

work out your salvation

Good morning church. It is good to be with you today. If you are just joining us today, we are right in the middle – week 5 – of a 10 week study in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

And this morning we come to another well-known text – Philippians 2:12-18 – where Paul instructs the Philippians (and us) to "*work out our salvation with fear and trembling...*"

In truth, it's not that complicated of a text, but it **definitely** is one that makes us wrestle – with what this command means, what it looks like, and how to make sense of it in the light of Paul's consistent teaching on grace. **Ephesians 2:8-10** particularly comes to mind:

*"For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are **God's** handiwork [or God's workmanship], created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

The apostle Paul, following Jesus, and in concert with the rest of the New Testament preachers and writers, is incredibly clear that salvation is both the act of God alone and the gift of grace alone – "*not by works, so that no one can boast.*"

And yet, here in our text this morning, we find this same apostle Paul commanding the Philippians (and us) to "*work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling...*"

There is something about this that feels so antithetical to the gospel.

So, what does he mean by this and where is the gospel in it all?

Because, I'll tell you – the gospel is at the very heart of this.

Truth is, this passage – even this very command – is a beautiful revelation of the gospel and invitation **into** the gospel.

So, let's begin by simply reading and hearing Paul's words. I'll read it for us.

Philippians 2:12-18

(12) 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.

(14) Do 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 sky (16) 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. (17) But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. (18) So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Let's pray.

One of the things I've come to love about the apostle Paul in this letter – something the Philippians must have deeply appreciated – is that Paul lived with a captivating vision of *the Day of Christ*. A captivating vision of the **Day** to which God is drawing all of history – the **goal** – the **end** to which God is at work in us. The **Day** that God has chosen when He will bring **all things** in submission to Christ...

When God will bring the **whole** cosmos to justice and peace... And when God's people **will** be **finally fully complete** in Christ. **Fully alive** in Christ.

We hear it for the first time in Paul's opening greetings – where he speaks of the joy he has that the Philippians have been his partners in the gospel from the first day till now – **v.6** – "*being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to **to completion** until the day of Christ Jesus.*"

When Paul thought of them, prayed for them, sat down to write to them – he didn't just see their current reality clearly and love them (though he did). But no, he saw more... He was captivated by a vision of what the gospel would ultimately bring about in them... that "*he who began a good work in [them] **will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.***"

I'm sure the Philippians appreciated this deeply.

As would we.

Cause it's incredibly easy, common, natural to see the way things **are** – in their current mix of beauty and brokenness – and conclude that **this is all it's ever gonna be.**

And I mean this in regard not primarily to our **outward circumstances** (our educational opportunities, income and investment prospects, relational possibilities), but to the inner realities

of our lives – what we often refer to as "our hearts". The deep and unseen, but very real part of ourselves that shapes and informs all that we do – for better or worse.

And in this regard, it is incredibly easy, common, natural to see the way things **are** – in their current mix of beauty and brokenness – and conclude that **this is all it's ever gonna be**.

Some of us have been Christians for a good while now, and though the years have brought some change, the sins of our youth aren't that far behind us. They're just now the sins of our 30's or 40's or 50's or 60's... right?

I'm sure many of the Philippians felt this way – that the way things are is pretty much the way things will always be. **Until** we're with Christ – on the other side of the grave – and then things will be different! So different and so good. Thank God. Our sin completely done away with and our lives completely in Christ.

This is how the Philippians **and many of us** see our lives.

But when Paul thought of the Philippians... when he prayed for them... and sat down to write to them – Paul always seemed to see them in the light of what they would ultimately become in the grace of God – women and men **fully mature in Christ**. Fully alive in Christ. Fully conformed to the image of Christ. *"filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and*

praise of God." (Paul says in ch.1:11). "*Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ...*" (Paul says in Eph 4:13). "*Filled to the measure of all the fullness of God...*" (Eph 3:19)

But here's the thing: according to Paul, this wasn't **just** their hope on the other side of the grave – in the day of Christ – **but, because of the gospel, this was their hope now...**

And in case you're worried that Paul was getting a bit loose with the gospel here, we need to acknowledge that this is something he learned from Jesus. Something **we** need to learn (again and again) from Jesus.

In truth, this is one of the most fundamental **revelations – claims – dynamics** of the gospel of Jesus. As Jesus Himself announces in **Mark 1:15** – "*The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*"

The time has come. The appointed time that God chose before the creation of the world to bring His Kingdom into the world – is here – **now – because Jesus, the King, is here – now.**

According to Jesus, and Paul his apostle, the hope of the gospel – the hope of God's radical in-breaking – God's rescuing, redeeming, restoring grace – is not just something to be hoped for on the other side of the grave. But it is something to be experienced today – in Jesus.

Not in its fullness. Not yet. But in Christ, nonetheless.

And this is what's captivating Paul as we come to hear him in **Philippians 2:12-18**. He is captivated by a beautiful vision of the **hope** that the gospel **means** for **their** and **our** *here and now...*

Listen again to what he writes. **Philippians 2:12-13**

"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, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

As many have clarified before: it's important to note that Paul doesn't say here, "work **for** your salvation". He says, "work **out** your salvation."

He's not saying, there is more for you to do to be saved. Only God can save us – so we run to Christ in faith. The faith He gives us.

There is no more for you to do to be saved.

But there is more – **far more** for you and I to discover and experience of the salvation that is ours in Christ.

That's what he's saying.

There is more – **far more** – **in** you and in me that has yet to be brought under and brought to life in the saving and redeeming reign of Jesus.

"For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

I love this verse – because I love what it says about the depths of God's work in us. About the realistic hope of the gospel. The depths to which the gospel reaches.

To the place of our will – our very desires – AND our doing.

Think about that: the place our will – our very desires – and our doing.

Are these not the very battlegrounds where many of us often lay fallen? And where we find one another fallen?

The battlegrounds of our will – our desires – **and** our doing.

Listen to what J.A. Motyer, a wise British evangelical wrote years ago, regarding this. He says,

"In every action, there are two aspects to be considered: the will and the deed, and one or other of these is often our downfall. Either we cannot bring ourselves to choose what we know to be right, or else, having chosen it, we fail to do it. Sin has corrupted both the power to choose and the power to accomplish." (Motyer)

What an honest and penetrating description of the deep brokenness that sin has brought in our hearts and lives. Is this not a realistic description of what we know to be true in us, apart from grace – apart from the rescuing and renewing grace of God?

"Sin has corrupted both the power to choose and the power to accomplish."

"We cannot bring ourselves to choose what we know to be right, or else, having chosen it, we fail to do it."

That's a reality we all know by experience.

And yet!

And yet here, in Paul's words to the Philippians – verse 13 – the beautiful reach of the gospel rings out – "*For it is God who works in you **to will** and **to act** in order to fulfill his good purpose.*"

Do we hear that? Do we hear what Paul is saying here?

That the saving grace of God – the saving action of God is not exhausted in our conversion, and then put on hold till our death!

No, the grace of God actually launches us into **a life** where God is now at work in us... in you... in me...

Not just giving us hope that He will **one day** redeem and renew us, but **is now** at work in us – in you – in me – "*to will and to act in order to fulfill **his** good purpose.*"

This is the gospel, according to Paul.

A gospel he learned from Jesus.

A gospel that doesn't just save our souls, but otherwise leave us unredeemed in the depths of who we are. No. The gospel – **Jesus' gospel** – seeks to redeem **it all**.

Every part of us.

Every part of you.

Every part of me.

Let's come back to the quote I read a moment ago.

But let me finish it this time.

"In every action, there are two aspects to be considered: the will and the deed, and one or other of these is often our downfall. Either we cannot bring ourselves to choose what we know to be right, or else, having chosen it, we fail to do it. Sin has corrupted both the power to choose and the power to accomplish.

But God is effectually and ceaselessly at work in you, both to will and to work – to recreate our wills and to impart to us his own capacity for effectual working." (129)

"To recreate our wills" – that is, to renew our affections, our desires – that we would no longer desire what is corrupt and self-serving, but truly desire **what God desires.**

"And to impart to us his own capacity for effectual working" – to empower us to **do** the very will of God... to pursue it, not just want to...

"In order to fulfill his good purpose"... Or as another translation has it, *"for his good pleasure."*

Ok, so what does **verse 12** have to do with this – the call to *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"*?

Well before we **return** to that verse, we need to actually **continue on** in the passage – because what comes after this all the more clarifies the meaning of what comes before.

(14) Do 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 sky (16) 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.

We'll stop there.

Instead of walking through this line-by-line, what we need is to recognize the **story** that Paul is actually referencing again and again throughout these verses – a story that is not that obvious without some attentiveness, but that opens up this whole passage for us in a striking way.

If your Bible is like mine – I have the latest version of the NIV with me here – then you might notice that there are quotation marks in the middle portion of v.15. "*Children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.*" Whether or not the quotations marks are in your translation, Paul's words here are taken from a verse in Deuteronomy (Duet 32:5) – and the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness.

Which also causes us to notice Paul's use of the word "*grumbling*" in v.14. A word that shows up again and again in the story of the Israelites in the years following their rescue from Egypt.

And Paul seems to be intentionally doing this – inviting us to call to mind the story of the Israelites – who, as a people, were rescued by God and claimed as His own – through God's saving action in the Passover Exodus.

And yet, as their story unfolds, beyond some fleeting moments of stated loyalty, they did not embrace the lessons of the wilderness and learn to truly live in the freedom of God... in the good purposes of God...

They claimed their status as the people of God, but stopped listening, worshipping, trusting and following the God who saved them...

They claimed their status, but rejected their call.

They claimed their freedom, but refused to learn to live in the freedom of serving God.

They claimed their status as God's people, but did not seek to walk in His ways.

And they ended up as pagan as the nations around them... Grumbling and arguing... Rather than "shining like stars" among the nations – a light to the nations – alive with the glory of God. *As God has always intended and desired.*

And understandably, Paul places this story before us – and calls us to **not let this be our story**...

And with this in our minds, the call of Paul in **Philippians 2:12** begins to not only make sense, but to be heard as the invitation of grace... a declaration of the gospel.

(12) 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.

With awe and reverence...

Because God's desire is not simply for you and I to grumble in the wilderness – no longer in Egypt, but not yet in the Promised Land... But His desire and invitation is for us to **know** the life of the Kingdom – life in Jesus – **here this place** – in this in-between space... To embrace and learn the ways of grace here in this space – in the times between the times – to learn to live the whole of our lives in the freedom of God's good reign...

The whole of our lives.

*The gospel – the saving grace of God – **worked out** into every facet of our being...*

(v.15) "Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky (16) 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. (17) But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. (18) So you too should be glad and rejoice with me."

I love Paul's confident hope here – for the Philippians and for us – his hope not only in the Day of Christ – but that the gospel brings this Day to us today – because Jesus is Lord and with us today... Because God is at hand today – at work – in us...

"The time has come," Jesus says, "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

As a pastoral friend of mine has often said – "The call to **repent** is always good news because, among other things, it means that things don't have to remain the same. That they can change. That we don't have to keep going in the same direction – we can turn around and experience life a new way...

Which is exactly what Jesus is saying to us today...

"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

This is Jesus' invitation to us – to me – to you – **today**.

So where does the gospel need to be worked out in you?

**Where is God inviting you
to acknowledge your need
for His redeeming, restoring work,
and to bow in faith and cooperate with His grace
– to follow Jesus today –
*that the gospel
– the saving grace of God –
might shine forth in you?***