

Working Out What God Works In

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[0 : 00] A few years ago, I had a stress test. If you haven't had a stress test, it's a test where you go to your doctor and they put electrodes on you and they test your systems.

They put you on a treadmill to get your heart rate up and they test your blood flow and allows the doctors to take various measurements to see how your heart is working, how it's pumping, its effectiveness.

I'm sure there are doctors here who could give a much more detailed description of what that's about. But it points to something that's, I think, a more universal principle, which is this.

When you put significant pressure or stress on something, the strength of that substance is put to the test. When you work out your heart on the treadmill, it tests it to see how strong it is, to see what it really is, whether it's strong or not, whether it's healthy or not.

The passage that we read earlier in Exodus 16 shows us God taking the people of Israel through a stress test.

[1 : 04] Remember the context of the Old Testament story. God had come and worked miraculously to deliver Israel from slavery to Egypt.

He worked with a mighty hand to break the power of the Egyptians and to allow the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, to go free. And as they were leaving, remember, he continued to provide for them in miraculous ways.

He parted the Red Sea in order for them to pass through and then bring it back together in a way that destroyed the army that was chasing them and set them into a wilderness journey.

But during that wilderness journey, as they were in the desert, what did they do? Rejoice that they were free? No. They grumbled and complained.

They lost sight of what they knew of God. They lost...they forgot what they had seen and heard from God. And the pressures of the moment clouded their understanding and their knowledge of God, and they turned on Him and on one another.

[2 : 17] And thus began 40 years of wandering in the wilderness as God led them again and again through this stress test to see what was in their heart. It strikes me that today we are no different.

God is giving us a stress test of various kinds. I don't know what it looks like in your life. My life this year, my computer died. My chimney needs repairs.

And I could go on, as I'm sure you could. You've been injured. You've gotten sick. You're facing a serious medical issue or chronic condition.

Maybe you've suffered job loss. Maybe your schooling is not going the way you want it to, or your career feels like it's sputtering. And in my experience, these kinds of stresses are nothing compared to the relational stresses in our lives.

When those that we love or depend upon have disappointed or hurt us. When wrongs have been committed but not owned up to and repented of. When we have disagreements and miscommunications, etc.

[3 : 24] Those kinds of stresses even more so test my heart. How easy it is in those moments to grumble and complain.

How easy it is for our eyes to be fixed on the immediate circumstances around us. What we see and feel. And we become consumed by managing and navigating those things.

And our hearts always turn, not to God, to remember Him. But to grumbling and complaining. It's so easy to justify it, isn't it?

You don't know how hard it is. I deserve to grumble and complain about this. We all know that this is true in our hearts. And Paul is writing his letter to the Philippians because they too are facing pressures.

They're facing some external opposition. Suffering for being citizens of the gospel in a city that's enamored with being citizens of Rome. And the pressure that's coming in there is the particular stress test that they are facing.

[4 : 29] And they too seem to be in danger of or have fallen into the pattern of grumbling and complaining. And this is the backdrop for our passage this morning.

So we're going to continue in our series in the book of Philippians. Philippians 2. And if you want to turn there, we're in Philippians 2. We're going to be looking at verses 12 through 18.

Philippians 2, chapters 12 through 18. And remember, as you're turning there, if you want to look it up in the pew Bible in front of you, just remember the context.

We have just talked about in verses 6 through 11 the amazing truth of Christ. That the humble Christ submitted himself to God.

Suffered indignity, loss, humanity, and even death for us. And then God took this humble servant and exalted him as the Lord over all.

[5 : 29] And it is out of this that this passage flows. So let's look at it together. Let's read it and then we'll pray and then we'll dive in. Philippians 2, 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 labor in vain.

And 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.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for this word. We thank you for the encouragement that it is. We thank you for the instruction that it gives. Lord, I pray this morning.

[6 : 56] I pray for your help as I proclaim your word, that you would give me clarity of words and of thought, that I would communicate well the truth of your word. I pray for us as a congregation that we would sit together under your word, receiving it.

And Lord, may we in the midst of this, Lord, see you in all of your splendor and glory. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

The main idea of this passage is actually fairly simple in some ways. In light of all that Christ has done and in light of all that Christ is for us, Paul's message for us is this, that God is calling us to work out what he has worked in us.

That's a broad outline. What we're going to do is look at it in two steps. The first step is verses 12 and 13, where we're going to look at this idea, this main idea of working out what God has worked in. And then verses 14 through 18, we're going to get specific.

Paul says, this is how we're meant to work it out. This is a particular way or expression of what he wants us to do, what God is calling us to do. So, first, let's look at this main idea in verses 12 and 13.

[8 : 12] Look at it with me again. There we go. As we look at this passage, we want to say first that the audience is very clear.

Paul is talking to the church. He is talking to believers. And he is saying, because you are in Christ, because I have already seen this pattern of life, that you have followed Christ and obeyed him, I want to encourage you to keep going.

Keep going and living out of this salvation that God has given you with fear and troubling. Work it out, is what he says. And it might be that our first reaction to this is, wait a minute.

This is not the gospel that Paul had preached. This is not the gospel of grace. Charles Spurgeon, 19th century preacher, has a great breakdown to help us think about there are two different aspects of our salvation that we need to distinguish at times in the Scripture.

And this is one of those times. The first aspect of our salvation is that God has done a work for us. God has done something for us in Christ, in his life and death and resurrection.

[9 : 36] He has broken the power of sin and death. And by grace, he has applied it to our lives that has nothing to do with our works at all. And that's the glory of the gospel of grace that we believe in.

That God has rescued us from our sin apart from anything that we could do. And so we remember things like Ephesians 2, 8, and 9. For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast. And that's the gospel of grace. But that's not particularly... Paul's saying that's the salvation that you already have.

And then, as Spurgeon says, there's a second aspect of it, which is then God is taking what he has done for us and he is working it into us. God is doing a work in us, the ongoing work of what we call sanctification.

Becoming more and more aligned with what God has already done. Expressing the salvation that we already have. Not earning it, but inhabiting it more and more and more.

[10 : 43] These are new patterns of living that flow from knowing the love of Christ and the certainty of salvation and the freedom of forgiveness and the hope of eternity.

Paul has given us already some exhortations about what this might look like. To be humble, to serve one another, to be self-denying, not self-exalting.

And Paul says that we're called to do this with fear and trembling. And again, fear and trembling to us might mean cowering and being afraid of punishment. But again, because of what Christ has done, we're not afraid of punishment per se.

But instead, we are captivated by the awe of a Savior who humbled himself to die for us and is now exalted above all. And yes, there will be a judgment for believers, but it will not be a judgment of ultimate punishment.

And we are to respond to him in awe, not in terror. In devotion, not in duty. As he calls us to live this out. Paul goes on though, he not only says, this is what you're supposed to do.

[11 : 53] Work out your salvation. But he says, in verse 13, here's the good news. God is at work in you. And the wonderful thing about it, the way he phrases this in Greek is really cool.

Because he's not just saying, God is at work in you. He's saying, in verse 13, for it is God, he is the working one. He is the one. It is about God, not the work that he's doing, but it's actually about himself.

God is working in you. The working one is at work in us to do this very thing that he's called us to do. What good news it is.

We may man the oars and raise the sails, but God is filling our lives with the wind of his Holy Spirit. With the power of his presence. So that we might actually carry out all the things that he calls us to.

His desire is for us to be a people who know the fullness and goodness of life with him. So Paul says, work this out.

[12 : 57] The salvation of what he's done for you. Work it out in your lives, for he is at work in you. Now we're going to spend a few minutes thinking about what does that look like in just a second.

But I want to pause. Because this is a passage where we see the two nodes of God's sovereignty and human responsibility in play. And I think it's often that we in our human minds think that God's sovereign work and our agency of will are somehow in conflict.

That it's either one or the other. But we can't have both working clearly. But I just want you to look at this passage and say, Paul sees no conflict.

He calls us to engage every faculty we have to work out our salvation. And then he says, for it is God at work in you. Enabling you. Empowering you.

And allowing you to do the very thing that he is calling you to. And yes, there is a mystery here. And yes, there are good philosophical questions for us to plumb the depths of to try to figure this out.

[14 : 01] But rather than getting hung up on the, well, is this me or him working? Let us instead rejoice that we have a God who is at work in us. That the very thing he calls us to, he's also working in us to enable us to do.

I think that's how Paul would want us to respond to these questions. So having taken that little exorcist, then what is it that God wants us to do?

What does this look like? How does Paul apply it to the Philippians and us? There are three things I see in verses 14 through 18. We're going to look at these in order. First, verse 14, do not grumble or dispute so that you will shine like stars in a dark world.

The language he uses here, do not grumble or dispute, is exactly the same words that are used in the Greek translation of Exodus 16 that we read earlier. Paul brings the whole story of the nation of Israel forward into this passage in lots of ways.

I'm not even going to point out all of them, but it's a really cool passage where all of this vocabulary, which is unusual in the New Testament, but is resonant from the Old Testament story of how Israel lived.

[15 : 14] And remember what we said about them. They lost sight of God and his powerful work of salvation and his ongoing presence with them. And in the midst of that, they grumbled and complained.

And this grumbling and complaining isn't just our griping, isn't just our moaning or gossiping, but it's a faithlessness. It's an untrusting with a critical and accusatory attitude.

This grumbling and complaining isn't just saying, man, this is hard. But it's when bitterness begins to set in our hearts and where we begin to blame, when we begin to accuse, when we begin to forget God is sovereignly working in our lives and instead turn on him and others.

And this kind of grumbling and complaining is a cancer to our hearts. It turns us away from God rather than towards him. It turns us away from his grace and towards our own circumstances.

It also becomes a poison in our community. When we grumble and complain in our own hearts, it's bad enough. When we grumble and complain with one another, it spreads like a poison.

[16 : 28] And we turn others away from God as well. So I want to ask you the question, when the pressure is on, what happens in our heart?

Is it joyful submission, faith-filled perseverance, loving service to others? Do we accept suffering, embrace hardship as a part of following Christ?

Because Paul says that there's a purpose for not grumbling and complaining. When we're able to take hold of this call to not be this way, then we are being who we ought to be.

Blameless, people of good repute, innocent as Adam was, not knowing good and evil. And Paul says, therefore, we are shining like lights in a world of darkness as God's children.

The Bible commentator, Alain Mottier, there we go. He's Irish, not French. Mottier says this, light is a beautiful illustration of something that does what it has to do by being what it ought to be.

[17 : 38] Paul calls us to do what we have to do, that is to be this shining light in the world by being blameless and pure, by avoiding or forsaking grumbling and complaining, because that flows from who we are.

And when we are who we are, the children of God in this world, then we shine like lights. We are separate. We are separate from the world around us, and we are able to bring the hope of the gospel and the light of the glory of Christ.

What a contrast that we might be faithful, contented, joyful people in the midst of all the pressures that we face. Now, before I go on, I want to say a few caveats.

It does not mean that we do not address in constructive ways things that aren't going well. It does not mean that we ignore or deny evil or wrongdoing, or pretend that there is not suffering and hardship in the world.

Paul acknowledges those things strongly. In fact, he says we live in a crooked and twisted generation. We live in a place, in a world that is out of sync with God's goodness and His good plan for the world.

[18 : 50] So, of course, these things are going to happen. And interestingly, those words are another place in Deuteronomy 32, where God has accused Israel of being a twisted and crooked generation.

And Paul's taking that language and saying, that's what the Old Testament people of God were, and they failed. But you now, with the Holy Spirit, have the ability to be the lights that God always intended His people to be.

Paul says, Christ has shown us a way to live. When we put our sufferings and our trials, the pressures that we face, in the context of God's work of salvation, we are able to walk dark roads and difficult paths with steadfastness, not allowing our lips to loose in complaining, or our hearts to harbor resentment.

You all may know the story of Helen Rosevear, the missionary to the Congo in the mid-20th century. If you don't, you should. Look her up on Wikipedia. Find some of her biographies.

Read her books. She's a wonderful person. John Dunlop actually knows her. So you can—he worked with her briefly. So you can get some firsthand stories if you want. But Helen Rosevear talks about the hardships that she faced and the sufferings that she endured during her missionary work.

[20 : 10] But she would use a word for it as she walked through her ministry. That was striking to me as a new believer. She said this. One word became unbelievably clear.

And that word was privilege. He didn't take away pain or cruelty or humiliation. No, it was all there.

But now it was altogether different. It was for him, with him, and in him. He was actually offering me the inestimable privilege of sharing in some little way the edge of the fellowship of his suffering.

Which is a phrase that we'll see again in Philippians chapter 3 verse 10. Do you hear what she said? When she looked at her circumstances, which were really terrible, through the lens of the gospel, she could say this is privilege, not grumble and complain.

May that be true of us as well. So Paul says first, to work out our salvation is to, with eyes of faith, see the gospel so clearly and see who we're called to be in Christ so well that we don't grumble and complain, but that we shine like stars.

[21 : 33] The second thing is what we see in verse 16, that we are to hold fast and hold forth the word of truth. What does he mean here? He means we want to make the gospel, or the truth of Christ, our lenses for how we see the world.

We want to put on gospel glasses to see everything. And this is what we've already seen in verses 6 through 11 about what Christ has done for us.

The cross reminds us that God's love for his people is unquestionably steadfast and sacrificial. The cross reminds us that God's power to save is sure and sufficient.

The cross reminds us that God's sovereign care will lead us through suffering to glory. The cross reminds us that God's holiness and his grace show us how we are to live as his people.

So Paul says to work at our salvation is to hold to this gospel lens over and over again. To look to Christ in the midst of our circumstances.

[22 : 43] There are lots of things that we're going to face in life that we're not going to be able to solve, that we can't be in control of, that we can't fix and change. And the only way that we're going to make it through and shine like stars is by holding fast to this gospel lens.

There is a God in heaven and he has sent his son Jesus and that is the most important thing. And we find everything else finding its place around that.

We might be tossed by every wind and wave of present times. We might be discouraged and downcast as we see the church stumble. We might be personally overwhelmed with grief, hurt, loss, or anger.

But when we look at Christ, these truths will keep us. They will keep us in Christ and they will keep us and allow us to live out the salvation that we have in him.

And this word holding fast or holding forth, it could mean either way. And so it's both us clinging to it, but it's also us holding it out for others. Because when we know this, we are able to shine like stars for others.

[24 : 01] Our character and our behavior under the pressures of life, this is the voice that we have in the midst of darkness and suffering to hold out to others and say, yes, this is a terrible, hard world that we live in, but there is a God in heaven and a salvation in Christ that allows us to walk through all of these things.

When the gospel is the thing that we cling to, then we are a light in the world and we're able to hold it out for others as well. So working out our salvation is these things, not grumbling as if God were not there and holding fast to the word of life.

But there's one more theme. This is a theme we've actually seen a lot in Philippians and we're going to come back to it in future times as well. But where Paul pulls from his personal relationship to the Philippians, a church that he loves, say this is the, and to point to a third way where he's going to work, encourage them to work out their salvation and for us to have the same, hear the same call.

The third thing is verses 17 and 18, that we would work out our salvation by rejoicing in the mutual glory of the gospel life, including its suffering.

Paul says in this section, suffering for the gospel is not just my path, like I'm a unique individual, an apostle that only I will suffer in.

[25 : 29] He says, you too have suffered with me and are suffering now because of the gospel. Paul says in verse 17, even if I am poured out like a drink offering, this is a sacrificial image from the Old Testament where the drink offering will be poured out on the altar.

And in that sense of pouring out is a sense of emptying and it is a sense of giving up one's life. Paul uses it to embrace the suffering of a gospel-shaped life, that he pours out his life for others to the point where heat may be emptied so that they may be full of the gospel.

Paul says, if I am going to suffer for you, even if I am going to suffer for you, I am not going to grumble and complain, but instead, I will rejoice. I will do it all for you, for your good.

And I invite you to do the same as you endure suffering, as you endure the pressures of life, as you feel the squeeze, and as you are tempted to grumble and complain.

Instead, rejoice because of this suffering for the gospel is something that we share in together and allows us to see Christ more clearly.

[26 : 51] And it's not just each of us individually doing this, but it's us corporately together. Paul is saying, I rejoice with you and you rejoice, I call you, rejoice with me in what God is doing.

that even in the midst of this stress test, what might be proven is not even the greatness of our faithfulness, but the joy of our salvation, the finished work that Christ has done for us, working itself out in our lives so that it might be shown not only to one another, but to the world.

What an amazing salvation that we have in Christ. for, of course, friends, the only way we can walk this route is by looking to Christ.

Remember Christ who in Hebrews 12 says, for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Remember Christ who did not count equality with God, something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. He humbled himself, took on human form, was obedient to death, even to death on a cross for us.

[28 : 06] And therefore, God has highly exalted him. He has vindicated Christ in his life and set him above all things so that the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess.

And friends, we will never live a life that does not grumble and complain unless we see the glory of Christ in his humiliation and his exaltation until our hearts are caught up in it.

When we fix our eyes on that, when we gaze at that daily in personal meditations, weekly as we gather as a church, this is what gives us the ability and the empowerment to live the life that God calls us to so that he might be pleased.

So that the world might know what a great salvation we have. This is the way of Christ for us. So let us consider the pressures that we're under and look to Christ.

May we work out our salvation so that our lives might shine like stars with the glory of the gospel and the hope that is ours in Christ and the love of God the Father.

[29 : 24] Let's pray together. Lord, we start this morning by confessing that we are people who are prone to grumble and complain.

Lord, how easily, Lord, we lose sight of you and in doing so, Lord, turn away from the truth and the hope of the gospel.

Oh, Lord, have mercy on us this morning. Lord, show us where there may be a wicked way in us as Dave prayed earlier. Help us to see where we have lost sight, where we have lost our gospel lenses, where we have loosened our grasp on the word of truth.

And Lord, we pray this morning that as we repent of those things that we would turn to you and know the joy of our salvation, to know the joy of following in your footsteps, to know the joy of fellowship with you, yes, in suffering, but also in death, and yes, even in death, but also then in resurrection and glory.

Lord, be with us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.