

## A WORK IN PROGRESS

### 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; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (NKJV).***

God is a Worker! He is the greatest worker in the universe. Elihu said to Job, “Listen to this, O Job; stand still and consider the wondrous works of God” (Job 37:14). All of us would profit greatly if we would stand still in this fast-paced world and consider the wondrous works of God.

The one and only eternal God works. He does not sit idly by, isolated on His throne, unmindful and uninvolved in the universe, isolated on His heavenly throne. Unlike the fictitious gods in Greek mythology and other false and fanciful depictions of “gods” lounging in laziness and sensual luxury, the holy, true and living God is a Worker! The Lord God’s work is the oldest work, it is the greatest work, it is the grandest work, and it is the most extensive work for He has worked from eternity past. It is inspiring to know that God is a Worker. Jesus said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17).

However, there is a dimension to God’s work that is almost startling: the God Who worked for six days creating this vast universe is also working within His born-again ones—these lives of His dust-originated creatures—what a wonderful truth! Think about it: *“it is God who works in you”*.

Here is the biblical background: Paul, that indomitable apostle of Jesus Christ, wrote a letter to the church in the city of Philippi, where he had previously ministered, and reminded them of the example of Christ stooping down, taking on humanity, humbling Himself in obedience, even obedience to the point of death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8) After writing about Christ’s obedience he challenges the Christians in Philippi to obedience saying, “...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; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”

Paul challenged his readers, with the example of Christ’s obedience fresh in their minds, to be obedient to his teaching and, even though they had already experienced salvation, to evidence that salvation by working out what God had put within them.

By his correspondence Paul opened a window into the mind of God for those Christians in Philippi and for us as well. He informs us that “We’re still under construction; God isn’t finished with us yet!” Paul writes that “God works in you...” and he encourages his readers to “work out your own salvation.” There are two workers mentioned in Paul’s counsel: God, the Author of salvation, and Christians, the recipients of that salvation. Let us think about each as follows:

## **THE WORK THAT GOD IS DOING**

*"...it is God who works in you..."*

"T" Shirts carry various messages. I have seen some clean messages and some obscene messages on "T" Shirts. One that I have seen repeatedly reads: "I'm still under construction; God ain't done with me yet!"

I have never been a Rock'n'Roll music fan but I became aware of some lyrics by a Rock'n'Roller named Bernie Leadon who played in the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band—that name clearly identifies their music—and who is in the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame. He wrote the following words to the song, *God Ain't Done with Me Yet*:

"I come up hard, I come up lean  
But God ain't done with me yet,  
I'm gettin' what I need to get  
Everything's alright, I guess  
God ain't done with me yet."

Bernie Leadon and the "T" Shirt wearers probably do not know that what they are singing and wearing is a biblical principle. Although their words lack grammatical finesse they make a theological point. The point is that God has His hands on the lives of those whom He has redeemed. He paid too much for our redemption to leave it up to us to figure out what we are to do after we come into His heavenly family. He is permanently involved in His progeny.

### **A. The Premise That Paul Establishes.**

The premise that Paul lays down is this: God is working in our lives — *"...it is God who works in you..."* — Let us look more closely at that truth:

#### **1. God's internal work. *"...it is God who works in you..."***

The great God Who worked to create the vast universe and who works to control it is willing to work in our small lives! How humbling that truth and how blessed we are to entertain this holy Guest within these earthly frames composed of dust. The very thought excites my inquisitiveness: what is this divine work about which the apostle Paul speaks?

It is sobering to contemplate God's work *for us*—His redemptive work, His intercessory work, His protective work, etc.—but it is humbling to consider God's work *within us*. In other words, we are under construction from the inside out. Authentic Christianity is an "inside job"!

What God promised to do for Israel is a good picture of what He does for us when we are born again by His Holy Spirit. He promised: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (Ezekiel 36:26). That in essence is exactly what He does by His internal work.

While visiting patients in hospitals over the years, I have seen signs that read: Department of Internal Medicine. That's it! God specializes in spiritual Internal Medicine - *"...it is God who works in you...."*!

#### **2. God's immediate work.**

Note also that this statement is in the present tense: "...it is God **who works**..." God is right now, in the present moment, working in the lives of every one of His children. There is God-work going on within us continually.

### 3. *God's incessant work.*

God is a consistent worker—when He takes us into His family, He begins a work that He never terminates until He accomplishes His purpose. In this letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote in chapter one: "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

God has a Grand Design for our lives and He is going to carry it out to completion! We can cooperate with Him and be blessed and be a blessing to others, or we can procrastinate and incur God's displeasure. If we are genuinely children of God, eventually He will, through discipline, bring us to the point of yieldedness to His work within us.

## **B. The Purpose That Paul Enunciates.**

*"it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure"*

### 1. *God's purpose is to produce within us a willingness to do His will.*

*"...God ...works in you...to will..."*

There is no willingness in the sinner's mind, in the unconverted state, to do the will of God, to please God or to do that which is acceptable to Him. When God converts us He converts our wills, to will that which is well pleasing to Him. The Weymouth translation of Philippians 2:13 is as follows: "It is God himself whose power creates within you both the desire and the power to execute his gracious will."

Our will is probably one of the largest factors hindering God from working in our lives. Our will must step aside before God can take full control of our lives. A minister once paraphrased the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) by saying, "... Thy kingdom come and my kingdom must leave. Thy will be done and my will must be surrendered." There is nothing more important than God's will, and it can only be found by denying our wills.

In John chapter 15 Jesus says that He is the Vine and we are the branches and that we are to bear fruit. The root of salvation has been planted within us by God. However, we are to manifest the product of that root in the garden of our lives. We can do that, for God is not an absentee Gardner. He is in us giving us the will to do according to His good pleasure.

God works in us to impart to us that which is not natural to us – that is, the qualities of new creatures in Christ Jesus. For example, Psalm 40:3 says that among those qualities is a new song: "he has put a new song in my mouth..." Why does the Lord put a new song in us? So that we will sing it! Why does he put within us His sanctified will to do – to work – that which he wills? So that we will "will" his will and "do" -- do -- that is activate His will.

### 2. *God's purpose is to produce within us a willingness to do His work.*

*"...God ... works in you both to will and to do..."*

Willingness to do God's work and doing God's work are two entirely different matters. Willingness is like an engine in an automobile—it has great potential but unless it turns the wheels it is useless. I have met many who have said "I want to do the will of the Lord", but over time I have seen no evidence that the will they say they have, issues in work.

The writer of the book of Hebrews concludes his epistle by saying that his desire for them is that God would, "make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:21).

We must be ever mindful that it is only as God's work is done according to God's will and in God's way, place and time, can we experience God's blessings. Paul concludes that great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, by saying, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (v. 58).

A children's chorus that I have heard many times in churches from coast to coast, sung by children's choirs, is:

"He's still working on me  
To make me what I need to be  
It took him just a week to make the moon and stars  
The sun and the earth and Jupiter and Mars  
How loving and patient He must be  
'Cause He's still workin' on me."

That is a simple yet scripturally correct little chorus. Although we are not adolescents singing in a children's church choir, we are children of the heavenly Father and need to be reminded of "How loving and patient He must be, "'Cause He's still workin' on me!"

### **THE WORK THAT WE ARE TO BE DOING**

*"...work out your own salvation..."*

I suspect that many Christians view their salvation in the past tense—that is, that they were "saved" at some point in the past and that matter having been settled, they just hang around on the earth until they die or Jesus comes for them. No! Don't think, "Well, it's all over. I am saved and there is nothing now to do but go to church." That attitude reveals that those persons do not understand the meaning of Paul's statement: *"...work out your own salvation..."* So, think scripturally about:

#### **A. The Meaning of Paul's Statement: *"...work out your own salvation..."***

There is the sense in which salvation is an instantaneous work accomplished by God; also, it is a continual work, the outgrowth of that salvation. The one is wrought by God inwardly and the other is worked outwardly by the recipient of the "so great salvation" (Hebrews 2:3). Salvation is a priceless gift. What are we doing with that precious gift? Are we, like the man who was given a talent and hid it (Matthew 25:24), hiding our salvation?

Paul addresses Christians in Philippi in the salutation to his letter in chapter one and verse one as follows: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi..." The recipients of his correspondence were already children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. They were already possessors of salvation. Paul is encouraging them to work out its implications, to diligently apply it in their lives.

"Paul does not say, "Work for your salvation." That is how the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible translates it. That isn't what the apostle writes. It is not "work towards acquiring your salvation", nor is it "work at your salvation", nor is it "work up your salvation." It is none of those things. Every true Christian has been saved through believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. They are all in the state of salvation at this moment. Salvation is God's gift to them, accomplished by Jesus Christ on Golgotha when he saved them there from enduring what he himself freely and lovingly chose to endure in their place." (Geoff Thomas)

In other words, Paul is telling us that we need to allow the salvation that is ours to be lived out in our daily lives. We are to "flesh out the gospel." Just like Jesus was the "Word made flesh" (John 1:14), we need to let our salvation be "fleshed out" daily. Eugene Peterson's transliteration says, "...let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives" (Galatians 5:25 *The Message*).

That which is within us must be worked out in day-by-day living. What God implants within us is to be implemented outwardly by us. This is what James writes about in James 2:17-18 when he says, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds." (NIV)

In other words, faith is internal – deeds are external. Outward deeds are a proof that there is inward faith. There is no such Bible teaching about a salvation that is not evidenced in conduct, holiness and in service. Salvation is not a passive possession, it has an active quality about it. It motivates to pray, serve, give, feed on God's Word, resist evil, pursue good, work the works of the Savior, manifest the fruit of the Spirit, etc.

A profession of faith registered by responding to an altar call, raising a hand, signing a card, praying a prayer, etc., resulting in that person assuming that they are in possession of new life in Christ, is but a spiritual "still birth" *unless* there are observable evidences – call them "fruit", "works", or whatever – that one is a new creature in Christ Jesus.

Churches have attendees who claim to be Christians but do nothing to indicate that they are working out salvation with fear and trembling. They are self and/or Satan deceived for they are deluded by thinking that salvation is a past experience, the date of which has been written in the fly-leaf of their Bible, but there is no daily working out of that salvation which they profess.

An illustration that I believe will help us understand God's work in and through us is seen when we use a glove. Yes, a plain glove. The hand is placed in a glove and then work is performed—it may be grasping a hammer that pounds nails or it may be washing dishes or

leading a blind person across a busy street or passing out gospel tracts, etc.—do we say, “The glove did all the above”? No, it was not the glove but the hand that was in the glove. What is the point of the analogy? Just this: God is the hand in our lives and we are the glove! When we do the work of God it is God’s hand working in the glove of our lives—He is working out through us!

### **B. The Manner in Which Salvation is Worked Out - “With fear and trembling”**

How are we to work out our salvation? “With fear and trembling”, Paul says. This is an expression meaning that we are to take this matter of practicing our salvation earnestly, diligently, conscientiously and seriously, not slovenly and carelessly. We have an account to give to God as to how we utilized the salvation that He has so graciously given us, and that accounting day is fast approaching. The Psalmist says, “Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Psalm 2:11).

“We work ‘with fear and trembling.’ Notice that it is not, “work with dread and doubt.” It means humility and a holy reverence; we have to realize the tremendous seriousness of this whole undertaking. The Christian is one who works out his own salvation with fear and trembling; fear lest he should fail or falter, lest he should not discern the subtlety of the world, the power of sin and his own weakness, and the holiness of God. So he walks with gravity lest he should be unworthy of this great salvation,” (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, “The Life of Joy,” Hodder, London 1989, p.180)

### **C. The Motive by Which Our Salvation is Worked Out. v. 13 – “it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.”**

God works into us His will for the purpose of accomplishing His “good pleasure.” It pleases God when His will issues in our work for Him. It is not our pleasure that is paramount, but God’s pleasure that should motivate us to good works. That is not to say that it is not pleasurable for us to be involved in accomplishing God’s good pleasure. It certainly is a joy to be involved in what God is doing in our world, but our pleasure should not be the overriding motivation for our labor for the Lord. The driving motive should be that we are pleasing God by working out our salvation “for His good pleasure.”

### **D. The Methods by Which Our Salvation is Worked Out. v. 14-16 – “Do all things without complaining and disputing, 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, holding fast the word of life...”**

In what ways are we to work out God’s in-worked salvation? Paul leaves no doubt as to some of the ways in which we can externalize our salvation. In verses 14-16 he gives us at least three ways in which salvation can be demonstrated.

#### **1. By the conduct of our lives. v.14 - “Do all things without complaining and disputing...”**

Other translations read:

“Do all things without murmurings and disputings” – (KJV);

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing” – (NASB);  
 “No bickering, no second-guessing allowed!” – (*The Message*);  
 “Do everything without grumbling or arguing” – (NIV);  
 “Do all things without grumbling and faultfinding and complaining and questioning and doubting among yourselves.” – (Amplified Bible)

It is more than interesting that the first evidence of one’s salvation that Paul lists has to do with the mouth—our speech—“complaining”, “murmuring”, “grumbling”, “bickering”, “arguing”, “faultfinding”, etc. If our salvation does not improve what comes out of our mouths, who will listen to the Word of God when we speak it?

The sounds of displeasure that come from our mouths originate in our minds – they are the outflow of an attitude toward God and those around us. Numbers 11:1 reads: “And when the people complained, it displeased the LORD.” Likewise, 1 Corinthians 10:6 & 10-11 warns us: “Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted .... nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition...”

Did you ever hear the song named “Grumblers” by Thoro Harris? It was sung by children’s choirs mostly, but it has a message for grown-ups as well. Some of the words are:

“In country, town or city, some people can be found  
 Who spend their lives in grumbling at everything around;  
 O yes, they always grumble, no matter what we say,  
 For these are chronic grumblers, and they grumble night and day.

O they grumble on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,  
 They grumble on Thursday too, yes, they  
 Grumble on Friday, Saturday and Sunday,  
 They grumble the whole week through.”

We Christians need to be very careful with our mouths because we will one day give account to God. We should follow the example of David who said, “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).

## **2. By the consistency of our light.** v.15 - *“among whom you shine as lights in the world”*

The above phrase does not say, “among whom you blink” or “among whom you flicker” – but, “among whom you shine”! We are the Lord’s lighthouses; the light from a lighthouse must be consistent. We need to ask ourselves: “What sort of light am I? Is my light dim from sin in my life? Does it shine on Sunday only and then flicker during the week?”

Consistent incandescence is what is needed. Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). Be a consistent luminary for the Lord in this world of darkness.

### **3. *By the communication of the Word of God.* v. 16 - “holding fast the word of life...”**

The gospel is the singular message that provides eternal life. It is the duty of Gospel believers to be Gospel broadcasters. The salvation that God worked into believers was the result of hearing and embracing by faith the Gospel. Therefore, it becomes those who have been gifted and graced by salvation to give out, that is to hold forth, the Gospel of the grace of God.

Some hold the Gospel forth by preaching it in a formal setting; others are to hold it forth in private conversations as they witness verbally and all are to hold it forth visibly by demonstrating its life-changing power in their daily walk with God.

Paul cites but three ways in which we can put our salvation to work. However, I hasten to say that these three ways by no means exhaust the many ways that we can “work out our salvation”. These three ways are but examples of how our salvation can be put to work for the glory of God and the good of mankind. Our salvation is to be outwardly displayed in our family life, business life, social life, public life as well as our church life.

### **Conclusion**

Individual responsibility is emphasized very strongly in the verses that we have been studying. We sing the song, “Jesus paid it all”; yes, but the next words are, “All to Him I owe”! We owe it to Him to nourish and grow our faith, which will result in the outworking of our salvation.

One of the most invigorating statements in the Bible is the statement in 1 Corinthians 3:9 - “We are laborers together with God.” Can you think of anything more exhilarating than to be selected by God to be on His work crew—to be on His team? To put human hands together with Divine hands to work, to construct, to help, to heal, to lift?

This is the Divine/Human Cooperative! Are we cooperating with God? Are we “steadfast, immovable, always abound-ing in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord”? (1 Corinthians 15:58) It is a satisfying experience to work with other human beings in a worthwhile endeavor. How much more satisfying it is to have the privilege of working with the Creator of the universe, the Author and Finisher of our faith!

What a perfect Model we have in the Lord Jesus:

- In His youth Jesus said, “I must be about my Father’s business.” (Luke 2:49);
- Later He said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.” (Jn 5:17);
- Near the middle of His ministry, He said, “I must work the works of Him that sent me” (John 9:4);



- At the end of his ministry He said, in His prayer in John 17, “I have finished the work you gave me to do.” (v.4). And, what a blessed privilege that we can be “laborers together with God”!

In her book, *Each New Day*, Corrie ten Boom wrote:

“Could a fireman watch men perish  
And not give a helping hand?  
Can you sit at ease in Zion  
With a world around condemned?”

Our salvation is an ongoing process. Has it been accomplished by Christ on the cross? Yes! Is it appropriated by believers? Yes! Are all professors in possession of salvation? Not if they are not working out their professed salvation with fear and trembling. How is your spiritual work ethic?

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