

## **Work Out Your Own Salvation with Fear and Trembling**

**by Tony Warren**

One of the questions that come up quite often in Reformed Christian debates is, "*if we are indeed saved by Grace, then what does Philippians mean when it says to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling?*" This because there are those who attempt to use this verse to prove that our salvation is both by God's grace and our own efforts. However, this idea of working to attain our own salvation is not only an obvious contradiction to the doctrines of the Bible, but also to the very Biblical definition of God's grace.

### **2nd Timothy 1:9**

- "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,"

We were called and saved not in God having regard for our own works, but in His election and grace that was ordained before the world began. The charge by Paul to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling was an exhortation to the church at Philippi to labor in obedience to the Word as the fruitful evidence (*not reason*) that they truly have salvation. In other words, it was a call of full confirmation to make their calling and election sure. The Greek word translated work is [*katergazomai*], which means to work to the fullest or to completion. Such work can only be brought about in Christ Jesus. God works in every regenerated soul to give us not only the will but the power to do what needs to be done. We can no more work for our own salvation, than we can raise ourselves up after we are dead and in the grave. Note carefully how this passage is so often taken "out of context" and the following verse completely ignored. When we read this "in context" we see that far from this passage being a semi-works proof text, it is just the opposite.

### **Philippians 2:12-13**

- "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

- For it is God which worketh in you **both to will and to do** of his good pleasure."

Now we see the truth. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling "because" it is God that is working in you "both" to will and to do of his good pleasure. Our fear and trembling is before the magnificent work of the Lord in us, not of fear of punishment of our own inferior labors. This is the reverential fear and trembling that "all" the prophets of old have shown before the Lord in the knowledge that they can do nothing of themselves, they (*and we*) are all upheld by the glorious power of God. When the apostle Paul told them in verse 12 that in his absence they should work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, he also clearly told them in Verse 13 just how they would accomplish that, and why it should be with trembling and fear. He says "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and do of his good pleasure." That Greek word translated do [*energeo*] is the exact same word translated worketh. The word clearly means that God is the active power within you so that you will work effectually. Thus when verse 12 says they will work (to the fullest), verse 13 lets us know explicitly that this effectual working unto salvation is by His actively moving us to do. Again, unambiguously declaring that it is God in us, and not we of ourselves working out our salvation--which is why we fear and tremble. That is what is meant by the rule of never forgetting the context. Which is that it is God working in us not only to do (*move us to work*) but also in us that our will (*not free will, God's will*) is to work. This is the part that many Theologians "choose" to ignore about the verse. That it's all about God's grace in us working us unto salvation, and not of our salvation being by our own works. This idea is a misunderstanding of the passage, and thoroughly contradicts God's Biblical narrative that our own works unto salvation cannot be grace. Salvation by our own works create a debt requiring payment, while salvation by grace is a gift of the "unmerited" favor of God. Man cannot be saved by both his own works and by God's grace. It's a contradiction in terms.

### **Romans 11:6**

- "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

When we look at the whole of Scripture, we see that the apostle Paul is exhorting the saints at Philippi that as they have listened to and obeyed his teaching of the Word when he was present with them, so they should now listen and be obedient to the Word when he is no longer there, and not be slothful but fear and tremble before the glorious work of God in them. In other words, Paul's going away and they are on their own (*so to speak*) with the Word of God. They must now work without the leadership of Paul, and they should not be slack, but be as earnest while he is away as they are when he is there.

In agreement with this is Paul's encouragement to them to do it with fear and trembling. In other words, they are not to be puffed up, but bear witness to the Scriptures and continue to obey them in the fear of God. Fear and trembling is not just incidental language. The difference between the saved and the unsaved is that the unsaved have no real fear of God. Therefore they won't bear witness to God's Word nor obey what is written in His Holy Book. That includes many professing Christians. You can quote them God's Word "word for word" and they'll retort that "*that was just your interpretation*" as if you were quoting your own words. The reason is, their conscience is seared that they have no fear and trembling before God's Word as true believers do. All throughout Scripture when you read of God's manifestations to His Prophets of Old, all shook with fear and trembling before God. They all had that earnest desire to do the will of God in reverential fear that is so rare these days. Today the arrogant and high minded Christians are busy attempting to make God a partner in their crimes or lawlessness. They look

at God a s super buddy who just goes along with them to wink at their sin. This is what having no fear of God delineates. A lack of real regard, respect or veneration. Every time man denies God's Word of truth, he in effect makes God a liar. By contrast, God says the evidence of a truly saved person is that they will keep (*as opposed to discard*) His Word. They cherish His Word as those who fear God and have a Holy reverence for His precepts. When Paul says, "with fear and trembling," it is this Godly fear that he is exhorting the disciples to work in, that their salvation may ultimately serve the purpose for which it was given them. In doing this, they assure or reveal evidence of their calling and election.

#### **Psalms 34:9**

- "O fear the LORD, ye his saints: for there is no want to them that fear him."

#### **Psalms 61:5**

- "For thou, O God, hast heard my vows: thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name."

#### **Psalms 103:17**

- "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children;

God contrasts this Godly fear of the elect with the wicked who have no fear of God and so transgress without care of offending God. With a seared conscience (1st Timothy 4:2), it doesn't bother them anymore to contradict God because they have become numb, so use to having no feeling there. The Bible uses the word seared, which is like having scar tissue on your body wherein if you touch that particular spot you may not feel it anymore. That may be a bad analogy, but you get my point. It is when you have the conscience wiped out so that it doesn't bother you anymore to deny or twist or reject God's Word. That is when there is no fear of God.

#### **Psalms 36:1**

- "..The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes."

#### **Psalms 55:19**

- "God shall hear, and afflict them, even he that abideth of old. Selah. Because they have no changes, therefore they fear not God. "

#### **Romans 3:16-18**

- "Destruction and misery are in their ways:
- And the way of peace have they not known:
- There is no fear of God before their eyes."

That is the fear and trembling that Paul exhorts the Philippians to have that they will reverence God and obey be obedient to His Word when the apostle is absent. The fear that God says the unsaved do not possess.

Paul's presence didn't bring them salvation and his leaving won't save them, they are saved by the Spirit in the hearing of the Word of God. The apostle declares they are to be a workman unto that salvation. In other words, he's saying the same thing Christ said in that we shouldn't

be slothful because a tree is known by its fruits. They should study and rightly divide or correctly distribute the Word (2 Timothy 2:15). Unlike so many pastors today who would likely tell them, "*you spoke the sinners prayer and so you are saved.*" That's not what the apostle tells them. He instructs them that as they obeyed the Word from Him as God's witness among them, so when he is gone they are to work out their own salvation (*in the Word*) in fear and trembling. It's not as if their obedience were a matter to be done only in his presence, but more earnestness in his absence showing their allegiance is to the Lord. He is encouraging them to study as workman, that they can correctly divide the Word of truth. God's Word cannot be divided seven different ways by seven different people, there is only "*the right or correct way*" to measure it out. Our salvation comes from the Word and our work in the Word comes from God. As it is written, faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. In Him only is how we can labor in our trial of "obedience" that we know our salvation is assured. For if we are slothful or negligent in this, what assurance do we have of our salvation? While in labor for the fruit of the Spirit, we have made our calling and election sure (2nd Peter 1:8-10). In other words, it is our duty as faithful Servants, not our debt in order to obtain salvation (Romans 11:6).

The scenario in this passage seems pretty clear. Paul was telling them that he would not be back, and that they should carry on in the faith that he had taught them from the Scriptures, just as they did when he was in Philippi. The Philippians from the start had shown a remarkable readiness to learn and a great respect for Paul. He exhorts them to continue to obey the Scriptures when He is gone, as they did when He was present. Work out their own salvation through fear of God and continued obedience because he will not be there to lead.

#### **Psalms 2:11**

- "Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling."

Labor or serve God in reverential fear and trembling, for it is this true devotion and piety that will bring you knowledge of your own salvation, through the Word:

#### **Proverbs 1:7**

- "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction."

This is the same principle. The believers are spiritual and wise and obey, and they gain knowledge because they keep, retain, preserve or cling to the Word of their God. On the other hand the non-christian (*as well as the unsaved who call themselves Christian*) despise this wisdom and they have contempt for authoritative instruction in the Word because they want to go their own way. They will not work or labor in their own salvation with fear and trembling, because they don't have God dwelling within them both to will and to do (Philippians 2:12-13). They will more than likely think it foolish for someone to hold to strictly obeying what God's Word actually says. There is no fear and trembling because there is no spirit of God in them, and thus no humility before God.

#### **Proverbs 15:33**

- "The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom; and before honour is humility."

Pride makes a man look at God's Word saying that "*it is He that chooses who to have mercy on, and it's all by His will rather than the will of man,*" and (incredibly) denies it means that as

that just man's own private interpretation. Man wanting to earn his own salvation is no new thing in scripture. It is honor, honesty and humility "*given of God*" that causes one to receive that truth and surrender to the authority of whatever the Scriptures say. That is how we work our own salvation. Through receiving God's Word in reverential fear.

In closing, let me say that the phrase "*work out your own salvation*" is not a declaration that we are either saved by our own works, or that we have any part in helping Jesus save us by our own works. That would be a contradiction to everything else the Bible says. Rather, it is an exhortation to the church at Philippi (*and indeed ultimately to us all*) to labor in our own salvation in obedience to the Word, in the reverential fear and trembling before the God that is our only deliverer. A call to make sure by our obedience to the Word that we truly have salvation, for as Christ told us, a tree is known by its fruits. Make your calling and election sure by keeping the Word of God in the midst of a perverse and crooked world.

### **Philippians 2:15-16**

- "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world;
- Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain."

Faithful servants, I encourage you to make your calling and election sure that in the day of Christ you be found to not have labored in vain. Not of working out your own salvation for God's favor of paying a debt for your efforts, but salvation by grace, which is "*unmerited*" favor by the "*finished*" work of Christ.

### **Ephesians 2:8-10**

- "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
- Not of works, lest any man should boast.
- For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

It is clearly stated in God's Word that our salvation is not of our own works but a gift by grace of God. Grace, which is unmerited favor, is contrasted over against works so that there is no way we can work ourselves into God's grace. If indeed we could work out our own salvation in the way some suppose, we wouldn't need a Saviour in the first place. We never could, we never will, and those who try will fail and fall in their vain efforts. The faithful let Christ (in them) work out their own salvation, as they fear and trembling before the magnificent, gracious, unmerited salvage of the Lord.

*"By mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the LORD men depart from evil. - Proverbs 16:6"*

Salvation is "*worked out*" in our calling and election as faithful witnesses and stewards of the talents that God has graciously given us, and ordained before the world began that we should use them to His glory. May the Lord who is rich in wisdom, mercy and patience, grant us that we might recognize His work in us, in fear and trembling before His magnificent salvation program.

Amen

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