



Catalog No. 1707  
 Philippians 2:12-18  
 Seventh Message  
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 May 3rd, 2009

## FAITH WORKING IN PRACTICE

In sporting contests, what always attracts my attention is the test under pressure. Athletes study, train and prepare, they expend many hours in practice, and then there comes that moment when they have to implement what they have learned under pressure. Can they get a hit in the bottom of the ninth with a runner on second and the score tied? Can they make the shot with 5 seconds left in the game? Can they make the putt on the last hole to win the tournament? When athletes succeed in those kinds of circumstances, it's a thing of beauty to me. I always wonder how did they do it.

The apostle Paul makes use of several athletic metaphors in his letter to the Philippians, indicating that the body of Christ is like a team in competition. Pressure is brought to bear from many directions, both internal and external. These pressures can weaken, distract, and undermine spiritual community. And yet, God intends his people to do something beautiful in the world. How can this happen? How does this work out in practice? Today we will talk about faith working in real life.

We conclude a critical section of Philippians before we leave this book for a while. Paul's personal comments at the end of chapter 2 actually conclude the first half of the book, but we will use that section to help get started again in the fall on the second half of the letter.

In this critical section, from 1:27-2:18, Paul makes an appeal to Christians to unity, to strive together for the progress of the gospel. He urges us to have a common mind-set of humility, of putting other people's interests above our own, of dying to self. He then talks about Christ as the ultimate expression of humility through his death on a cross. Here Paul returns to his appeals and exhortations. Our text breaks down into three sections.

### I. The Call to Obedience

**So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (2:12-13 NASB)**

This well-known verse is troubling to some, so it is important to deal with it correctly. Paul addresses the faithful in Philippi as "my beloved." This is the first of three times he uses this term, and we are reminded of his deep affection and fondness for this community. They enjoyed a special, long-term bond.

The appeal is to obedience. The Philippians have always been obedient in the past, and Paul desires them to be obedient in the present. He wishes he could be with them to head off any tension among them and to encourage them in their striving together for the advance of the gospel in pagan-saturated Philippi. But he can't be with them since he is in prison. So he challenges them to be obedient to God in his absence, to take responsibility for their "own" salvation.

The words "so then" give the context for this obedience. The appeal is based on what Paul has just said about the mind-set demonstrated by Christ. Previously he had exhorted the Philippians to have the common mind-set of humility, of dying to self. This was demonstrated in Jesus, who although he was pre-existent with God and equal to God, emptied and humbled himself and became obedient to die on a cross. The verb "to obey" in verse 12 is the same as we saw in verse 8, where Jesus was obedient to death. To obey means to hear and take action.

Specifically, Paul urges the Philippians to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling." This phrase has caused a lot of difficulty and has been misinterpreted to mean that we must work hard, doing good works, in order to be saved or to maintain our justification. This is not what Paul is talking about. He is not going back to the beginning. The Philippians were believers, saints in Christ Jesus, already.

Salvation here doesn't refer to the beginning of the spiritual journey or the end. It refers to the ongoing maturing or process of salvation. Paul is urging the Philippians to live out their salvation in Philippi—to work it out, to put it into practice. In appealing to obedience he is not referring to a specific set of rules. He is urging a complete and total surrender to the lordship of Christ, following his example of selfless living.

The attitude of the working out of faith in reality is one of fear and trembling. This doesn't mean that we are to fear what might happen to us if we don't obey. Rather, we hear in these words an echo of the Old Testament. This is the attitude of a person in the presence of God—the attitude of the fear of the Lord. Paul uses these same two words in Ephesians 6 to describe the attitude that a slave is to have towards his master, as if his master was Christ himself. In other words, it means to take God seriously, to have an attitude of holy awe and wonder. The Christ we follow is the one to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that this one is Lord. We live in constant awareness of the one we are called to serve. We

don't live our gospel lives casually or lightly. Everything we do makes a difference.

The swine flu has everyone on edge these days. Schools are closing, vacations getting cancelled, people are not shaking hands. There is a sense of fear— probably a media-produced, heightened sense of fear. But there is also an attitude that this could be serious, so we are altering our behavior and plans quite willingly. Can you imagine if we lived with such an attitude in our relationship to God and our willingness to be his servants? Can you imagine people being so serious about eternal things that they were lining up at churches to ask how to be saved?

Why are we to work out salvation in fear and trembling? Here is the ironic twist: it is God working in you. We have fear and trembling because God is in our presence, living, working, saving, blessing. He is the one who is both willing and working. First, God changes our willing, our desire for a new way of living. Second, he provides the power to put in motion our renewed understanding of life. He is the empowering presence that takes our willingness to serve and puts it in into effect, giving energy to our desires. All of this takes place by God's will for God's pleasure, i.e., for his delight and glory.

How is the church able to stand the test under pressure and succeed in being what God has called it to be? It is because God is at work. Our life is God's working from first to last. And yet we are not totally passive. We are involved in working out our life in Christ, checking our heart and our attitude, but the burden is not on us to be successful, only to trust. The outcome is not dependent on our strength or effort. We are a work in progress, but it is God who is working.

It is hard to find an illustration for how this works. But here is one I will try on for size. When my son was young he played baseball and I coached. Kids start by playing T-ball and then move on to live pitching. Before they get to pitch, however, each coach pitches for his own team. Most of the coaches pitched underhand, trying to make the pitch more hittable by lobbing the ball. I never did that. I threw the ball overhand and a little harder, so that the pitch height didn't vary. I had a good aim and I knew how each of my kids swung the bat. In other words, I could make a pitch that I was certain my player could hit. We annihilated teams! The result was not due to my players' ability, however. When the kids had to pitch, we lost. The result was due to my ability to pitch the ball where they would hit it. All the batter had to do was swing. The results were guaranteed.

Perhaps this illustrates how God works in our life. We have to get in the game, step up to the plate, and swing the bat. But God is pitching, and he will ensure that we hit the ball. Actually, he may also be swinging the bat.

## II. The Call to Harmony and Purpose

Verses 12-13 are general, but now Paul gets more specific:

**Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, (2:14-16)**

The call to obedience has to do with unity, and thus frames what was said at the end of chapter 1. In these verses we hear several echoes of the OT, especially the story of the Exodus. The church is the people of God. We have been called out of slavery and bondage into a life of faith and dependence on God. We are the people with whom God dwells. But we are tempted to behave in the same way as Israel did when they were in the wilderness. These OT stories provide important lessons for us, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

**Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. ... Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Cor 10:6, 11 NAS95)**

The idea of “doing” picks up on the idea of obeying and working. “All things” reminds us that we are to bring all things under submission to God. In Philippi, this meant standing firm and contending for the gospel in the face of opposition and the temptation to succumb to internal unrest.

Grumbling and disputing is a clear echo of Israel's unrest in the wilderness and constant complaining about food and water and security. They were so untrusting of God and Moses that they continually desired, of all things, to go back to Egypt, back into horrible slavery. No matter how much we don't like our circumstances they are known and they are comfortable. God took this complaining spirit so seriously that eventually only two people from that generation, Joshua and Caleb, entered the Promised Land.

Unlike the Israelites, who grumbled against God and Moses, the Philippians were bickering with each other. Paul is telling them to not be like the murmuring Israelites but to seek the same mind-set of love and unity. When I complain too much my wife tells me, with Paul-like thunder: no whining!

Internal discord is a huge problem in the church when members feed on each other. People talk about others under the guise of “caring for the flock.” They share about the sins of others in the guise of “seeking prayer.” In Galatians, Paul calls this biting and devouring, and it results in the body consuming itself. This is what renders the church so ineffective in the world.

During our trips to the south to help victims of Hurricane Katrina, some of our people became acquainted with a couple from the midwest, Susan and Monty, who left their jobs to help the flood victims in Mississippi. After they had been gone for a couple of years they went back home for a visit. They found that people were still talking about the same things and the same people they had been talking about two years previously. They realized how nothing had really changed much

in their church, but were able to see how unimportant these things were to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The reason the Philippians are urged to stop grumbling is that they might be blameless, innocent, and spotless children of God, fulfilling their role to be a light appearing or shining in the pagan world. “Blameless” is an echo of the word that God spoke to Abraham in Gen 17:1, “walk before Me, and be blameless.” The word “innocent” is used in contrast to knowing or being associated with evil; being pure of heart, innocent as doves. The word “above reproach” or “spotless” is often used in conjunction with being holy. Husbands are instructed to love their wives like Christ, who presents the church to himself “in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless (spotless)” (Eph 5:27).

God has called us to be his people, his children, displaying his character in the midst of a perverse and crooked generation. Here again is an echo of the Exodus, but with a twist. In Deut 32, the song of Moses, Moses referred to the defective Israelites, full of blemishes, as “a perverse and crooked generation.” Now Paul is applying that term to the pagan world in which the Philippians live.

Paul’s desire for the Philippians and God’s desire for us is to be distinct from the non-believing world. When we resort to bickering and quarreling and arguments, we become very much like the world. The same is true when we succumb to idolatry. When we shrink back from God’s call on our life, the light of the gospel fades. Again the concern is to be united and to strive together for a cause greater than ourselves: to live as citizens of heaven and be lights in a dark world. (The idea of shining as lights is probably an echo of Daniel’s apocalyptic vision in Dan 12.)

The way we influence the world and shine as lights is by holding fast the word of life, the word that feeds us with truth and nurtures our soul. The idea is not holding fast the word so no one takes it away, or holding fast the word to protect us from the world. The emphasis here is on evangelism: the advance of the gospel. We influence the darkness with the word that gives life.

This section of Philippians, which we have been studying for three weeks now, gives us a great picture of what God has called us to become as his people and how he wants to use us to advance his kingdom. Gordon Fee sums up Paul’s perspective by saying: “the purpose is God’s glory, the pattern is Christ, the principle is love, and the empowering is through God by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

This text in Philippians raises important questions for any church body.

What would new people experience if they came into our assembly? Would they be drawn to Christ? Would they experience light and life?

How is God using us to advance his gospel? How are people coming to Christ?

Is our body characterized by unity or grumbling?

Do the elders and pastors share a common mind-set and vision for the church?

What pressures are hindering us from being the people of God?

I am not suggesting anything by these questions. They are just questions to ponder so that we can work out the salvation that God is working in us.

Last week I told you the story of Helen Roseveare and her suffering as a missionary in Africa for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. Here is something she said:

It is utterly essential to persevere to the end. To start a race is fine; but it’s much more important that we finish, that we hit the tape. . . . Our present activity is to tell others about Jesus, with earnestness, and to remain faithful to him in all that he has called us to do. We must continue daily in this, in order to please him, in choices big and small. There’s a temptation to slack off, tone down, seek greener pastures, but we must remain committed. This means that we must be willing to go down into the valleys. And in our hardships we must trust that God is accomplishing his greater purposes for us.<sup>2</sup>

### III. Paul’s Boasting and Joy

In the middle of verse 16, Paul changes gears abruptly and transitions to himself.

**so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me. (2:17-18)**

Two thoughts emerge from this.

First, there will be a great benefit for Paul if the Philippians obey, which might even be a further incentive for them. If the Philippians hear his word and seek a common mind-set for God’s greater purposes, then Paul will have an occasion for boasting when it counts—when Christ appears. He will be encouraged that his life counted for something, that he did not run or toil in vain. Here Paul uses two metaphors, likening his ministry to running a race or working strenuously. He has trained hard and worked hard for the gospel. He longs for the prize of seeing the fruit of his labors.

Second, Paul invites the Philippians to share in mutual joy as they share in mutual suffering. Here he employs another OT image by comparing his current suffering in prison to a drink offering. He is being poured out as a sacrifice for the sake of Christ and the Philippians, for their faith. But in the midst of his suffering he experiences joy.

The Philippians are also suffering for their faith. Paul exhorts them to reciprocate and rejoice as well. His life and theirs are bound up together. The word for “rejoice” occurs four times, twice in compound with the preposition “with”: rejoice together. Paul and the Philippians share in mutual suffering; they can also share in mutual joy.

Joy is a big theme in Philippians. Suffering does not diminish a joy that is centered on future glory and the thought that our suffering can produce eternal fruit.

There will always be things that create fear and distract us from working out this salvation we have been given. Every week, every month, every year there will be something: swine flu, problems in the economy, terrorism, or injustice of one sort or another. There will always be something. We can live our entire life waiting for things to fall into place, settle down, or be resolved. The danger is that we will always put off the eternal for the sake of the immediate dilemma.

The athlete who performs under pressure and experiences the joy of victory always amazes me. But I am more amazed by the apostle, who is able to rejoice even while the knife is at his throat, without complaining. His joy doesn't fade with the rising sun because he lives for the day of Christ.

Paul reminds us that we are citizens of heaven. God is at work, doing things that matter. We are to take our salvation seriously. We live in the presence of God, even if it means suffering. In the apostle's perspective our suffering is a sacrifice to God that produces a joy centered on future glory. For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross, and we can, too.

If Paul were here today, he would say, “My beloved, rejoice in your hardships and difficulties, because God is at work in you.”

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Gordon Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 97.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from a website for John Piper's ministry: [http://www.desiring-god.org/Blog/850\\_stand\\_\\_helen\\_roseveare/](http://www.desiring-god.org/Blog/850_stand__helen_roseveare/)

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