

Philippians 2:12-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/phil/phil-2/philippians-212-16/>

Paul encourages the Philippians to have the mindset of Christ: to obey God no matter the earthly cost. To continually adopt this mindset takes hard work, but it is work worth doing, motivated by a fear of God to reject worldly attitudes, to not complain in the face of hardship, and to live apart from the normal sinful way of the world. The encouraging thing is that it is God working through us if we choose to obey, and it pleases Him and points nonbelievers toward Christ.

Paul has just described the mentality of Jesus, and exhorted his Philippian partners in the gospel to make an intentional decision to adopt the same mentality. That might be summarized as “Obeying God, no matter what, is the path to our greatest fulfillment, even when it would be easy to think otherwise.” Paul continues this theme, and transitions to application with the bridge of *So then, my beloved*. The *So then* connects what is about to be said with Paul’s admonition to adopt Jesus’ attitude of radical obedience. Jesus left the most comfortable and desirable situation imaginable, to take on a task that was, by comparison, horrific, because He knew obedience to the Father is always the best possible path to take. We are asked to believe the same way.

Paul calls these Philippian believers *my beloved* because of their participation in the gospel, both through their example of obedience as well as their financial support of Paul (4:15-17). Paul now admonishes them by adding *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*. The Philippians had already demonstrated a pattern of obedience. They had *obeyed* the commands of Jesus in Paul’s *presence*. Paul admonishes them to obey *now much more* in his *absence* from their presence. This would certainly be the natural choice for them, if they indeed adopted Jesus’ example by choosing the same perspective He adopted (verses 5-10).

Paul adds an instruction to *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*. The word translated *salvation* means “something is being delivered from something.” It is translated “deliverance” in verse 19, where it appears Paul was asking the Philippians to pray for him for deliverance from the temptation to be afraid, which would cause him to fail at boldly proclaiming the gospel. What is being delivered from what in this context? The first thing to note is that the deliverance being addressed must be “worked out.” And this “working out” should be done with *fear and trembling*. Further, the deliverance being contemplated connects the “working out” that must be done by the *beloved* Philippians in *fear and trembling* with the work of *God, who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure*.

It seems a good way to connect all these things is as follows:

- Paul is exhorting the Philippian believers to have *fear and trembling* that they will miss out on living in such a way as to gain *His good pleasure*. The worst outcome in life is to live it in such a way as to miss out on the opportunity to please God with our deeds, and miss out on the rewards He desires to give us.

- Therefore, the *salvation*, or deliverance in view is from the terrible outcome of missing out on the amazing opportunity to live a life that is pleasing to God.
- This is directly connected to the attitude Jesus had, that Paul desires the Philippian believers to adopt. Jesus viewed the immense cost of obedience to the Father as being well worthwhile.
- The *work* they are being asked to do in order to have *salvation* or deliverance from squandering their life opportunity to gain the rewards of obedience is actually to allow God's *work* in them to flow through them.
- The goal of life is to live for God's *good pleasure*. This was demonstrated in verses 5-10 by Jesus being willing to leave heaven to come to earth and learn obedience, to take on the sins of the world in obedience to His Father. If Jesus believed such radical obedience was worth it, then so should we.

Luke 1:71 uses the word translated *salvation* in verse 12 in the following context:

“As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—
 Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES,
 And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US;”
 (Luke 1:70-71)

In this case, the verse is speaking of Israel being delivered from the hand of its enemies.

Because the word *salvation* is so often used to refer to being saved from hell to heaven, this verse can be confusing. But taking *salvation* of verse 12 to mean “deliverance from Hell to heaven” is problematic on many fronts, and does not fit the context. Taken that way, it would require the way to heaven to include works of obedience, when the Bible makes clear that we get to heaven solely through faith. Paul stated clearly that no human could obey sufficiently to be justified in the presence of God (Romans 3:23-24; 4:1-5). Paul made it clear that justification in the sight of God comes only by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). When we are justified in the sight of God through faith, we are fully accepted because of what Christ did for us on the cross.

Of further note is that in 2:15, Paul calls the Philippian believers “children of God.” And in chapter 1, Paul addressed this letter to the “saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.” So a sudden addition of a requirement of “working” to get to Heaven does not fit the context.

Our unconditional acceptance in Christ as “saints” and “children of God” is completely independent of works. That is why God's Spirit comes to indwelling believers upon their initial belief. Clearly Paul had no doubt that the Philippian believers to whom he wrote were justified in God's sight. He writes here that *God who is at work in you*, likely referring to the work of the Spirit in the lives of the Philippian believers. Paul will say in the next chapter “we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God” (Philippians 3:3). In this statement, Paul makes it clear that he lumps himself together with the Philippian believers as being the “true circumcision,” by which Paul means the spiritual chosen of God (Romans 2:28-29).

Therefore, it seems clear that Paul's desire is that his *beloved* brethren in Philippi do the difficult work of obedience, following the same spirit of Christ, so that they will receive the great rewards of Christ. Paul testifies in a number of places how he himself embraced suffering because of the rewards he believes he will gain for his obedience (1 Corinthians 9:24-27; 2 Timothy 4:8). Paul admonishes believers throughout his writing to live "this day for that day," speaking of the Judgment Day (1 Corinthians 3:11-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Romans 14:10-11). Here Paul is urging the Philippian believers to exert their most strenuous efforts to gain the greatest of prizes. To accomplish such a great thing requires *salvation* or deliverance from worldly attitudes. It requires us to *work out* adopting perspectives that are true, and real. It takes exertion to accomplish choosing the right attitude, to choose perspectives that align with that of Jesus. And in adopting those perspectives, it will lead us to *work for His good pleasure*. The motivation needed is to have *fear and trembling* of missing out on such greatness. To do so is to miss the great opportunity of living on earth. This life will be the only time in our existence where we will be able to live and know by faith. This is apparently such an enormous benefit that the angels in heaven are watching us closely to try to gain understanding themselves (Ephesians 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12).

It is likely that many of the Philippian believers were retired Roman soldiers. Roman soldiers were renowned for being able to endure hardship. One of the things that made them so formidable was the ability to go on long marches and still be able to fight. A small example of this can be seen in Acts 23:23-32, where a group of Roman soldiers march all night to deliver Paul to Caesarea, then return to Jerusalem the next morning. It seems Paul is giving the Roman soldiers a vision of extreme hardship toward a great cause. Adopting Jesus' attitude toward obedience, and living in courageous obedience, as Jesus did, will result in the greatest possible outcome for life.

Paul continues with his admonition to live a life of obedience, adopting an attitude that "it is worth any price" by commanding them to *Do all things without grumbling or disputing*. Paul exhorted them to enthusiastically embrace hardship. But when hardship comes, it is human nature to grumble and complain. The children of Israel gladly fled slavery in Egypt, but soon turned to grumbling when they endured hardship. Paul encourages his *beloved* partners in the gospel to do *all things without grumbling or disputing*. The reason is *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*. Again, Paul notes here that these Philippian believers are already *children of God*. They became *children of God* when they believed the gospel, and trusted in Jesus.

But Paul is admonishing these *children of God* in Philippi to go beyond mere spiritual birth, and *appear as lights in the world*. Just as Jesus was the light of the world, and displayed God's glory through His obedience, so Paul exhorts the Philippian believers to do. By living a life that is *above reproach*, contrasted with the culture around them that is *crooked and perverse*, they will *appear as lights* shining in darkness.

By living in this manner, being *blameless, innocent* and *above reproach*, the Philippian believers, who are *children of God*, will be *holding fast the word of life*. The word translated *hold fast* could also be translated as "take heed of." The idea is that by living a life of truth, love, and

service, the Philippian believers will be holding true to the word of God. They would be living in obedience, just as Jesus lived in obedience.

Paul now connects the reward that the Philippians could gain with his own reward in the Day of Judgment. Paul notes that he desires that the Philippian believers live faithfully *so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain*. Again, Paul does not pretend humans can act apart from self-interest. By instructing us to love others as we love ourselves, the Bible makes clear that humans have a built-in desire to seek self-interest. Paul simply desires that the Philippian believers act from a position of enlightened self-interest. By seeing reality truly, it becomes apparent that radical obedience to Christ is the path to our greatest self-interest, while self-seeking leads to self-destruction.

In Paul's case, he is transparent in his desire. He desires to *glory* in the *day of Christ*, when all things are judged. And the particular *glory* he desires is to glory because his Philippian disciples gain glory from Christ for their faithful obedience. It is like a proud parent at their child's graduation, recital, or competition. The parent glories in their child's glory. Paul is the same. He is rooting for his spiritual children to win at life by having the same attitude and action Jesus did. If they win, he wins. If the Philippian believers live faithfully, then Paul's work is complete. If they do not, then Paul has *run in vain*. His *toil* on their behalf would be *in vain*. Paul would still be rewarded for his faithfulness. But it seems that Paul places greater emphasis on his opportunity to glory in the success of his spiritual children than in that of himself.

We have no knowledge that Paul had a wife and children of his own. It seems however that he adopted a very paternal attitude toward his spiritual children, and had great fervor to see them succeed in life by living in obedience to Jesus. It is likely that Paul's occasion to write this letter was to thank the Philippian believers for supporting him financially in his need, while living under house arrest in Rome at his own expense (Acts 28:30; Philippians 4:15-17).

Biblical Text

¹² 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; ¹³ for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing; ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.