

Shining Bright in a Dark World

Philippians 2:12-18

One of my favorite things about living in Manhattan is that you are always about a ten minute drive in any direction from being in the middle of an open field, surrounded by open pasture. Seriously, just pick any major highway outside of town and drive ten minutes and you'll soon be able to find a gravel or dirt road that will take you to some kind of open grassland. Peaceful and quiet. Before we had kids my wife and I would actually do this occasionally on our date nights. We would drive out of the city, find a random road (not personal property), and simply stargaze. It would absolutely take our breath away. Away from the light pollution of the city, the stars shine incredibly bright against the backdrop of complete darkness. They shine with a purity and clarity that is impossible not to notice. You can't help but stand in awe and wonder, marveling at the beauty of it all. To look at the stars in this setting, you can't help but praise God because of his glory and perfection.

In today's passage, the Apostle Paul makes the observation that we live in a warped and crooked generation. A warped and crooked generation is not a criticism on any specific person or group of people, but is simply a designation for a world that is trying to do life without God. It is a broken and oftentimes dark world because of sin. The world was marred by sin in Paul's day, and it is marred by sin even now. This picture of shining as stars in the sky is the same picture Paul uses when describing the kind of people we are to be and the kind of lives we are to live as followers of Jesus Christ in this world marred by sin. Whether it is war, injustice, inflation, or any other host of problems, there are plenty of reasons for us to grumble and argue. To blend into the culture around us. And oftentimes that is what we do, isn't it! On social media, on the news, in our workplaces or classrooms, we fight one another and complain about how bad things are. Far too easily we as Christians get caught up in it. I know I have. Have you?

But God has another purpose in mind for those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us that in obedience to God, we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling *so that*, we would shine like stars in the sky against the backdrop of darkness. As believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are to hold firm the hope held out to us in this Gospel, rejecting the ways of this world, and thus shine like stars in the sky amongst the watching world. This is God's good purpose for us...for his people. Today's passage is going to show us how this is going to happen. How do we shine like stars in the sky? First, the Apostle Paul gives us a command...we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Second, Paul gives us two means for how to do this...forsaking grumbling and arguing and holding firm to the hope of the Gospel. Lastly, Paul gives us the reward we can expect from doing these things...joy. A command, the two means to accomplish that command, and a reward. First, let's look at Paul's command to work out our salvation in verses 12:

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,

Paul begins by encouraging the Philippians. He affirms their past obedience: “as you have always obeyed...” Paul is not rebuking them for disobedience. Rather, he is encouraging them that as they have always obeyed, they are to continue to do so even though he is not physically present with them. What was the temptation when mom and dad left the house as a kid? Disobey, right? Paul says that is not to be the case for the Philippians. And what does he tell them this obedience should look like? That they are to **work out their salvation with fear and trembling**. This is the command Paul gives us today.

What does it mean to work out our salvation? It is important to note before we go any further that what Paul is referring to here is not earning our salvation. Working *out* vs. working *for*. Rather, Paul is referencing a salvation that is growing or maturing. The truths and realities of our saved status permeating every part of who we are. In other words, growing in Christlike character.

Biblical salvation is not just a ticket into heaven, but a daily reality. In calling us to “work out” our salvation here on earth, Paul is encouraging us to mature. To grow up. Paul begins this section of the letter with “therefore”. Everything Paul is telling us is rooted in the passage preceding it. Steve preached on Philippians 2:5-11 a little over a month ago, and I want to go back to this portion of the letter a little later. But this passage, which is commonly known as the Christ Hymn, is where Paul tells us that we are to have the same mind as Christ. That is, humility. To work out our salvation is to grow in the humility of Christ Jesus.

Paul says that we work out our salvation *with fear and trembling*. He gives the reason in verse 13.

13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

Fear and trembling implies a posture of reverence and dependance on God. We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling *because* it is something that ultimately depends on God, not anything we can conjure up on our own. We have to start here. In cooperation with the indwelling Holy Spirit, we put effort into making sure that our character grows into Christlikeness. But *it is God* who puts this desire within us. *It is God* who works in us to accomplish this will through obedient action.

It is almost impossible to grow in something when you are proud and arrogant. If we approach God with a mindset that we are kind of doing ok without Him, we will be stunted in our maturity. But when we understand that we are poor and needy, and that need can only be fulfilled by someone else, namely God our creator, then and only then are we at a place where growth can actually happen. The posture needed for a maturing salvation is fear and trembling. Reverence and dependance. Respect for who God is and an

understanding of our need for Him. We will not shine like stars if we are not reverent before God, and dependent upon Him for our growth.

These verses are encouraging to me for two reasons. 1) maturing in salvation can be a reality for all believers. You. Myself. Can. Mature. What a gift! This truth alone ought to begin to flicker the light within us. 2) God wants to do this work in us! It's his *good purpose* Paul says at the end of verse 13. We don't have to twist God's arm to help us in this. He desires more than we do that we grow in the character of Jesus. This is really encouraging for me and good news for all of us.

But what does this look like practically? Paul does not give us this command and then leave us wondering what it might look like to actually live this out in everyday life. He gives us what we need in verse 14-16. Let's look at these verses to find out the means by which we are to work out our salvation. Verse: 14:

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation."

The first thing Paul tells us to do in working out our salvation is to **reject grumbling and arguing**. This verse harkens back to Deuteronomy 32:5. When the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, Moses, their leader, condemns them by calling them a warped and crooked generation. And why is this? He calls them this because though they had witnessed firsthand God's faithfulness in providing for them as they wandered in the desert for 40 years, they continued to grumble and argue. They missed it! They were no different than the peoples and nation surrounding them! They grumbled and argued with one another, with Moses, and ultimately with God. Thus, God, through the prophet Moses, actually denounces them as his children. Deuteronomy 32:5,

5 They are corrupt and not his children; to their shame they are a warped and crooked generation.

How's that for a verdict? But notice the difference in what Paul says to the Philippians, he calls them to become "children of God without fault." In referencing the disobedience of Israel in the desert, Paul is warning the Philippian church (and us) to not be like them and thus disqualify ourselves as God's children. Rather, we are to pursue blamelessness and purity in our lives, thus affirming our identity as God's children. Grumbling and arguing are stumbling blocks for our growth as followers of Jesus to the watching world.

But purity and blamelessness...that sounds pretty good, right? I mean, who doesn't want to be considered pure and blameless? I sure do! Forgive me for stating the obvious, but grumbling and arguing actually does us no good. But we go there so often, don't we? I know I do. I like to call grumbling and arguing the "**captivity of self-entitlement.**" We grumble and argue because we feel entitled to something. The Israelites felt they deserved better. And so do we. We are selfish. And the more selfish we are, the more miserable we are. It is the major theme of sin in the Bible. The captivity of self-entitlement brings no joy. It contributes absolutely nothing to our maturity in salvation, but only hinders it.

Listen, I have always regretted my moments of grumbling and arguing (which are many). Never once have I looked back at those moments and thought to myself, "yeah, that was worth it." No! On the opposite side, By God's grace, the moments that I have chosen humility and servanthood are moments in my life I have never regretted. I have never regretted moments when I've chosen to think less about myself and more about the good of others for the glory of God. You see, God is inviting us into a better way as children. It is a way that leads to life! *Grumbling and arguing does nothing but turn off the light of the church in the world.* It is the opposite of shining like stars.

But what are we to do instead? If grumbling and arguing are off the table, what alternative do we have? Paul gives us the answer in verse 16. Paul tells us that we don't simply passively

reject grumbling and arguing. Rather, we are also to actively hold firm the word of life. Paul says at the end of 15 and beginning of 16:

15 Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life.

Paul tells us that we are to **hold firmly to the word of life (the Gospel)**. The word of life here is simply the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Do you remember back in chapter two where Paul talks about the humility of Christ? I referenced this passage earlier, but here I want to read it for us:

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*6 Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

*7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

This is what we hold on to. *This* is our alternative to grumbling and arguing. The humility of Christ. We hold on to this Gospel resolutely. Why? Because the world is warped and crooked, and the light of the Gospel is its only hope.

The warped and crooked generation around us is going to do everything it can to strip away our hope. The world is going to do everything in its power to give us a reason to grumble. To invite is un. To argue. To complain. The bait is there, isn't it? Do you feel it?

What does Paul ask us to do here? Hold firm the word of life. Jesus, your savior. Everything he taught. Everything he did. Everything he stood for. His compassion, his humility, his sacrificial love. Hold on to that! This is the only way we are going to shine like stars! We aren't going to get there by grumbling. Not by arguing. Only by believing and living the Gospel.

So my question for you today is this: **What are you holding firm to?** Is it the gospel? Or is it something else? What entitlements are holding you captive? Take a spiritual audit of your life. What are you holding firm to as the source of your hope and joy? It can be anything. We all have it. Social status or image management? A political ideology? Money? Reputation? These are all things that cause fights and quarrels aren't they? Either within our own souls or with others.

Whatever it is, be honest with God about that and bring it to him with humility and a heart to repent. Remember, it is God's good pleasure to see you grow in your salvation. Let go and surrender whatever it is that you are holding on to for hope and strength and hold firm the hope held out to you in the Gospel. Hold on to Jesus.

In verses 16-17, Paul gives us yet another reason for us to do these things:

And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. ¹⁷ 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.

Here we see Paul expressing his deep desire and longing that the Philippians would remain faithful to this Gospel until the very end.. The boasting he was eager for was not self-centered, but rather for the glory of God. In verse 16, Paul is essentially saying this, "My ministry to you Philippians (everything I've done for you) is validated by you doing this very thing. Working out your salvation. Holding on to the Gospel."

Paul's words in verse 17 express his willingness to do anything and everything to see that the Philippians remained faithful. He was willing to pour out his life, figuratively as well as literally in the form of his own martyrdom in the hopes that the Philippian church would be built up. We may wonder, how is it that Paul could say such things? Because of this truth:

The Joy in Working Out Our Salvation Is Worth It. The joy we will experience when we take Paul's words to heart will make it all worth it. Paul was able to rejoice and be glad because he ultimately knew what mattered most in life: knowing Christ and making Him known. All things considered, his present circumstances were less than ideal. He had every reason to grumble. Paul felt the consequences of a warped and crooked generation on a daily basis. Yet he was able to hold onto the reality that it was all going to be worth it. Even if it meant death for Paul, he rejoiced in pouring out his own life for the sake of others, *for that is exactly what Jesus did for him.*

Working out our salvation for the sake of shining like stars in the sky is worth it. It is worth every sacrifice, every suffering, every strange look. Because Jesus is worth it. Jesus found joy in this in enduring the cross. The apostle Paul did as well in his suffering. And in verse 18, Paul is encouraging the Philippians *as well as us* to take great joy in this. He says:

¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

Paul, writing from a prison cell, not knowing if he will ever see the Philippians again, wrote with joy in the hope that the Philippians would continue in their obedience to grow up in their salvation. He is essentially saying, "Don't feel sorry for me! I've found the prize! The joy of the Lord is mine and no one can take it from me! Join me in this joy! Shining like a star is so much better!"

Read Betsie account.

Betsie Ten Boom is a person who had worked out her salvation with fear and trembling. She got it. She had every reason to grumble, didn't she? Yet, in obedience to God, she held on to the hope of Christ Jesus her savior. And what was the result? She was a star, shining bright in the darkness of her barracks. And her fellow prisoners could not help but notice and be changed. What is more amazing is that in the midst of this horrible suffering, she experienced the fruit of joy. Jesus was worth it.

This kind of life is on the table for us today. We can grow. God wants it for us. He will put that in us to want it and to do it. It's His good pleasure. Let us work out our salvation so that we may shine like stars. So that we may experience His joy, no matter what the circumstances. Let us pray.