



Speaker:
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God Working in us

◀ Series: Philippians • 7 of 7

6/8/2022 (WED) | Bible: **Philippians 2:12-30**

Can you save yourself? If you try really hard, pursuing holiness all the days of your life, you'd surely earn salvation, wouldn't you?

I'm afraid not. It's true, our reading mentions working in our salvation. But the only reason you'd think it was about earning salvation is if you hadn't read the rest of the Bible. As it happens, in our reading, we don't have to venture very far for an explanation. The very next verse tells us salvation is of God.

So the title of my message today isn't, *How to Earn Salvation*, but rather *God Working in Us*. I'll be speaking about how God works through us in every aspect of our salvation.

Paul's letter to the church at Philippi has been very encouraging, hasn't it? He's urged them—and us—to pursue growth in grace. He's shared his excitement at their new-found fervency in telling others about Jesus. And he set a great example for service in that, although he knew the world to come was better than this one, he was happy to stay and get on with his job, knowing Christ would be there all along the way to supply his every need.

My previous two messages were based on a quite wonderful little section of Scripture. In just a few lines, it describes both the absolute humility of Jesus Christ and his ascension to absolute *glorification* to the highest heavens.

Today, it's about God working in us. I want to begin by explaining this apparent contradiction, this paradox, which seems to say both that **we** do the saving and *God does too*. Then I'd like to separate them. I'll speak about God's activity in saving his elect, then I'll pick out from this passage some pointers to help us to live the life God wants.

The Paradox

We need to firstly settle the meaning of the word "salvation" as it's employed in v12. In the Bible, it's used in a variety of ways:

- It can describe being delivered out of some temporary trouble
- It can refer to the moment of a sinner's conversion
- And it can speak of the whole process from conversion to entrance into eternity.

It's this last one in use here. Specifically, it's about faith and works throughout the life of a believer. It's about our suffering with Christ in our afflictions. And it's about being conformed to the image of our Lord and saviour.

That being so, we're still left with the issue of salvation being said to involve our efforts but also the efforts of God. Which is it?

Well it's both, of course. It's both. You *really do* stuff. You *do* things God wants. And this pleases God. It's acceptable to him (if done in Christ's name).

And yet v13 makes it very clear God is behind it all. And I mean **all**. Our verse says God puts it in us to both will and work. **That means he gives us the will—the desire—to do the thing in the first place; and he also gives us the ability to do it.**

I'd like you to look at verses 12 and 13 again, please. Take note of the term "work out" in v12. We "work out" our salvation. Then in v13, it says God "works in" us. In other words, whatever it is works *into* us then works *out* of us.

I like freshly-ground coffee. I love my coffee machine. I put some water in it and some ground coffee, and after ten minutes or so, out comes this perfect product.

So it might help to think of this working in/working out in a similar way:

- God puts in you the will to do things required
- He adds the ability to do them
- And these things come together in you, and you produce works which are appropriate for one who God's dealing with.

When I talk or write about this mystery of God's sovereignty and man's duty, I always feel I'm treading on thin ice. If I put too much emphasis on God's work in us, I risk neglecting the huge amount of exhortation the Bible gives us about how we should think, speak and act.

If I put too much emphasis on behaviours, I'll get called a heretic by those who want to focus on nothing but God's sovereignty!

This is why I try to let *the emphasis of the Bible* be reflected in what I say. I keep closely to the Scriptures and let *them* speak, even if that upsets someone or even conflicts with some view I've held for years.

I've always vigorously avoided the idea we cooperate with God in salvation. It's always horrified me. And I realised I hated it so much because of what I thought it meant. It gave the impression someone was saying, *Okay Lord; I've decided to work with you on this, so let's get this salvation thing done. You do a bit, I'll add my bit, and then it will all be complete.*

Understood in that way, it SHOULD horrify us! Firstly, we can't just decide to go along with what God wants. Sinners are DEAD in their sin. If God doesn't initiate salvation in a person, that person will NEVER call out to God. Secondly, it gives the impression salvation is only partly of the Lord. This being an evangelical church, I expect no one here will disagree with me when I say **salvation is all of God**.

So you won't hear me use the word "cooperation" much in these things. But the truth of salvation is that God operates and *we also* operate. You could say then we "co"-operate alongside God.

And it's here we hit the brick wall of this mystery. When we do things for God, he himself describes it as us doing them. But he also describes the works as having their origin and power in himself. Richard Melick in the New American Commentary puts it like this:

*"Human energy could never accomplish the work of God,
yet God did not accomplish his purposes without it."*

There's the mystery then. Like I said, I want us next to split this up and firstly look at God's work in us.

God's Work

Last week, I brought to your attention a word: "therefore". We have a similar word at the beginning of v13 today. It says "for". *Because*. Here it's used to say, "Do [this] *because* God [does this]." "Let these things come **out** of you *because* God has put them **in** you."

What does it mean then for God to work in us?

Well, there's our will. God plants in us the desire to obey him. At some point in the believer's history, they became one of the houses the Holy Spirit is said to live in. And he was the efficient cause of them putting their trust in Jesus Christ.

And the Holy Spirit doesn't move out! He's not a lodger but a *permanent resident* in your heart. And this godly influence which began at your conversion continues your whole life. He gives you new desires. He motivates you to want to do things you previously wouldn't have been interested in.

Note our text says it's not only the desire to do these things God plants in us but **everything that's needed for us to carry them out**. To keep it straightforward, I've broken this down into just two factors.

Firstly, God gives us abilities. When he wants us to have a certain attitude or perform a certain action, he enables us to do it. And these abilities are given to different people at different times. And they're given in different degrees, too; one person might have no ability whatsoever, another will have some ability, while yet another will be highly proficient

in that thing. And this is one of the ways God directs us along a path of his choosing. If you're rubbish at maths, you don't go and apply to be a maths teacher!

So if God means for us to do something for him, he'll give us the ability to do it.

But as well as abilities, he also arranges our circumstances:

- He chooses when we'll be born
- He chooses where we live
- He chooses whether we have a family or not
- And he arranges the world around us in such a way as to give us opportunity to carry out his work.

We sometimes say it's like God is "opening doors" for us. And this arrangement of our circumstances is *also* used by God to guide us in our Christian life.

So there are these three factors in play: (a) the will to do a thing, (b) the ability to do it, and (c) the opportunity to carry it out. If one of these is missing, the action can't take place.

I might have a desire to be a world leading theologian, someone who'll leave a significant and lasting legacy for the church of God for years to come. I might also have the opportunity. The doors of the universities are open, and I can have access to all their books and other resources. I can study and take exams.

There's just one problem: I'm not clever enough! God hasn't given me that exceptional mind that could grasp all these theological issues and add to them. He just hasn't given me that talent. Had he wanted me to take that course in life, he'd have given me that exceptional ability. He wanted me somewhere else.

You believers: God has always had a plan for each one of you. And he's continually worked in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

His good pleasure. All things which occur are because of the good pleasure of God. Last week, we said everything that's done by us or by God is for his glory. You can say it's for our happiness too, and that would be right, but what we mean is the ultimate purpose in all God's dealings with men is his own glory.

So his good pleasure dictates what he does, and what he does brings him glory.

Our Work

That's a bit about God's work in us. What about our work then?

It said here God works in us. And it said we "work out" those things. This term "work out" does reflect the underlying Greek text very well, but it's not entirely helpful in our day. If I asked you to "work out" something, you'd think I was asking you to solve a puzzle!

It might be better if we think of this as *outworking* instead of “working out”. It’s talking about the outworking of our faith. What we should produce quite naturally.

These people belonged to Jesus, as do we. And that relationship’s meant to influence us in our daily lives:

- It’s meant to influence how we think
- It’s meant to influence how we speak to other people
- And it’s meant to influence how we behave. It’s meant to guide us to do those things God wants and avoid those things he hates. If we’re Christians, we’re expected to act like it!

Our reading today includes a number of pointers which Paul gives us about the Christian life. And in the second half, from v19, we even find in his talk about Timothy and Epaphroditus characteristics which we’d do well to copy. There are quite a few attributes worth mentioning, so we’ll have to go through them pretty quickly.

1. V14 tells us, in everything we do, to avoid complaining and arguing. The Hebrews, having been the objects of such great and powerful deliverance from Egypt, still managed to grumble against Moses and, by extension, grumble against God himself. You could say we’ve been delivered from the “Egypt” of this present world, so we need to be extra careful not to moan when doing our Christian duty.
2. V15 encourages us to be blameless and innocent. We’re in the same boat as the Philippians and every other congregation that’s ever existed. We live right in the middle of a world that’s perverted. Our Bible calls the people of this world “twisted”! You may say *Our so-and-so has a heart of gold and will do anything for you*. But day in day out they blatantly violate God’s holy standards, and we need to make sure we remember that and not let their behaviour rub off on us.
3. The verse continues in reminding us we’re like lights shining in the darkness of this world. We should stand out. I know we already stand out because we don’t live like them. They think we’re weirdos or snobs. But what this means is our behaviour is to be so good that they can’t really say anything bad about us. They see in us a light, even if they can’t understand it.
4. When we get to v16, we’re encouraged to “hold fast” the word of life. The “word of life” is a belief system. It centres around Jesus Christ and him crucified. We’re to hold these truths tightly. I think it’s fair to say we can apply this to our entire Bibles. Whatever truths we learn from the Scriptures should be held in the heart and treasured. What’s more, it’s expected we’ll want to share these marvellous realities with the people in this world who are lost.
5. Paul ends this section in v18 by asking them to copy him. He had feelings of gladness and joy because of them, so he suggests *they* be glad and rejoice with him. One of the hymns by Horatius Bonar goes:

*Rejoice and be glad!
The Redeemer has come!
Go look on His cradle,
His cross and His tomb.*

We, above all people, have cause to be glad and be full of the joy of the Holy Spirit.

6. Paul promises the church he planned to send Timothy to them when he could. Paul clearly has a high opinion of his protégé. He compares him to other people he knew. Paul says those other people—who he means, we don't know—are nowhere near as selfless as Timothy. The young minister of the gospel exceeded everyone else around Paul in terms of putting Jesus and other believers first. You may remember quite recently we were in v3 of ch2, and it told us to count others as more important than ourselves.
7. We also see Paul, in v22, refer to Timothy's service with him in the cause of the gospel. Further on, Paul uses a similar term to describe Epaphroditus, calling him a "fellow worker". Paul's relationship with Timothy is described as that of father and son, such was the closeness. And their love for each other was based on their common love for the Lord and a zeal to serve him in the furtherance of the gospel.
8. In v25, we see Epaphroditus is also called a "fellow soldier". Paul wants us to know those in the business of the gospel should think of themselves not only as servants but also *soldiers*. We might turn up to church on this pleasant day, feeling relaxed and not having suffered any opposition from this world or hindrance by the authorities. **But we shouldn't forget we're in a war.** We not only fight sin within us and the devil trying to cut us down but we're heavily outnumbered by the people of this world who oppose the things of God. *War*.
9. Paul acknowledged how Epaphroditus ministered to his need, just as we're to minister to *each other's* needs. Paul says his messenger nearly died in the course of his ministry. The Philippians couldn't all be there for Paul, and this shortfall was made up by Epaphroditus, and it damaged his health. (v30 sounds like Paul's criticising the Philippians church, but in ch4 he recognises they did have concern for him but had no opportunity to help him.)
10. For this, we go back to v12. All this outworking of salvation activity God puts in us is to be done in fear and trembling. It's because these things in us **are** from God that we have this huge responsibility to see to it they flow *out* of us in our lives. This fear of God is no different from what was expected of the Hebrew people. Psalm 2 enjoined them to "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling". In our service to God, we're to find that sanctified balance between joy in God and fear of him.

There then are ten references in our passage as indicators to what the outworking of our salvation should look like.

And it's important to remember where this passage sits. We should pay attention to the context our section's located in. In ch1, Paul tells them to be of "one mind". Earlier in ch2, he again impresses on them the importance of humility and putting the interests of others first.

What this means in what we're looking at today is that **this is a community project**—that is, the Christian community in the town of Philippi. And as we take on board these things ourselves, we're to understand we're not meant to look for improvements in ourselves in isolation to other people. All these characteristics are to be developed alongside other believers. God wants to see us together, united. There's no little corner in the kingdom of God where Christians can live in isolation. When we grow as a local church, we not only become closer to each other but we also draw near to God, and in the way he's prescribed.

God's grace is sufficient for all these things. It always will be.

I heard about a Methodist minister years ago down in London. He walked past this shop and saw a sign which read, "Amazing Grace! Supplies EXHAUSTED!" Was the shopkeeper announcing God had run out of grace? Of course not.

Some of you'll remember in the early 70s a pipe band made a record. And one of the tracks on this record was a rendition of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Despite all expectations, the single went to number one in the charts. And it stayed at the top for weeks. And of course this shop had simply sold out of all the copies of the single it had.

No, friends; the warehouses of God's provision will never run low. By his grace, God is fully committed to supplying you day by day with all you need to do his will.

So keep on leaning on him daily in prayer. Study his word. Learn from other believers. And enjoy the great honour of expressing your salvation in the holy fear of the God who is pleased to use you as an instrument of his good pleasure and glory.

Amen.