A Study of the Book of Philippians

An Eye on the Goal (Philippians 2:12-18)

“It is one thing to know that God requires repentance, it is quite another matter to experimentally mourn and groan over our vileness. It is one thing to believe that Christ is the only Savior for sinners, it is quite another matter to really trust Him from the heart. It is one thing to believe that Christ is the sum of all excellency, it is quite another matter to LOVE HIM above all others. It is one thing to believe that God is the great and holy One, it is quite another matter to truly reverence and fear Him.”

~ A. W. Pink

I. Overview

The command of 1:27, “to conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel,” stands as the rubric for this entire section. After Paul illustrates the ultimate example of Jesus walking in humble obedience before the Lord, the apostle now returns to the Philippian believers. They are called to live as God’s blameless children.

II. The Call to Be Obedient (2:12-18)

vv. 12-13 - Just as the Son was obedient (v. 8), Paul commands the Philippians to walk in obedience. Rather than a heavy-handed order, Paul couches this imperative with terms that convey an affectionate appeal (see 1 Cor 10:14; 15:58; 2 Col 7:1; 12:19; Phil 3:1).

Who exactly is the object of their obedience? It would seem that Paul is referring not only to the Lord, but also to apostolic authority and teaching (see Rom 1:5; 2 Col 10:5,6; 2 Thess 1:8).

“work out your salvation” - Two leading explanations for this exhortation are given:

• *Salvation is sociological rather than theological.* Paul is referring to the spiritual health and well-being of the entire community. Support for this position includes the following: (1) “salvation” can refer to well being and health (see Acts 4:9); (2) the wider context is an address to the entire church; (3) their personal salvation is the act of God; (4) the “you” is plural indicating the corporate notion surrounding the edict; and (5) “fear and trembling” speaks of attitudes toward fellow human beings (e.g., humility - 2 Cor 7:15).

• *Salvation is theological.* This imperative is urging “the Philippians to show forth the graces of Christ in their lives, to make their eternal salvation fruitful in the here and now as they fulfill their responsibilities to one another as well as to non-Christians” (O’Brien, *Philippians*, 280). Support for this position includes the following: (1) “salvation” usually refers to personal, eternal salvation in the book of Philippians; (2) the plurality of “you” simply indicates that the entire church should be involved; (3) Paul’s concern is a continuation of what God has already done (see 2 Peter 1:10-11); (4) “fear and trembling” denotes an awe and reverence for God.

“fear and trembling” - Paul is the only New Testament writer to utilize this phrase (see 1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 7:15; Eph 6:5). Rather than a fear of humans, the phrase is used to convey
an attitude of reverence and awe in the presence of God. Their reverence in living out their faith is because they understand the Lord Almighty is working in and through them.

What implications can we draw from Paul’s statement that it is the Lord who “brings forth in you both the desire and effort”?

The participle rendered “for the sake of” indicates that the object to which one is aiming (see A. T. Robertson, *Grammar*, 632). In other words, their completed salvation is to fulfill God’s pleasure (see Eph 1).

vv. 14-16 - Returning to the topic of unity, Paul calls for the absence of grumbling and quarreling. Several commentators do not see any correlation between these descriptors and the phrase used of the Israelites in the wilderness (e.g., Exod 15-17; Num 14-17). Instead, these scholars argue that Paul is calling for harmony and good will within the Philippian community (e.g., see Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 100-101). While the first part of chapter 2 does address unity, the broader context focuses on living out one’s faith before the Lord. One could argue that failure to walk in harmony with the saints is ultimately grumbling and arguing against the Lord. As in Exodus 17, to grumble against God’s appointed leader Moses was a direct affront to God.

Paul provides two reasons why there needs to be harmony within the church and ultimately in their relationship with the Lord:

- **They will be found blameless and pure (v. 15).** While believers are redeemed out of this evil world (Gal 1:4), they are to be in the world (Jn 17:18). As noted by one commentator, “in the midst of the world is our proper place as the Lord’s people. For it is only there that true Christian witness can be borne and influence for Christ effectively exerted” (R. P. Martin, *Philippians*, 116).

  “shine as lights” - Followers of Jesus are called to shine forth God’s truth and goodness in a morally corrupt and dark world (see Jn 12:36; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5).

- **They will exonerate their spiritual leader, Paul (v. 16).** Their faithfulness would provide a reason for Paul to be proud when he accounts for his ministry on the day of Christ (see 2 Cor 5:10).

“run in vain” - The term for “run” is used frequently by the apostle Paul to describe his entire ministry. This term is used of athletes in a stadium running toward the finish line (e.g., 1 Cor 9:24, 26; Gal 2:2).

“labor in vain” - The term for “labor” speaks of physical tiredness due to work, exertion, or heat.
Both terms speak of the importance of stewardship and a desire for God’s commendation for an effective ministry (see 1 Cor 3:10-15).

vv. 17-18 - “poured out like a drink offering” - While some scholars believe this imagery stems from a pagan practice, it is more probable that Paul is referring to the libation of wine or olive oil that was poured out over or beside the burnt offering (Num 15:3-10). Such a gesture completed the sacrifice. One scholar writes, “If one thing remains to make that offering (i.e., the life of the Philippian church) perfectly acceptable, Paul is willing that the sacrifice of his own life should be that one thing” (F. F. Bruce, Philippians, 63).

Whatever the outcome, Paul states “there is cause for rejoicing, for it will be to the honor of God for the welfare of the church and in the interest of Christ's cause on earth” (J. J. Muller, Philippians, 96).

Do not miss the repetition of “joy” and “togetherness”. The opportunity they have collectively to serve the Lord should result in great rejoicing.

III. Intersect

A. The victorious Christian life takes time and effort. The Gospel was never meant to serve simply as “fire insurance”!
   Ephesians 6:10-20 -

B. The victorious Christian life is never meant to be lived in isolation. The Gospel was meant for community.
   Galatians 6:2 -

C. The victorious Christian life recognizes one's dependence upon the Lord. The Gospel only demonstrates our need for divine assistance.
   Romans 8:26-30 -
For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Wayne Grudem raises the following important questions related to the discussion of salvation and eternal security. He writes, “Do you have assurance that you are truly born again? What evidence do you see in your own life to give you that assurance? Have you seen a pattern of growth in your Christian life over time? Are you trusting in your own power to keep on believing in Christ, or in God’s power to keep your faith active and alive?” (Systematic Theology, 806).

Spend some time interacting with Grudem’s questions. In so doing, be sure to read 1 John 5:13.

“There is a kind of cavalier attitude toward our security today. There is little trembling. Little vigilance and earnestness and caution and watchfulness over our souls. There is a kind of casual, slack, careless attitude toward the possibility that we might make shipwreck of our faith and fail to lay hold on eternal life. We have the notion that security is a kind of mechanical, automatic thing. We prayed once to receive Jesus. We are safe and there is no place for “working out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).” ~ John Piper