



WEEK ONE: Philippians 2:12-16a

Working Out Our Salvation Together: A Brief Introduction

Our theme for 2026 is taken from Philippians 2:12b, “Dear friends... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” There are two primary aspects that we hope to emphasise over the course of the year. The first is the sense of continuity. We hope to strengthen and develop a number of good things that have begun and hope that this is your experience in your Life Group this year. The second is the corporate aspect of this work. It is something we do together. We hope to continue to foster our sense of community as we engage in our mission and purpose as a community of faith: to see lives changed by Jesus.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): Philippians 2:12-16a; 2:1-11; Exodus 20:18-20; 19:4-6

Over the next two weeks we are going to dive deeply into Paul's admonition to the Philippian believers found in 2:12-16a. This week we focused on the first two verses. “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, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”

Let's begin with Paul's designation of the Philippians as his “dear friends”. Paul often expresses deep affection for those he is writing to, but the believers at Philippi appear to have had a special place in the apostle's heart. Part of this appears to have been related to their understanding of and commitment to Paul's ministry from the very beginning. According to Luke's account in Acts 17 the first convert in Philippi was a prominent business woman named Lydia. After she and her household are baptised she urged Paul and his companions to stay in her home and, Luke says, “she persuaded us.” At first glance this may not seem like much of a report but the wider context suggest it is, in fact a really big deal. Paul was extremely careful about who he allowed to support his ministry. In antiquity, finding a patron always came with strings attached. Paul was insistent that the gospel remain free from these social obligations. For example, Paul didn't allow the Corinthians to support him. Lydia and the Philippian church were some of the few who appear to have really understood Paul's calling and to have shared his commitment to it.

This understanding of their dear friendship modifies Paul's use of authority. While he is commanding them, he does so as a friend, not so much as an apostle. And the Philippians “obey” him like friends; going above and beyond in their application of Paul's teaching, direction, and correction – even when Paul is absent they go above and beyond.

It is this group of dear friends to whom Paul says, “continue to work out your salvation”. There are a few things to note about this command. First, the verb “to work” has a focus on the completion or accomplishment of the task and Paul has a very deep interest in the completion of their salvation (see Philippians 1:6, 10, 25, 28). Salvation for Paul has an

‘already-but-not-yet’ aspect. There are aspects of what Jesus has done that have already been accomplished. At the same time, there is need for perseverance since there are aspects of our salvation that are yet to be perfected.

Second, this command is to all of the Philippians. The pronoun “you” is plural. This is important because it shapes our understanding of the ‘salvation’ Paul is talking about. The very first word in verse 12, ‘therefore’, points us back to what he has just said about Jesus. In a section that many scholars believe was an early hymn Paul has reflected on the example of Jesus who, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage.” This profound demonstration of humility and commitment to God’s purposes is presented as a model and paradigm for the Philippians to follow, “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...” (v. 5).

At the risk of oversimplifying the text, Paul seems to want the Philippians to continue to work out the relational aspects of their salvation. This is borne out by the rest of the letter. Using his own example, that of Timothy and Epaphroditus, and that of Christ, the apostle urges them to greater love for each other, climaxing in his admonition to Euodia and Syntyche to “be of the same mind”. These two women, who we assume are leaders in the church, are not getting along and Paul wants to address this before it ruptures the community of faith.

The reason Paul wants them to get along, however, is important to understand. We have a clue in his use of “fear and trembling”. This is a phrase Paul uses elsewhere to describe a humble and receptive approach to others (see 1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:15). However, it also has an Old Testament antecedent in Exodus 20:18-20 where the people of Israel, in response to the overwhelming theophany at Mount Sinai, stay at a distance and trembled with fear. Moses tells them not to be afraid for the LORD has appeared, not to frighten them, but to inspire them so that they might “fear” him and not sin. This “fear” is not the fright they had at the foot of the mountain, but the deep respect of the LORD that invokes trust and obedience.

Paul’s use of the Christ-hymn ended with a similar overwhelming vision – the exaltation of Jesus that should encourage them to trust and obey Paul’s command to live like Jesus did. In the next couple of verses Paul seems to have Israel in the wilderness in mind which makes it likely that this use of fear and trembling alludes to Sinai.

There is, however, one more critical piece to Paul’s argument. The Philippians are to work out their salvation for it is God who “works” in them. This is a different Greek term. It is the word from which we get the English term “energy”. It is used twice in verse 13. It is God who energises you to will and to be energetic in order to fulfill his purpose.

To return to Mount Sinai, God’s purpose for his people was not just to be sinless. Their purity wasn’t the end, but was a condition of fulfilling his ultimate purpose for them. In Exodus 19:4-6 we are told a bit about this purpose. Israel was to be the LORD’s ‘royal treasure’; the symbol of his reign and rule (like the crown jewels). They were to be a kingdom of priests; mediating the blessing of God to the nations. They were to be a holy nation; both pure but mostly “set apart” for these purposes.

Their purity in actions was meant to serve this grand purpose. For Paul, “getting along” wasn’t the end game, but a condition for the fulfilment of God’s big purpose in Christ: the restoration and renewal of all things. In other words, the relationships between followers of Jesus points to the overarching purposes of God in the world. “Getting along” is critical because of that purpose!

One of the characteristics of a community of faith “working out their salvation together” is that is a community of “dear friends”. A community that shares a commitment to the mission of God in the world and, because of the importance of that mission, seeks to have the same attitude of mind as Christ Jesus in their relationships!

There are other characteristics of a “working community of faith” and we’ll turn to those next week.

Questions to Ask

1. Salvation for Paul is both ‘already-but-not-yet’. What aspects of our salvation are ‘already’ and what aspects are ‘not yet’?
2. Paul describes the Philippians as “dear friends”; those who shared his commitment to the mission of God and contributed to his ability to fulfill it. Do you have (or have you ever had) any “dear friends” in this sense? Describe the relationship and its contribution to your faith.

3. The example of Jesus is of setting aside legitimate rights for the purposes of God and the good of others. How can we adopt this attitude in our relationships with others?
4. The people of Israel were overwhelmed by the revelation of God at Mount Sinai; a revelation given to cause them to fear/deeply respect the LORD. We have been given an overwhelming vision of the exalted Jesus in the Christ hymn for a similar purpose. What is the basis of your own “fear” of the LORD? In other words, why do you trust and obey him?
5. The quality of our relationship with others in the community of faith points to the purposes of God to restore and renew all things. How can we begin to cultivate “dear friends”?

A Prayer to Pray

Pray Commit yourselves to pray for a deepening commitment to each other and the mission of God in our lives together. Pray for our community of faith, that we might commit to “working out our salvation together”.

A Practice to Try

This week, practice hospitality. Remember that hospitality is more than inviting someone over for lunch (though it can certainly include this!). It is offering a welcome to another. Consider who and how you can welcome others into our community of faith.

Readings to Read This Week

The following passages reflect on God’s plans and purposes and the relationships of his people as they relate to those purposes. As you read, consider the nature of the relationship described and the interplay between the relationship and God’s purposes.

2 Chronicles 30:1-31:1

Psalms 133

John 17:20-26

Acts 2:42-47

Ephesians 4:1-16

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

At the beginning of the ministry year it is worth reflecting on our vision as a community of faith; to see lives changed by Jesus. This is the grand purpose to which our relationships with each other point. vision as a community of faith is to see lives changed by Jesus. In this series we want to consider what that really means – what does a life changed by Jesus look like?

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. Please encourage your group to check their details on GBC Links; to update any details that have changed and to fill in the domains on passions, skills, and interests. This will enable us to invite them to be involved in areas that are more in line with who they are, and, if their details are correct, to invite them!

