

p 43 WEEK 6: WORKING OUT WHAT GOD HAS WORKED IN

Philippians 2:12–18

The Place of the Passage

Having exhorted the Philippians to pursue further unity (1:27–2:4) by looking to Christ as the supreme model of selfless humility (2:5–11), Paul now provides a series of exhortations related to perseverance, especially in light of the watching world (vv. 12–18).

The Big Picture

Paul encourages the Philippians to *work out* the salvation that God is *working in* them, demonstrating the genuineness of their faith to both Paul and the world.

p 44 Reflection and Discussion

Read through Philippians 2:12–18, which will be the focus of this week’s study. Following this, review the questions below concerning this section of the book of Philippians and write your responses. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, page 2284, or visit www.esvbible.org.)

Paul begins verse 12 with “Therefore ...” What follows, then, is the logical outworking of what he said in verses 5–11. But how so? What is the relationship between verses 5–11 and verses 12–18?

The Philippians are called to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (v. 12). This might at first sound like a salvation *by works* instead of *by grace*. But key words in verses 12–13 make it clear that it is not salvation by works. What are those key words, and what do they tell us about what Paul means here?

Verses 12b and 13 are clearly complementary. The first half speaks to human responsibility; the second speaks to God’s sovereignty. There is a small connecting word that Paul uses in the middle. What is it and how does it function?

p 45 What does “fear and trembling” have to do with *working out your salvation* and *God working in you to will and do*? Describe this “fear and trembling” in your own words, and explain why Paul exhorts Christians in this way.

In verse 14, Paul calls the Philippians to “do all things without grumbling or disputing.” Based on what you know of this epistle thus far, in what ways might the Philippians be tempted to grumble or complain? In what ways might they be tempted to dispute or argue?

Recall that Paul began his exhortations in 1:27. He continues this through 2:12–18. Do you see any repeated themes in this broader section? Write down the verses and language that apply. (Hint: start with “disputing” in 2:14 and look for related themes from the earlier verses.)

Of course, “grumbling” and “disputing” (v. 14) are wrong, and that’s reason enough for Paul to command the Philippians to forsake such actions and attitudes. But what specific reasons does Paul give in verse 15? How would the p 46 sins of “grumbling” and “disputing” stand in the way of Paul’s aims for the Philippians, according to these verses?

Paul borrows language from Deuteronomy 32:5 when he calls the Philippians to be “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (v. 15). What themes or words in Philippians 2:12–18 relate to the generation in the wilderness spoken of in Deuteronomy 32:5?

Uncertain of his future, Paul again entertains the possibility of martyrdom when he writes of being “poured out as a drink offering” (v. 17). In 1:12–23 Paul gave multiple reasons why he could rejoice in his imprisonment and impending execution. Now in 2:17–18 he gives different reasons for rejoicing. What are they and what do they mean?

Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to consider the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for you.

p 47 **Gospel Glimpses**

SALVATION, A FULL PACKAGE. The letter to the Philippians is replete with assurance that when God begins his saving work, he will bring it to completion (1:6). There is a genuine, personal responsibility to *work out* his salvation (i.e., work out the implications more deeply and more broadly in all of life). But even this call is grounded in the reality that God continues to work “in you” (2:12–13). Even more encouraging is the fact that he does this “for [or according to] his good pleasure” (v. 13)—not according to our work or good intentions. He is not limited by us; rather, he enables and empowers us. Paul is explicit: God works in our *wills* and in our *works* (v. 13) And, again, why? Because he wants to! It’s his plan and pleasure to do this!

WORKING BECAUSE OF GOD’S WORK. The sovereignty of God’s sanctifying work in the Christian is far from a disincentive to our own personal work. God’s work is the very basis and primary

motivation for ours. It is certainly a mystery precisely how the human responsibility of verse 12 and the divine sovereignty of verse 13 work together, but both are indeed true; both truths are clearly stated. But the word connecting them, “for” (v. 13), is telling, since it speaks to the motivation of our work, or the implication of God’s work. God’s ongoing, gracious work must not lead to laziness, indifference, or passivity, but to an awe-filled longing and striving to see salvation worked out more broadly and deeply.

Whole-Bible Connections

THE SIN OF GRUMBLING. Paul calls on the church to resist “grumbling” and “disputing” (v. 14). This is one way in which salvation is worked out into the corners of everyday life. But this seemingly simple command also has a missional aim: “that you may be ... without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation among whom you shine as lights in the world” (v. 15). The absence of complaining and arguing is a testifying mark of those who have put their full trust in the Lord and his plans. Therefore, God takes the sin of grumbling quite seriously. This was a major theme in Israel’s years in the wilderness. Not coincidentally, Paul quotes from one of those stories of Israel’s grumbling when he exhorts the Philippians to be “without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (see Deut. 32:5). But Paul borrows this language with a twist. Deuteronomy 32:5 spoke of the grumbling *Israelites* as “no longer his children” but rather “blemished” and part of a “crooked and twisted generation.” But Paul now calls on the Philippians, as *true* “children of God” (v. 15), to do what Israel did not do: to trust God and not complain or argue. They must be different from Israel of old and the world around them now.

p 48 LIGHTS IN THE WORLD. When Paul writes that the Philippians “shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15), he is tapping into rich biblical language. God promised in Isaiah 42:6–7 that he would one day “give a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.” The New Testament writers clearly saw this promise fulfilled in the coming of Jesus (Matt. 4:16; Luke 2:32). In fact, Jesus himself insisted that he is “the light of the world” (John 8:12); he came into the world “as light, so that whoever believes” in him will “not remain in darkness” (John 12:46). But Jesus also told his disciples that, by extension, they are “the light of the world.” He said, “let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). Elsewhere in Isaiah, God said he will raise up a people who will be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). Paul and Barnabas quote these very words as the basis for their mission to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47). So too the Philippians are to “shine as lights in the world.” In short, the Philippians are part of this same great thematic development in God’s global saving purposes.

SACRIFICIAL OFFERING. Paul sees his possible martyrdom as a “drink offering” (Phil. 2:17). This is language from the Old Testament Levitical system in which wine was poured onto the ground or an altar as a sacrifice and as a symbol of a life poured out for God. Paul sees his death as worship, as sacrifice, and as a sign of a life fully consecrated to the Lord (see 1:20). Further, he sees the sacrifice of his life as a drink offering which is “upon the sacrificial offering of [the Philippians’] faith” (2:17). Their faith and ministry is its own sacrificial offering. Paul’s “offering” in death, should *he* soon be martyred, would be a kind of completion of *their* sacrifice (again, see 3 John 6–8).

Theological Soundings

SANCTIFICATION. The Westminster Shorter Catechism from the 1640s explains sanctification as “the work of God’s free grace whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.” That’s what Paul writes about in Philippians 2:12ff., beginning with a general appeal (vv. 12–13) and moving to specifics like not grumbling (v. 14) but instead rejoicing (v. 18). This is a lifelong process, not something immediate or fully achieved in the short term. Sanctification is comprehensive in that it involves the will, actions, and affections. It is not merely moral improvement, not merely “biting the tongue” to hold back grumbling. It is spiritual, even personal. We resist grumbling as “children of God” (v. 15). Sanctification is also gospel-rooted, and yet being *worked out* (v. 12). Thus, there is no real spiritual fight against grumbling or arguing without continually “holding fast to the word of life” (v. 16). It is only [p 49](#) this kind of true spiritual transformation that can bring “joy” even in the prospect of a dear friend’s impending death (vv. 17–18).

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Philippians 2:12–18 for your own life today. Consider what you have learned that might lead you to praise God, repent of sin, and trust in his gracious promises. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of the (1) *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

3. Theological Soundings

4. Philippians 2:12–18

[p 50](#) As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment now to ask for the Lord’s blessing and help as you continue in this study of Philippians. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on a few key things that the Lord may be teaching you—and perhaps to highlight and underline these things to review again in the future.