**GENERAL APPLICATION AND OBEDIENCE**

***12Therefore, 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, 13******for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose***

 **Philippians 2:12,13 (NIV)**

On the basis of what he has just said about Christ, Paul comes back to the appeal for harmony that began in 1:27. The call to ‘*continue to work out your salvation’* is ‘theme’ sentence for the appeal and is under-girded by three realities (1) Paul’s affection for them and their long term relationship with him (2) their own long-time obedience as far as the gospel is concerned (3) God’s work in them effecting their obedience for His own good pleasure – the same God who exalted Christ, and for whose glory the whole world will pay homage to His Son.

‘*Therefore’* indicates that Paul is about to apply the appeal of 1:27 - 2:5 (by way of 2:6-11) to the believing community in Philippi. Before he comes to the imperative (‘*continue to work out your salvation’*), he will first remind them of his affection for them and their long history of ‘obedience.’ ‘*My dear friends’* is used three times in the letter, a clear sign of the very warm and personal affection Paul holds for this church.

This is further evidenced by the appeal to his and their long-term relationship, expressed in terms of their ‘obedience’ both when he is present and absent from them, ‘*as you have always obeyed*.’ While Paul had at times urged ‘obedience’ to his words (2 Thessalonians 3:15 c.f. 2 Corinthians 8:9; 7:15), it is more likely he is thinking of their obedience to Christ. In his letter to the Romans Paul affirms strongly that faith in Christ is ultimately expressed in obedience to Christ, not so much in the sense of unthinkingly following His *rules* but more in the sense of following His *rule* – of coming totally under His Lordship, of being devoted completely to Him (Romans 1:5 c.f. 15:18). In 2 Corinthians 10:5,6 ‘*every act of disobedience’* stands opposed to ‘*obedience to Christ*.’ Further, Paul has just given in this Philippian letter the reminder of how Christ’s own obedience led Him to the cross and to His present status of Lord of all. If this understanding of ‘obedience’ is correct, Paul is starting by way of reminder that they have always given evidence of their faith by their obedience to Christ.

Before getting to the main point of the passage, (‘*continue to work out your salvation’*), Paul again (from 1:27) mentions the distance between them (‘*not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence’*). He longs to be with them, not only for mutual joy, but also for their ‘progress’ in the faith (1:25). Instead he finds himself away from them at a time when some mending is needed. They have had a long history of obedience to Christ and the gospel, whether Paul was present or absent; now that he cannot be present, and some differences among them have arisen, he urges them to continue in obedience ‘*now much more’* in his absence.

That brings him to the imperative ‘*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling’* (2:12), a text that must not be removed from its context to discover its meaning. In context Paul’s command is ethical. He is not dealing with ‘people getting saved’ or ‘saved people persevering.’ His concern is how ‘saved’ people live out their salvation in the context of the believing community and the world. At issue is their ‘obedience,’ their working or carrying out in their corporate life the salvation that God has graciously given them. Obviously the corporate begins with an individual response. That is assumed. In Paul’s thinking, people are saved one by one (in discontinuity with election in the Old Testament) but (in continuity with the Old Testament) they are saved to become ‘a people for God’s name.’ The concern in this passage is with their being His people in Philippi, as 2:15 makes clear, ‘*so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation.’*

In context ‘*work out your salvation’* means to continue in their obedience to Christ. This is picked up in the next clause: what God empowers in them is to will and do regarding this obedience. Contextually that means they stop whatever squabbling is going on and get on with being ‘God’s *blameless* children’ in pagan Philippi. To ‘*continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling’* is not referring to individual believers but to the salvation that God has wrought in making them a people of God for His name in Philippi. Even though they will have to respond individually, the command has to do with what takes place in their community life as they return to their common cause with regard to the gospel.

Finally, they are to work out their salvation ‘*with fear and trembling’* (2:12). This unusual phrase is taken from the Old Testament where it was primarily used of the dread that pagans experience at the presence of God (Exodus 15:16; Isaiah 19:16) which is then transferred to their dread of His people because of the wonders God performs for them (Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25). Paul’s other uses of the term (e.g. 1 Corinthians 2:3) reflect human vulnerability. What people see in someone who lives ‘*with fear and trembling’* is not self-assurance but defencelessness. This ‘*fear and trembling’* is an attitude believers should have knowing the kind of God they serve. If the whole universe of created beings is to pay homage to Christ (as outlined in 2:9-11), the Philippians need to keep moving forward in their obedience (= working out their salvation) as those who know to stand in awe of the living God. This implies no lack on their part. The God who saved His people is an awesome God. The call is to ‘*work out’* the salvation God has given them with a sense of holy awe and wonder.

Paul often places an imperative within the context of God’s prior action (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5:7; Galatians 4:9). ‘*For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose’* (2:13). The Philippians are to ‘*work out’* their obediencebecause God Himself is ‘at work’ in and among them. The verb ‘works’ in ‘*For it is God who works in you’* means God is empowering them and not that He is doing it all for them. Even though their obedience must be in the context of ‘*fear and trembling*,’ they are reminded that this obedience is ultimately something God effects in and among them.

Not only does God empower the ‘doing’, but also the willing that lies behind the doing. This has everything to do with Paul’s understanding of Christian ethics which begins with a mind transformed by the Spirit and not an outward obedience to a set of rules that regulate conduct. A transformed mind is conformed to the character of God so that behaviour is a reflection of God’s heart and will (Romans 12:1,2). The ‘doing’ of salvation for Paul lies in the ‘willing,’ which means a radical transformation of life by the Spirit. Being ‘converted’ means having one’s life invaded by the Holy Spirit. New behaviour is effected, but more than that, a new desire toward God is created that in itself prompts new behaviour in the first place.

All this is to fulfil ‘*his good purpose’* (2:14). The word translated ‘*good purpose’* was used in 1:15 as the motivation for those among Paul’s friends who preached Christ out of love and ‘*goodwill’* toward Paul. The same meaning could be intended here; God is at work in them both to will and to do what promotes goodwill in the community. Another, and more likely meaning, is that God does this for His people because it pleases Him to do so. Since God is wholly good, His doing what pleases Him is not capricious but wholly good for those He loves. It delights God to delight His people.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

*Paul’s letter to the Philippians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament) by Gordon Fee (William B Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995)

*Philippians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries) by Ralph Martin (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1987)

*The Message of Philippians* (The Bible Speaks Today Series) by Alec Motyer (Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham, England, 1984)

*The Holy Bible (New International Version)* (International Bible Society, Colorado Springs, CO., USA, 1984)

*The Prison Letters* (Paul for Everyone) by Tom Wright (SPCK, London, 2004)

*Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1996)