

Working Out Our Salvation

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[0 : 01] Thanks very much, Jill. I wonder if any parts of that passage stood out to you as we read through it. The first time I read through it, the thing that kind of stood out to me last week was this idea of grumbling.

We all love a good grumble, don't we? Grumbling or complaining or negativity can just be such a natural response and often feel like such a well-merited response to so many areas of our life.

I'm sure we could all think of things right now that we have to grumble about. And yet we're going to see in this passage this morning that Paul holds out a radically different approach to life.

Paul presents us with a far more positive picture. And again, I think if we're honest, do we not think that a world without grumbling, without disputing, without this kind of negativity that Paul speaks about would be an incredible place.

We're still in this middle section of the book of Philippians at the moment, thinking about what it looks like to live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.

[1 : 13] That was the language that we were introduced to last week, really what it means to live as God's people. And we're going to see this morning that these citizens, this community, is a place that is able to put aside this grumbling which is so common in our lives and strives to live out that positive picture that Paul presents.

And that's one kind of particular and specific application that Paul is going to kind of hone in on this morning. It perhaps grabs our attention because, if we're honest, grumbling is something that all of us struggle with.

It might be kind of out loud what we say to other people. It might be more private and holding on to that kind of bitterness in our hearts. It's something we all struggle with. If you're sitting here this morning thinking, I'm glad the person next to me is going to hear this message.

They love a good grumble. This will sort them right out. Now would be a good time to kind of move your focus slightly closer to home and think of yourself. This is something that we're all drawn toward, that temptation to grumble.

And so that's something really practical we'll be speaking about. But before we get there, and in fact the only way that we can get there, Paul first reminds us of this big picture of living as citizens worthy of the gospel, of living as God's people, or to use the language of this passage, of working out our salvation.

[2 : 37] Working out our salvation. So that's where we'll begin this morning, verses 12 and 13. Working out our salvation. Let me read those two verses again.

It says, 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.

For it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. One of the repeated emphases that we've heard in this letter to the Philippians, I think, is this call to a committed Christianity, to an active Christianity, to something where our salvation isn't something that's just kind of up on a shelf somewhere, as it were, not making a huge difference, but where actually our salvation, that the gospel, being God's people, energizes and sets our priorities in every area of life.

That we work out our salvation. Paul reminds us of that this morning, and he gives us in this first couple of verses, I think, three things to remember about God that we need to work out that salvation, to live this active faith that he's calling us to.

And the first thing that he wants us to remember, first of all, is to remember what God has done. Note there how this passage begins with, therefore. It's obviously kind of referring back to something.

[4 : 05] What's it referring back to? Well, really, with what we finished with last week, verses 6 to 11 of chapter 2, we called it last week kind of the heart of citizenship. We talked about it as the foundation that the church is built on.

What did it say? If you've got a Bible in front of you, you can kind of glance down and have a look. But let me summarize, because it is really this incredible presentation of the gospel.

It is this great news that we don't need to try and elevate ourselves up to God, but that in the person of Jesus, God came down to us.

That he humbled himself completely, even to death, death on a cross, death in our place, in order to save us, in order that our sins might be forgiven.

And so the point is, therefore, we live as God's people in light of that rescue we've already received through Jesus. And that is why Paul says that, work out your own salvation.

[5 : 08] It's not work for your own salvation. The essential truth that we must never forget as we live out our faith, as we strive to live as God's people, is that we do that having been rescued, not in order to earn a rescue.

God rescues his people first. You might remember we saw that as kind of the introduction to the Ten Commandments. Why were these people to live this way? Because of what God had done first. Just the same here.

Grace is that foundation. God's unmerited love and his rescue. But it is a grace that motivates us into action. So we remember what God has done, and that spurs us on.

The second thing in these opening verses, Paul says we need to remember in order to work out our salvation. We remember what God has done, this secure foundation. We also need to remember who God is.

Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, Paul writes. I wonder how you respond to that, that Paul says as we work out our salvation, there should be fear and trembling.

[6 : 17] Why does Paul say that? Well, he actually takes those two words. He is referring there back to the book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible, where God appears to his people and gives them those Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai.

And it says there in Exodus, and the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off and said to Moses, you speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us lest we die.

You hear those two words there, they were afraid and trembled. That's what Paul is referring back to in this time when really the people were there and they rightly understood the sheer power and holiness of God.

They saw that without a mediator, without someone kind of standing in between them, that they couldn't draw near to this God. You speak to us and we'll listen, they said to Moses, but don't let God speak to us lest we die.

That's just how seriously they took this God. Paul is saying here that the incredible thing is that because of the gospel, we can draw near to God. Jesus is that perfect mediator.

[7 : 25] As we said, we have the security of that relationship to what he has done, not in our actions, but Paul is making the point, but don't take God lightly.

Don't take God lightly. Just because God has rescued you, don't try and tame God. Don't forget this is the same God that back in Exodus, the people rightly trembled in the presence of, that God has now saved us and he deserves that we give everything to him because he is that holy God.

He is that God that brings forth fear and trembling. One of the key times in my Christian life, it was probably in my 20s, reading a book called Knowing God by J.I. Packer.

I probably mentioned it before, but it's something that I always remember because it was one of, this book was one of the first things that I'd really engaged with that presented a picture of God that was so much bigger than me, that presented a picture of God that managed to portray something of his greatness, his holiness.

The first time, I think, that I understood about a God who really would bring about fear and trembling. And suddenly, having kind of grasped that, it became so clear how my sort of half-hearted approach to living for him, the things I was messing around with, just became entirely inappropriate in light of the holiness of this God.

[9 : 00] He had to be someone taken seriously. You know, you might not be much of a reader, but whatever it is, you know, do engage with something that helps you remember or perhaps helps you to grasp for the first time the greatness, the holiness of God.

I think one of the big dangers for the church in our day is that we have a convenient God who fits around our agendas and our priorities and our schedules, ultimately a fairly small God.

And so we only respond in in a fairly small way. But Paul is saying, remember who God is, his greatness, his holiness, his majesty, and the responsibility and also the privilege it is to work out our salvation as his people, people belonging to and owing everything to that holy God.

And so Paul says, remember what God has done, remember who God is. And thirdly, he says in these opening couple of verses, to remember what God is doing. So we have that foundation of what God has done. He has rescued us.

But we see here, God is still at work. Verse 13, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Paul's giving us this reminder, really this massive kind of confidence boost that when we step out and do God's work, when we try and proactively live out our salvation, when we put that into action, we're not doing that on our own.

[10 : 30] We're not doing that in our strength. It is God at work in us. We work because it is God who works. Our salvation isn't like, you know, God has kind of wound up one of those little toys and then he's done his part and he's just set it going and now we're on our own and who knows where we'll end up.

No, the only way we have any hope of working out this salvation is because God continues to be at work. We saw that right back at the start of chapter one of this letter.

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. We have that confidence. You could perhaps say that our working that Paul speaks about here is the same as how a transatlantic sailing crew works.

They work hard. They give everything, blood, sweat and tears. They do that because the wind is also working, propelling them along. The wind doing its work doesn't mean they say, oh, that's fine.

We can just chill. No, that's when they work all the more and yet if there was no wind, their work would be pointless. We remember what God is doing. We know that God is at work in our lives, growing us to be more like Jesus.

[11 : 40] That our will and our work, as it says, our desires and the actions that flow out of them would be for his pleasure. We see here that God has promised he will do that.

He will work in us. And so, in light of that, we work to do everything in our power to join in his work, to serve him and his people, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, knowing it is God who works in us.

If we're serious about living out our faith, that real privilege there is of being involved in what God is doing, what is of eternal significance. And Paul says we absolutely should be serious about that.

Remember, Paul is writing here to the whole church. We saw that right at the beginning of this letter. He's writing to all of us. He's not saying here's something for the real keynotes or here's something for some kind of Christian professionals.

No, this is Paul's direction to the whole church to live out our salvation with fear and trembling. He says we do that by looking first to God, remembering what God has done, remembering who God is, remembering what God is doing, and through that wholeheartedly committing our lives to him.

[12 : 55] We work out our salvation. I love what happens next in this passage. He says suddenly from this kind of big topic, look at the vastness of God, give your whole lives to him.

Paul suddenly focuses that down and applies it to what might seem to us to be a fairly mundane or a fairly day-to-day issue, something we'd be tempted to think is not really that big a deal.

But Paul obviously takes it very seriously. And it's, as we said before, this idea of grumbling, this idea of complaining, this idea of disputing.

Paul says that a key part of living out our salvation is not grumbling, but rejoicing. And so let's look at that. Secondly, we're kind of funneled in here. And the second thing we're going to look at, verse 14 and 15, it is not grumbling, but rejoicing.

It says this, do all things without grumbling or disputing, 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.

[14 : 09] As we said earlier on, that grumbling, disputing, talking others down to big ourselves up, that comes so naturally to us, doesn't it?

I'm sure there's not a person in this room that can't think of a time when they've done that or been tempted to do that or kind of played that over in their minds or in their hearts. And yet Paul says that when we actually get what God has done for us, when we grasp, when we remember his love, his incredible holiness and his ongoing work in our lives, that working that out means that we put away grumbling, we put away disputing, we put away disputing, we can put away negativity and we can instead rejoice.

Another big theme we've seen in this letter is the idea of unity within the church, isn't it? But there is also a kind of non-gospel unity, you might say, an unhelpful unity in so many areas of life, in so many staff rooms across the country, in so many friendship groups at schools.

I think if we're honest, in so many churches as well, what brings people together is this grumbling and disputing. It is picking a side against something else.

It is uniting around something that isn't quite what we or our little group would like it to be like. We can unite around what is negative. And yet Paul says that the church should be radically different because its unity is formed around the gospel.

[15 : 40] It's unity not in grumbling or complaining or this group versus that group, but it is unity in a shared love for Jesus. It is unity by reminding ourselves that we don't need to be discontent because that is really what lies at the heart of grumbling, isn't it?

Discontentment or things that's not fair, we're not getting what we think we need. But we don't need to be discontent but instead can celebrate together that in Christ we have everything we could ever need.

That this holy God, this vast God has welcomed us in and so we can live joyfully together as his people. And so we want to reject kind of grumbling as being the thing that unites us but every bit as important is also rejecting the kind of grumbling that would divide us.

Grumbling at one another, grumbling about one another, either dwelling on that in our hearts or sharing eagerly with others perhaps that the failures of different people or where things aren't going the way we'd like them to go, grumbling and disputing in that way can cause huge issues in the church.

And again, Paul says that can't be how God's people live. It brings us back to that humility we focused on last week, that humility we were just speaking about with the younger guys there.

[17 : 01] As we see Christ's humility for us, suffering in our place, it says we have that mind of Christ among ourselves as it says back in verse 5 that again, rather than grumbling against one another, we consider others more significant than ourselves and so we're able to, we're eager to, to build up one another.

Because again, we're not going to ranking ourselves compared to the person next to us but we're secure in Jesus and so we can forgive as he forgives and we can encourage one another rather than pulling each other down.

So that grumbling, those disputes have no place. And the great motivation here is that Paul says what might seem like a small thing, not grumbling, not complaining, not being a people of dispute and negativity, he says actually this has a huge effect.

A church living this out, Paul says, shine as light lights in the world. It's an incredible and an uncommon community that then draws people in.

And in some ways that's fairly obvious, isn't it? If someone new comes along to the church and the first thing they hear is a kind of discontent and grumbling or if people speak to someone who they know is a Christian but it's always just kind of doom and gloom or negative talk about other people.

[18 : 27] That's not very distinctive, is it? It's really the same as what we see in the world all around us and I suppose ultimately it's communicating that the gospel doesn't really make any difference.

But, if people come into a community or if people meet Christians who are glad and rejoicing as Paul says he is in verse 17 that Paul is rejoicing despite his situation, despite his imprisonment, despite the fact he thinks he might even be killed, still he says he's able to rejoice because the faith of others is being built up.

If we are glad and rejoicing as Paul calls us to be in light of the gospel, verse 18, likewise you should always, sorry, you also should be glad and rejoice with me. If we're able to live that out, remembering what God has done, remembering who God is, remembering what God is continuing to do, well that makes us then to shine, that makes us as God's people distinctive, that demonstrates that Jesus really is the good news that we say he is.

It encourages people to want to know more. If we are joyfully working out our salvation, that is an attractive thing that brings others in to see who is or what is, who is, ultimately Jesus is the foundation of that salvation.

Now that doesn't mean, and I think it's always really important to clarify this, it doesn't mean that we all just need to kind of pretend that everything is fine, everything is perfect, that we have no issues.

[20 : 05] It absolutely doesn't mean being insincere. It doesn't mean that we pretend that our life or our church is, you know, like people you see on Facebook or Instagram where everything is brilliant and it's always having fun and they have no issues whatsoever.

It's absolutely not that. It's not a dishonesty. But it does mean, and remember, this is working out our salvation. This takes effort and training our minds to remember that salvation through Jesus.

It does mean people, it does mean being people for whom the joy of that salvation, the security of what Jesus has done, and the certain and eternal hope that he alone offers, it does mean being people where that joy is actually the dominant note over and above the challenges that we face.

That when we are tempted to grumble, when we are tempted to vent, that actually we remember all we have in Christ and that as his people we are representing him, that the holy God and that he is at work within us.

It says we really get that, it says we really commit to that, it says we really work that out and it has that incredible effect of making us a people who are serious about God but also who are joyful about God.

[21 : 26] It means as individuals and as a church we are people who are not grumbling but rejoicing and that that in itself is an attractive thing drawing other people to see Christ as the reason for that joy and the reason for that hope that we're able to share.

So there we go, working out our salvation, not grumbling but rejoicing. Those are the two things we've looked at so far. If you've got a Bible in front of you, you might notice you've still got a fair way to go to get to verse 30 but don't worry.

This last section we're going to be a lot shorter, a lot quicker as Paul concludes this chapter really with two examples. Paul finishes this chapter with two people who sum up everything we've seen, I think not just this morning but so far in this letter to the Philippians.

So far in this letter from the beginning Paul has spoken about being people in committed gospel partnership, about living as citizens worthy of the gospel, about having the mind of Christ, about humbly serving others, about working out our salvation in fear and trembling, not grumbling but rejoicing.

We've had a whole brilliant kind of panorama, picture of what this church we're to aspire to looks like. And Paul now says, well if you want to see that in the flesh as it were, here are two people, Timothy and Epaphroditus, two people the Philippian church would have known well, two examples who are living this out in really practical ways.

[22 : 57] And I say we don't really have the time this morning to spend on these two examples that they deserve but ultimately what we see here in line again with that big message of Philippians are two people whose love for God shows itself in love for God's people and which is then worked out in really determined and practical ways.

Let's have a brief look at the two of them. Timothy, Paul says, has been genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippian church. He has this genuine love for them. Why does he love them so much?

Well it's not just because they were nice people or they may well have been. It's not just that he happened to have some good friends there. No, we see in verse 21 Timothy is a guy who echoing back to verse 4 of chapter 2 Paul says doesn't seek his own interests but those of Christ.

And that shows itself in having a genuine interest, a genuine concern, a genuine love for Christ's church, for these people of the Philippian church.

And so as Paul is looking to send someone to update the Philippians on his situation in the future to keep building that partnership they have to make that journey of around a thousand miles, probably two or three months work, who could do that for him?

[24 : 20] Who's going to be willing to do that? Well Timothy is the guy who is available and willing and who will go and step out in that way.

It doesn't get much more practical than that, does it? And Epaphroditus is similar. Epaphroditus has come to Paul from Philippi to bring him a collection, money for Paul to live off while he's in prison.

Prisoners had to fund themselves and part of the Philippians gospel partnership with Paul was this collection, this gift which they'd given him to allow him to continue to live and also to continue to work, encouraging a number of churches through these letters he's writing while locked up in prison remember.

And again, Epaphroditus' love for God means that even though it seems he must have become ill on this journey or upon his arrival, he risked everything. Verse 34, he nearly died for the work of Christ.

Epaphroditus would not give up on this partnership, would not give up on this support that enabled Paul to carry on this gospel work that would encourage the church. He was working out his salvation in this most practical and sacrificial of ways again.

[25 : 36] And so this chapter finishes with two guys who didn't just kind of talk the talk, they literally walked the walk, they put their faith into action and into practice, who didn't grumble about hardships, whether that is Paul in prison, whether that is Epaphroditus' ill almost to the point of death, but rather they worked out their salvation in fear and trembling, knowing it was God at work in them.

Two men who gave their very best to serve a God who deserves that entirely. And I think as we finish that, it's a great challenge for us, isn't it?

We've thought of this specific area of grumbling that Paul has focused on, but perhaps also these two examples, Timothy and Epaphroditus, challenge us to think where else can we be living this out?

Where else can we, like them, be working out our salvation from that place of real security, real certainty, remembering what God has done for us, that foundation of the gospel, be remembering who God is, that we are living for, representing a holy God, a serious responsibility, but living boldly and sacrificially for him, remembering what he continues to do, that he continues to work in us.

And that as we try and remember that, as we keep that at the front of our minds, that we would work, that we would commit all that we have to living for his glory, that he would reveal to us in the different ways in which we are part of this church, in the different places that we live, in the different relationships we have, whether that is family or colleagues or friends, that we would be working out our salvation, that we would be putting it into practice, that we would be willing to suffer and willing to sacrifice in order that Christ and his church might be built up all for God's glory.

[27 : 29] Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we hear that call this morning from your word to work out our salvation. Lord, we ask that you would protect us from an insecurity that forgets what you've done for us in the gospel and makes us think we perhaps need to prove ourselves or earn your love.

We pray as well that you would protect us from a casual attitude towards you and towards living as your people, an attitude that forgets your greatness, that doesn't tremble in fear, but rather pushes you into the background of our lives.

Lord, we ask instead that you would help us to know our security in Jesus and in response to give our whole lives to you.