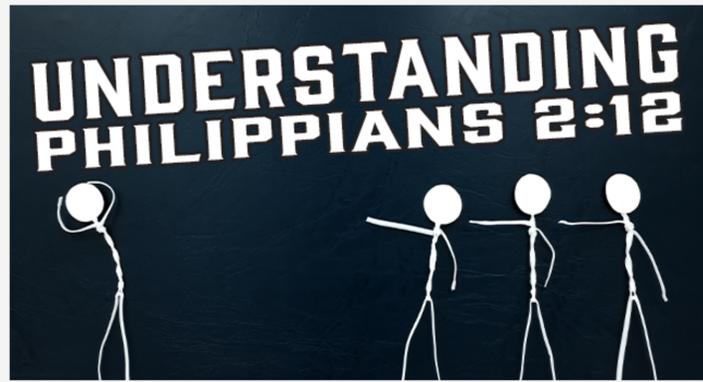


UNDERSTANDING PHILIPPIANS 2:12



by Grant Hawley

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As a missionary, I have the pleasure of interacting with pastors in many different cultures, and learning about what concepts and situations provide challenges for those in ministry. I've been surprised to find that the passage that provides the most challenge to pastors as they teach Free Grace is not James 2, First John 3, or anything in Hebrews, but Philippians 2:12, which reads, "Therefore, my beloved, as you 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."

Here in the United States, there's an easy response to this that is widely circulated. It says, "The passage says, 'work out' not 'work for' your own salvation." The idea is that, having salvation, we should express it through good works. This concept is true, and can be demonstrated with other passages like Romans 6 or Titus 3:8, but is it what Paul is saying in Philippians 2:12?

The Greek word translated "work out" is *katergazomai*, which means, "to bring about a result by doing someth[ing], achieve, accomplish, do."¹ It's hard to see how the concept of expressing the salvation we already have could fit with the meaning of *katergazomai*.

I'd like to suggest another view.

One of the elementary principles of hermeneutics is that words can have a range of meaning, and which of the possible meanings the author intends is determined by the context. The word "salvation" in Philippians 2:12 is the key word we need to understand, and, thankfully, the text of Philippians offers a lot of help here.

The term "salvation" usually does not refer to possession of eternal life in the Bible. Possibly not a single use of the term in the Old Testament has this meaning, and this meaning is relatively uncommon in the New Testament as well. Usually, it is used to refer to salvation from trials, from enemies, from being killed, from sickness, from persecution, from sin's power in our lives, and similar things.

In Philippians 1:19-20, Paul tells us what he has in mind. He writes:

“ For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

In the historical context, Paul is in prison in Rome, and his circumstances are likely to provide situations in which he could be afraid to speak the truth about Jesus Christ boldly. But he has an "earnest expectation and hope" that through the Philippians' "prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" God will save him from succumbing to that fear, and as a result, "Christ will be magnified in [his] body, whether by life or by death."

In 1:27-30, Paul says that the Philippians have the same conflict and refers to the same kind of salvation. He writes:

“ Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.

Salvation in this context is that they would not be terrified by their adversaries as they suffer for Christ's sake.

Note how Paul takes us back to 1:27 in the text of 2:12, when he says, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence..." Compare, "Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come to see you or am absent..." But this is not the only connection between these passages. Obviously, "salvation" occurs in both, but so does a reference to fear. In 1:28, it's "terrified" and in 2:12, it's "fear and trembling." Finally, both 1:27-30 and 2:12-16 are direct calls for the Philippians' obedience.

In addition to these connections, Philippians 1:12–2:18 forms a chiasm, in which these two passages are parallel. The chiasm is laid out as follows:

- “ A. 1:12-26 (Paul's suffering for the Philippians' sake and reasons for rejoicing in the midst of it)**
- B. 1:27-30 (The Philippians obedience in the midst of a fearful situation)**
- C. 2:1-4 (The Philippians called to humble themselves to put others ahead of themselves)**
- C'. 2:5-11 (Jesus Christ humbling Himself to put others ahead of Himself)**
- B'. 2:12-16 (The Philippians obedience in the midst of a fearful situation)**
- A'. 2:17-18 (Paul's suffering for the Philippians' sake and reasons for rejoicing in the midst of it)**

With all of these reasons to see these passages as parallel, we should understand "salvation" in both passages the same way. With this in mind, the meaning of Philippians 2:12b becomes clear. "Work out your own salvation with [i.e. in the midst of]² fear and trembling" should be understood as the Philippians being careful to ensure that as their adversaries apply pressure to them, just like what was happening to Paul, that just like Paul, with all boldness as always, so now also Christ would be magnified in the Philippians' bodies whether by life or by death.

And lest we think this salvation comes from the force of human will, we are told "it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (2:13), just like the salvation Paul was looking for would come "through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."

This is not as easy to explain as the common view, but the common view is easily shown to be inaccurate by those who have the ability to look up the Greek word behind the phrase "work out," and we don't want to misrepresent the verse. But if we take the time to show how Paul uses the term "salvation" in Philippians, it can help to demonstrate how to apply sound hermeneutics, and it has the added benefit of helping encourage believers who may be going through persecution.



¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. *katergazomai*.
²The word translated "with" in the Greek is *meta*, which BDAG defines as "marker of attendant circumstances of someth. that takes place" in the context of "moods, emotions, wishes, feelings, excitement, states of mind or body," which is the case here, i.e. "fear and trembling." The English word with also has this possible meaning, but for clarity in the translation, it is best to use, "in the midst of." *Ibid.*, s.v. *meta*.

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