

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

Philippians 2:12-30

Key Verse: 12b-13

**“...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”**

We are living in a warped and crooked generation. Jesus gave us clear direction how to live as Christians in this world. He said, **“You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world”** (Mt 5:13-14). This means that we should resist corruption, like a salty preservative, and shine like stars in the darkness of the world. However, these days Christians have lost influence. There seems to be little difference between Christians and non-Christians. According to statistics, rates of divorce and internet pornography use are almost the same for Christians and non-Christians.<sup>1</sup> This is why gospel preaching is often ineffective. This is why God’s name is blasphemed among non-Christians. J.I. Packer said, “North American Christianity is 3000 miles wide and 1/2 inch deep.”<sup>2</sup> Why do Christians lose their influence? There may be many answers to this. In light of today’s passage, one is that Christians do not understand salvation as the Bible teaches it. In witnessing to others, evangelicals tend to emphasize salvation by faith alone. We also emphasize God’s love, saying, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”** (Jn 3:16). This is absolutely true. But the problem is that we ignore sanctification and spiritual growth. So, people become complacent in their spiritual lives, believing that they have a one-way ticket to heaven, regardless of how they live. But the Bible tells us that being born again as a new creation is just the beginning. After that we must grow into the likeness of Jesus. Through today's passage let's learn what it means to work out our salvation. Let's also learn why it is so important, and how we can be influential Christians in this warped and crooked generation.

**First, the meaning of working out one’s salvation (12).** Let’s read verse 12. **“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling...”** In 2:8, Paul talked about Christ’s obedience in order to fulfill God's salvation purpose. Now he tells us how Christ’s obedience is replicated by his followers. The words, **“...as you have always obeyed...”** indicate that the Philippians had obeyed Jesus’ words thus far. They always obeyed, not only in Paul’s presence, but also in his absence. They were not like slaves who only appeared to work before their master’s eyes. Rather, they

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

obeyed God from their hearts all the time. So Paul did not need to tell them to obey, but simply to continue to do so. Why should they continue to obey? It was to work out their salvation. Here we need to understand what “work out your salvation” means. The words “work out” are very familiar to us. We “work out” at the fitness center. But here the meaning is to work with God to accomplish his salvation purpose in us. For this, we need to obey God from our hearts.

Many people become nervous at the word “obedience.” They think Jesus’ obedience is beautiful. But they don’t want to be told to “obey” by someone else. Some have been mistreated in the name of “obedience.” Yet obedience to God is essential in Christian life. If we remove the words “obey” and “obedience” from the Bible, it is like removing a leg from a chair; it will surely collapse. Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me” (Jn 14:21a, 1984 NIV). Those who claim to have faith, but lack obedience, are contradictory. James said, “Faith without deeds is dead” (Ja 2:26). True faith produces obedience (Ro 1:5). Sin entered the world through Adam’s disobedience, and death came through sin. Through Jesus’ obedience, salvation came to all people (Ro 5:12,19). As Jesus worked out salvation, by obeying God absolutely, so we should work out our salvation by obeying God with fear and trembling.

Here we need to think about the concept of “salvation.” In a narrow sense, salvation means to be justified by faith. However, in a broader sense, it includes sanctification. When Paul says, “work out your salvation,” he is referring to sanctification. “Sanctification” means: to become holy, to purify and free from sin. Jesus prayed for his disciples, “**Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth**” (Jn 17:17). Sanctification is taught us repeatedly in the Bible. 1 Peter 1:15-16 say, “**...just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’**” St. Paul, after warning Timothy against ungodliness, including love of money, charged him, “**But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called...**” (1 Ti 6:11-12a). Sanctification is an ongoing process of growing to be like Christ. 1 John 3:9 says, “**No one who is born of God continues to sin because God’s seed remains in them. They cannot go on sinning because they have been born of God.**” When we are born again, God’s seed is planted in our hearts. It grows and transforms us until our whole being is changed into the likeness of Christ. If we ignore sanctification, we hinder our own spiritual growth. Then we lose joy, vitality and saltiness - our Christian influence. When we obey God in working out our salvation, we can grow in Christ’s image. This gives us great joy and makes us salty people of good Christian influence.

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

Paul included the phrase “**with fear and trembling.**” This describes a right attitude before God. Many people take salvation lightly, as if it is obtaining a kind of certificate. But it is not such a small matter. It is a matter of eternal life and death. So working out our salvation should be the most important matter to us, evoking fear and trembling. This fear is not of losing everything due to eternal punishment. It is a reverence for God which seeks to give him the honor he deserves (Heb 12:28-29). The Quakers were good examples. When we fear God, we obey God, and work out our salvation.

**Second, it is God who works in us (13).** Verse 12 seems to suggest salvation by works. But it is clear that Paul rejects any such teaching when we see verse 13. It says, “**...for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.**” As we saw in 1:6, Paul had confidence that God who began a good work of salvation in us would carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. God is the main actor in his salvation drama. Our salvation does not depend on ourselves, but on God. It is God who works in us to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. His good purpose is to sanctify us until we bear the likeness of Christ (Ro 8:29). When we hear that God works in us to will and to act, it seems that God is taking over our wills, and we don’t need to do anything. We seem to be robots. But God still respects the free will he gave us. So he does not force us to obey him, and allows us to disobey even though it causes harm. Yet God wants us to learn willing cooperation as he works in us. God calls us to his holiness, and then empowers us to pursue holiness. God calls us to his service, and then empowers our service. God energizes his children to obey and serve him. So Augustine said, “We desire, but God raises the desire in us. We act, but it is God who empowers our action.” This means that our salvation does not depend on our works, but on God’s sovereign will. Because of this, we can have a great assurance of our salvation. God is at work in us. God never sleeps; he is tirelessly active. God works effectively. God is working to transform us into the likeness of Christ. He cannot be deflected from his course, nor will he fail to achieve his purpose. Nothing is impossible with God. No one can stop his work. What he wants us to do is obey willingly.

**Third, shine like stars (14-16).** Verses 14-16 tell us how to work out our salvation with God. We are children of God. Paul tells us what children of God should not, and should do, in this warped and crooked generation. **First of all, he mentions something we should not do.** Look at verse 14. “**Do everything without grumbling or arguing....**” Paul first tells us not to grumble. Grumbling may not

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

seem as serious as murder, adultery and the like. But when it is allowed to continue it ends up as arguing, which leads to rebellion. As a community of believers tries to work out salvation together, grumbling or complaining can destroy their fellowship. So Paul took it seriously. When do people complain and grumble? Usually, it is in response to hardships which call for sacrifice. At such times, people ask God, “Why do you give me a hard time? Why must I suffer like this? Why me?”

After God delivered the Israelites from the bondage of slavery in Egypt, God led them to the wilderness to sanctify them. They suffered from hunger, thirst and enemy attacks. Whenever they experienced these hardships, they complained to Moses and wanted to go back to Egypt. They fantasized about their past lives and became irrational. Moses explained to them, **“You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord”** (Ex 16:8b). What happened as a result? Paul said in 1 Corinthians 10:10, **“And do not grumble, as some of them did - and were killed by the destroying angel.”** Paul went on to apply this in verse 11, **“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us....”** Grumbling and arguing can become a subconscious habit. In our society, complaining about products or services is a means to improvement. Those who complain will get results. Complaining about products and services may be okay. But we should not complain to God or to God’s servants or to each other in the Christian community. That is why Paul says, **“Do everything without grumbling or arguing.”** Instead of grumbling, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”** When we grumble or argue, God is displeased. Then trouble and distress will follow us wherever we go (Ro 2:8-9). When we rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances, God is pleased. Then goodness and love will follow us all the days of our lives (Ps 23:6). It is most important to please God. This is the chief purpose of our lives.

Next Paul tells us what we should do and its result. Verses 15-16 say, **“...so that you may become blameless and pure, ‘children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.’ Then you will shine like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain.”** Paul worked hard to help the Philippians. He believed they would become like Jesus and that his labor was not in vain. Here, the central thing Paul tells them to do is to hold firmly to the word of life. If one wants to live an influential Christian life as the salt of the earth and the light of the world, it is not enough to merely not grumble or argue. We should hold firmly to the word of life. Here “the word of life” is “the word of God” which

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

gives life to the soul. There are many good words in the world. But none of them can give us life. None of them can revive our weary souls and save us from the power of sin and death. Only the word of God can give us life, meaning, and hope, and revive our souls. Once, Jesus shared with crowds of people that he himself is the bread of life. They responded by saying to themselves, “We don't care, give us a Big Mac.” Then they complained, **“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?”** Jesus explained in John 6:63, **“The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you - they are full of Spirit and life.”** But still, many people did not accept it. They grumbled and left. However, his disciples held firmly to his word as the word of life, saying, **“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life”** (Jn 6:68). We should hold firmly to the word of life in a dark time so that we may not drift away. Many false ideas and distractions try to attract our attention. But when we hold on to the word of God, it can be the anchor for our soul, firm and secure (Heb 6:19). When winds of relativism and storms of deception come, without an anchor to hold us, we can easily drift away. But when we hold firmly to the word of life we have an anchor for our souls. We can be firm and secure in the words of life.

Not only do we need to hold firmly to the word of life, but we also need to **“hold out the word of life”** (1984 NIV). There is a saying, **“The best defense is a good offense.”** The best way to overcome the darkness is to shine the light. Many people sit down, saying, “The world is too dark. I can't do anything.” Then they despair, eat too much, and engage in meaningless media activity all night long. But when we shine the light, all the darkness will disappear. We can find the direction we should go and what we should do. That is why God wants us to hold out the word of life. When the early apostles were persecuted and put in jail, the Lord opened the doors of the jail and let them out. Then he said, **“Go, stand in the temple courts, and tell the people the full message of this new life”** (Ac 5:20, 1984 NIV). Holding out the word of life is the way to revive our soul and also to save others. It is the way to shine like stars in the sky. The darker the night, the brighter we will shine like stars. The darkness of the world is not the real issue. The real issue is whether we are holding out the word of life or not. When we examine American church history, revivals have always come during dark times. It often begins with a few young people who are awakened by the words of life through the work of the Holy Spirit. Now is the time for another spiritual awakening. It is time for young people to be awakened by the word of life and hold out the word to this warped and crooked generation. Let's pray that God may move young people's hearts and revive our nation once again.

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

**Fourth, three examples of working out salvation (17-30).** In verses 17-30 we find three people who were exemplary in working out their salvation. **First, Paul talks about himself as he served the Philippians (17-18).** Paul uses the metaphor of “**being poured out like a drink offering.**” Israelite priests, after placing burning sacrifices on the altar, would then pour wine onto them (Lev 23:18,37). This wine or “drink offering” was the final act that made the sacrifice acceptable to God. In using this metaphor, Paul acknowledges that the Philippians had already offered a sacrifice and service to God by faith. Now Paul was willing to do anything - even die - that their sacrifice might be pleasing and acceptable to God. Paul did not think about himself, but about Christ and his people. Paul offered his life joyfully, not reluctantly. So he said, “**I am glad and rejoice with all of you,**” even in a prison cell, awaiting death.

Paul speaks of Timothy in verses 19-24. He had hoped to send Timothy to them soon to help them grow spiritually. The reason he chose Timothy was that there was no one else like him who showed genuine concern for their welfare. Everyone looked out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy proved himself as a Christ-centered person. He served with Paul in the work of the gospel as a son with his father. Paul and Timothy had a deep love relationship. In order to serve God’s people, we need to form relationships like theirs and work together in love.

In verses 25-30 Paul mentions Epaphroditus, whom he was sending back to encourage them. Paul calls him “my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier.” He served with Paul, even though he was sick. He was distressed when he learned that the Philippians found out about his illness. When Paul sent him back, he asked them to welcome him in the Lord with great joy and to honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. Here we can find common denominators in these three exemplary men. They devoted themselves for the work of Christ at the risk of their lives. They were Christ-centered and genuinely concerned about others. When they followed Christ’s example, they became such model Christians. They show us practically what it is like to work out salvation with fear and trembling. We need these kinds of examples. There are many among us. We should honor people like them and learn from them.

Let’s pray that we may continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, realizing that God works in us to will and act in order to fulfill his good purpose. Let’s pray to become influential Christians who shine like stars in the sky.

# CONTINUE TO WORK OUT YOUR SALVATION

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/15-familykids/42-new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released>; <http://ezinearticles.com/?Christians-and-Porn:-Pornography-Is-a-Growing-Problem-in-the-Church&id=7359096>.

<sup>2</sup> Packer, James I., 1990. "A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life," Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.