

# Working Out Our Own Salvation

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**Bible Text:** Philippians 2:12-13  
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We read holy Scripture in Philippians 2. Philippians 2.

1 If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, 2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. 3 Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. 4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. 5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: 8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. 9 Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: 10 That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; 11 And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. 12 Wherefore, my beloved, as ye 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 which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. 14 Do all things without murmurings and disputings: 15 That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; 16 Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain. 17 Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. 18 For the same cause also do ye joy, and rejoice with me. 19 But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state. 20 For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. 21 For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's. 22 But ye know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in the gospel. 23 Him therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will

go with me. 24 But I trust in the Lord that I also myself shall come shortly. 25 Yet I supposed it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, and companion in labour, and fellowsoldier, but your messenger, and he that ministered to my wants. 26 For he longed after you all, and was full of heaviness, because that ye had heard that he had been sick. 27 For indeed he was sick nigh unto death: but God had mercy on him; and not on him only, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I sent him therefore the more carefully, that, when ye see him again, ye may rejoice, and that I may be the less sorrowful. 29 Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness; and hold such in reputation: 30 Because for the work of Christ he was nigh unto death, not regarding his life, to supply your lack of service toward me.

We read the word of God this far.

The word of God to us this morning is verses 12 and 13 of this chapter, Philippians 2. "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye 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. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." This word of God, beloved, guards the church and each of the members against two perennial threats. One of those threats is the temptation that we take the credit for our salvation or for some aspect of our salvation to ourselves. In some respect or others, we pride ourselves on the notion that we save ourselves which carries with it the implication that our salvation depends upon ourselves. In the language of the text, we emphasize that we ourselves work out our own salvation. We then ignore the inseparably related 13<sup>th</sup> verse of Philippians 2 which tells us that it is God who is working in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Against that threat, the passage guards us but the passage also guards us against the equally mistaken notion that because in fact it is God who saves us, we therefore are permitted or even required to be passive and inactive which will mean carelessness and even disobedience of life. In the language of the text, this error consists of emphasizing that, after all, it is God who works in us to will and to do. But to emphasize verse 13 in such a way that we ignore verse 12 and the connection, the close connection between verse 13 and verse 12.

Our text guards us against both of these very real temptations and errors by setting forth to us the whole truth of salvation. Indeed, we are called, called by this passage, to work out our salvation and, in fact, to take this so seriously that we engage in this spiritual activity with fear and trembling, and at the same time, the passage instructs us that this calling is due to the truth that God himself works in us to will and to do.

The main truth of the passage is undoubtedly the exhortation in verse 12, "work out your own salvation." That is evident from the fact that verse 13 gives the reason or ground for this exhortation. The exhortation is the word of God to us this morning and that makes plain from the outset that the Gospel of salvation by the grace of God alone, the truth of

the Gospel that all of our salvation is God's work, does not imply passivity on our part, inactivity, much less lead to carelessness and ungodliness of life. On the contrary, the truth of salvation by grace alone includes necessarily that we are active in working out our own salvation.

Consider that word of God and hear that exhortation with me this morning, working out our own salvation. The meaning, first of all; then from the text, the ground; and third, the incentive. Working out our own salvation: the meaning, the ground, and the incentive.

Working out our own salvation recognizes that we are already saved. If we are to work out our salvation, clearly implied is that salvation has been worked into us. The exhortation to be active in working out salvation understands that God has saved us and has saved us not only by choosing us in election and redeeming us in the death of Christ, but also by the inner work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. You cannot work salvation out if God has not already worked salvation in. There is no salvation to work out if God has not already worked that salvation in you in your spiritual heart, the center of yourself spiritually. This exhortation therefore does not come to those who are not saved. If there is any individual here who has not been saved, who hasn't come to church this morning out of a believing heart and a sincere desire to praise God as his Savior but is still unsaved, the exhortation of the text is not for you. The word doesn't say to you, work out your own salvation, if you have no salvation. To you, if there is such a person here, the exhortation of the Scriptures is rather: repent and believe and in that way, receive and enjoy salvation, and then this exhortation also comes to such a one.

God has saved us. God has worked his salvation into us and now we are to work it out in the sense of exercising that salvation; putting that salvation into practice; developing that salvation in all of our life; applying that salvation to all aspects of our earthly life. The example that comes immediately to mind is the example familiar to us all of earthly life. Your parents gave you your earthly life when you were conceived and born. Strictly speaking, God gave us physical life by conception and birth from our parents. That physical life was a gift. You had nothing to do with that, neither did I. But as soon as you were born and I was born, we began to exercise that physical life. It happens as soon as a baby is born as everyone knows, how that little babe waves his arms; how that little child kicks her legs; how those babies exercise and develop their physical life even by their squalling and their crying, sometimes in the middle of the night. That's not only to show their discomfort or their hunger, but that's the exercise and development of the physical life that God gave them through their birth. Then all our life long, we work out the physical life that our parents gave us by our playing, by our studies at school, by all of our activities in work and in recreation. So it is with regard to salvation or spiritual life. God has given us this salvation. God has worked this salvation into us. Now, the calling of the text is exercise that salvation. Put into practice that spiritual power. Develop it. Put it to use. Grow in it. That's something we do in our own unique circumstances of life, each one of us in his or her own way.

You'll notice the language of the text: work out your own salvation. That indicates not only that salvation is our possession but that indicates as well that the circumstances of

the life of each one of us are different and unique. I must work out my salvation in my own unique circumstances life and you must work out your salvation in your own particular place and with regard to your own particular calling. I'm called to work out my salvation as a minister of the Gospel, as a husband, and as a father, and with regard to whatever other circumstances of my life are unique to me. Some in the audience must work out their salvation as wives in marriage; as mothers in the home; and as grandmothers in their family. Some in the congregation must work out your salvation as unmarried persons; as single persons. Others work out their salvation as married persons in the institution and life of marriage. Some work out their salvation with regard to wealth. Others work out their salvation in circumstances of grinding poverty. We work out our salvation in circumstances of health, but also sometimes in circumstances of sickness. We're called to work out our salvation specifically with regard to the troubles and sorrows of our life, whether the sorrows of sickness, disability, of being widowed. Some work out their salvation as young people full of the energy and hopes of earthly life that lies before them. Others of us work out our salvation in the circumstances of old age.

That's importance to notice. The thought of the exhortation this morning is not merely or not only work out your own salvation by reading the Bible every day and by praying every day and by faithfully attending the worship services of the church every Lord's day. Those activities are important. We're not working out our salvation if we don't do those things, but that's not all or mainly what the apostle has in view here, rather he has in view that our entire earthly life become a matter of working out our own salvation, and that that is the main thing about our earthly life. Not how I can be successful. Not how I can be famous. Not how I can enjoy ease and comfort. Not as though there is anything wrong with any of those things, but those aren't the main features of the life of the saved child of God, and certainly not the main calling that God gives to us as his saved people. The main thing about your earthly life and mine is that it is the sphere and the means by which we are working out our salvation. Even though, then, earthly life and its circumstances may be disappointing to some, mostly hardship for some, that member of the church must not suppose that his or her earthly life is wasted or of no account, on the contrary, those are exactly the circumstances that God gives us in order that in those circumstances we work out our own salvation. The great issue in the final judgment is not going to be, "Did you have a good time in your earthly life? Were you successful in your earthly calling as the world counts success? Did you make a name for yourself?" But the great issue in the final judgment will be this: did you in all of your earthly life as a male or a female, a young person or an old man, a rich man or a poor man, a healthy woman or a sickly woman, one whose life was apparently trouble-free or one whose life was fraught with sorrows, did you work out your own salvation?

How serious a matter this is, the text indicates by its description of the manner in which we are to work out our own salvation: with fear and trembling. The original of the Bible in the New Testament has a way of indicating that a word or a phrase has the emphasis in the passage and with regard to this text, the emphasis falls upon that phrase "with fear and trembling." It is as though the word of God says to us this morning, "With fear and trembling work out your own salvation." It's almost as though it's taken for granted that the members of the church know that their calling is to work out their salvation. What

needs to be emphasized is that we take this seriously. What needs to be emphasized is that we carry out this calling, every one of us, with fear and trembling.

Fear in the text means exactly what we understand by fear, apprehension that some evil will befall us or our life. With regard to working out our salvation, we have a legitimate lively apprehension of some disaster striking and such is our fear in this matter that we tremble, we shake at the prospect of this evil befalling us. The fear is not the fear that we may fail to work out our salvation with the result that we lose our salvation and perish eternally in hell. That's not the fear. That's never the fear of the believing child of God who is living in his or her faith. And that that is not the fear of the text, the passage itself makes plain in verse 13, God is working in you to will and to do of his good pleasure, and if our salvation is a matter of God's working within us, our salvation is certain. Absolutely sure, and we're not plagued by doubt or fear that we may lose our salvation.

The apostle has given us that assurance of salvation already in the opening chapter, the sixth verse, "Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." That's our confidence as Christians. That's our confidence specifically as Reformed Christians. We are confident of the preservation of the saints and therefore of the perseverance of the saints and not in general, but also in particular. We are confident of this very thing concerning ourselves personally. God who has begun a good work in us, will perfect it in the day of Jesus Christ.

What then is the fear of the text in the matter of working out our own salvation? A real fear. That fear is that by our own sinfulness or by our own foolishness, we may mar God's work of salvation within us and upon us. Our fear is that by our own foolishness or weakness, we may place a blot upon the handiwork of God in his work of saving us. Think, for example, of a carpenter, a skilled carpenter, who is busy with his saw and other instruments carving a beautiful work of statuary. That carpenter proceeds with his work with a certain fear and that fear is that there may be a slip of the saw or of the other tool that he is using that mars and spoils that beautiful work with wood that he is engaged in making. Or think of another example, think of a skilled painter at work painting a beautiful picture. As that painter applies the brush to the canvas, he has a certain fear that his hand may slip and that there may be a blot upon that picture that he is painting. That's the fear of the text, the fear in which we work out our own salvation every day.

God has begun a marvelous and a beautiful work within and upon each one of us, a magnificent work that glorifies the great artist, the great worker of salvation, in comparison which the great sculptures and painters of the history of the world fade into insignificance. Now, I am fearful knowing myself, knowing the total depravity still of my human nature, knowing my foolishness by nature, I am afraid that I may say something, that I may do something, or that I may fail to do something, that mars that great work of salvation that God has begun in me and upon me; that I may be responsible for throwing upon the canvas of salvation in my own life a dark blot of sin that spoils that work of salvation.

It's good for us upon awakening in the morning to kneel by the side of our bed or to sit on the edge of the bed and to pray and we thank God for keeping us through the night; we pray for his blessing in the day that stretches before us. It's good for us that we make one of our petitions and not the least as we begin each new day, "O God, keep me today from marring the work of salvation in me. Keep me from my own foolishness and weakness that would place a blot upon the canvas of the holy life that thou hast begun in me." That prayer, that petition, does justice to the teaching of the text that our own working out of salvation depends upon God.

Having exhorted the church in verse 12, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," the apostle adds in the same breath and that's why verses 12 and 13 must always be preached and be read together in their connection, the apostle adds, "For it is God who works in us to will and to do." The connection between verse 12 and verse 13 indicated by the word "for," or "because," the connection is that the fulfilling of the exhortation of verse 12, working out our own salvation, depends upon God's working in us to will and to do. Verse 13 therefore is the explanation of the exhortation itself in verse 12.

Someone might ask, someone might ask this morning, "Why must I work out my salvation? Don't you know that it's God who works all of my salvation in Jesus Christ? Why then do you exhort me, work out your own salvation?" And the answer is, "For, or because, God works in you to will and to do." God accomplishes your full salvation in such a way that he makes you active and calls you to be active in developing and exercising and manifesting and growing in the salvation you have received from him.

Or, again, verse 13 is the ground of the exhortation of verse 12 in that it expresses the possibility of your fulfilling the exhortation. Someone might respond to the exhortation of verse 12, work out your own salvation, by saying, "That's not possible. My working out my own salvation is an impossibility. I know myself to be such a sinner. I know myself to be so weak that I can't possible do this." The response of verse 13 is, "God works in you to will and to do. That's the possibility of the working out of our own salvation."

God works in us. He also works outside of us. God has worked salvation for us. God has worked salvation for us in his decree of eternal election when he chose us unto salvation. God worked for us 2,000 years ago in giving up his own Son for our redemption, to clear us not only from the punishment of sin but also from deserving to have sin rule over us. He worked for us, but that does not exhaust God's saving work, he also works in us applying that salvation and realizing his purpose in election, regenerating our heart, indwelling us by the Spirit of Jesus Christ so that we become new creatures and are holy. That's his work of sanctification.

And God works in us in such a way that he works in us to will and to do, literally the text speaks this way, "God works in you the willing and the doing." You recognize willing and doing as the two aspects of a good work. When you engage in a good work, first you will or purpose that work and then you do it, you carry it out. Willing and doing are the

two aspects of the activity of the child of God in living a holy life. Willing and doing are the two main aspects of working out your own salvation.

And now the truth is, God works in us both of those aspects, both the willing and the doing. God therefore works in us the working out of our salvation to which we are exhorted by the main part of the text. I would be doing justice to the text if I would explain it this way: work out your own salvation for God is working in you your working out of your own salvation. God doesn't save us and then leave the willing and the doing up to us as though God says, "Now I have regenerated you, I have united you to my Son Jesus Christ by a true and living faith, I've given you the Holy Spirit, get to work now and you do the rest of it." Neither is it the case that God merely gives us the capability to will or to desire to do the good and then leave it up to us to exercise that will and carry out that ability, but God actually works in us and gives to us the willing itself. Nor does God in saving us merely give us the willing, we desire to do the good but leave up to us to do it, he works in us both the willing and the doing.

This makes clear and calls to our attention the right relationship between God's work of salvation for us and our actual enjoyment and exercise of that salvation in our own life. "Work out your own salvation for God works in you the willing and the doing." The text does not say work out your own salvation in order that God may work in you the willing and the doing. That would make God's work dependent upon our work. Neither does the text say work out your own salvation and God works in you the willing and the doing. That would make our Christian life cooperation between God and us. We work and God works, we cooperate in our actual salvation. Neither does the text read this way: work out your own salvation but God is at work in you to will and to do. That would view the Christian life as a kind of competition and conflict between us and our working on the one hand, and God and his working on the other hand. But the text is precisely this, "work out your own salvation because God works in you the willing and the doing." Our working out of our salvation, our practice of our salvation, our exercise of our salvation, our application of our salvation to all the circumstances of our earthly life, our working out of our salvation is dependent upon God's gracious powerful working in us. All of our salvation therefore, including our own active exercise of salvation, is the work of the Almighty grace of God in Jesus Christ. God doesn't depend upon you for your working out of your salvation, standing back to see once now whether you to whom he has given salvation will practice it and live in it and apply it, but your and my working out of our salvation depends upon the working of God.

Let's notice and take to heart because that's the main thought of the passage, that salvation by sheer, sovereign, almighty grace does not imply passivity on our part or inactivity, much less carelessness in the Christian life. The truth of salvation by grace alone rather implies and includes that we are active, that we are zealous, that we are careful, that we even live day by day in the fear lest we mar and spoil this great work of God within us. If there is a church member who responds to the truth of salvation by grace alone by saying, "Therefore I may live a careless life, even a sinful life," that church member has never heard or understood anyway, the truth of salvation by grace alone. The truth of salvation by grace includes not only that God chose you and that God

redeemed you and that God regenerated you and gave you the beginning of spiritual life, but also that God is constantly at work within you and me, all our life long working powerfully the willing and the doing. And if there is a church member who responds or thinks he responds to the truth of salvation by grace alone while living carelessly and wickedly, that individual must be disciplined, either to bring that individual to the spiritual knowledge that the God who worked for him also worked in him and that salvation consists not only of election and redemption but also consists of the activity of the child of God in working out his salvation, or the discipline serves the purpose to rid the church of one who is not a member of the church in reality at all.

This is a great calling, a difficult calling, as all of us recognize. Work out our own salvation, have that as the main purpose of your entire earthly life in the world. Because of the importance of this calling and the difficulty of it, the word of God also gives us incentives to carry out this calling. God works the willing and the doing but he works the willing and the doing by means of incentives that motivate us to heed the exhortation and fulfill it. There are three such incentives in the text.

The first is indicated by the words with which the passage begins in verse 12, "Wherefore, my beloved." Wherefore work out your own salvation. Wherefore calls attention to something in the preceding verses of the chapter out of which our working out of our salvation must flow and which will motivate us to work out our salvation and that in the preceding verses to which "wherefore" refers is the heart stirring account of the love, the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Philippians 2 is the grand passage that tells us that Jesus Christ who is himself God the Son, nevertheless did not think being God the Son was something to hold onto as though it would prevent him from humbling himself into coming into our world as a man and then humbling himself even unto death, and that the death of the cross. Because Jesus Christ humbled himself, becoming in the likeness of human flesh, humbled himself to death all his life long, and humbled himself for us to the death of the cross, therefore work out your own salvation on account of which salvation he did this in his sacrificial love for us. Working out our salvation therefore is a matter of grateful love, grateful love to Jesus Christ for his sacrificial love toward us. Does it seem difficult sometimes to you, young people as well as grown ups, to work out your own salvation? It does. It is. It means sacrifice sometimes. It means suffering. It means denying yourself something that's very precious to you. Nevertheless, because of your thankful love to Jesus Christ who loved you with such a love, work out your own salvation.

The second incentive because this is serious business, this calling to work out our own salvation, the second incentive in the text is found in the words in verse 13, "of his good pleasure." Mistakenly, we sometimes read those words as though they gave the direct object of the preceding words in the text, "God works in you both to will," and then we understand those concluding words, "to will and to do his good pleasure." The thought however is not that God works in us to will and to do his good pleasure, the text reads that God works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure. It describes the purpose of God in working in us to will and to do. It answers the questions, "Why does God work in us to will and to do? Why isn't he satisfied with just working for us in eternity or on the



cross? Why must salvation also consist of his working in us?" And the answer is: his good pleasure. That's his eternal counsel. In that eternal counsel he chose us in election. In that eternal counsel he decreed to give up his own Son for our redemption, but in that eternal counsel, he also decided that the purpose of it all would be that by our lives we should show forth the glory of the God who has saved us. His good pleasure includes that you and I work out our own salvation, showing before the whole world as a testimony the glory of the God who has delivered us from sin and death, and that we also be a witness to all who see, churches and individuals. God wants it to be evident that we are saved and that evidence we give when we are busy working out our salvation. That's an incentive, isn't it? Especially in the hard times. We find ourselves saying if not to God then to each other and to us, "Why must I so suffer? Why must living the Christian life be so painful, so costly, so sacrificial?" And the answer comes back from heaven in our text, "That's of God's good pleasure that in those circumstances and by that difficulty you may show forth the glory of the God who has saved you."

And the third incentive is in the text itself in the ground, "For it is God who works in us to will and to do." That's the incentive, especially in those times in our life because of our own troubles or our family troubles or the troubles of the church, we come perilously close to crying out, "I can't. I want to but I can't. In this specific circumstance with regard to this burden, with regard to these sorrows, I cannot work out my salvation by living according to the holy will of God." Then the text's encouragement and incentive in this, "It is God who is working in you the willing and the doing. For you it is impossible, for me it is impossible, but for the God who is working in us to will and to do, it is not impossible. It is possible. It will be a reality. Lean not upon yourself, but lean upon God at work within you." Then our "cannot" changes, it changes into the glorious words with which the apostle ends this epistle, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Amen.

Let us pray.

*Our Father, it is our desire, our determination, and also fittingly our petition, that we shall work out our own salvation; that that shall be our life from childhood to old age, from the cradle to the grave. And we have the confidence that this will be our life to thy praise because we trust in thee and because it is thy own infinite almighty power of grace that accomplishes it. Thanks for that. In Jesus' name. Amen.*