordship.

In other words, through the good news, through what Jesus has done, we're called into God's new construction project. The centerpiece of his plan to restore and renew the world.

If you want to carry the analogy on, God the Father is the architect who in his eternal wisdom has laid out the perfect plan. Jesus Christ is the federal, state, and local governments all combined in

one person who is the one supreme authority but also the one who's paid the entire cost through his faithful obedience, through his death and resurrection.

[11 : 06] And we are the construction workers who have the great privilege and responsibility of being part of God's plan to restore and renew the world under the Lordship of Jesus.

It's a high and holy calling. That's what the church is meant to be, the visible demonstration of what Jesus has done in his death and resurrection. A people who proclaim this message and are defined by this message and go into the world with this message and a people whose lives are gradually being shaped and transformed and changed by this message of Jesus who humbled himself to the point of death and was raised to life as Savior and Lord.

So that's why the church is necessary because it's a visible demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's why Paul says in verse 12, therefore, at the beginning of this section, everything comes back to this gospel of Jesus that shapes what we do.

So that's why the church is necessary. It's a visible demonstration of the gospel. But second, if building the church is necessary and it's what God has always intended to do, why is it so hard? Maybe you can relate to this. Maybe you've been part of churches that have had lots of struggles. Maybe you stopped going to church for a while because you got fed up with it. Or you felt like maybe it's not worth it.

[12 : 37] Why is building the church so hard? Well, Paul acknowledges that's hard. In verse 12, he says, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Now, notice, he doesn't say work for your salvation.

That's not possible. Salvation is a gift from God by grace alone. But he does say work out or live out the salvation that you have in Jesus with fear and trembling, with reverent awe and godly fear.

In other words, living out the gospel or working out the implications of your salvation is not an easy task. If you've ever worked on designing a skyscraper or constructing a bridge or even just building a house or even just repairing a room, it's a complicated project with all kinds of potential pitfalls.

Sometimes lives are at stake. It's a challenge. And Paul acknowledges that living out the gospel is not easy. And he points to two particular challenges that we face in building God's church.

First of all, in verse 14, he says, do all things without grumbling or disputing. You know, that's been one of the most difficult parts of this whole bridge project that has caused years of delays is that the state government, the local government, the construction company just haven't been able to agree sometimes.

[14 : 15] It's taken a long time. And one of the biggest challenges that we face in the church is the same thing. Grumbling and disputing. It's the pitfall that the people of Israel fell into when they walked through the desert after God had saved them out of Egypt in the Old Testament.

And it's the same words that are used in the Old Testament. They were grumbling or complaining against Moses and disputing or accusing God of not caring about them and wanting to accuse God of doing them wrong.

And Paul says don't fall into the same trap that they did. And sometimes we need to hear this reminder sometimes over and over. Sometimes I've even quoted this verse to my kids.

But you know I imagine I'll have to either quote it or convey the same idea over and over and over again. And you know what? I need to hear this verse over and over and over again.

Just yesterday I failed. I did the exact opposite with my wife. I was a contentious complainer.

[15 : 32] Back in chapter 2 verses 1 through 4 Paul calls us to humility. He says preferring one another above ourselves. Seeking not only our own interests but also those of others.

You know this can be I mean it's very simple. There's no theological debate about what this verse means. Do everything without arguing or disputing or however it translates it.

Grumbling or disputing. It's very simple but it's hard to put into practice. And that's why Paul returns to this theme so often and reminds us of what Christ did in humbling himself and sacrificing himself for us and saying that very same mind that was in Christ Jesus let that be in you by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So that's the first challenge we face is disunity grumbling and disputing. The second challenge we face is transitions. Now for the church in Philippi Paul had been the major leader who had begun the process of building the church and in one sense for a time it might have seemed like Paul was the one who was holding this together.

He was sort of like the head of the construction firm that got the project going. But in this passage Paul reminds them in a couple places I won't be around forever.

[17:04] In verse 12 he says not only as in my presence but much more in my absence. He refers to him being absent from them. And in 17 and 18 he actually talks about the possibility of his own death.

In fact it's the inevitability it's only a question of when not if. Paul says I'm not going to be here with you forever. I'm not going to hold you guys together.

But whether or not I'm here the calling of God on your life hasn't changed. that's why he says work out your own salvation. It's not me who's going to hold everything together.

I was given authority from God to care for you and oversee you but I'm not the ultimate overseer of this project. I'm not going to carry this work from beginning to end.

Only God is. You know sometimes this can be hard if there's a leader that you respect or a Christian mentor or a friend that you look up to who's invested in you and for whatever reason they move on or maybe they pass away or maybe you have to move somewhere else and they're not part of your life anymore.

[18:25] And maybe you come to a new church and you haven't as hard to feel as hard to connect with people and you feel like I don't know if it's going to be what it was.

And Paul encourages them I'm not the one who started this project. God is the one who started this project and God is the one who's going to carry it to the finish.

It's hard to build the church of God. We have to face the challenge of the temptation to disunity and we have to face the challenge of transition.

But Paul says in the end, Paul says it's all worth it. It's necessary, it's hard, but in the end, it's worth it. Verse 13, he says it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

God the Father made the plan from eternity past. Jesus Christ paid the cost and we are the workers, but that's not it. God the Holy Spirit dwells in us and empowers us to get the job done.

[19:40] And when Jesus left and went back to heaven, he didn't just leave it up to us. He didn't just say, over to you, you all can figure it out.

He sent the Holy Spirit to be another comforter, another helper, just like Jesus had been with his own disciples, carrying them through, watching over them, reminding them of the truth.

And he sent the Holy Spirit into our lives to do just that. Philippians 1, verse 6 says, he who began a good work in you and among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

What God has started, he's going to finish. And even if it's in a work in progress now, God's not going to let it go.

And that's a word of encouragement to us, that what God has started in your life, by bringing you to Jesus, by drawing you near to Jesus, he's going to continue and carry on.

[20:50] And he's faithful to his promise. You know, just like Paul, we live in a crooked and twisted generation. We live in a city that's divided by mistrust between people of different races and different political ideas and different education levels.

We live in a society that increasingly lacks a foundation for clear moral guidance. We live in a world that's broken and messed up. And in the midst of this world, God has called us to be a people who shine as lights in the world.

That word can be translated like stars in the sky. You know, do you remember long ago when God talked to Abraham and he brought him outside on a clear night and he said, look up at the sky and see if you can count the stars.

And that's how many children, descendants, offspring, that's how many children I'm going to make out of you. That's how big your family is going to grow.

And he wasn't just talking about Abraham's physical descendants, right? Because Abraham's descendant was Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ says, anyone who believes in me becomes a child of God, a part of God's family.

[22:13] And so Paul's saying, this is what God's doing in the church. As he's fulfilling the promise to Abraham, a people like the stars in the sky.

But you know, also in the ancient world, we don't think of it as much today, because we have GPSs and all kinds of other navigational tools, but if you were a sailor and you were lost at sea, you look up at the stars, and the stars show you where to go.

Because the stars don't change, they're low, well the stars, I understand there's orbits and all that stuff, but basically the stars stay put. They don't switch their formation around.

They reliably point you in the right direction. And Paul's saying that's what the church is called to be, a people who stand firm, and who can light the way, and who can show the way to a world that's lost, and who can point the way back to God through Jesus Christ.

We're called to be God's new construction project, a living demonstration of the gospel, a living demonstration in the present of what God's glorious kingdom will look like in the future.

[23 : 28] A thing of beauty shining in a dark world, and a solid pathway. That's God's vision for his church. Now I know, we're still a work in progress.

If you were around here ten years ago, do you remember what the new Q Bridge looked like? It looked like a few big mounds of dirt that they were, for some reason, they started by making these big huge mounds of dirt in the middle of Route 34 and some other highways.

And you look at them and you're like, what in the world is going on? There's these big piles of dirt. But actually now, that's where the new exit ramps are going on.

Right? Or even if you remember five years ago, you know, it's a long process to get this construction work done.

And you know, as a church, we're a work in progress. We're not the finished product. Okay? If you're hoping for a perfect church, we're not it. And you know what?

[24 : 35] If we were perfect, you would spoil it anyway. But we are a church that's a work in progress. For the glory of God. I want to end by sharing a story about God's work in this particular church.

I shared it this morning, so if you're here this morning, you hear it twice. But it fits with this passage tonight. And I hope it encourages you as we conclude. So 15 years ago this fall, Trinity Baptist Church had 20 members and no pastors and no building to meet in.

We're renting a space. The church has existed since the 70s, but it had gone through a split in the mid-90s and it had barely survived. And so the members thought, you know what?

We've tried to make this work. We've given it what we can, but maybe it's just time to close down. And so they called a meeting. The church council called a meeting to discuss how to gracefully close the doors.

Well, at 1030 that morning, October 12 of 1999, the wife of the chairman of the church council got a phone call from her neighbor. Said, are you guys still looking for a pastor?

[25 : 43] She said, well, I guess so. He said, well, we interviewed this candidate at our church and he wasn't quite the right fit for our church, but we think he's a great candidate and we think that you should consider calling, inviting him to be your pastor.

Well, the church council decided to change their agenda that evening from deciding how to close down to deciding how to call a new pastor and get him over here from the UK, from another country. Right? And most of the church members had never met him in person. Well, we'll probably never call a pastor in quite the same way again. But that was the first step in what's in an amazing work of God, to restore and renew this church so that we can hold fast to the word of life and hold out the word of life to the city of New Haven.

You know, God has been faithful to us in the past and he's begun a good work among us and he promises to continue that work. So brothers and sisters, let us work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that it is God who works in and among us.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this glorious calling that you've set before us to be lights in the world, to be like stars in the sky, pointing the way to life, holding fast to your word.

[27 : 22] Lord, you know the challenges that we face, you know the challenges that each of us face. Lord, you know the ways that we can become discouraged. We pray that you would encourage us by the power of your Holy Spirit.

Lord, that you have called us into fellowship with each other and with you and you're going to continue the good work that you've begun and bring it to completion. Give us that great assurance and Lord, may that strengthen us to walk faithfully with you each day.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.