

A Call to “Work Out Our Salvation”

Philippians 2:12-13

Philippians 2:12-13: *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now 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 do for His good pleasure.”*

Background Notes

The epistle to the Philippians is one of the “Prison Epistles.” The apostle Paul wrote this letter from Rome in the early 60s AD, when Nero was the Roman emperor. Paul was a prisoner - but under house arrest, not in a prison cell or dungeon. Acts 28:30-31: *“Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”*

Under house arrest, Paul was able to preach and teach to all who came to visit him. I’m sure he had some great “home Bible studies” in that rented house! But Paul could not leave the house. Because he was a prisoner of Rome, awaiting his trial, he was chained to a Roman guard at all times. The Roman soldiers who were assigned to guard duty with the apostle Paul certainly would have heard the Word preached to them on many occasions. They would have been right there as Paul taught Bible studies. Some of them must have become believers, because Philippians 1:12-13 says that the gospel reached even into Nero’s palace through Paul’s imprisonment.

One of Paul’s reasons for writing this letter was that a problem with division and disunity was emerging within the church. This is an important background note for the book of Philippians. We don’t know the cause of the disagreement, but it was not a major doctrinal problem because Paul dealt with doctrinal error in no uncertain terms. He spoke immediately about doctrinal error in Galatians, for example, where the believers were mixing Law and Grace – a major doctrinal problem!

Here in the book of Philippians, the problem causing division appears to have been a non-doctrinal issue or a minor doctrinal problem. Maybe it had to do with the location of the church. Maybe it had to do with their outreach ministry - what evangelistic program would best reach unbelievers? Maybe it was a power struggle between individuals in the church. Whatever the cause of the problem was, there is an emphasis on unity and the need to come to unity throughout the letter to the Philippians.

In Philippians 2:1-11, the Philippians were exhorted to be concerned about *each other* - not just concerned with their own personal interests, ambitions or agendas. This attitude would certainly help toward unity. Philippians 2:3-4, *“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”* That kind of attitude will go a long way towards creating unity!

Verses 5-11 are a wonderful passage that exalts our Lord, Jesus Christ. But notice that verse 5 begins with *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...”* The context of this wonderful Christological passage is a call for unity! The Philippian believers were asked to develop the same self-giving attitude of our Lord, who willingly left the glories and joys of Heaven and became a Man in order to save us from our sins.

It's in that context that we come to the often-misunderstood text in verse 12: *“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”*

What does *“work out your own salvation”* mean?

Doctrinal Points

1. **“Work out your salvation” does *not* mean we obtain salvation by working for it.**

Notice that the text does ***not*** say, “work ***for*** your salvation,” or “work ***toward*** your salvation,” or “work ***at*** your salvation.” No – it says, “work ***out*** your salvation.” There's ***no*** idea here of attaining salvation by good works!

The Bible must harmonize with itself, and Scripture clearly teaches that we don't earn our salvation by doing good works. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”* And Titus 3:5 says that we are saved *“not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to God's mercy.”*

If you think that somehow you can “earn” salvation by living a “good” life, or by doing good works, you are mistaken. Isaiah 64:6 says that even our righteous deeds - even the best things we do - are like dirty rags in God's sight! Relative to God's standard of purity and perfection, even the very best of our good works are worthless. There's no way we can do enough good works to get ourselves into Heaven, because we can never achieve God's standard of perfection on our own.

There's only one way to obtain salvation and get into Heaven – by committing your life to Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, because He died on the cross for your sins. Acts 16:31 says, *“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.”*

In Philippians 2:12, “work out your salvation” does not mean that salvation is obtained by working for it. Well then, what *does* it mean?

2. “Work out your salvation” *does* mean that unity is attained by working for it.

Remember the background for the letter - the rift and disunity that was beginning to raise its ugly head in the church at Philippi? In the first part of this chapter, Paul told the Philippian believers to follow the Lord's self-giving attitude in their relationship with one another. In verse 12 he continues the theme by telling them to work out their “salvation” *in reference to this problem of disunity*. That's the context for verse 12.

The word “salvation” here can be translated “deliverance” or even “solution.” In Philippians 1:19 Paul said, *“I know that this will turn out for my salvation through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”* Some translations say “*deliverance*” rather than “*salvation*.” The same Greek word is used here in verse 12, and the word that's translated “salvation” could be translated “deliverance” or “solution.”

In Philippians 1:19, was Paul was writing about his salvation from sin? No! He was writing about his “deliverance” or “salvation” from imprisonment in Rome. The word “salvation” can refer to more than just the salvation of our souls. In fact, it can refer to being “saved” from drowning, or from a fire, or from a variety of other problems or difficulties. So verse 12 could be translated “work out your deliverance” or “work out the solution” to their problem of *disunity*.

Paul reminded them that they had always been obedient Christians when he was with them, but now, in his absence, it was up to them to work out their own “salvation” from the problem of disunity. God had saved them; they already had their salvation from sin. Now they needed to let that salvation be shown by working out their disagreement, and working their way to unity.

Here's an illustration. Recently one of my Bible college students had a problem: his grade point average was too low in a required course, and he couldn't graduate. So we worked out a solution. He wrote a major paper to raise his grade, and he was able to graduate. We “worked out his deliverance” from the problem. We “worked out a solution” to the problem. We “worked out his salvation”!

So in essence Paul was saying: “Brothers and sisters, you need to work out a solution to the problem that's causing your disunity! I'm not going to tell you how to do it. You need to work out it out yourselves. Work out your own salvation! Work out your own deliverance. Work out your own solution to the problem, and come to unity. And remember - do it with fear

and trembling, because it's very important. You're not just 'playing church'! God wants to see a united fellowship. So work out your salvation with fear and trembling. Come to unity!"

Because of the context, this is what we believe to be the proper interpretation of Philippians 2:12. The phrase "work out your salvation" has nothing to do with earning salvation by good works. "Work out your salvation" means that we obtain unity by working for it!

Practical Application

You can work it out!

Is there disagreement or a lack of unity in your church or fellowship? You can work it out! It's not impossible! You can work out whatever problems are causing disunity.

Your church may be enjoying harmony and unity right now, but - just in case, somewhere along the line, something comes up that might tend to cause a disagreement or a lack of unity - remember this practical application: You can work it out!

Why can we say **with confidence** that you can work it out? Look at verse 13: "*For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*" God Himself is working in us - if we let Him. **God will always enable us to do what He asks us to do.** God wants us to remove any problems that cause disunity, because God loves to see unity amongst His people. Psalm 133:1 says, "*Behold how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.*" And in John 17, our Lord Jesus prayed for unity and love among His followers.

If there's a lack of unity in your church, your fellowship, or your ministry, you **can** work the problem out. It's not like solving a disagreement in the business world. We are the body of Christ, and God is at work in us to accomplish His good pleasure. He wants to see unity in the body. Pleasing God is the positive side of this.

"Work it out" could also be applied to problems in a Christian marriage. God wants married couples to be unified. And - He is at work in believing husbands and wives to bring it about, so don't quit your efforts at reconciliation. You can work it out!

So - if there's a lack of unity for whatever reason - a people problem, a marriage problem, a family problem, or a church program problem - don't pretend the problem doesn't exist. Don't sweep it under the rug. It won't go away if you try to ignore it. Work it out!

And as you're working it out, remember the words of Philippians 2:3-5. Don't try to manipulate people to get everything your way! Don't try to call all the shots yourself! "*Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*" If your attitude is "*the same as that of Christ Jesus,*" **you can work it out!**