



PHILIPPIANS

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...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:11

One must understand the context fully in order to make a right determination about this verse. First, Paul wrote about Christ's emptying Himself and coming in the form of a bondservant and in the likeness of man. Then he entered into the glory of what that has resulted in –

“Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Therefore, the words “that every tongue” are given in accord with the list provided in verse 10, meaning “those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth.” It is an all-inclusive statement. From angels to demons, and from the living to the dead, all tongues “should confess.”

The word “confess” signifies a frank and open confession. No sentient being is excepted, and all will confess openly and without a doubt, “that Jesus Christ is Lord.” These words, in particular, necessitated understanding the context. What does it mean when Paul says, “Lord?” Albert Barnes argues that –

“The word “Lord,” here, is used in its primitive and proper sense, as denoting owner, ruler, sovereign; compare the notes at Romans 14:9. The meaning is, that all should acknowledge him as the universal sovereign.”

His words are true, but they fail to fully explain the meaning of “Lord.” The term kurios, which is used here, means exactly as Barnes described, but there is more to be understood from it. The Old Testament Greek translation of the Bible translated the term “Jehovah” as “Lord” again and again. These are the Scriptures that Paul and the other apostles most frequently cited, and this is what Paul is conveying here.

Although the term kurios doesn’t adequately and completely explain the divine name, neither does the Hebrew term Adonai which is often used in place of Jehovah. However, it gives us an understanding of who is being referred to. The context of verse 2:6, and the all-encompassing statement given in verses 10 & 11 demand that kurios is, in fact, speaking of Jehovah. Only with this intent do the final words of the verse have their fullest significance. Paul says that all will confess Jesus as Lord (meaning Jehovah) “to the glory of God the Father.”

How can this be? The answer permeates Scripture, but a few verses draw the two together as One in the Godhead –

“For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, 23 that all should honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him.” John 5:22, 23

“I and My Father are one.” John 10:30

“Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either; he who acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” 1 John 2:23

The intimate relationship between the Father and the Son is highlighted so that we can understand what God has done. He has united with humanity and dwelt among us. The two are One in essence. Jesus is Jehovah ever revealing the unseen Father to us.

Life application: Paul’s confession in Romans 10:9, 10 is asking us to believe exactly what is relayed here today. We are not merely acknowledging that Jesus Christ is a sovereign over us, but that He is our God. If you do not recognize the Son in this capacity, you do not have the Father. It is time to apply the truth of Scripture to your life for the salvation of your soul.

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;
Philippians 2:12

The verse begins with “Therefore” in order to have us contemplate, consider, and then apply what has previously been stated. In verses 1-3, he spoke of unity of faith among the believers,

doing that which is right and appropriate towards one another in order to maintain the fellowship. This was followed with an explanation of what he meant in verses 5 through 11. There he began with, "Let this mind be in you." This is the context then of the "Therefore" we have now been presented.

He follows up with "my beloved" in order to set the tone for what he will next say. They are near and dear to his heart, and he would ask them to understand this. It is an appeal that because of this heartfelt bond, they would be all the more willing to receive and apply his words which are coming.

He immediately follows this with, "as you have always obeyed me." His words show that he knew of their faithfulness to his words, just as if they were from the Lord Himself. He was the apostle designated to bring the word of the Lord to them, and they understood it to be such. Because of this, they were obedient to the words of instruction he passed on to them.

Next, he again builds upon the thought. He is working from one point to the next to come to his main exhortation. In other words, the reason for "Therefore" still lies ahead. They had always obeyed, but he notes that it was more than just in his "presence only, but now much more in" his absence that he desired them to do so. It is one thing to be obedient when the boss is around, but when he goes out, how will the employees act? Paul is using his absence as a way of spurring them on to faithful obedience.

After these words of commendation and encouragement, he states next the reason for the "Therefore" by saying, "...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." The phrase he writes has produced an unhealthy amount of bad doctrine over the ages, and for no valid reason. Context is king, and a verse (or thought) taken out of context is a pretext. Paul is in no way implying that they need to work in order to be saved.

First, even from this one verse, it is apparent that they are saved. The word "brethren" implies this. Therefore, he is not speaking of works in order to be saved. The word for "work out" in Greek is *katergázomai*. It comes from *katá*, meaning "down, exactly according to," and it intensifies *ergázomai*, which means "work, accomplish." Thus literally it means "work down to the end-point." In other words "to an exact, definite conclusion." Paul is asking his already-saved brethren to work their salvation down to its conclusion.

The context of the thought is based especially on the opening words of verse 5 mentioned above, "Let this mind be in you..." We have been given an example of what Christ did by coming in His humbled state as a Man in order to save humanity. It is Christ's work which, therefore, saves. Paul's words are asking us to "work out" our salvation, not in anticipation of being saved, but in the state of salvation which we already possess.

Looking to the example of Christ, which is what the “Therefore” is based on, will show us what he means quite clearly. In Revelation 13:8, Christ Jesus is called “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” This was a position that was determined from the very beginning. Nothing could thwart it, and nothing could change it. And yet, He had to come and “work out” that position within the stream of time. This is why Paul first explained the work of Christ and then said, “Therefore.”

We too have been predestined for salvation. In our acceptance of the work of Christ Jesus, it is a done deal. Nothing can change it, and nothing can thwart it. However, we still have to live out the life that we have been handed. We may only live four minutes after our salvation, or we may have 99 years of living ahead, but we are to work out that salvation; a salvation which is already accomplished, to the glory of God.

Finally, this process is to be “with fear and trembling.” Vincent’s Word Studies, citing a scholar named Wardlaw, provides us the meaning of these words –

“This fear is self-distrust; it is tenderness of conscience; it is vigilance against temptation; it is the fear which inspiration opposes to high-mindedness in the admonition 'be not highminded but fear.' It is taking heed lest we fall; it is a constant apprehension of the deceitfulness of the heart, and of the insidiousness and power of inward corruption. It is the caution and circumspection which timidly shrinks from whatever would offend and dishonor God and the Savior. And these the child of God will feel and exercise the more he rises above the enfeebling, disheartening, distressing influence of the fear which hath torment. Well might Solomon say of such fear, “happy is the man that feareth always.””

When a person receives an inheritance, there is nothing they need to do in order to earn it. It is simply theirs. However, each will work out how they handle what they have been given differently. Paul’s exhortation is one which asks his readers to obey the gift of their salvation, not only while he is present, but also in his absence. We are now to do likewise.

Life application: Context matters.

...for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. Philippians 2:13

The words of this verse, which complete those of the last verse, seem almost contradictory. Taken side by side, they read –

work out your own salvation with fear and trembling
for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure

How can it be that we are to “work out our own salvation,” when it is God who works in us? It does, at first, seem contradictory, but it is not. The word “works” in verse 13 is *energeó*. It is derived from two parts, *en* meaning “engaged in” which then intensifies *érgon* which signifies “work.” And so it indicates “to energize” and thus “working in a situation which brings it from one stage (point) to the next, like an electrical current energizing a wire, bringing it to a shining light bulb” (HELPS Word Studies).

This reveals that God is working to produce a certain result or effect in us. This then leads us “to will and to do.” Paul doesn’t tell us how this is done. Rather, he simply avows that this is the case. Understanding this, we need to then reflect on the greater part of what is left unstated. In so doing, we can make several logical deductions.

It says that God works in us “to will and to do.” It does not say that He does; instead, we do. He merely prompts us to do so according to His will. It cannot be that He compels us to do, because all Christians fail to do rightly at one time or another, and some chronically. If our resulting actions were according to His will, we would never err, but err we do.

There is no physical force compelling us to do what Paul is speaking of, and even the prophets of old, and the apostles themselves, were prone to resist His will (for two of innumerable examples, read 1 Kings 13 for an Old Testament example, and Galatians 2:11-21 for a New). Therefore, the influence Paul is speaking about is a moral force. As it is not a physical force, it cannot mean that we are “compelled” in the sense of action. We are still free moral agents allowed to work our will against His will. In doing so, it is we who err, and it is we who will fail and reap the consequences of the failure.

Therefore, if we are not compelled by force to act, then His will which is being exercised can, in fact, be resisted. The example of Peter, if nothing else (and there is more) shows us this truth beyond a doubt. The influence of God is there actively working in us to energize us to obedience and right living. As a light bulb that shines, He works in us to illuminate His glory, but unlike the lightbulb which has no moral disconnect, man does. We can, and often do, fail to shine as God would intend for us.

Understanding this, we cannot use this verse as either a means of claiming that we are under an externally leading force of the Spirit which gives us all the guidance we need, nor can we claim that God is responsible when we sin. Both of these are errors in logic. The first diminishes our need for study and active obedience to God’s word, and the second imputes wrongdoing to Him. Both of these are to be rejected because they are false.

Context must be considered, and so let us look at our responsibilities in the surrounding verses, and see this truth highlighted –

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; 13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. 14 Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, 16 holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.

Life application: If you do not “hold fast to the word of life,” then God’s efforts in you will be neither according to His will, nor His good pleasure. Hold fast to the word of life.

Do all things without complaining and disputing, Philippians 2:14

Paul now brings in a thought which is quite similar to that which he had introduced just a few verses ago. It is almost parallel to 2:3 & 2:4, and it seems to indicate that this type of strife was a besetting sin of the church at Philippi, and one which he is intent on highlighting in order for the people to see it and correct it. The strife of verses 3 & 4 were among one another, and the strife here is more directed towards God.

He petitions them to “Do all things without...” In other words, in everything they do, they are to conduct their actions in accord with what will next follow. It is an all-encompassing thought that asks them to live out every aspect of their lives in this manner. What they are to do without includes two separate things –

Complaining. The Greek word is goggusmos. It is a word that was used repeatedly in the Greek translation of the Old Testament concerning the murmurings of the children of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. It indicates murmuring, muttering, and grumbling. They are to refrain from these as they “do all things.

Disputing. The Greek word is dialogismos. Though translated as “disputings” which gives the sense of arguing between people, it is probably more inclined to mean “suspicions” or “doubts” which cause a person to inwardly question the reliability of a matter. If this is so, and it seems more probable, it would then contrast with the first word.

In these then, there is a moral aspect to rebellion against God, just as the Israelites grumbled against Him in the wilderness. There is also an intellectual rebellion against Him, where they inwardly call into question His perfect will towards them. Paul asks them to do all things without these negative aspects in their hearts and minds.

Life application: When we experience trials, do we grumble against God as they come? Or do we trust that they are a perfect part of His will for us? And likewise, do we internally reason out that God is unfair with us? Or do we rather set our minds on contemplating how difficult times actually are serving a greater purpose in our lives? Let us endeavor to not grumble against the Lord, and let us endeavor to intellectually be confident that He has our lives safe and secure in His capable hands.

...that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,
Philippians 2:15

The words of this verse are intended to explain the result of complying with the previous verse—

“Do all things without complaining and disputing, 15 that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world...”

By doing all things without complaining or disputing, we will “become blameless and harmless.” The word blameless gives the sense of being without fault. This then would be in relation to laws which exist, be they religious, moral, or civil. It indicates adherence to such laws so that nobody can call into question our obedience to those laws which are rightly imposed upon us. The word in Greek indicates being above reproach because of moral purity. When we act within morally pure guidelines, we will be sincere towards ourselves, in our relationship with God, and in our dealings with others. No harm will come when we so confine ourselves to such a state.

Following this, Paul explains what the result of this will be. We will be “children of God without fault.” The two are to be taken together. One can be a child of God, but bearing fault. And one can certainly have fault while not being a child of God. Paul’s intent is that because we are children of God, we are to act as such, not having fault as we live “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.” The words here are reminiscent of those found in Deuteronomy 32:5, especially the Greek translation of it. That verse says –

“They have corrupted themselves;
They are not His children,
Because of their blemish:
A perverse and crooked generation.”

Moses' words there spoke of the children of Israel who had rejected the ways of the Lord and had gone completely astray. There is no reason to assume that this isn't exactly what was on Paul's mind as well. The Jews in Philippi, and indeed around all of the churches, were crooked and perverse, trying to creep in among the churches and introduce heresy into the congregations.

The Judaizing factions led faithful Christians astray with their "works based salvation." The same type of people have continued to exist in the church since then. Moses says that they are "not His children," but Paul is speaking to those at Philippi (and thus us!) as "children of God." Therefore, we are to live our lives as separate from such people, and yet Paul says, "among whom you shine as lights in the world."

The idea is that we are to conduct our lives in such a manner that we will be the light that these people need in order to turn to the Lord and away from their crooked and perverse ways. The word for "shine" is found only here and in Revelation 21:11. It specifically refers to luminaries, such as the stars in heaven, or some other shining beacon. The idea we are to see here is that of a beacon which warns of disaster ahead, such as a lighthouse on a rocky shoal. Our light is to shine in order to keep such crooked and perverse people from finding their final ruin, but rather to find the truth of the ways of the Lord. It is our job to be seen in the world as such beacons.

Life application: As noted above, the words of this verse are tied to the admonition that we are to do all things without complaining or disputing. Should we fail in this, then we will be ineffective in the testimony which we are asked to present in Paul's words of verse 15. How we conduct ourselves has importance in many ways, including leading the lost to Christ. Let us always be careful to conduct ourselves with this in mind.