

**KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner Part ten -
 Sunday, August 30th, 2020, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2046
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WHAT DOES PAUL MEAN WHEN HE TELLS US TO “WORK OUT OUR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING?”

Philippians 2:12-16 - “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, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. [14] Do all things without grumbling or questioning, [15] 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, [16] 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.”

Perhaps few texts have been wrangled over more than this one. Arminians emphasize verse 12 as Calvinists do verse 13. And this is sad because Paul’s line of thought doesn’t run along the lines of this dispute at all. He isn’t placing our work and God’s at opposite ends of the pole. Rather, the wording of the text seems to link our work and God’s in a wonderful marriage.

Why are we to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling? ***Because*** everything about our standing in grace comes from God’s sovereign hand. These two sides of the truth ***embrace*** rather than ***fight***. And our interpretation of the passage must pull these threads together.

Then there’s the strange wording of the first portion of **verse 12** - **“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but *much more in my absence....*”** I can certainly see why Paul wants them to be obedient ***both*** when he’s with them and when he’s not. But what can he possibly mean by saying

they should obey him **“much more”** in his absence? Why **more** in his absence than his presence?

These two questions will form the teaching agenda for study of this text today. And I think the answers will be best found if we keep in mind that the whole of chapter two - at least right up to the end of **verse 18** - is an explanation and expansion on the idea Paul launched in **1:27-28** - **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, 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, [28] and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”**

From this point on Paul has been painting a picture of what a life **“worthy of the gospel of Christ”** looks like. Particularly, he’s been painting a picture of what a life **“worthy of the gospel of Christ”** looks like ***in the body of Christ*** - in the way ***Christians live together and treat each other.***

That description gets very specific in **2:2-4** - **“....complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”**

Then Paul brings it all right down to where the rubber meets the road. He gives the ***motive*** for this kind of self-abandonment - this kind of denial of our own self-protection and pursuit of our own rights. He says we are to have the same mind as our Lord. And He left everything for us. **Verses 5-11** give us the Google maps view of His path to Lordship. He denied Himself and esteemed you and me (His enemies) more worthy than Himself.

The logic here is clear. The servant is not greater than the master. If this was the mind of Christ, and I am *in* Christ, then this same mind is the only option left for me. When I cling to my rights - *any* of my rights - it is a departure from the Lordship of Christ Jesus. All of that brings us up to verse 12. Now we're in a better position to look at the first of our two questions. What does Paul mean when he says we're to ***“work out our own salvation with fear and trembling?”***

1) **HOW WE ARE TO WORK OUT OUR SALVATION WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING**

The word ***“Therefore....”*** shows Paul hasn't switched subjects. He's not letting go of what he was saying *before* the “therefore.” ***“Working out our salvation”*** has to be interpreted along the same lines as 2:2-4 - ***“....complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”***

This is not working *for* my salvation. It is working *out* my salvation. And the *kind* of working out Paul still has in mind is the working out of *relationships* in the body of Christ. It is the working out of the *mind of Christ Jesus* in situations where I'm tempted to put *my* interests first instead of those of someone else in the body of Christ who has trampled my dreams and desires.

That's why Paul very specifically says - ***“Have this mind among yourselves (not just “in yourselves”), which is yours in Christ Jesus....”(2:5)***. The emphasis is on the way my salvation gets played out *collectively* with others, not just

individually inside my own skin.

Do I have the mind of Christ? Do I put others first and myself last the way Jesus put me first and Himself last. That's the part of salvation that has to be ***“worked out”*** every day in the body of Christ if Jesus is actually my Lord.

Then Paul tells us the ***reason*** we must work out our salvation relationally this way. The reason is everything we have received in terms of the blessings of forgiveness and salvation has been graciously given and worked into our lives by God in Christ Jesus. He accomplished everything for us while we were enemies of God. He worked miraculously for me when I was totally undeserving. I stand on grace alone for everything I've received from Father God in Christ Jesus.

Finally, Paul says this should leave me working out the mind of Christ toward everyone else in the body of Christ with ***“fear and trembling”*** - ***“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....”***

What does this mean? How does knowing that everything I've received in my own salvation is by grace alone set me to working that salvation out relationally in the body of Christ with ***fear and trembling***? Just what is ***fear and trembling*** anyway?

Fortunately, this isn't the only place in the Scriptures where Paul used this term. We can see the meaning these words usually carry in his mind:

1 Corinthians 2:1-3 - ***“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. [2] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him***

crucified. [3] *And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling....*”

2 Corinthians 7:13-15 - “Therefore we are comforted. And besides our own comfort, we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his spirit has been refreshed by you all. [14] For whatever boasts I made to him about you, I was not put to shame. But just as everything we said to you was true, so also our boasting before Titus has proved true. [15] And his affection for you is even greater, as he remembers the obedience of you all, *how you received him with fear and trembling.*”

Ephesians 6:5 - “Slaves, obey your earthly masters *with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ....*”

The point to note in each of these cases is that “***fear and trembling***” consistently describes an attitude manifested toward ***individuals in the churches mentioned***. These aren’t descriptions of people fearing and trembling before **God** (at least not directly), but before other **people** with whom they were involved.

The first text describes the way Paul approached the church with fear and trembling. The second describes the way the church received Titus with fear and trembling. The third describes the way slaves were to serve their earthly masters with fear and trembling.

And this is exactly what Paul is telling the Christians at Philippi to do as well. His argument would go like this. “Because you’ve received everything that has to do with your salvation and eternal life so freely and graciously from God make sure you approach everyone in the body of Christ - even those with whom you may have a grievance or problem - with ***fear and trembling***. Make sure there’s a

humble tenderness as you display the mind of Christ to others.”

So ***fear and trembling*** is the opposite of a stance of assertiveness or pride or retaliation. I’m not lifting myself up in any way. I’m taking the low road Jesus took for me on the cross.

That’s it. If you and I really understand that we are so totally indebted to God who works everything in and through our lives we can’t help but approach everyone else with fear and trembling. This is how the salvation God has given us will be worked out - played out - among the body of Christ. All the arrogance will be gone. We won’t be demanding of others. We will no more exact justice from them than God did from us.

That this is exactly the kind of ***working out*** our salvation Paul has in mind is clear from the way he expands on this in the next few verses:

Philippians 2:14-16 - “Do all things *without grumbling* or questioning, [15] 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, [16] 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.”

Of course, if they truly relish their whole existence as an outflow of God’s grace they will be a people marked by ***ungrumbling*** dispositions. Grumbling is the way the fallen self responds to unfairness. But we are working out the mind of Christ, not the mind of self. People will know this church understands the grace of Jesus because they will not be able to miss that same graciousness spilling over as the mind of Christ floods His people. It is this gracious mind of Christ that ***shines***.

It is this loving, condescending, non-self-seeking humility that will cause the **words** of these Christians to be heard as genuine and authentic by those still outside God's grace - **"...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...."**(2:15).

And now we're in a position to look at the other question raised in our introduction. Why does Paul tell these Christians to obey **"much more"** in his absence than his presence?

2) **WHO YOU AND I ARE WHEN NO ONE ELSE IS LOOKING IS WHAT WILL CHANGE THE WORLD**

Philippians 2:12 - **"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 key question is this: now that Jesus is gone and no longer physically present on earth how will people believe He still lives and transforms lives? How will people come to hunger for more than just the religions we're involved in, or the church to which we belong, and call on Christ Jesus to love them and save them and dwell in their hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit? What will give our words about all of this credibility?

This seems to be Paul's concern for the church at Philippi because he specifically mentions it at least twice in the first two chapters of his letter to them:

Philippians 1:27-28 - **"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, 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, [28] and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”

Philippians 2:14-15 - “Do all things without grumbling or questioning, [15] 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....”

In each case what gives evidence of the reality of Christ is the manner in which these Christians show the mind of Christ to each other. But there’s a catch. If those watching the believers at Philippi think they are living the way they live out of loyalty to **Paul** they will not be drawn to the reality of **Christ**. Only when Paul **isn’t there** are their actions a testimony to the living power and grace of Jesus Christ. It’s when Paul **isn’t** there that the people are pointed to Jesus as the **only possible source** of these transformed, loving lives.

So Paul urges them to make sure they are **more diligent** to work out their salvation with fear and trembling to each other especially when he isn’t there to prompt and motivate them. This, more than anything else, will cause the light of the gospel to shine and Christ Jesus to be seen, all by Himself, as glorious and life changing! It is ever so. And it is the same calling that rests on the church - **this** church - today.