

Shine Like Stars In A Hostile World **Philippians 2:12-18**

Introduction

Here Paul gives specific application to what he said in the previous statement he made at the end of chapter one and demonstrated in the nature of Jesus. Paul's concern is the status of the gospel in Philippi, both for the Philippians own relationship with God and their influence on the outside community.

There are three sentences in this section (12-13; 14-16, and 17-18). The first two are imperatives. (1) Get their act together as a community. (2) Murmuring and arguing is forbidden for the sake of unbelieving Philippi. (3) Encouragement to endure their suffering for the gospel in order to be able to mutually rejoice when Christ returns.

Get Your Act Together: 2:12-13

Paul spoke of the Philippians salvation in 1:28. He continued that discussion. Just as he did in 1:28, the discussion here continues to address the community of faith rather than individuals. Here, Paul wrote of the specifics the Philippians needed to hear concerning life within a community of faith in a hostile environment. Paul began by stating the affection ("my beloved") he had for the Philippians that he described in the opening of the letter. Following this repeated acknowledgement of his affection toward the Philippians, Paul acknowledged his awareness of the history of their obedience. Their obedience had been consistent, not dependent upon Paul's presence. This goes back to 1:27. Paul was deeply concerned about the state of the Philippians' faith and his absence from them added to his concern. Paul believed the Philippians were in a perilous situation that could damage their faith if they did not respond appropriately. It needs to be understood that when Paul talked about obeying him, it was not in any way disassociated from obeying Christ, nor was it intended to elevate Paul's power. To Paul, any obedience to his teaching was in reality obedience to Jesus.

Due to the language of "work out your own salvation," this has traditionally been a difficult text for some theological perspectives. However this is to be understood, it cannot be interpreted properly without acknowledging the prior statement "and this is God's doing" (1:28) and the following statement, "for it is God who is at work in you" (2:13). This statement in no way speaks of an individual doing things to merit, earn, or contribute to their salvation. This would contradict what Paul says in many other texts. That this "working" speaks of obedience can be seen in that this is in the context of a "just ... now" comparative sentence. Just as you have obeyed, now work out your salvation. "Obey" and "work out" are synonymous here.

The word translated "work" can just as correctly be translated "carry out" (Fee, pg 234 footnote 20). Fee well states the meaning of this text.

"The context makes it clear that this is not a soteriological (study of salvation) text per se, dealing with 'people getting saved' or 'saved people persevering.' Rather it is an ethical text, dealing with 'how saved people live out their salvation' in the context of the believing community and the

world. What Paul is referring to, therefore, is the *present* “outworking” of their *eschatological salvation* within the *believing community* in Philippi.” At issue is ‘obedience,’ pure and simple, which in this case is defined as their ‘working or carrying out in their corporate life the salvation that God has graciously given them.’”

Individuals are being called to carry out their mission in Philippi within the community of faith. Specific to this context, Paul is addressing the apparent squabbling going on within the community of faith that is hindering the progress of the gospel and is threatening the community of faith itself.

The phrase “with fear and trembling” is another phrase that receives a great deal of attention. As with all difficult or confusing words or phrases, context is where insight is found. This is certainly not intended to convey that disciples are to cower toward God as though there is no loving relationship. This very likely goes back to the statement in 2:10 that some day “every knee will bow.” The community of faith should understand the majesty of God and what it means to live in his presence. The Philippians should understand that carrying out the mission God has given them is to be done with awe and wonder. Living a life worthy of the gospel is not to be done nonchalantly.

Although disciples of Jesus are called to actively live out the gospel message, the power to do so comes from God. The “you” in verse 13 is plural. It is God working in and among the community of faith. Although the Philippians were exhorted to take an active role in carrying out their mission, it was ultimately God working among them that would make their obedience possible. We get caught up in works verses grace in texts like this and miss the point. Paul’s point is that the Philippians are not being asked to do something that totally requires their own energy and power. God is working among them, empowering them.

Not only does God empower their “doing,” God empowers their *will* to do. In theological discussions today, some like to focus on the imperative for Christians to “do” but often have trouble with or ignore this statement. The indwelling Spirit of God transforms the mind of disciples affecting both their behavior and their will or desire.

“The believer is not one who has been begrudgingly “caught by God,” as it were, so that obedience is basically out of fear and trembling over what might happen if one were to do otherwise; rather, being Christ’s means to be “converted” in the true sense of that word, to have one’s life invaded by God’s Holy Spirit, so that not simply new behavior is now effected, but a new desire toward God that prompts such behavior in the first place.”
(Fee, pg. 238)

God does this “for his good pleasure.” This is not God’s self-serving, self-gratification. Such would go against everything said about the nature of God in 2:6-8. The thought here is that God does this because it pleases him to empower and bless his people.

For The World's Sake: 2:14-18

Israel's experiences in the Wilderness, stands for all time as examples of either what to do, or most often, what not to do. "Murmuring and arguing" takes the reader back to Israel's frequent murmuring in the Wilderness (Exodus 16:12 et al.). This is certainly an obvious indication of events occurring within the faith community in Philippi that led to Paul's focus on standing side-by-side with one mind.

This text also goes back to God's statement to Abram in Genesis 17:1 ("be blameless"). Paul was making it clear that God's purpose for the Philippians was the same as God had for Abraham. Moses repeated God's concern and expectation for his people to live blameless lives (Deut. 32:5), charging Israel with having been a "blameworthy and crooked generation" (LXX). The world did not see God's glory through Israel. Instead of being shining stars Israel joined the nations around them in being blameworthy and perverse. Equal to God's purposes for Israel, the community of faith in Philippi was to live blameless lives so that the outside community around them could see God's glory.

Illusions to OT texts continue. Israel's eschatological (end times) hope was that the "wise shall shine like the *luminaries* (Daniel 12:3). The Hebrew text follows with, "and those who lead many to righteousness as the stars" while the LXX reads, "those who hold strong to my words." The NRSV's "holding *to* the word of life" in verse 16 may be misleading. The idea here is not *holding to* as if the Philippians were in some kind of protective or defensive position. The text literally reads, "word of life holding." The NIV's "holding forth the word" may be closer to Paul's intent. As the Philippians get their internal act together (shine like stars), they would be holding forth the gospel in the midst of the darkness of the pagan world around them. By holding forth the gospel, the Philippians would find themselves within the eschatological story of Daniel.

If God's purpose for the Philippians did not remain a reality, Paul would not be able to boast when Christ returns ("day of Christ"). In such a case, the Philippians would not be participating in the fulfillment of Israel's eschatological expectations. Isaiah said, "my chosen ones will not labor in vain" (Isa. 65:23). Yet, the Philippians were possibly on the verge of doing just that. The Christian community of faith lives within God's eschatological purposes for the cosmos. This is an incredible gift and privilege not to be squandered.

Paul was not looking forward to some self-centered boasting. Paul's boasting was always in Christ because he understood everything he did was empowered by the Spirit of God. Boasting here is akin to the gladness and joy with which Paul longed to enjoy with the Philippian faith community when Jesus returns. Paul longed for the Philippians to join him in boasting (celebrating) in what Christ had accomplished through them.

"Run" and "labor" are two of Paul favorite images for ministry. The two words could be two different metaphors or the same metaphor. "Labor" would then be the image of the training involved prior to athletic competition. Although there is no idea of merit in this metaphor, there is effort involved in ministry. As stated earlier, that effort, including the will, is empowered by God. It is not pulling one's self up by one's own boot straps. Paul so loved the community of faith in Philippi that he longed for his labor

to bear fruit rather than his ministry being in vain, which would occur if they chose to continue their internal conflict rather than holding forth the gospel in Philippi.

The image of “libation over the sacrifice” comes from Israel’s sacrificial system. Levitical priests were involved in offering animal sacrifices and grain offerings that included a drink offering of wine being poured out. Some see in this image as that of blood being poured out on the sacrifice. This would give the image here one of martyrdom. But Paul does not speak in this letter as if he expects to die. In chapter one he stated that he expected to “remain and continue with all of you” (1:25) and later he will say that he trusted he would soon come to Philippi (2:25).

This is acknowledged to be a difficult text to unravel. The best I have read is that Paul’s imprisonment is pictured as a drink offering poured out upon (mixed with) the Philippians’ sacrifice and offering of their faith. This common suffering for the gospel is cause for mutual rejoicing. If correct, this view goes back to 1:29-30 where the Philippians’ suffering is referred to as a gift. This ends with an imperative for the Philippians to rejoice in their mutual suffering with Paul as Paul rejoices in this mutual experience.

Conclusion

The Philippians were involved in an internal conflict that was not only affecting the faith community internally; it was also affecting the influence of the gospel in Philippi. Paul called the Philippians to a life worthy of the gospel, which was a call to stand side-by-side in one mind as they faced opposition from the outside. The model for such a life is Jesus (2:6-8).

This text focuses on some of the specifics as to how the Philippians were to follow the model of Jesus and live a life worthy of the gospel. The Philippians were to “work out” or better “carry out” the salvation with which God had blessed them. This is probably best understood as “live out” their salvation. The posture of their life was to be one of reverence and awe in the God who had blessed them. Not only is there a call for disciples to carry out to their mission, there is the promise of the working of God among them. As is true throughout scripture, God’s people accomplish nothing without the enabling power of God (barren Sara, David and Goliath, et al.).

The Philippians were following an OT model, murmuring Israel in the wilderness. Instead, Paul called them to live within the eschatological expectations of prophets like Daniel (shine like stars, hold forth the gospel, live blameless lives). Paul longed to rejoice along with the Philippians (boast) on the day Christ returns. Paul encouraged the Philippians to rejoice with him in the mutual suffering they both experienced as a result of holding forth the gospel in a hostile world.

Points To Be Made

1. Disciples are called to live out (work out) their salvation in a way that blesses the faith community and the world.
2. There is no place for murmuring and grumbling within the community of faith. It prevents God’s people from shining like stars in the midst of a hostile world.

3. Disciples are called to hold forth the gospel even when facing a hostile world. The model for doing so is none other than Jesus (2:6-8).
4. When fellow disciples suffer for the sake of the gospel there should be rejoicing for that mutual experience that reflects and share in the life of Jesus.
5. In our mutual suffering in this world we look forward to the time when Jesus returns and we celebrate together.