

Make my joy complete
Psalm 16 and Philippians 2:1-13

Philippi was a prosperous Roman colony in the mountains north of Greece - Macedonia. Many of the Philippians, were retired Roman soldiers who had been given land in the area and who served as a military presence in the frontier city. Philippi was strategically located on the main trade route the Via Egnatia. Gold and silver were mined here. The citizens were Roman citizens, Roman law applied and Latin would have been spoken. There was no synagogue in Philippi as there were only a small number of Jewish believers living there. This may explain why Paul does not quote the Old Testament in his letter to the Philippians. There was a place by the river, where a few women met to pray. In Acts¹ we read that when Paul and his companions had travelled to Philippi they had gathered at the river on the Sabbath. Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth and her household had been baptised and provided hospitality for Paul, Silas and Timothy. Lydia and the followers with her formed the nucleus of the church in Philippi.

They had supported Paul financially, and continued to do so while he was under arrest in Rome.

And so, Paul starts this letter with thanksgiving and prayer: *"I thank my God, every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.... It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me, God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."*

One can only imagine the joy with which Paul wrote this letter, and the joy with which it was received.

The letter by Paul to the Philippians, has been described in the following way:

*"This is Paul's happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious. Before we read a dozen lines, we begin to feel the joy ourselves—the dance of words and the exclamations of delight have a way of getting inside us. ... Paul doesn't tell us that we can be happy, or how to be happy. He simply and unmistakably is happy."*²

This despite Paul's circumstances when he wrote this letter to the believers in Philippi. At that time Paul was under house arrest, awaiting trial and he had been for some two years.³ But as we read this letter we see that being confined could not contain either the sharing of the gospel by Paul, or, his joy.

Under the Roman system, the prisoner had to finance himself – his rent, food, blankets, writing materials and anything else required. Paul was likely chained to a Roman soldier and would have dictated the letter having someone else to write it down.

Last week, Lincoln preached on Philippians 1:21-30. Lincoln pointed out how Paul exhorts us as believers to live a life of service, a life that is not self-centred or self-exalted, but a life worthy of the Gospel of Christ.

¹ [Acts 16:11-15](#)

² From the introduction to Philippians in *The Message* by Eugene Peterson.

³³ [Acts 28:1-31](#). "30 For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. 31 He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!"

Lincon said that in this time where individualism seems to be the major priority we are:

- firstly, to stand firm in the one spirit, having the same disposition, same character, same nature and a common purpose; and
- secondly, we are to contend as one person for the faith of the gospel – each one of us has a role to play, a purpose and a calling in God's plan.

This morning we look at the passage that follows in Philippians, namely the first 13 verses of chapter 2.

Paul continues exhorting those at Philippi to take the focus off themselves, not to look only to their own interests, but to the interests of others and to imitate Christ's humility.

Listen to the powerful writing of Paul: “

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

Joy is bubbling out of this “Epistle of happiness” but Paul says, “make my joy complete.”

Make my joy complete by making sure that you do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but act in a way in which your attitude is the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Paul is teaching that unity comes from being like-minded, having the same love and being one in spirit and purpose. While disunity comes from selfish ambition and vain conceit.

And then we get the beautiful poetic description of the humility of Christ. The poetic, even lyric, character of these verses is apparent, leading many to view them as an early Christian hymn⁴ taken over and perhaps modified by Paul. Whether this is so, or not, the verses express Paul's conviction as he describes Christ's humiliation in verses 6 to 8 and exaltation in verses 9 to 11.

In regard to Christ's humiliation the following:

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,”

Paul is stressing that Jesus is fully God having those qualities that make God specifically God.⁵ Jesus had these qualities, but he did not consider his high position to be something that he could not give up.⁶ He did not have to grasp these, in the sense of hanging on to them. For our sake he was prepared to forego his high position.

⁴ Colossians 3:16. " 16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."

⁵ 2 Corinthians 8:9.

⁶ Footnote on page 1807 of the NIV Study Bible

"... But made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant."⁷ Jesus as servant leader, exemplified by Jesus taking on the role of washing his disciples' feet.

"... Made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant." Jesus emptied himself, not by giving up his deity, but by laying aside his glory and submitting to the humiliation of becoming man. And then Jesus, fully man, humbled himself in absolute obedience even to death on a cross. Jesus died as someone cursed - as crucifixion was the most degrading kind of execution that could be inflicted on a person.

In Galatians: "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*"⁸

And then the poetic hymn goes on to deal with the exaltation of Christ.

*"Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name."*⁹

This is followed by those lines that are very well known, Jesus exalted, so: "... *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.*"¹⁰

Paul has set out Christ's humiliation, but also the exaltation that followed on his absolute obedience.

Make my joy complete. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but act in humility with an attitude the same as that of Jesus Christ. And then Paul goes back to instructing those at Philippi, as he instructs us here and now.

Instruction that is appropriate at all times, but maybe of particular importance at this time as we are living under restrictions in this Covid-19 pandemic. A time when we have been separated from meeting physically.

Paul writes: "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."

To put this in our times: "Therefore, my dear friends as you have always obeyed, not only when you can meet physically together, but now much more when you cannot meet physically together, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

But what does Paul mean by continuing "to work out your salvation". This sounds just the opposite of what Paul stresses so strongly in Romans, Galatians, Ephesians¹¹ and elsewhere. That it is not by our deeds that we are saved but by faith through grace alone.

Is Paul contradicting himself?

⁷ Demonstrated so powerfully in Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Read [John 13 3-17](#).

⁸ Galatians 3:13 and [Hebrews 12:2](#)

⁹ [Ephesians 1:20-21](#).

¹⁰ In Isaiah 45:23: " By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear."

¹¹ [Romans 3:21-28](#); [Galatians 2:16](#); [Ephesians 2:8-9](#)

In Ephesians, he wrote: “8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”

What does Paul mean by saying that we are to continue to work out our salvation? And particularly to do so with fear and trembling. And remember this is a letter to those at Philippi who are commended in the partnership in the gospel from the first day until the time of writing.

I think it's important to note that Paul is not contradicting himself. He's not detracting in any way from the statement that salvation is by grace through faith alone.

William Barclay¹² writes this: “Work out your own salvation. The (Greek) word¹³ he uses for ‘work out’ is one which always has the idea of bringing to completion. It is as if Paul says: “don't stop half-way; go on until the work of salvation is fully achieved in you.” No Christian should be satisfied with anything less than the total benefit of the gospel.”

So Paul's statement that we are to “work out our salvation” must not be seen as a reference to our attempting to earn our salvation by works. Rather, it is an instruction to us to continue with the ongoing process of growing spiritually and developing in maturity.

Paul is underlining the fact that salvation is not to be a gift received once for all, with nothing to be done thereafter. He is urging those at Philippi to be strenuously involved in the ongoing process.

The writer of Hebrews puts it like this: “14 We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.”¹⁴

What does Paul mean when he says that we are to work out our salvation “with fear and trembling”? This is not fear and trembling at the prospect of punishment. It comes from two things:

- our own human helplessness to deal with life in our own strength; and
- and awe and reverence for God.¹⁵

But those at Philippi were reassured because as we read further Paul says his readers are to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, for “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Here Paul uses a different word for “work”¹⁶. Not the word meaning “complete” but the word used of the action of God, effective action of God.

¹² William Barclay in his book “The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians”.

¹³ *Katergazesthai*. “As always Paul chooses his words very carefully, the Greek word he uses for ‘work out’ is *katergazesthai* which always conveys the idea of bringing to completion. Paul is once more encouraging his friends, whatever happens, do not give in! Do not be satisfied with a half-hearted response, keep going until God has worked out fully in you his plan for your life. See:

¹⁴ Hebrews 3:14

¹⁵ William Barclay.

¹⁶ *energein*.

So as we continue on our journey of salvation God is with us. We are not called on to journey on only in our own strength.

But it is important that we understand that we have a part to play as we respond to what has been done for us.

James puts it like this: "22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did."

William Barclay writes that without our cooperation even God is helpless. Every gift has to be received. A doctor might prescribe medicine that will result in a cure, but nothing will happen unless the patient takes that medicine. He writes: "*there can be no salvation without God; but what God offers we must take. It is never God who withholds salvation; we are responsible for depriving ourselves of it.*"

These first 13 verses of Philippians 2 need to be read again and again.

Paul starts by continuing with the theme of joy, asking those at Philippi to make his joy complete. Make his joy complete by considering others rather than themselves and imitating Christ's humility.

He goes on in poetic form to describe Christ's humiliation and then his exaltation.

He concludes these 13 verses by reminding those at Philippi, and us, that we have a major part to play. Our part is one of continuing action in response to what God has already done for us. But we have God helping us, to bring our salvation to completion for His good purpose.

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