

TOPIC XIX

"FEAR AND TREMBLING" - PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.”

This verse has caused some consternation among believers because some legalistic teachers quote it to support the idea that our salvation is by works and not by grace through faith alone. They are wrong. The point Paul is making is introduced by the words “so then”, (οσπε) which conveys, “based on all that I have just written”, and refers to how one works out the gift of salvation they already possess, not that which they are trying to achieve. We know this because he has already referred to his reader’s faith. Further, his telling them to, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” is stated because, “God is at work in you both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure”.

The idea of “working out” one’s salvation simply means to commit to accomplishing something with what has been given to us as a gift. In this case, the gift of “rescue by His grace” (salvation) is what we have been given. We are to accomplish what we are being taught in this epistle to accomplish with this costly gift as the presence of God in us wills. The act of salvation is finished on our behalf by Christ. But our lives here continue on with divine purpose. This is the point of the imperative. We need to look at the immediate context and the words used here.

The word for “work out” is quite common and simple. The intent is simply, “be engaged in accomplishing God’s will with the gift of salvation He has given you”. Very simple. The key is the context as well as the Greek word itself. The Greek word is: “κατεργαζεσθε”, (katergadzesthe). This is a cognate of two words, “kata” (according to) and “ergadzomai”, “to work” or to “be engaged in” or to “accomplish”. We get our word “ergonomics” from this word. Notice that we have the same root word in a different form in verse 13, “For God is at work in you”. Here is a typical Hebrew parallelism. You work because God is at work. Both of you are teaming up to accomplish something good because you have the gift of salvation.

Note the word “*His*” is italicized in the NASV. This word is supplied to reference the supposed subject of the sentence. The translators assumed it is God. But that assumption isn’t necessary. The subject antecedent is in verse 12, and, it is the people to whom Paul is writing. It could better and more accurately translated something like, “for your sakes”. So we have, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you both to will and to do on behalf of goodness (or good reputation, or for your benefit)”. This makes good sense in the context of the passage.

Let’s use the simple illustration of a “work out” at a gym. In a sense, this fits the context. In the gym you are given access to the equipment (you own it, let’s say) and a coach or trainer. Rather than just go to the gym and sit on the equipment, or try to figure out how it is put together, or grease the fittings, or argue as to its potential with someone, or speculate about what results one might obtain, etc., one must develop an exercise schedule and get to “working it out”.

Now, back to the context. Don’t worry about the odd order in the English, “work out your own salvation...”, but try to grasp the intent. Words alone, or the verse one may get fixated upon is not going to help a lot. One must see not only the tree, but also the forest it is in. What does God wish to do through the people at Philippi? Place the interpretation within the context and you will have it. Another simple

illustration might help. If you are given a new dishwasher or vacuum, “working out” your appliance would entail turning it on and cleaning the dirty dishes or floor, but more so, in the context of this epistle, you now have the power to help your neighbor to do the same.

Now to the “fear and trembling” statement. The context for using this phrase is crucial. The sentence leading into it says, “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence...”, tells us that Paul thought he probably not or might not be there to help them and encourage them and so they are without his help. But, following the phrase are the words, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure.” Their lives as Christians will now need to depend on the inner source of work God Himself has done and is doing on their behalf.

And now, a few additional thoughts. To understand the full intent of Paul here, we must remember that this passage is in an important larger context. It follows upon Paul’s admonition in verse 5 of this chapter to, “Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,...” and proceeds to describe Jesus’ sacrificial work on our behalf as the central model of what our attitude needs to be toward who we are and why we are here in reference to others. A key passage to the intent of the epistle is 1:27-30,

“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by *your* opponents--which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that *too*, from God. For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be* in me.”

Thus, thrust into the world with the gift of truth and life, we obey the prompting of the Spirit in touching the lives of others. The fear and trembling follows this admonition regarding obedience, not because we are afraid of losing our salvation or of incurring God’s wrath, but because we are sent on a mission. The following verses note,

Philippians 2:14-15, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,...”

This new purpose for our lives is unfamiliar and uncomfortable. We are no longer able to just stay within the confines and comfort of our previous bondage or darkness. Rather, we are “lights in the world”, much as Christ came as “The Light of the world”. We face our own Gethsemane and we take up our own cross and follow after Him if we are to be obedient. As with Jesus, however, we also have God working in us to will and to work His purpose for our sakes. He is there to strengthen us to endure any circumstance and challenge to our faith we face. (Note 4:13) “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Jesus Himself, had demonstrated that only in a sustained communion with God does one’s life become viable to minister to the needs of others.

The awesome presence within us of The Creator and Father of us all is the chief reason for the “fear and trembling” in this verse. This in itself would be cause enough for “fear and trembling” without the commission we have received. This type of response to God’s presence working within us is not the terror of guilt and possible judgment and rejection. After all, He is within us, not outside of us ready to judge. So the response is one of awe and humility, falling as it were, on our face before Him, recognizing our total inability to do his will without His aid. We feel, perhaps, like Isaiah did as he describes his encounter with God’s glory in chapter 6 of his book.

Isaiah's response to God's question "Who will go for Us?" was "Here am I, send me!" So, within us, God is working to accomplish a beautiful thing for the purpose of working through us to others in His name and with His love and truth.

Paul, no doubt felt the same "fear and trembling" at his initial encounter with Christ. Perhaps we can better understand Paul's use of this phrase when we consider that Paul himself knew whereof he spoke. Looking back, we remember Paul's own encounter with Christ as well as the church's view of this "Saul of Tarsus" in the early days. First, the impact of Saul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was devastating (Acts 9:1-9). He was crushed. He was unable to eat and drink. His own testimony is that this event was humiliating, debilitating and crushing. He didn't know what was to befall him. He was filled with "fear and trembling" for he had met the risen Messiah face to face. Finally, a wonderfully obedient saint named Ananias entered the "lion's den" and ministered to Saul and told him what the Lord wanted in his life. Later, he left Damascus and came to Jerusalem. Acts 9:26 reads, "When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple". Paul and the disciples were well acquainted with "fear and trembling" and how it thrust one upon the mercy and power of the Lord.

Thus, we have this same sense of "fear and trembling" because God, by His precious Spirit is at work in us. We bear the name of Christ and all that goes with it, including suffering if need be. Further, the consequences in the lives and welfare of others hang in the balance of our own attitude. Will we be humbly obedient and pliable to the work of God in us?