



MARCH 21, 2021 | PASTOR PETER YI

## “Working Out Our Salvation” (Philippians 2:12-18)

**<sup>12</sup> 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, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.**

**<sup>14</sup> Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. <sup>18</sup> So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.**

Have you ever day-dreamed about some great thing that’s a few months away, like a vacation, or getting married, or some other big event? The event might be a long way off, but because you’re thinking about it so much, it completely distracts you from doing the things you need to do today. Just this week I had that experience. I was planning to go on a 7-day cycling/camping trip with a friend in May or June. And once that idea got in my head, that’s all I was thinking about. Where should we go? How many kilometers should we ride every day? What equipment do I already have? What equipment do I need to get? What will the weather be like? What will our menu be? I have half a dozen web pages open...google maps...camp sites...bike sites...YouTube videos. Then, it dawns on me. What the heck am I doing? I gotta get back to work.

You see, the dream of the future was so compelling, so beautiful, that it negatively impacted the way I lived today. Now, I suppose, if I were to do it again, I should let the future dream affect me differently. So, rewind the video. There’s the dream to go on this trip. Okay, I need to get in better shape. I need to ride several times a week to improve my fitness. I should shed a few pounds. That’s number one. Then I might think...gosh, I need to save some money for this trip. I may need to sell some junk on Kijiji. And so on.

Now I share that because we just spent two weeks looking at the greatest vision of the future that could ever be envisioned by any human being. The condescension and exaltation of Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Universe and Hope of the World! Our thoughts are in heaven. We’re envisioning the billions upon billions of people who will bow their knee and confess with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father, but Paul doesn’t let us get lost in that glorious future for too long. Yes, we can and should linger there, and return again and again to that vision, but we also have to live life here, today, now. And this is what comes next in the passage we just read. How are we to live in the here and now, in light of the great triumph of Jesus Christ?

In this passage Paul emphasizes two things that we need to do, in light of the exaltation of Christ, which are indicated by two imperative verbs. The **first** is to ‘work out your salvation’ in verse 12 and the **second** is to “do everything without grumbling or arguing” in verse 14. These are the two main points of this passage.



Let's look at the first one. Work out your salvation. Now, we have to be careful how we interpret this phrase. It doesn't say "work for your salvation" or "work in order to earn or achieve your salvation." It just says, "work out your salvation." So, what does he mean by that? Well, we know that Scripture consistently teaches that salvation is not by our achievement, but it is a work of God. When the disciples asked Jesus, "Master, who then can be saved?" He replied, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). Even earlier in this letter Paul affirmed that our salvation is a work of God. Listen to 1:28. **Philippians 1:28** without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

So, the phrase 'work out your salvation' cannot mean that we must do works to achieve our salvation. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Here's what Paul is getting at. He tells the Philippians, remember after you were saved, and I instructed you in this new faith in Christ? Remember when I taught you the moral and ethical teaching that should now flow out of those who are truly saved? Remember how you obeyed those teachings when I was with you? That was the working out of your salvation. Now I ask you, in fact, by the authority of Christ, I command you, to continue working out your salvation by living in obedience to the law of Christ. In saying this, he's speaking about what should be the result of our salvation, but he's also referring to our final salvation, when Christ returns, and we shall all stand before our Saviour and Judge. So, in light of the salvation already achieved by Christ in you, and the salvation that will be completed at his return, live now, in this manner.

Think of this comparison. Working out our salvation is not like a ladder that we should all be climbing, and if we climb hard enough and high enough, then on that last day, we will reach the top and be saved. That is a description of salvation by works, not salvation by grace. Rather, think of salvation this way. Think of a small child. That little girl will someday become a woman, and that little boy will someday become a man. There is essentially nothing that child can do that will prevent those outcomes from occurring. To want to remain as a child in body or in mind is impossible. Now, since we already know the outcome, we should live every day in light of that truth; we live in light of that undeniable, inescapable, beautiful future reality. Mom and dad know this, so they make sure that the child takes in physical nourishment, gets exercise, gets proper sleep. The child has to develop his or her mind, become smarter. The child has to work at controlling emotions. As the child grows and grows, year after year, they are living closer to the future reality that will eventually be theirs. They don't earn adulthood. Adulthood is already theirs, so live now, in light of that future.

The particular issue that Paul's addressing here is unity and harmony in the church. It's imperative that we work out our salvation especially as it relates to maintaining harmonious relationships in the church. This is both an individual and corporate exercise. As an individual, corporate unity must be one of our highest priorities. I must value it, cherish it, work toward it, and fix it when it goes the wrong way. Each of us has to have this attitude towards unity. At the same time, it's a corporate exercise. Unity by definition is something that is corporate, it implies more than one. The striving for and preserving and strengthening unity needs to be a primary collective value. There's no sense in coming together when the members of a church do not share this common value and goal.

For Paul living in unity and harmony is a sign of spiritual maturity, it's a sign of healthy Christian relationships. The way that Paul moves them toward spiritual maturity is by saying, you were all friendly and loving when I was with you (but it does appear that since my departure, things have gotten a bit out of hand), so show your true maturity, show me that you've really grown up, by pursuing unity even in my absence.



Here's an example. For parents, I think our goal, as part of our parenting, is that our kids will do the right things, not just because we're there and if we catch them doing the bad thing, they'll get reprimanded, and maybe even if we catch them doing the good thing, they'll expect a reward...but what we want our kids to become are people who will do the right thing because it's the right thing, not because of the fear of mom and dad's punishment. We want them to move from dependence to independence. This is what Paul is encouraging them to be, and that goes for us as well.

The **second way** Paul moves them to live in unity is seen in the phrase "with fear and trembling." This phrase is used several times in Paul's letters and what it refers to is this. It describes an attitude of humility and submission in God's presence.

There's a short Latin phrase that goes like this, **Coram Deo**. It's an important phrase that encapsulates the Christian life. Here's how theologian RC Sproul describes Coram Deo. "This phrase literally refers to something that takes place in the presence of, or before the face of, God. To live *coram Deo* is to live one's entire life in the presence of God, under the authority of God, to the glory of God.

This phrase captures the way we are to live our lives as the people of God." He continues, saying, "To live in the presence of God is to understand that whatever we are doing and wherever we are doing it, we are acting under the gaze of God. God is omnipresent. There is no place so remote that we can escape His penetrating gaze." To work out our salvation with fear and trembling is to live Coram Deo, in the presence of God.

However, let's also make sure we understand the concept of the fear of the Lord properly. It's a complicated word because it does contain elements of terror and dread. There are elements of awe and reverence. And there is also mixed into the fear of God, love and affection. Maybe this story will help. In the Chronicles of Narnia series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, one of the characters, a girl named Susan, sees Aslan, a giant lion, who represents the Christ-figure. Well, she sees him for the first time, and asks Mr. Beaver, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion..." "Safe?" said Mr. Beaver..."Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe, but he's good. He's the King, I tell you." I think from the writings of fiction, Lewis captures really well what God is like and at the same time, what the fear of God is like. So as the children interact with Aslan throughout the Narnia Chronicles, yes there's a deep admiration and reverence, there's even terror and there's intimate affection and love. That's what fear and trembling is. We'd be wrong to think that it only means that God has his arms crossed, scowling at us, just waiting for us to step out of line so he can zap us, but we shouldn't take him lightly either. We shouldn't consider him as a pushover, who sweeps sin under the rug either. He's holy **and** he's loving. It's before this God, with fear and trembling, that we are to work out our salvation.

Then in verse 13 Paul informs us how the working out of our salvation is actually done. "For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose." The Greek word is *energeo* which is where we get the word energy. It means "to put one's capabilities into operation, to work, to be at work, to be active, to operate, and be effective." When used with God it means that while we are working out our salvation, God is also working; he's putting all his capabilities into operation, he's actively working, energetically, and effectively in us." Let me give you another verse that says something very similar. In 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul writes this.

<sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

Paul worked, he says; in fact, he says he worked harder than anyone else, and yet, it wasn't him that was working, but the grace of God. Think of how this works with our theme of "growing in grace" this year.



You and I are putting in a lot of effort to grow, practicing a whole range of spiritual exercises. We're praying, we're reading, we're cooking meals and serving others, we're fasting, we're memorizing.

All of these things take effort. All of these are absolutely necessary for spiritual growth. Apart from doing these we cannot and will not grow, but we also desperately know this. If God doesn't work in my work, it's all for nothing. If God's not in my Bible reading and, in my serving, then it's not going to stick. We all know that to be true. God won't read the Bible for you; he won't cook the meal and deliver it for you; he won't evangelize for you. That's our work and yet, somehow, in some spiritual and somewhat mysterious way, God is also at work in us.

Even after we're done working, does God stop working? Is God only working when we're working? Does the plant only grow when the farmer is directly involved in planting, cultivating, and watering? No, of course not. In fact, more growing is occurring when the farmer is not directly attending to the plant. Let's say you share the Gospel with a friend. You've befriended the person. Prayed for the person. Invited the person. Answered dozens of questions. Gave away books and a Bible. That was your work. And God was also in that work. But even when you're not working, isn't it reassuring to know that God continues to work in your friend? That's what's going on.

Even more specifically, God even affects our will or our desire to work. I was talking to a member of the church this past week and we were talking about the fruit of our salvation, and I said that one of the ways that we can discern in ourselves or in others that we are truly saved is by observing changes in our attitude, our ambition, and our appetites. Appetites refers to desires. Think of the desires we had before God changed our hearts and now consider the new desires that were wrought by the Holy Spirit. For all of us, aren't there like 4 or 5 things in the area of desires that God has transformed? Desire for money. The desire to please people. The desire for safety and security in earthly things. The desire to put myself first. Haven't all these things changed? It's God who changes your want list. Things you thought were so important, and things you wanted so badly, are no longer even on the list. And a new set of desires has replaced them, such as, a desire to worship God; a desire to please him by obeying his commands and ceasing from sin; a desire to serve and help others, even before serving and helping yourself. Who placed these new wants, this new will in our hearts? It was God. This is so amazing, you know why? Because all of us, from time to time, don't have the desire or don't have the right desire and if it is indeed God who works in us new desires, then we can pray for him to do that in us.

However, even for self-disciplined people this is very important. Why? Well, for self-disciplined people their trap is that they depend on their self-discipline and because they're so disciplined, they might neglect to invite God into their spiritual activities. So, they do and they do and they do, but for some reason, there's no noticeable change in their lives. Why? Because God isn't working in them. So, what can you do? Here's an example. Let's say you are really disciplined in Bible reading. You hardly skip a day. You faithfully read your 3-4 chapters every day, but you're not seeing the growth. So, here's how you might want to change it up. You make a bookmark of Psalm 119:18. "Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law." Every time you read the Bible you pray this verse. "Lord, this verse informs me that there are wonderful things in your law. I know that to be true. But Lord I also understand from this verse that unless you open my eyes, I will just go on seeing without actually seeing. Lord I want to see those wonderful, life changing things. Open my eyes that I might see wonderful things in your law. Amen." Give that a try.

That actually happened to me in my preaching. I've been preparing, writing and delivering sermons for 30 years. I've become better at it. More efficient. And so on. Sometimes I go through seasons when I'm depending more on my skill and experience than on God. So, about a year ago, we read this book on preaching which taught how to trust in God in our preaching, through the acrostic, APTAT:



- Admit you can do nothing without God
- Pray for help
- Trust a specific promise
- Act
- Thank God for his provision and goodness.

So, I wrote that down on a piece of paper and I've stuck it in my preaching Bible.

Now, the reason God works his powerful and effective work in us, to even change our wills, is in order to fulfill his good purpose. Whose good purpose is he fulfilling? Yours? Mine? No. His! We are working out our salvation; that is, we are living today in light of eternity, under the Lordship of King Jesus; and while we are working, God is working in you and me, in us, to change our wills...toward which direction...to be more in line with His will. And what's the purpose of all that? To fulfill and to accomplish his good purpose. What is God's good purpose? To do what pleases Him, what glorifies Him.

This short phrase, I believe, is so important for us today. Many modern people today, including Christians, are overly obsessed with self. Everything is seen and analyzed and lived through the lens of self to an extreme degree. It's all about self-awareness and self-fulfillment. This can be a real danger for true happiness and fulfillment. Now, we can never escape from ourselves, our 'selves' will always be there, but here's what I'm trying to get at. When you read verse 13, ask yourself this question. Are you more excited about God working in you or are you more excited about his good purposes being fulfilled? Now, is this a real choice? Do I actually have to choose? Well, yes, I think you do. Because the way you instinctively answer this question, reveals who and what you care about more. Do you care more about yourself or do you care more about God? You see, one of the great things the Gospel does, is that it sets you free from being enslaved to yourself. This is actually the point of the last 20 verses or so. Don't be selfish, don't just think about yourself, it's not all about you. Think of others first. Think of others better than yourself. Live in unity. Jesus didn't think about himself. He became nothing. He obeyed God. God exalted him as king (implication: I'm not king. I'm not the center of the universe. Christ is.) God saved you, despite your sin. And now as you work, he too is working, to fulfill, not your purpose, but his; his ultimate purpose is his glory. And that's what should get us really excited.

In verse 14 we get a better idea of the details of what working out our salvation is to look like:

**(Philippians 2:14)** Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky <sup>16</sup> as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Paul gets very comprehensive and very specific at the same time. He says to do everything without grumbling or arguing. Does everything include taking out the trash? Raising children? Doing homework? Listening to parents? Saying I'm sorry? Thinking about lockdowns? Dealing with issues at work? Of course, doing life together as a church community. We've all been far too guilty of doing the exact opposite of what Paul demands here. Instead of doing all these different things without grumbling or arguing, we've done everything **with** grumbling and arguing.

Now, let's not gloss over this point too quickly. Paul gives us the reason for why we should behave this way. Verse 15 says, "so that you may become blameless and pure." Look at the connection Paul is making. The goal of every Christian is to be imitators of God, children of God. We, as God's children, are to resemble our



Heavenly Father and the things that prevents us from becoming like God and becoming holy is grumbling and arguing.

Have you ever wondered why you might not be growing, and changing? It may have nothing to do with the big things and everything to do with the little things. Do relationships matter to you? Is living at peace in your relationship of the highest priority? Is there a pervasive spirit in your heart of complaining, and grumbling, and arguing? That might be the reason.

Paul then, goes on to say that this grumbling attitude also effects our witness. Look again at the text:

**(Philippians 2:14)** Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup> so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” **Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky**

How can we shine, how can we present an attractive witness if all we do is complain? All that complaining shows that we are not content. It steals away our joy. And we'll be far too busy fighting amongst ourselves instead of reaching the world in which we live. I think this especially applies to us during covid, and perhaps especially to me. I've complained that we don't have enough vaccines. I've complained about the leadership of our Premier. I've complained about not being able to gather for worship. How about you? Our complaining does not enhance our witness. It doesn't make us shine bright, rather it makes our lights not shine at all.

Finally, Paul connects working out our salvation with the Word of God. Sanctification occurs in our lives only through the Word. It's the Word that tells us that complaining and arguing are wrong. It's the Word that tells us that what areas we need to correct. It's the Word that tells us what a child of God looks like. It's the Word that shows us the beauty and power of unity. It's the Word that informs us how our witness to the world should be. Let's not presume to think that we can grow in holiness, in obedience, apart from God's Word.

Just consider the Israelites as they ventured out of Egypt and into the wilderness on their way to Canaan. They complained about food, they complained about water, they complained about not having any meat, they complained that their enemies would capture them and kill them, they complained that Moses was away on the mountain too long, they complained about Moses' leadership style, they complained to go back to Egypt. All they did was complain, complain, and complain. All this complaining jeopardized their holiness, jeopardized their relationship with God, and jeopardized their witness to a pagan world.

If this is you, then join me in repenting and asking the Lord to begin his work of transforming us.

Friends, what an apt word during this season of life, during covid, and especially as it relates to this year's theme to grow in grace. Let us all strive together to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Let's pray.