



Steadfast Bible Fellowship

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“A Light to the World,” Philippians 2:12-30

The profound doctrinal truths that Paul reviewed in 2:5-11 were intended to have a transformational effect on the Philippians. It was to produce a transformation in how they lived their lives individually and as the living, corporate body of the church at Philippi.

The Sanctification of the Philippian Believers, 2:12-13

Paul addresses the believers as “my beloved,” (“my dear friends”), indicating a family love and care as members of God’s family. This expression no doubt reminded them of the experiences they had shared when Paul had planted the church (see Acts 16:19-40): When Paul was with them, they followed his instructions willingly. He asked them to do the same thing in response to his letter.

He instructed them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” How should we understand this command? A reminder that the term “salvation” (*soterian*) has three dimensions—justification, sanctification and glorification. It is obviously sanctification that is Paul’s focus here.

“Work out” here is in the middle voice, which involves a constant process of self-initiated activity. “Fear and trembling” communicate the virtues of humility and dependence, a major theme of chapter 2.

V. 13 begins with “for,” which could be translated, “because.” God is at work—both in our wills and in our actions—“to will and to work for His good pleasure.”

The “Good Pleasure” of God Illustrated, 2:14-18

Vv. 14-16: The verbs of this section are in the present continuous tense, meaning they are to be done continually. The testimony of the Philippians to their community meant there needed to be no “grumbling or disputing” among the believers at Philippi: Complaining and arguing among themselves sent the wrong message. The purpose of Paul’s admonition was that they be “blameless and innocent” (above reproach and pure), i.e., “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.”

How are believers, as God’s children, to be “without blemish?” Paul’s answer is a metaphor, “as lights [“stars”] in the world.” Believers are lights as they “hold out” or “hold fast” to “the word of life,” an obvious reference to the Gospel. [This exhortation reminds one of Jesus’ metaphor that His followers are the “light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).] Paul added an additional motivation for them to consider—that “I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.” This was not a reflection of selfish ambition, but an Apostle dedicated to promoting the glory of God in all that He did.

vv. 17-18: Paul described the relationship between his suffering and imprisonment and the Philippians' sacrifice and worship by using an Old Testament simile—a “drink offering” poured upon the burnt offering in Exodus 29:38-41; Leviticus 23:12-13; Numbers 15:1-10. What the Philippians had done in sacrifice and service to God in helping Paul was an act of worship and Paul's suffering was a drink-offering poured out over it. That truth was a source of joy and gladness for Paul.

Timothy and Epaphroditus: Worthy Models, 2:19-30

Paul offers Timothy and Epaphroditus as models of 2:12-18. He planned to send Timothy to the Philippian church. In a world of selfish, self-elevating leaders, Timothy was unique to Paul (“no one like him”); and he was a man of “proven worth.” He had been tested and was proven to be above reproach. He also planned to send Epaphroditus to the Philippian church. Note the five-fold description of him.

Vv. 27-30 reflect the heart of Paul as a pastor. He was concerned about Epaphroditus but also how the Philippian church would respond hearing of his illness and its effect on Paul.

Questions:

1. Are you “working out your salvation with fear and trembling?” Do you understand clearly the difference between justification and sanctification in your life?
2. Do you also understand the importance of v. 13—that God is at work in your life? Both v. 12 and v. 13 are central to the process of sanctification.
3. In what ways are you a “light to the world” for Jesus? What does that mean?
4. Paul offered Timothy and Epaphroditus as models for the Philippians? How important are godly models to you? Who are the models in your life? How important is it for our children to have godly role models?

—Dr. Jim Eckman