

Working Out Our Salvation
Philippians 2:12-18
Part 4—Choose Joy

Introduction

From the earliest days of the church, the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of believers has been debated. Is the Christian life essentially a matter of passive trust or of active obedience? Is it all God's doing, all the believer's doing, or a combination of both? I realize these questions have been debated for two thousand years, but I believe Scripture teaches the Christian life involves both God's sovereignty and human responsibility. It's not one or the other; it's both.

Paul writes in Ephesians: *“For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Ephesians 2:8&9) The focus here is on God's role; his sovereign gift of grace.

On the other hand, in Acts 16:31 Paul says, *“Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.”* The focus here is our role; it's our responsibility to actively believe. Thus, we see woven in Scripture a mysterious tapestry showing that the Christian life involves both God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

This mystery is one of the focal points in today's passage in Philippians. This is the fourth message in our series which we're calling *“Choose Joy.”* Today we consider Philippians 2:12-18 but we begin with verses 12&13. I invite you to follow along in your message notes.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Verse 12 begins with the word *“therefore.”* Every time you see the word *“therefore”* in Scripture you need to ask what it's there for? In this case, it connects verse 12 with the preceding verses. In other words, because of Christ's obedience to leave heaven, humble himself and die on the cross, therefore, we're also called to live a life of obedience. Paul writes, *“Therefore...as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence...”*

In other words, as a result of Christ's obedience, we are also to obey God—following the Lord's example—whether anyone is there to see it or not! One of the hallmarks of an authentic Christ-follower is obedience. In our passage, God specifically highlights **Three areas of obedience.** The first is to...

1. Be diligent with our salvation

Paul writes in verses 12&13 “...Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” You might underline that sentence in your notes. It’s one of the clearest scriptures showing the mysterious blending of God’s role and our role in the Christian life. Our part is to diligently work out our salvation and God’s part is to give us the will to do that.

The idea behind “*working out*” salvation is to apply sustained effort in developing our spiritual lives. The verb is in the present tense indicating the command has a continuing emphasis. This is not once and done. It’s ongoing daily. That’s why the NIV translates the phrase “*continue to work out your salvation...*” This is a process that requires ongoing effort for the rest of our lives.

The exhortation to work out salvation is to those who already know Christ. This is not a call to work to achieve salvation; it’s a call to live out our faith.

- This is call to show forth the fruit of our salvation.
- This is a call to have deeds that go along with our faith.

Salvation is a gift of God’s grace which comes through faith in Christ. We can’t earn salvation. But once we receive God’s grace, once we’re adopted into God’s family by placing our faith in Christ, then we have a responsibility to work this out in our day to day lives.

Notice we’re to work out our salvation with “*fear and trembling.*” This means we’re to diligently pursue God’s will with reverence and healthy respect. The idea of fearing the Lord is found throughout the Bible. Proverbs 1:7 says “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...*” To fear means to show reverence and respect. We’re never to forget that God is God and we’re not. It’s worth noting that every time someone in Scripture comes into God’s presence it’s an overwhelming experience. For example:

- God told Moses from the burning bush to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground.
- When Isaiah was brought before God he cried out “*Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...*”
- When the Apostle John saw the glorified Christ his face looked “*like the sun shining in all its brilliance*” and John fell at the Lord’s feet as though dead.

To work out our salvation with fear and trembling means we don’t treat the Lord in a glib cavalier manner. We view his sacrifice in holy reverent awe. Because the Lord gave his very best, we give him our very best. Over and over again Scripture calls us to diligence in our spiritual lives. This theme is repeated in 1 Corinthians 9:24. “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*”

This same theme is also found in Colossians 1:29. *“To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”* All of this points to our personal responsibility to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. This is something that I can’t do for you, nor can you do it for me. It’s an individual responsibility for each of us.

This is why developing healthy spiritual habits is so helpful...things like...

- consistently attending weekend worship
- regularly spending time in God’s word
- praying
- fasting
- serving
- meditating on Scripture
- being connected with others in a Rooted Group or a Belonging Group
- and practicing biblical principles of financial stewardship.

Some experts suggest that over 90% of what we do is done by habit. Thus, it’s essential to develop healthy spiritual habits to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

But the flip side is in verse 13...once we’ve applied ourselves with diligence, once we’ve done all that we can to nurture and develop our spiritual life, then when we look back over our shoulder, we realize that it’s been all God’s power and all God’s grace that made spiritual progress possible. *“...For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*

The word *“work”* in verse 13 is from the same Greek word as the English word energy. God energizes us to obey him. This means it’s ultimately God’s power that enables us to make spiritual progress. *“To will and to act”* refers to the believer’s will and the believer’s actions. God is working in us, energizing us so that we want to do God’s will and we want to act out our salvation. In the end this is so that God’s good purposes for our lives will be fulfilled. *“...For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”*

Let me share an example of this. For decades David Howard was one of the most influential mission leaders in the world. He was a student at Wheaton College in 1947 during which time a German man worked at the college as a custodian. The German had been a prisoner of war in WWII and spoke very little English. As far as the students knew he wasn’t a Christian. So, David, along with Jim Elliott, (who would later become a martyr in Ecuador) formed a prayer group to pray for the janitor’s salvation. After a time, the German left Wheaton and the students lost track of him.

In 1978 David was invited to direct a consultation on world evangelization. The group was composed of leaders from around the world, including Billy Graham and Leighton Ford. The organizational meeting was held in Bermuda. One day, David had some free time so he went on a walk along the waterfront. He happened to walk with a German Christian leader who was also attending the meetings.

As they surveyed the port, they noticed a British submarine and the German mentioned that he had served in Hitler's submarine corps. He went on to say that toward the end of the war Hitler pulled everyone off the submarines and put them on the front lines as infantry. The man was wounded in Holland so the Germans left him as they retreated.

He was captured by the British and sent to England. Then he went from England to the United States. He said his name was Peter Schneider. He was the chairman of the board of the Billy Graham Association in Germany. He spoke perfect English and served as Billy Graham's interpreter whenever Billy preached in Germany.

By this time David Howard began scratching his head. The name Peter Schneider sounded familiar. So, David asked, "*Peter were you ever at Wheaton College in Illinois?*" Peter said yes, he had been a janitor for a time right after the war. By this time David was about ready to jump out of his skin. David asked, "*Were you a Christian at the time?*" Peter said that he wasn't. He had become a Christian later at a YMCA camp in Wisconsin.

Then David said, "*Peter, you would have no way of knowing this, but I must tell you that Jim Elliot and I had a vision to pray for your salvation. We organized several other students. We prayed for you to come to know the Lord. We couldn't witness to you because you didn't know much English back then, but we faithfully prayed for you in those days.*"

There was David standing on the waterfront in Bermuda talking with a man he prayed would become a Christian thirty years earlier. Now that man—Peter Schneider—was a Christian leader in Germany committed to reaching the world with the Gospel of Christ.

I think this is a beautiful illustration of the mysterious blending of God's sovereignty and human responsibility in salvation. God's power became operative in Peter's life as a result of the prayers of the students at Wheaton. Through those prayers, Peter's heart was softened and wooed toward the Gospel. That was God's part.

But at some point, when he was at the YMCA camp Peter made a decision to cross the line of faith. That was his part. This mystery is captured in Philippians 2:12&13. "*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, (our part) for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose*" (God's part).

Thus, the first area of obedience in our passage is focused on our diligence. Instead of allowing our spiritual lives to run on cruise control, we're to diligently work out our salvation with fear and trembling. The second area of obedience is to...

2. Be careful with our words

¹⁴Do everything without grumbling or arguing,¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of

life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.

I think every one of us should underline verse 14. In fact, would you repeat it out loud with me? “Do everything without complaining or arguing...”

Wow! Do we ever need to keep this in mind! The word that catches my attention is “everything.” Do everything without complaining or arguing. Everything means everything; every area of our lives. This means doing chores that we don’t like without complaining. This means not complaining about family members we don’t appreciate. This means not complaining about our boss, or about how tired we are, or about our health, or our government. Everything means everything.

Do you know why this is important? It’s important because how we use our tongue (the words and tone of voice we use) is a reflection on what’s going on inside us. Jesus said, “For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” (Matthew 12:34)

What’s inside our heart becomes evident by the words that come out of our mouth. Thus, if God is truly at work in our heart, if we’re truly being transformed by his grace on the inside, it will be evident in our words. That’s why complaining and arguing are not to come from our lips.

I love the way Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:29. “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Would you repeat that verse out loud with me? (Repeat) “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths...” Nothing unwholesome is to come from our lips; no complaining, no arguing...just words to build people up.

Now the key to do this is to fill our heart and mind with wholesome thoughts. If we fill our heart and mind with wholesome thoughts, then the words that come out of our mouth will be wholesome. Have you been able to memorize our key verse for this series yet? I hope so. It has to do with what we think about. It’s Philippians 4:8.

Let’s repeat it out loud. “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

Philippians 2:15 indicates when our language reflects God’s grace then we’ll stand out in the crowd. “So that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life.”

Paul describes the world around us as “a warped and crooked generation.” That’s graphic language. But we see this, for example, in the foul language that’s

commonplace in society. I'm shocked by the vulgarity I overhear in casual conversations. Strange as it may seem, it was only a generation ago when "*Gone with the Wind*" created shock waves for recording the first curse word ever spoken on film. My, oh my, we have come a long way in just a few decades!

But once we begin to rid ourselves of the world's vocabulary, once we stop the complaining and negativity, and, instead, once we begin to speak wholesome words to build people up instead of tearing them down, we will "*shine like stars in the sky.*" In other words, we'll begin to stand out; people will notice the difference and our testimony will then "*hold firmly*" or declare or make known the Gospel—which is the word of life.

Titus 2:8 encourages us to behave in such a way that it makes "*the teaching about God our Savior attractive.*" I can't think of a more dramatic way to make the Gospel attractive than by being careful with our words.

So far, we seen two key areas of obedience: (1) We're to be diligent with our salvation and (2) We're to be careful with our words. Finally, (3) we're to...

3. Be faithful when we face suffering.

We see this in verses 17&18. *17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. 18 So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.*

At the time he was writing the Philippians, Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He was held prisoner for two years not knowing if he would be released or if he'd be executed for his faith. That's the background of verses 17&18. Paul is saying that even if he's executed, even if his life is poured out like a drink offering, he would still rejoice and be glad.

The Jews, along with other ancient religions, practiced drink offerings. After placing the sacrificial animal on the altar, the priest would take wine or water and pour it either on the burning sacrifice or on the ground in front of the altar. The drink offering symbolized the aroma of the offering rising into God's presence.

Paul likens his possible death to a drink offering being poured out over the sacrifice and service of the Philippians. Whatever happens, even if he dies for his faith, Paul is glad and he rejoices. And, in verse 18, he encourages the Philippians to rejoice with him.

Paul shows us: The measure of our faith is seen most clearly when we're going through tough times. It's easy to love God when everything is going smoothly. But it's when things are not easy—when life caves in like it did for Job—we see the true measure of our faith. That's why this third area of obedience is so vital. Following Christ's example of suffering without losing heart—rejoicing in the face of trials—moves us into the realm of supernatural living.

Do you recall Philippians 1:29? It's a verse that doesn't get preached on very much. It says we've been granted not only the privilege of believing in Christ, but also the privilege of suffering for him. In the words of Psalm 23, sometimes God will lead us into green pastures and beside quiet waters. But other times he will also lead us through the valley of the shadow of death. And the times we suffer following Jesus into the dark shadows of the valley are often the times when we grow the most.

Conclusion

Arthur Gordon relates a story of a man who was stricken with polio at age three. Because of the illness, his parents abandoned him at a New York City hospital. Eventually he was taken in by a foster family and went to live in Georgia in hopes that warmer climate would improve his condition.

What actually improved his condition, though, was not the climate. It was Ma'am Jean. She was an elderly black woman who took the frail, lonely boy into her heart. For six years she daily massaged his weak legs, administered her own hydrotherapy in a creek, and encouraged him spiritually with stories, songs and prayers.

Night after night Ma'am Jean continued massaging and praying. Then one morning, when he was about twelve, she told the boy she had a surprise. She led him into the yard and placed his back against an oak tree.

Years later he said he could still feel the rough bark on his back. Then Ma'am Jean took away his crutches and moved a dozen steps back. She told him the Lord had impressed upon her that the time had come for him to walk. "*So now,*" Ma'am Jean said, "*I want you to walk over to me.*"

The boy's instant reaction was fear. He knew he couldn't walk without crutches. He had tried before and failed. So, the boy shrank back against the tree. Ma'am Jean continued to urge him to step out, to try to walk. The boy burst into tears. He begged. He pleaded.

Then Ma'am Jean's voice rose suddenly. It was no longer gentle, but full of power and command. "*You can walk, child! Now walk over here!*"

She knelt down and held out her arms. And somehow impelled by something stronger than fear, the boy took a faltering step, and another, and another, until he reached Ma'am Jean and fell into her arms, both of them weeping. It was two more years before he could walk normally, but the boy never used crutches again.

Why do we suffer? Why does God sometimes lead us into valleys filled with pain? One reason is because God has something better in mind than we can imagine. And because we can't imagine the better things God has prepared for us, we press our backs against the bark-covered walls of our lives—unwilling to step out; paralyzed by fear. All the while God calls to us in our pain and in our hardship to walk to him; urging us with his gentle, compelling voice. "*You can walk, child! You can walk!*"

Beloved, this week God is calling you to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Let his grace be evident in your spiritual diligence, in your words, and especially, in your attitude toward suffering. *“You can walk, child! You can walk!”*