8 Philippians 2:12-18 We can work it out!

1. Introduction

a. We are in chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Philippians, which is marked by a very upbeat and joyful dialogue from the Apostle, writing from his home in Rome where he is a prisoner. In these first two chapters he writes to encourage the church in Philippi in their fight against some strong opposition that they are encountering, and especially he wants them to maintain their strong unity as the family of God in a somewhat hostile environment.

b. In these next few verses Paul fleshes out his exhortations with some practical application. In chapter 1 he set the context by saying "…conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." In other words, you must live a life that is consistent with the gospel. It's the call to holy living, godly conduct, to become more like Jesus. Now he turns his attention to one more key to living the Christian life in obedience to Jesus.

   i But the way he says it may sound at first a little outrageous!

Philippians 2:12-18 *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. [14] Do all things without grumbling or questioning, [15] that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, [16] holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. [17] Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*

c. v12 is very easy to misunderstand for obvious reasons – it must always be read alongside v13 which is key to understanding what Paul means. Dr Martin Lloyd Jones described these verses as "*perhaps one of the most perfect summaries of the Christian life to be found anywhere*." These verses address the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, and how they should be worked out in practical living as they impact on our salvation.

d. V12 reminded me of trying to solve a maths problem. You have to know how to interpret and manipulate the numbers to arrive at the right solution. If you've ever watched "Countdown" you'll know sometimes there's more than one way of working out the right answer. To solve a maths problem you have to know what you are aiming for and what method you are going to use to solve the problem. What steps do you need to take to obtain the answer? Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, that is exactly what Paul is saying in these verses. He begins with what is considered to be one of the most important passages in the whole bible on sanctification.

2. The lifelong journey of sanctification

a. Sanctification is just a long word that describes the process of growing in Christian maturity. The bible describes it in different ways – becoming more Christ-like; imitating Jesus; following Jesus and so on. Elsewhere, Paul talks about becoming *more godly* – showing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, having the law written on our heart, or being conformed to the image of Christ. Different

descriptions but they all mean the same thing: we are changing from what we were to what we will be.

2 Corinthians 3:18 *And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, <u>are being transformed into the same image</u> from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

i This is how that change or transformation can be initiated – by beholding the glory of the Lord, spending time in the presence of the Lord in worship and prayer fuelled by the Word. If we devote our time to that, we will find ourselves changing as we come more and more into agreement with Jesus' desires for us. Worship is agreeing with who God is, and prayer is agreeing with what God wants to do.

b. We should consider the tenderness with which Paul addresses the Philippian church – "…*my beloved, my dear friends*." He is being very firm in giving them direction, but he wants them to understand that it comes from a loving heart. When we encounter verses of scripture that may appear to be difficult or harsh, we must remember that God is not a policeman looking to catch us as soon as we put a foot wrong. He is a loving father who wants us to succeed, and in his word he has given us much instruction so that we are able to succeed and not fail. Like our maths problem – he's given us the method of working in his word so that we can check out with the right answer. He doesn't do the sum for us, but he shows us how to get it right.

Philippians 2:12-13 *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, [13] for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*

c. People struggle with these verses is because they try to apply them in the wrong way. Most people make the assumption that Paul is telling us to individually work out our own personal salvation. Not so, because all of the words that Paul uses in the Greek are plurals, so "you" in both of these verses refers to the whole church. And even if we didn't know the Greek, the context should lead us to the same conclusion.

d. Paul is appealing to the church as a whole, based on the example of humility shown by Jesus, to work out the practical implications of their salvation in their relationships with one another. They must lay aside personal priorities and desires and humbly serve one another – if they do that they will stand out like bright lights in the darkness of the world (v15). The way that they relate to one another as a community is important because it has an impact upon the witness of the church and the success of the gospel in their locality.

e. We must all feel that the church is a safe place where we honour and respect one another, we look out for one another, and despite our differences, we all feel valued and accepted. But it also means that we must give room to discussion and agreement as to what that looks like in the light of the scriptures and the revelation we have from God.

f. There is an individual dimension to all of this too, as the corporate whole is made up of individuals. We all have a part to play, and that's where the "with fear and trembling" comes in. There is a weightiness and a seriousness about this which means that we regard the things of God and our part in them with reverence. We are dealing with things that are holy. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, so if we want to make wise decisions, we need to cultivate an attitude of coming to the Lord in the right way.

i Scripture does not advocate approaching God with anything other than reverence and awe. The writer of Hebrews tells us that God is a consuming fire to be respected.

ii That's not to say that God is inapproachable – far from it, but there is a right way to approach him. We can know and experience incredible love and intimacy in the presence of God, and he wants to make himself known to us at the deepest heart level, but we are not his equal and his ways are not our ways.

Psalm 24:3-4 *Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? [4] He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.*

g. But there is a second part to all of this – God is also at work in us, to will and to work his good pleasure. Everything that exists does so to bring glory to God, it's "His good pleasure." It's all for pleasure of God. But this is contrary to man's sinful disposition, wanting our own good pleasure. We want our will to be done, accomplishing our own goals. How can we change? God changes us from the inside out.

h. So there's our part and there is God's part. We can't do God's part and he won't do our part. We work outwardly because God is at work inwardly. It's about partnership – coming into agreement with God and working together with him to bring about his purposes in our lives.

Proverbs 21:31 *The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD.*

Psalm 127:1 *Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.*

i. God is intimately involved in our lives, and whatever we turn our hand to or put our efforts into, unless God has initiated it, it has no purpose. Work with all your might, but don't trust in your work – trust in God. Make plans, but don't trust in your plans, trust in God. So get your horse ready for the day of battle – but don't trust in your horse, trust in God. Build your house – but don't trust in your house, trust in God.

j. God is at work in us all the time, creating a God-driven purpose in each of us. So even our willing and desiring to live and work for God, comes from God. He both motivates us and enables us. Sometimes we want to do the right thing, but we lack the ability or the energy to do it. God steps in and gives us the strength and ability to do it. Sometimes we can't even seem to want to do what is right. Then God will step in and create in us the desire to do his will.

k. God is always the initiator. In God's mind there is always a next step for each one of us to take. How does he make his will known to us? Often he impacts upon our will by bringing about a discontent. He has many ways of achieving this. Then he cultivates within us a genuine desire for holiness and righteousness, so we reach out to him for help. That's when he comes in to bring about the transformation that is needed and the strength to see it become a reality in our lives.

3. Salvation belongs to our God…

a. What does Paul say we have to work out? Our salvation. What is its application within our context? Outside of Jesus we are perishing because of God's wrath and condemnation. Salvation refers to God rescuing us from Satan's grasp and transferring us into the kingdom of light.

b. But Paul is addressing people who were already saved. Now he's telling them to work out the practical implications of the salvation they already possessed. It is nothing to do with any kind working to produce good works in order to obtain salvation. Once we possess salvation, then it's necessary to work it out in its practical, everyday application.

c. We have to learn to hold in tension two seemingly contradictory truths that the bible affirms:

   i Salvation from start to finish is God's work – that's the inward part

   ii Salvation requires diligent effort on our part – that's the outward part

d. We are to pursue godliness because God is at work in us for our godliness. Change is not optional in God's plan, it's an essential part of what he is doing in you.

4. ~~Grumble, grumble~~ little star…!

Philippians 2:14–18 *Do all things without grumbling or questioning, [15] that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, [16] holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain. [17] Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. [18] Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*

a. It's not "Try to do most things without grumbling or complaining…" The problem for us is that Paul is writing under the direction of the Holy Spirit; what he says is bound to come into conflict with our human nature. The Holy Spirit sets the bar higher than we would like.

b. We live in a culture where complaining and grumbling are the norm. Everyone does it. Mostly we grumble when things don't go our way or some kind of adversity crosses our path. Most of us don't see grumbling as a major sin, but the bible says otherwise.

Numbers 11:1 *And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp.*

a. God takes grumbling and complaining seriously. Israel became experienced grumblers in the wilderness audibly expressing their discontentment. They grumbled because of lack of food and water. But their desires for these things turned bad, because they wanted them more than they wanted God or trusted his provision. Instead of seeking God, they grumbled.

b. Grumbling is more than just the voice of discontentment – it is also the voice of unbelief. When the sons of Korah led a rebellion against Moses (Numbers 16) the consequences of their grumbling provoking God's response to it should give us serious pause for thought:

Numbers 16:31-32 *And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. [32] And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods.*

c. Events like this were recorded for our instruction (1 Corinthians 10:10-11), so that we can learn from them. Now Paul says one of the primary ways in which we can work out our salvation, is through the high bar of not grumbling or complaining whatever the circumstances.

d. And when we fail, the Holy Spirit comes alongside. On your own you can't do it, but with the help of the Holy Spirit you can. As we learn to renounce our own self-effort and rely on the Spirit of God at work in us, we can begin to experience his supernatural enabling power. It comes down to making the choice of our will to continually make this the habit of a lifetime.

e. Here are three questions to ask yourself whenever you feel a grumble rising up inside:

   i What am I wanting right now more than I want God's will?

   ii What craving has become more important than pleasing God?

   iii What am I desiring that is greater than knowing Jesus?

f. Outward circumstances don't have to compel us to grumble. Paul showed the way – in chains and restricted in his movements, yet everything he wrote to the Philippians is resonating with joy and gratitude to God.

g. Grumble in Greek is ***goggusmos*** (pronounced gongusmos) from which we get our English word gong. This Greek word was associated with the low, threatening, discontented muttering of a mob who distrust their leaders. So its primary meaning is an undercurrent of discontentment, often spoken under the breath rather than declared out loud.

h. Remember, Paul is still addressing relationships within the church fellowship, so that is the first place we must put these verses into practice. If we are to have the mind of Christ, then grumbling and questioning has no place within our fellowship. There are three reasons why we need to be vigilant about this:

   i Grumbling and complaining denies God's sovereignty

   ii Grumbling and complaining disrupts unity

   iii Grumbling and complaining discredits our testimony

i. Of course, genuine complaints or concerns or questions can be raised. But this needs to be done openly and with a good heart so that good relationships are maintained and the unity of the Spirit is not broken.

j. We live in a crooked and perverse generation, grumbling and complaining are all around us. Our godly lives will cause us to stand out like bright lights in the darkness. Those who are crooked will lead others along the same path. They reject God in favour of their own ideas, and lead others into that same rejection, leading them astray and perverting their minds with lies and ungodliness.

   i Western civilization is collapsing – but so is Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Culture is on a downward spiral, and deviancy, lawlessness and lies are the norm in society. Law and order are under threat and many now live in fear.

   ii Our own society has become so crooked and perverse that now what is evil is proclaimed as good, and what is good is proclaimed as evil in much of it. The murder of an unborn child is now seen as a matter of choice rather than the evil that it truly is. Diversity, globalism and tolerance are the new buzzwords driving popular opinion. Humanism is king and the truth of God has been exchanged for a lie.

k. In the midst of this crooked and twisted generation we have the opportunity to shine like stars. We are supposed to be noticeably different and as Paul puts it, without blemish. Our testimony is built on the life we have in Christ, a life free from complaining and arguing, a life filled with the joy of living in the freedom that Jesus has brought us into and the salvation he has led us into. We live a life of joy and thankfulness that brings glory to God, even in the face of adversity.

5. Shining…

a. For something to shine it needs fuel, a source of energy. The sun is a star; on a sunny day we can feel the effects of that energy and we can see the results of it because everything around us is illuminated by its light. So the sun keeps shining because it is fuelled by a source of energy that is contained within it. Without that fuel, the sun would quickly go dim and cease to give out its light.

b. In Matthew 5 Jesus described us as the light of the world. To shine as a light in the world, what's the fuel that's going to keep you shining? Remember the old song: "Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning…" We need oil. Where do we get the kind of oil that the bible says we need to keep us burning?

1 John 2:27 *But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him.*

c. Firstly, our source of oil comes from our intimate devotion to Jesus. We receive oil as we devote time to being in his presence. The Spirit tenderises our hearts enabling us to feel more of God's desire for us. This enlarges our desire for him, illuminating hearts with his beauty.

d. Secondly, we gain oil by holding fast to the word of life that teaches us and enables us to live a godly life in this crooked and perverse generation. Paul urges us to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly…" (Colossians 3:16) – the more we saturate ourselves in the word, the more we will be able to live it out. God wants our hearts to be filled with his word and with the oil of his Spirit so that we will be able to shine brightly as lights in this world.

6. Conclusion

a. To be able to rejoice as Paul did in his sacrificial service of the faith of others while in the midst of difficult personal circumstances requires us to be mature in our walk with the Lord. Paul is a tough act to follow in his devotion to Jesus and his ability to rejoice even in the harshest of circumstances. His concern was whether at the end of the age Jesus would judge that his life had been run in vain. That's why we must hold fast to the word of life because it will be our guide, our inspiration, our motivation and our strength in the difficult days ahead.

Nehemiah 8:10 *And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.*