

“It Is God Who Works In You”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Texts: Philippians 2:12–30; Deuteronomy 32:1–9

As Paul sees it, the Philippians are in a very difficult situation. There is tremendous pressure from the Greek and Roman citizens of Philippi for Christians to renounce their faith in Jesus and return to the Roman religion of their friends and neighbors. It was a dangerous thing, the Romans thought, not to honor the gods. Those who renounced the traditional Roman gods and now followed Jesus might even anger the gods to the point that calamity would come upon the empire. Christians must be identified, and pressured to renounce this new and foreign God, Jesus. Then there was the pressure coming from those who professed faith in Jesus, but added good works as a condition for being saved from the wrath of God on the last day. These men were known as Judaizers and fully convinced that in addition to believing that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah, one must undergo ritual circumcision, keep the Jewish feasts, and follow the Jewish dietary laws and customs. The Philippian Church has withstood this pressure so far, but Paul exhorts them to stand firm until he or his emissary Timothy can arrive to offer them encouragement.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. We are working our way through the second half of the second chapter. As I mentioned last time, the system of chapter and verses is useful to help us find a particular passage in the Bible, but not so helpful when the chapter breaks disrupt the flow of an author’s thought. This is the case in Philippians chapters 1-2, when, at the end of chapter one (vv. 27-30) Paul exhorts the Philippians to stand firm—an exhortation continuing on well into the second chapter where Paul appeals to the “Hymn to Christ” (the *Carmen Christi*) of verse 6-11 where Jesus’ humility is set forth as an example for his readers to follow. As we saw last time, the Christ hymn was composed by Paul or someone else, and was likely sung in the apostolic churches. Paul appeals to it, because the Philippians were probably familiar with it.

But Paul’s exhortation actually continues until verse 18 of chapter 2.¹ The theme of this lengthy exhortation is best summed-up by verse 27 (of chapter 1), “*let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that . . . I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.*” Recall that Paul was instrumental in the founding of the church at Philippi when he proclaimed the gospel of Christ crucified there ten years earlier. Yet, he now finds himself under house arrest in Rome when composing this very personal letter to a church far way in Greece, many members of which Paul knows quite well.

One of the key points made by Paul is that in order for the Philippians to stand firm and accomplish the things which the Apostle is admonishing them, the Philippians must adopt the same attitude (mind-set) which Jesus did in his incarnation. In the *Carmen Christi*, we read that Jesus “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at 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.*” Though existing eternally in the form of God, Jesus did not use his deity to

¹ O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians*, 272.

his advantage after he took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin. Rather, Jesus humbled himself by taking the form of a servant, becoming obedient unto death so as to accomplish those things necessary for our salvation. Although the Philippians are to follow the example of Jesus, our Lord's incarnation is a unique event and cannot be repeated. Nevertheless, the Philippians are to have the same humble attitude of Jesus, *if* they are to stand firm in the face of persecution which they were then facing from the Greco-Roman pagans without the church, and from the Judaizers within.

What follows in the balance of Paul's extended discussion (vv. 12-18 of chapter two) comes as additional part of the extended exhortation begun in verse 1:27. This can be seen in the fact that there are a significant number of imperatives (commands) in these verses. In order to resist persecution and thwart the false teachers, Paul's beloved Philippians must do the things Paul mentions. This is where we will begin. Then, very briefly, we will take up Paul's "thinking out loud" hopes of eventually returning to Philippi to see his dear friends again in vv. 19-30. Although imprisoned until his appeal before Caesar, in the meantime Paul hopes to send Timothy, along with Epaphroditus, who served as the messenger between Paul and the Philippians, back to the congregation to offer them help and support.

As we pick up where we left off last time, (Philippians 2:12), we do so mindful of the fact that we interpret the exhortation Paul makes here (one of a string of imperatives) in light of the gospel promise (the indicative) which is found in verse 13. In verse 12, Paul writes, "*therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" The Philippians have always been obedient to the things which Paul has taught them, and they are to continue to remain obedient even while Paul is absent from them.

The context for Paul's comments (this extended exhortation) is very important to keep in mind because there have been those who quote the line "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling*" as though Paul were exhorting Christians to strive hard in order to be saved—i.e., that salvation only comes to us as a consequence of a life devoted to good works and the service of Christ offered with fear and trembling (humility). It is rarely put this starkly but it is what is implied. This phrase is also cited as an exhortation for apathetic Christians to wake up and realize not to take the grace of God for granted—to get back to working out their salvation. But this too is not really what the Apostle means.

Paul is imploring the Philippians Christians in the face of those persecuting them to work out that deliverance from God's wrath on the day of Christ Jesus which they already possess. Paul made this point quite emphatically back in verse 6 of the opening chapter. "*And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*" God has begun his good work (new creation) as seen in the fact that those to whom Paul is writing (Philippian Christians) are *already* believers in Jesus because they have been justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone (a doctrine Paul will explain in chapter 3). Now, in order to stand firm and live in a manner worthy of the gospel, the Philippians are to make a sustained and concerted effort to live in godly fear and to stand firm in Paul's absence in light of the day of Christ's return.²

We know this is the case based upon several factors. First, Paul addresses his readers/hearers as "*my beloved,*" which is an affectionate address to his brothers and sisters in Christ, who are known by the fact that they have obeyed Christ from the time the gospel had been preached to them until the time Paul writes this epistle. Having believed the gospel, the Philippians have demonstrated a spirit of

² O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 273-74.

obedience—which is a fruit of saving faith. The Philippians strive to obey the things commanded them whether that comes from the Apostle directly or from the preaching of God’s word (the Old Testament). They are his “beloved,” an expression which only makes sense if Paul is writing to people whom he knows to be Christians. When Paul tells them to “work out” your salvation, he means it in this context. He is not telling “his beloved” that salvation is a reward for their accomplishments—after they’ve demonstrated sufficient work and shown enough godly fear. Rather, this congregation of believers should continue to show forth the fruits of Christ, namely standing firm in one mind, in love, and in one accord. This exhortation should be understood in the sense of “keep doing what you are doing.”

The second reason we know it to be the case that Paul is not telling people to “save themselves,” is what follows in verse 13. God’s people are not left on their own “to work out their salvation in fear and trembling,” for, as Paul goes on to tell the Philippians, “*it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” In many ways, this is a restatement of Philippians 1:6. God is already at work within his people. This is why they are his people in the first place—God is already at work in them.

The exhortation to work out one’s salvation with fear and trembling, *if* left to stand on its own, would indeed be a word of condemnation to the Philippians—not a word of encouragement to continue on living in a way consistent with the gospel which results from embracing the attitude of Jesus. But this exhortation to “work out” our salvation does not stand on its own. It comes in a particular context (the Philippians are to stand firm in Paul’s absence) and it is followed by a reminder that salvation is God’s work within us in the sense that the desire to work out our salvation in the fear of God is a fruit of his work already begun within us. As Calvin wisely reminds us, there is the will or desire to do something (which we may have) and the power to do these things (which we do not have). Therefore, we have nothing to boast about. But as Calvin adds, “a good will is accomplished in us entirely by God.”³

When we previously spoke of God’s good work in us as a work of new creation (1:6), so too the very desire to work out our salvation (to accomplish something) in fear and trembling is the fruit of God’s mighty new creation power which is already molding us into the image of Jesus. So, when Paul speaks of God working in us according to his good pleasure, he is thinking of God’s purpose to save his people on the day of Christ Jesus (judgment day). Having already begun this work in us, God will accomplish his saving purposes and his work of new creation. He will stir within in us the desire to work out our salvation in the godly fear of God’s power—awe. The fact that we even worry about this is the proof that God is working within us. Otherwise, we would never care.

Out of this knowledge (that God is already at work within us, so we strive to work out our salvation in godly fear) come a series of further exhortations to live as “children of God,” in the midst of a “crooked and twisted” age. In verse 14, Paul implores the Philippians that in order to live in a manner “worthy of the gospel,” they are to “*do all things without grumbling or disputing*” [or questioning]. Once again, Paul’s thought world is Second Temple Judaism and Hellenism, and more importantly his knowledge of the Old Testament read through the lens of its fulfillment in Jesus.

When Paul exhorts the Philippians not to grumble or dispute, we might miss the loud echo from Deuteronomy 32:5 (our Old Testament lesson) which tells us that the Israelites wandering in the wilderness were not innocent and blameless because of their grumbling. Hardly. Moses says of them,

³ Cited in Graham Tomlin, ed., Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI, Philippians and Colossians (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 58-59.

“they have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation,” a statement which Paul will use to characterize those persecuting the Philippians from within and without. The irony here is easily missed. The Gentile Christians in Philippi must not be like the Israelites in the desert who grumbled and complained. It is the Gentile pagans (the persecutors) who are now identified as “crooked and twisted,” along with the Judaizers, who see themselves as restoring true Israel. Paul lumps the Judaizers in with the disobedient Israelites and even associates them with the Gentile pagans as “crooked and twisted.” This is easy to miss, but it is a real shot at the Judaizers plaguing the Philippians.⁴ They are like the crooked and twisted Israelites. So to are the Gentile pagans. Both the pagans and the Judaizers stand under God’s judgment.

Those who are working out their salvation (which we might say is but another term for sanctification) will strive not to grumble or complain, especially in reference to persecution from unbelievers. These exhortations echo the things Paul told them previously in verses 1:27-30. If Christians strive to be of one mind, abide in love, and then stand firm, grumbling and complaining can only serve to eat away at the unity of the congregation, much like a corrosive acid eats away at metal. Again, the focus here is not so much on particular actions, but one’s mind-set (general overall attitude).

Thinking others to be as important as ourselves and following Jesus in humility, will mean that we should stop complaining about our current circumstances. The persecution we face is inevitable. The world hated Jesus. It will hate all those who identify themselves as his follower. If we have been chosen by God to believe in Jesus, we’ve also been chosen by God to suffer for his sake. Should anyone boast about being one of God’s elect, we should simply remind them of the connection Paul makes between being chosen by God (it has been granted us to believe in Jesus) and persecution, (it has also been granted us to suffer for his sake). Complaining how we are treated does us no good (it never changes anything—only God motivating us to act changes us), and it weakens the church’s unity and common love each for the other, especially at a moment in time when the Philippian congregation needs to stand united in the face of external persecution and internal threats from false teachers.

The reason for this striving to be peaceable and agreeable is Paul’s concern for the church’s witness to heretics within and to the persecutors outside. Paul goes on to make this point crystal clear. So *“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.”* Picking up on Jesus’ words from John 8:12 that he (Jesus) was the light of the world, who in the Sermon on the Mount told those assembled that they are to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14), Paul reminds the Philippians that being a light in the midst of darkness is the foundation of Christian witness, especial to those persecuting them. The imagery of a light shining in darkness points to the fact that Jesus is truth incarnate (light) in a world filled with error and false religion (darkness). Jesus is that one who shows people the path to God’s favor because he is the one who secures what is necessary for anyone to be reconciled to God. In imitating Jesus’ humility, Christians function as light in the darkness of a pagan world. In an important, if paradoxical way, humility is of much greater effect than fighting back with force or violence, falsehood and slander, and other such things which characterize people whose ways are twisted and crooked.

Those who are justified through faith in Christ are innocent before God. Jesus has died for our sins and his perfect righteousness covers our unrighteousness. We are blameless before God because the law of

⁴ G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; 2007), on Philippians 2:14-15

God (having been fulfilled by Christ, for us and in our place) no longer condemns us. Therefore Paul's exhortation to be innocent and blameless refers to the Philippian church's witness to those outside the church—those openly persecuting its members. If Christians are characterized by a humble and genuine concern for others (true humility), are not self-seeking complainers, then, Paul says, they will be innocent and blameless before their critics, that “crooked and twisted” generation.

There are several points of application here. It is impossible to assess the damage which scandal brings upon Christ's church—when Christians act in ways other than innocent and blameless. Think of the televangelist scandals of the recent past. Not a person here supports them, but when they misbehave, their stink lands on us. Think of the scandal of child sex abuse in the Roman Church. This congregation is hardly sympathetic to Roman doctrine and practice, yet Rome's institutional failures and the resulting scandal certainly colors how non-Christians view anyone who names the name of Christ. Thankfully, the kingdom of God advances through the preaching of Christ crucified so that even the smallest, weakest, and most feeble of congregations can rely upon God's power to see people come to faith in Jesus. At the same time, these scandals have rendered Christ's church in America anything but blameless and innocent in the eyes of outsiders. One response is to redouble our efforts to heed Paul's exhortation and to make sure that our own public witness is, as far as possible, blameless and innocent. If non-Christians are offended by our gospel, well then so be it. But if we offend them by our conduct, well then, shame on us.

Another point of application is Paul's designation of his generation as “crooked and twisted” originally applied to Israel in wilderness—the disobedient people of God walked in the wrong way (“crooked and twisted”). Paul now applies this image to the larger Greco-Roman world—crooked and twisted in its thinking and in its values. It is a world which stands under God's judgment and without hope.⁵ Christians are to be innocent and blameless, the opposite is “twisted and crooked.” This how pagans act. This is how modern Americans act. The crooked and twisted way is our natural default setting.

Those of us over 40 have witnessed in our lifetimes a very rapid decline (dare I say it, a “free-fall”) of personal virtue and public morality, along with American culture's wholesale acceptance of libertine sexual ethics. This decline of personal morality and public virtue is shocking to those of us who are the children of the so-called “greatest generation.” Because of human sin, our generation has always been twisted and crooked, but it sure seems that things are getting worse, rapidly. Because our generation has never seen this before, we are easily tempted to assume that nothing like this has ever happened before. Since things have never been this bad, the end must be at hand.

This decline might be true of our particular circumstances in modern America, but Paul and the Philippians would beg to differ with us about how bad we have it. Lest we forget, things were very difficult in the Greco-Roman world for Christians. Paul writes this letter to a persecuted church from a Roman jail, because he had been arrested for preaching the gospel.

By its very nature, Christianity is a religion of exiles who sojourn in a foreign land—just as Israel did in Babylon, or in Egypt. We are pilgrims here. There are blessings and curses that come with such a Pilgrim existence. But let us not fool ourselves into thinking that this world (even so-called Christian America) will ever be a place which embraces our doctrine or welcomes the proclamation of Savior and his word. This was the case in Paul's day. It is the same in ours. This is why the temptation is so great to sand off all the rough edges of true Christianity into some sort of harmless parody—civil religion.

⁵ O'Brien, Commentary on Philippians, 295.

There will be no utopias in this world—Marxist, democratic, socialist, or republican. Yet, there is no despair in Paul’s exhortation, nor does he call down fire on those worldly institutions which oppose him. His task is to preach Christ. God will deal with every crooked and twisted generation to follow in his mysterious providence, which is why Paul never does exhort the church to strive to redeem that particular culture in which it finds itself. Paul also believes that redeemed Christians will to a certain degree influence and restrain whatever “crooked and twisted” generation in which they find themselves.

Paul puts his realism about human nature in existential terms in verses 16-18. *“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. 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.”* Paul self-consciously places his confidence in God’s word (the word of life), knowing that when Jesus returns, the Lord himself will right all wrongs and will put an end to those institutions and ideologies which oppose the kingdom of Christ. Only then will persecution of the faithful cease, and only then will people stop distorting the gospel.

Because of his calling to do God’s work, Paul fully trusts that his labors in preaching the gospel are not in vain. Even if he is poured out as a drink offering—as when the Jews and the Greeks and Romans poured out wine on the ground or an altar, symbolic of the giving of one’s life—Paul does so for the sake of others. In this case, his beloved Philippians. In light of their faith in Jesus, the Philippians too are to give themselves to whatever the Lord has for them, knowing that it will never be in vain. Should Paul live or die, remain in prison, be put to death, or even released, the Philippians are to be glad for Christ’s saving work, for Paul’s service to the Lord, and in this they should rejoice.

The next section of this chapter is Paul’s expression to the Philippians of his desire to return to see them, should he be released, along with his plan to encourage them in the meantime. Since he cannot come now, Paul tells the Philippians, *“I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.”* Timothy was with Paul in Rome, but also had been with Paul when the gospel was first preached in Philippi. If Paul cannot come, who better than Timothy? Paul goes on to say of his young pastoral intern (in vv. 21-22), *“for they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy’s proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.”* As Paul had lamented, many in Rome were preaching Christ out of envy or ambition, but not Timothy who is a son to Paul and has a track record of faithfulness. Paul’s desire is that *“I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.”*

But until Timothy can come, Paul says, *“I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.”* It was Epaphroditus who had come to Paul from Philippi after the Christians there learned of Paul’s arrest. Another faithful servant of Christ, Epaphroditus brought Paul a gift of some sort, but took ill once in Rome. In fact, as Paul says in verse 27, *“indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.”* Whatever it was that laid him low, because of Christ’s mercy he had since recovered for which Paul is thankful, having been spared additional grief.

So, as Paul tells the Philippians, *“I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.”* Epaphroditus is the one who will actually carry this letter from Rome to Philippi. *“So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.”* Paul is

very grateful for this servant of the Lord who endured so much for the sake of his church. The Philippians should also be grateful for his faithful service as well.

What then, do we say by way of application. We have reflected upon Paul's exhortations to the Philippians, and as we strive as a church to obey them, we must keep in mind that these exhortations are grounded in the fact that God is already at work within us according to his goodwill and pleasure. Having begun that good work of new creation within us God will see it through to completion at the day of Christ Jesus. While we strive to stand firm in the face of this crooked and twisted generation, let us love one another as we imitate the humility of Jesus. But we will never accomplish these things unless we are clear that "*it is God who works in you, to will and do according to his good pleasure.*" This is why we work out our salvation in godly fear and trembling. It is a salvation which we already possess. May Jesus Christ be praised!