

**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.**

The opening words of v. 12, “So then,” translate the single Greek word, “Ὡστε (*hōste*), “for this reason, “therefore,”<sup>1</sup> which connects the previous context (1:27–2:11) to Paul’s concluding exhortation for this specific portion of the letter. The similarities between 1:27 and 2:12 cause these two verses to act as “bookends,” thereby framing 1:27–2:11 as a cohesive unit with vv 12–13 containing Paul’s concluding exhortation.

1:27	2:12
Only <u>conduct yourselves</u> in a manner <u>worthy of the gospel of Messiah</u> ,	So then, my beloved, just as you have <u>always obeyed</u> ,
so that whether <u>I come and see you</u> or <u>remain absent</u> ,	not as in <u>my presence</u> only, but now much more <u>in my absence</u> ,
I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind <u>striving together for the faith of the gospel</u> ;	<u>work out your salvation with fear and trembling</u> ;

Given the similarity of these two verses, causing them to act as “bookends” that frame the text between them as expressing the Apostle’s intended meaning, enables us to properly interpret Paul’s meaning for verses 12–13.

*So then, my beloved* – Paul uses the term “my beloved” (*ἀγαπητοί μου, agapētoi mou*) to emphasize that he knows with certainty that those who made up the core of the Philippian community were, in fact, true believers, for they are first “beloved” by Yeshua, and as a result, share the love of God by living lives of righteousness which includes caring for each other.

*... just as you have always obeyed* – To “love one another” is one of the primary evidences of being “born again” unto a new life in Messiah. The Philippian believers expressed such divinely energized love by sending Epaphroditus to Paul in order to bring those things which he other-

<sup>1</sup> BDAG, “ὥστε,” p. 1107.

wise would lack as a prisoner in a Roman prison. But the very fact that they sent Epaphroditus with provision for Paul indicates that they were acting in unity to provide Paul's needs. As Yeshua Himself teaches us:

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (Jn 13:35)

It is important to note that Paul considers the normal, sanctified life of a true believer in Yeshua as that which is marked by "obedience" to God's revealed will. It is a life that is marked by obedience to God's word, which includes genuine repentance when one disobeys, that is the true mark of a believer in Yeshua.

*... not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence,* – True obedience flows from a "changed heart," that is, the inner working of the Ruach in the believer's life and the yielding of one's will and actions to conform to that which pleases the Lord. Paul's point here is that the Philippians were not "acting like believers" just to please Paul or to receive his personal approval. They were not "putting on the cloak of religion" when Paul was in their midst but returning to their own ways when he was away. Their primary motivation for seeking to help Paul was to fulfill the very words of Yeshua Himself and to honor Him first and foremost. Surely they were grateful for Paul's ministry in bringing them the gospel, but the proof of their genuine obedience was that they remained faithful and obedient to the truth as taught and exemplified by Yeshua Himself.

It is clear that "religion" in and of itself is not enough, for apart from having Yeshua as the primary focus and motivation in one's life, acts of "religious piety" become man-made and self-exalting even if this is denied. The real test of one's religious fervor is how one lives when others aren't watching and even more, how one lives and acts in the context of persecution or societal disfavor.

For Paul, the Philippian believers had demonstrated the reality of their commitment to Yeshua as a life of faith in Him because they continued to strive "much more" for what would please their Savior even when Paul was no longer with them to observe them living out their lives of faith within the believing community. For even though Paul had left their community, they continued to grow even more fervent and with greater intent to live in a way that honored the One they had come to know as their Savior.

But Paul likewise teaches us here that we should never be fully and finally content with the level of sanctification to which we have indi-

vidually attained. Thus, in exhorting the Philippian believers he likewise exhorts us in this inspired text, for we too must ask ourselves what motivates us to act in accordance with God’s commandments and teachings. Is our primary motivation to honor the One Who has given His life for us or is it that we might personally be accepted by others and seen to be worthy in their eyes? True perseverance in the ways of righteousness must be energized and strengthened by a genuine and growing desire to please the One Who has redeemed us. To “have the mind of Messiah” as Paul teaches us in the previous context (2:5) is to live a life a service to Him first and foremost, a life that seeks to honor Him, pointing others to Him and not to oneself.

... *work out your salvation with fear and trembling*; – The word order of the Greek puts the phrase “work out your salvation” last in the clause (μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου τὴν ἑαυτῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε). If we were to translate it woodenly it would be: “with fear and trembling, your own salvation work out.” Thus, we must first ask what Paul means by “fear and trembling” as it relates to our life of faith, that is, our salvation granted to us by God’s grace.

First, the Greek φόβος (*phobos*), when used in the context of “fearing God,” very often carries the sense of “deep reverence,” that is, a growing realization of the utter holiness and majesty of God in contrast to one’s own finite nature as well as the on-going struggle against the sinful flesh. This, by the powerful working of the indwelling Ruach, establishes a growing desire to please God in all aspects of life, enabling the believer to grow in faith and in dependence upon God so that He will enable a growing victory over the flesh as one more and more yields oneself to Him. In this way, our deep reverence for Who God is and what He has accomplished for us in Yeshua, continues to grow and become the controlling factor in our life.

Second, the growing “reverence” for God is coupled with “trembling” (τρόμος, *tromos*), which is obviously used to denote an outward sign of a deep and substantial “reverence” or “fear.” The two words, “fear” (*phobos*) and “trembling” (*tromos*), are used together four times in the Apostolic Scriptures: 1Cor 2:3, 2Cor 7:15, Eph 6:5, Phil. 2:12. When considering these, it is clear that “fear and trembling” were used as a pair of words to denote a proper and acceptable attitude which results in proper actions. This is particularly seen in 2Cor 7:15 in which Paul thanks the Corinthian assembly for receiving Titus whom Paul had sent to minister to them:

His (Titus’) affection abounds all the more toward you, as he remembers the obedience of you all, how you received him

with fear and trembling. (2Cor 7:15)

Thus, it is seen that “fear and trembling” does not necessarily imply on-going trepidation or fear of being rejected. In our text “fear and trembling” would primarily emphasize a life-perspective that constantly increases in one’s appreciation for and awe of God’s infinite sovereignty, holiness, and love.

...*work out your [own] salvation* – As one might expect, there are those who, having isolated this phrase by itself, have taken it to mean that in some measure one’s eternal salvation is earned by one’s good works. But, of course, this would not only be contradictory to the whole scope of the Scriptures but also contrary to what Paul himself teaches.

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, (Rom 4:4–5)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2:8–9)

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, (Tit 3:5)

What is more, those who would think that Paul is teaching eternal salvation to be, in some measure, obtained by one’s own “good works,” apparently have failed to read the next verse, for as we shall see, it is clear that both the desire to “say yes” to God as well as the ability to please Him by one’s life, is attributed to the divine working of God Himself.

What, then, is the import of Paul’s words in this verse? What are we to learn from the divinely inspired admonition to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”? It is first and foremost that God’s eternal salvation for all those He has chosen to be His, is comprised of both “justification” (being declared righteous) and “sanctification” (becoming more and more set apart to God in holiness and thus from sin).

Justification is purely the gift of God’s grace to those who believe, applying to their account the payment for sin paid by Yeshua through His death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession. Because the debt of sin has been paid, God declares those who are “in Messiah” to be eternally righteous in His sight. And since He is the Judge of all the

universe, no one can overturn His legal declaration of “righteous” for all those for whom Yeshua died.

Further, the inevitable fruit of being justified is a progressive sanctification, meaning that the child of God will inevitably make progress in overcoming the sinful nature and living righteously in this world through the power and enablement granted by the indwelling Ruach, as the fruit of Yeshua’s intercession for all who are His.

Thus, when Paul writes in our verse “work out your [own] salvation,” he is describing the process of “sanctification,” i.e., becoming more and more like Yeshua, winning the battle against the sinful nature, and progressing in living out the righteousness which God has granted us in Yeshua. In short, “sanctification” is making progress in becoming who we truly are in the Messiah, Yeshua.

The reason I have added (in brackets) the word “own” to the NASB translation is because the Greek actually would emphasize this. In the phrase itself the Greek word τῆν ἑαυτῶν (*tēn heautōn*), translated “your” in the NASB, actually emphasizes “one’s self” and the fact that the definite article (the word “the”) is added makes this even stronger. The point simply is this: no person can accomplish sanctification, i.e., the fruit or result of genuine salvation, for someone else. Surely we can encourage and help each other to grow in being set apart unto Yeshua, but ultimately growth in sanctification must be the desire and the on-going decision of each redeemed individual.

That ultimate sanctification is the inevitable outcome for all who are truly saved is taught in the Scriptures. Indeed, there are statements of Scripture which describe sanctification as having already been fully accomplished. This indicates that the believers final and full sanctification is as certain as if it has already been accomplished. And yet, as our text emphasizes, this sanctification is something that is likewise the participating work of the believer, empowered by the Ruach Himself.

To the *ekklesia* of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Messiah Yeshua, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, their Lord and ours: (1Cor 1:2)

Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Yeshua Messiah and in the Ruach of our God. (1Cor 6:11)

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, (Eph 5:25–26)

The theological truth we learn from this is that our ultimate and final sanctification is secure and inevitable, but God has ordained that the process of final sanctification will also involve our participation. Thus, both of these axioms are true: “Persevere we must, persevere we will!”

John Murray gives this succinct definition of “sanctification.”

When we speak of sanctification we generally think of it as the process by which the believer is gradually transformed in heart, mind, will, and conduct, and conformed more and more to the will of God and to the image of Christ, until at death the disembodied spirit is made perfect in holiness, and at the resurrection his body likewise will be conformed to the likeness of the body of Christ’s glory. It is biblical to apply the term “sanctification” to this process of transformation and conformation.<sup>1</sup>

*...for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.* – Here Paul brings us back to his opening statement in 1:6.

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until [with a view to] the day of Messiah Yeshua. (Phil 1:6)

This truth is taught throughout the Scriptures, that God is the creator, both of the physical world as well as the spiritual reality of the elect who are drawn to faith in Yeshua, granted the gift of faith and enabled by the hand of God to overcome the sinful flesh and to be a living trophy of God’s omnipotent power and love.

...even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us for adoption to Himself as sons through Yeshua Messiah, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which He has blessed us in the Beloved. (Eph 1:4–6)

For we are His workmanship, created in Messiah Yeshua for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Eph 2:10)

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1 John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols (Banner of Truth, 1977), 2.277.

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:18)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; (Eph 2:8)

In our verse, Paul begins where one must begin, if describing one’s choice to receive Yeshua as one’s Savior from sin and as one’s Redeemer for life eternal. For he makes it clear that “*both to will and to work*” are the result of God working within the one who saved. Here is how Calvin explains the phrase “it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work.”

There are, in any action, two principal departments — the inclination, and the power to carry it into effect. Both of these he ascribes wholly to God; what more remains to us as a ground of glorying? Nor is there any reason to doubt that this division has the same force as if Paul had expressed the whole in a single word; for the inclination is the ground-work; the accomplishment of it is the summit of the building brought to a completion.<sup>1</sup>

The mystery, of course, is that God, in His infinite wisdom and omnipotent power, decreed that by His sovereign will He would bring to Himself a host of people that no one can number, from ever nation, tribe, people, and language group (Rev 7:9). And in the certainty of the Almighty’s plan and purpose, He enabled all whom He would redeem to accept Him through the message of the gospel. Yet, as Calvin has noted, such ability to accept His gift of salvation gives no one a platform for pride, for even this ability is a gift from God as our text plainly teaches. It is God Who is at work within the elect, drawing each one to Himself through drawing them to Him and granting them the gift of faith. In all of this, the elect are not passive but active through God’s grace. As Murray writes:

...no text sets forth more succinctly and clearly the relation of God’s working to our working. God’s working in us is not suspended because we work, nor our working suspended because God works. Neither is the relation strictly one of co-operation as if God did his part and we did ours so that the

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1 Calvin, *Philippians*, p. 65.

conjunction or coordination of both produced the required result. God works in us a we also work. But the relation is that *because* God works we work. All working out of salvation on our part is the effect of God's working in us, not the willing to the exclusion of the doing and not the doing to exclusion of the willing, but both the willing and the doing. And this working of God is directed to the end [the goal] of enabling us to will and to do that which is pleasing to him.<sup>1</sup>

And all of this is to fulfill "His good pleasure!" Consider the love of God and how it transcends our ability to fathom or explain. For He, being in need of nothing, put His love upon those who would, apart from His work of love, deny Him and live a self-centered existence. And He did this "for His good pleasure." This defines the love of God, that He would eternally rejoice over the saving of sinners, for it is a love that is entirely placed upon helpless beings who, when so loved, will forever be in eternal fellowship with Him.

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1 Murray, John, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 148-49.