

Chapter 5: Sanctification

Philippians 2:12–18

Since Philippians 1:27, Paul has been encouraging the Philippian believers to live worthily of their gospel citizenship. He began by exhorting Christians to stand together in unity (Phil. 1:27), but then he defined that unity (Phil. 2:2) not as utter sameness, but as “humility” (Phil. 2:3). Finally, to describe the permanent example of humility, Paul pointed us to Christ, who “humbled himself by becoming obedient” (Phil. 2:8). From unity to humility to obedience, Paul has unfolded a detailed description of what it looks like to live out our gospel citizenship.

Now, in Philippians 2:12–18, he picks up that idea of obedience (“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always *obeyed*...”; Phil. 2:12) to address a lingering question: why should the Philippians believe that they will succeed? At the beginning of this letter in Philippians 1:6, Paul had expressed his utter confidence “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,” but how could he be so confident? The Philippians are in the midst of deep suffering (Phil. 1:29–30), and Paul is not able to be present to encourage them (Phil. 2:12). Without even Paul’s direct assistance, what hope could they possibly have of not only growing, but of persevering all the way to the end? And even if they had Paul’s direct assistance, is it reasonable to expect *anyone* to live up to Paul’s example of rejoicing in the midst of suffering even if the gospel *is* advancing (Phil. 1:12–18)?

It is here that Paul enters into one of his richest meditations on human responsibility, divine grace, and new covenant promises of perseverance for believers in the midst of suffering. If the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 is the chief theological *example* in this letter, then Philippians 2:12–18 provides this letter’s chief theological *exhortation*.

The Command: Grow by Grace in Sanctification! (Phil. 2:12–13)

It is a harsh transition from the majestic heights of the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:6–11 back to the rough, day-to-day struggles of Christian living. Nevertheless, Paul doesn’t allow us to think for a moment that the story of Christ’s sacrificial, obedient humility gives us a fantasy for our imaginative escape from this world. Rather, Christ’s own servanthood provides us a pattern to follow in our own lives.

The grammar of the conjunction “therefore” in Philippians 2:12 helps us understand Paul’s transition as an *application* of the preceding section (the Christ hymn) into a logically concluding *exhortation* that Paul gives in Philippians 2:12–13.¹ Specifically, Paul connects the two passages by acknowledging how the Philippians “always obeyed” (*hupēkousate*), which connects back to the *obedience* of Christ himself from Philippians 2:8 (*hupēkoos*).² Paul uses the word “therefore” to connect Philippians 2:12–18 with the full series of exhortations that began all the way back in Philippians 1:27. The message, then, is very clear: just as Paul rejoices through his suffering to see the gospel

advance (Phil. 1:12–18), and just as Christ willingly obeyed by suffering even to the point of death (Phil. 2:6–11), so also the Philippians should live worthily of the gospel (Phil. 1:27–2:4) by pressing on in faithful, cruciform obedience as the day of Christ Jesus approaches (Phil. 2:12–18).

Paul’s writing in this section is a masterclass on motivation in the way he exhorts them forward through encouragement. To begin, Paul calls the Philippians “my beloved” (Phil. 2:12), a word reflecting his deep affection for the people in this church. Then, Paul praises their history of obedience, “as you have always obeyed, so now” (Phil. 2:12), a phrase that encapsulates the entirety of his partnership with the Philippians (Phil. 1:5), including everything from their prayers (Phil. 2:19) and their financial support (Phil. 4:14–18), as well as even their initial faith in the gospel when Paul, Timothy, and Silas first preached Christ to them a decade earlier (Acts 16:12–40).³

Work out Your Salvation

Therefore, on the basis of the Philippians’ obedience in the past—and ultimately on the basis of Christ’s own model of obedience—Paul urges the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). Paul rejects any kind of fatalistic passivity, but presses the Philippians toward *striving* forward in their salvation. Far from instructing them to “let go and let God,” he prohibits them from sitting back in the kind of waiting where they refuse to obey until sufficiently jolted by the Spirit.⁴ Paul exhorts the Philippians forward in gospel growth—that is, in what theologians call *sanctification*.

Instead of passivity, Paul issues a call-to-arms. *Work out* your salvation with fear and trembling before the Lord! Biblically, the idea of “fear and trembling” doesn’t refer to a sense of terror before the Lord in the way you might feel if someone threatened to harm you; rather, Paul refers to a sense of the sheer weight of the authority and power of God stacked up against your own, broken smallness. This is awe, joy, reverence, dread, urgency, and helplessness all rolled into an overwhelming sense of fear and trembling.⁵ In context, Paul is also appealing to the authority of the Exalted Servant who reigns as *kurios* over the cosmos—who also reigns over *you* personally: the Lord Jesus Christ. Bow the knee to Christ and confess his lordship *by* working out your salvation in fear and trembling before him! Paul leaves no room to avoid Christ’s summons to discipleship here; rather, he pleads with the Philippians to continue working out their salvation, as they have done since the beginning, but he stresses the urgency of this project now, in his absence, more than ever.

The phrase “so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence” (Phil. 2:12) suggests that Paul may have sensed a different degree of obedience when Paul is present with them than when he is absent from their midst.⁶ Paul is worried that, if (he) the cat is away, the mice (they) will play. It doesn’t require passive-aggressive rebellion on the part of the Philippians for them to feel less motivated in Paul’s absence than they might be when they hosted the apostle in their midst. All of us naturally drift toward the mindset of “Out of sight, out of mind.” Still, Paul said something very similar in Philippians 1:27, urging the Philippians to live worthily of their gospel citizenship, “so that whether I come and see you or am absent,” he may hear of their progress in the gospel. Relatedly, we read throughout this letter of Paul’s ongoing anxiety of knowing the Philippians again (Phil. 1:24–26, 2:24), and also of his desire to send Timothy and Epaphroditus on his behalf to inquire into their wellbeing (2:19, 28). Paul longs to hear that the Philippians are growing in spite of his absence.

Paul’s anxiety for the Philippians is instructive, since it recognizes something important about human nature: namely, that we have to pay special attention when we are *absent* from our church

communities. Whether we are traveling on a business trip or a vacation, or whether we have moved our family to another community, or whether we, as young adults, are moving out of the home to go to college or to get our own places—whenever we go outside of our normal circumstances, we are in particularly vulnerable situations. When we are absent from our church communities, we are out of the range of those who know us best and bear the responsibility for exhorting us forward in our faith. Therefore, we must be wary of immediate temptations to do things that we would *never* do if we were surrounded by our spiritual communities. Additionally, we must also watch out for the slower temptation of allowing the interruption of our normal routines to cause us to drift away from seeking Christ in the word, prayer, and worship. Whether we are present or absent in our local church congregations, we must continue working out our salvation with fear and trembling.

God is at Work

We must be careful, however, to avoid a serious mistake as we interpret what Paul writes in Philippians 2:12. That is, we must not think that Paul is falling into the false teaching of the ancient heretic Pelagius (c. 350–418 AD),⁷ who argued that human beings are capable of living their lives, on their own, apart from God’s grace, to the same level of perfect obedience that Christ himself achieved.⁸ While Paul insists that we must not wait for a divine jolt before we move into action, Paul also rejects the false dichotomy of pitting our own effort against God’s grace. *Yes*, we must strive to work out our own salvation, but *no*, we are not doing this work from our own motivation, willpower, or strength.

In fact, Paul gives one of the strongest, clearest statements of the necessity of divine grace in Philippians 2:13 that he offers in any of his writings. To balance out Philippians 2:12, he writes, “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” In other words, the ground and cause of our ability to work out our salvation comes not from ourselves, but entirely from God. Moisés Silva provides four important implications of what Paul writes here that are worth quoting at length:

For all that, our dependence on divine activity for sanctification is nowhere made as explicit as here. To begin with, God’s work is viewed as having a causal relation to our working (*gar*, for); our activity is possible only because of divine grace. Second, the syntax is emphatic: Paul says not merely “God works” (*ho theos energei*) but “the one who works the working is God” (*theos...estin ho energōn...to energein*). Third, the divine influence is said to extend not only to activity but to our very wills—a unique statement, though the idea is implied in other passages....Fourth, the apostle reinforces our dependence on God’s sovereignty with a concluding reference to “his good pleasure”..., a distinctly theological term used to describe divine grace.⁹

God *causes* our work; God *himself* is the working one; God works even by reforming our very *wills*; and God does all this for his *own* good pleasure. Paul rejects fatalistic passivity, but he also refuses to allow us to take credit for any of the work that we end up doing. If we are conformed to the example of Christ in any degree, that sanctification has not come about by our own strength, but from the grace of God.

Since this perspective on the paradoxical unity between human responsibility and divine grace is often called “Calvinism” as a shorthand, John Calvin’s own comments on this passage are also worth quoting at length:

There are, in any action, two principal departments—the inclination, and the power to carry it into effect. Both of these [Paul] 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 groundwork; the accomplishment of it is the summit of the building brought to a completion. He has also expressed much more than if he had said that God is the Author of the beginning and of the end. For in that case sophists would have alleged, by way of cavil, that something between the two was left to men. But as it is, what will they find that is in any degree peculiar to us?¹⁰

We *must* work out our salvation with fear and trembling. And yet, from beginning to end, all the glory goes to God both for giving us our willingness to work out our salvation and for giving any growth that happens. We humans retain full responsibility for our lives, and yet God is glorified as both the architect and the builder of salvation in our lives.

Now, we must differentiate what Paul writes here from what he says about *justification*, where we are counted righteous in Christ through faith. Our justification is passive, so that we receive Christ’s righteousness through faith apart from any works of the law that we contribute whatsoever, as Paul clarifies later in this letter to the Philippians: “...that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8b–9). But here in Philippians 2:12–13, Paul does not speak of our justification, but of our *sanctification*, in which we cooperate with God’s Spirit as we grow in holiness. In justification, God works and we are wholly passive in the process. But in sanctification, we strive *and* God works—or, better, we strive *because* God works. It is not as though we are working on one part of the project, and God on another; rather, God is the one who drives our desires and efforts by his grace, from first to last.

Perhaps no one applied this tension more beautifully as the church father Augustine, who wrote, “Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!”¹¹ Indeed, Augustine exemplifies how to work out these doctrines of human responsibility and divine grace in our lives—that is, in *prayer*. When we falter to find the will or the ability to do as God commands, we can pray that God will shape our desires and give us power to do all that he commands. We must do everything we can to avoid temptations to sin, especially by making thorough use of the means of grace (God’s word, prayer, worship, the sacraments, etc.), but nothing we do can accomplish anything of lasting spiritual value apart from God’s work to give us the desire and the strength to obey him. We are called to work out our salvation in dependence upon the work of God in our lives.

The Secret of the Cruciform Life

Now, don’t miss what Paul just did—Philippians 2:12–13 represents the secret to the cross-shaped life that we have been searching for since the beginning of the letter. In these two verses, Paul takes the glorious example of Christ himself from Philippians 2:5–11 and explains how sinful people like

you and me can “have this mind in you” (Phil. 2:5). On the one hand, our transformation into cross-shaped people living cross-shaped lives that resemble the cross-shaped life of our Savior requires extraordinary effort. We must do everything that we can to work out our salvation in fear and trembling under the lordship of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. No suffering is too harsh, no indignity too demeaning, and no effort too straining. The Lord Jesus commands that we follow his example by taking up our cross and die to ourselves in order to live for him.

But on the other hand, we do not work as those who have no hope. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit, we are sinful, broken people who cannot manufacture one drop of holiness for ourselves, and we must never pursue our sanctification as though we could. Instead, we walk by faith, believing that Jesus will give us grace for every challenge by his Holy Spirit. Every time Jesus puts anxieties in our path, we must walk by faith, trusting that God will work all things out for our good (Rom. 8:28). Every time Jesus puts suffering in our path, we must walk by faith, trusting that God’s Holy Spirit will not allow single moment of heartache to fall to the ground useless, but that he will use every trial to prepare for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4:17). Every time Jesus sovereignly leads us into need, we must walk by faith, trusting that God will supply every one of our needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). We can confidently face any trial or temptation, knowing that we are not alone, but that Jesus is using everything to make us his cross-shaped, cruciform people for our good and for his glory.

Paul knew this secret well, for he faced extensive loss, suffering, and indignity for the cause of Christ. We marvel at his ability to rejoice in his suffering, but we share Paul’s secret: the power of God’s Holy Spirit working in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. We can work out our salvation in fear and trembling, striving to obey and glorify God in everything we do, because God himself enables us to do so. This isn’t an overestimation of human potential, ability, or goodness—this is what it means to walk by faith in the promises of the gospel to conform you to the image of Christ.

The Contrast: A Failure of Sanctification (Phil. 2:14–16a)

The first two verses of this passage, then, function as an exhortation and an encouragement. We see, at once, law and gospel, command and grace, duty and promise. Paul praises their *longstanding* obedience for the sake of urging them toward *continued* obedience, while reminding them that God himself is the one giving them the *desire* and the *ability* for obedience. In this next section (Phil. 2:14–16a), Paul carries on his exhortation by assembling a pastiche of quotations and allusions to the Old Testament to develop and underscore his larger exhortation point dramatically. Here, Paul urges the Philippians to behave differently from old covenant Israel in order to realize the original eschatological goal for God’s people—the goal that old covenant Israel had failed to attain, but that Christ has now achieved *for* and *in* us.¹²

Grumbling and Questioning

First, Paul urges the Philippians to “Do all things without grumbling or questioning.” The word for “grumbling” is the same word used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) to translate the “murmuring” that the Israelites committed against Yahweh and against Moses in the wilderness.¹³ It is a word that communicates something more than complaining, but a

restless, unsatisfied kind of rebellion. Then, the word Paul uses for “questioning” is the same word from which we get our own word “dialogue” (*dialogismōn*), but here, it doesn’t carry the idea of respectful debate that our English word suggests. Rather, like “grumbling,” this word also conveys the idea of something more along the lines of argumentativeness. More specifically, the word suggests “anxious reflection” or “doubt”—the kind of doubt that leads the doubter to raise questions not for the sake of clarity, but to cut down.¹⁴

In their grumbings, the Israelites asked many kinds of these anxious, doubting questions to Moses to challenge his authority (and, worse, *Yahweh’s* authority) directly: “And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’” (Ex. 15:24). Or, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (Ex. 17:3). Or, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num. 12:2). Or, “Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” (Num. 14:3). Or, “You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the LORD?” (Num. 16:3).

Against the backdrop of grumbling, questioning Israel, Paul’s words take a specific dimension. Again and again, Israel challenged the authority of their leaders and of God out of an anxious doubt of the *goodness* of what God was doing. When they entered into places of suffering or hardship (often surrounding the lack of food or water, or the nature of leadership), they did not joyfully submit to the leaders whom *Yahweh* had appointed over them; rather, they grumbled and shredded the leadership of those in responsibility over them with sharp-edged questioning. They were not seeking information, but seeking to indict; not to build up, but to blame; not to ascertain information, but to attack. More than that, they did not walk by faith, working out their salvation with fear and trembling in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit working within them; rather, they grumbled against and questioned both Moses and God.

From this perspective, can we read between the lines to ask whether there was some grumbling and questioning within the Philippian church *against their leaders*? Is it possible that this grumbling against the leadership is part of the reason that Paul respectfully acknowledges the “overseers and deacons” in the greeting of this letter (Phil. 1:1)?¹⁵ Admittedly, we are being speculative to suggest such a thing;¹⁶ however, if this kind of grumbling and questioning of leaders is *not* happening, then at the very least Paul is writing this specifically to *prevent* it from happening.

Blameless, Innocent, and Unblemished

Next, Paul explains the purpose behind and the goal for refraining from the negative activities of grumbling and questioning, which is “that you may be blameless and innocent...” (Phil. 2:15). The word “blameless” (*amemptoi*) has a sizable role in the Old Testament. In the covenant of circumcision, God summarizes all Abraham’s covenantal obligations with the word “blameless”: “I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1; LXX: *amemptos*). “Blameless,” then, became the shorthand word for total obedience to the law of Moses, so that Paul later in this letter uses the same word to describe his former life as a Pharisee: “as to the law blameless” (Phil. 3:6; *amemptos*). Here, though, it is probably correct to say that “the focus is not the Mosaic law, yet righteous living is still in view.”¹⁷

Second, the word “innocent” (*akeraios*) carries the idea of purity in the sense of being unpolluted,

or “still in its original state of intactness, totality or moral innocence.”¹⁸ The most concrete example in the New Testament to symbolize our innocence is when Jesus told his disciples to be as wise as serpents, but as *innocent* (*akeraioi*) as the sacrificial dove (Matt. 10:16).¹⁹

Third, the word “without blemish” is a single word in Greek, *amōma*. Once again, this word pulls us into the sacrificial world of the Mosaic law,²⁰ since it can refer to “the absence of defects in sacrificial animals” (e.g., 1 Pet. 1:19; Heb. 9:14).²¹ But, even though Paul starts by piling up sacrificial imagery, he has a largely moral concept in view. He uses this word for “without blemish” as a part of a larger quotation from an important Old Testament passage. The phrase “children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation” (Phil. 2:15) is a modified quotation to Deuteronomy 32:5, where Moses had condemned the sinful Israelite people as “blemished children, a crooked and twisted generation.”²² While the word for “blemished” is the same word as “without blemish” in the unnegated form, the words for “crooked and twisted generation” are the same in the Greek Septuagint as what Paul writes here in Philippians 2:15.

In context, the overall effect of this quotation is clear. Paul is drawing a stark contrast between, on the one hand, the failure of the grumbling, questioning Israelites, and, on the other hand, the growth of the Philippians who are being sanctified by God’s grace. While the old covenant Israelites themselves were the crooked and twisted generation, Paul is warning the Philippian church to avoid blemish by observing everything that has he has written leading up to this point—by seeking unity (Phil. 1:27–30), by humbling themselves (Phil. 2:1–4) with the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5–11), and by working out their salvation with fear and trembling by the grace of God (Phil. 2:12–13).

Shining Lights, Holding Fast to the Word of Life

Finally, Paul states the end result of seeking to be without blemish. In the midst of a crooked and twisted generation surrounding them, the unblemished Philippians will “shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (Phil. 2:15–16a). These two phrases stand together as a single, modified quotation of the Septuagint’s translation of Daniel 12:3: “the wise shall shine as lights in heaven, and those who hold strong to my words as the stars.”²³ But, it would be helpful to look at each phrase individually before considering their function together.

Paul’s phrase about shining as “lights” in the world does not refer exclusively to stars, but to “any heavenly light-giving body,”²⁴ although the next part of the verse in Daniel 12:3 does refer specifically to “stars” as one kind of these heavenly lights. This is important, since the people of God in the Old Testament were often described with symbolism of heavenly lights, such as in Joseph’s dream where he saw eleven stars (which represented his brothers, the heads of the other eleven tribes of Israel) bowing down to his star in Genesis 37:9. Additionally, he also saw the sun and the moon (his father and mother) bowing down to his star as well. In other words, heavenly lights (whether stars, the sun, or the moon) represent the people of God.

But that isn’t where the Bible ceases to use heavenly light imagery to represent the people of God. Additionally, we should remember God’s promise to make Abram’s offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven (Gen. 15:5), or the prophecy from Numbers 24:17–19 that the Messiah would come as a star out of Jacob.²⁵ The prophecy in Daniel 12 that Paul uses in this letter to the Philippians foretells the final, eschatological judgment of all humankind. The immediately preceding verse says this: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2). It is in reference to this final judgment that

God says that the wise shall shine as lights in heaven, and those who hold strong to his words as the stars. Against the backdrop of the Pentateuch, the prophecy in Daniel is using the imagery of “shining as lights...as the stars” to describe the eschatological goal for God’s people to be glorified in radiance, like the lights of heaven.

We should not overlook the fact, though, that when Paul speaks about how the Philippians will shine as lights, he does not speak of a distant point in the future, but about a current reality. They are to shine as lights “in the world,” a deliberate modification of Daniel 12:3, which speaks of the wise as lights “in heaven.” As with the adjustment of the imagery from Deuteronomy 32:5 to speak of the Philippians as unblemished children *in the midst* of a crooked and twisted generation, so here the Philippians are to shine as lights *in* the world. We are not called to shine humility and obedience outside of the world, but within the darkness of the world.

The phrase “holding fast to the word of life,” then, describes the *way* in which God’s people become glorified—through remaining firm and established in clinging to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As the people of God remain unshaken in humble obedience to the gospel, even through places of deep suffering, the world recognizes the radical difference between Christians and the world. Although we will not attain to the most radiant form of our glorification until the day of Christ, Paul is urging the Philippians to lay hold of what they can, here and now.

Pursuing the Goal of Glory

In total, this brief section of Paul’s letter pulls together an entire biblical theology of God’s purposes for his people with only a few quotations and allusions to old covenant Israel. Astonishingly, Paul speaks of the believers in Christ as the fulfillment and realization of everything that God had put forward for the Israelites, and Paul urges us to “do all things” in such a way as to reach what old covenant Israel could not.

But why should we believe that we will accomplish what Israel failed to do? Paul has already given the answer: “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). God the Father sent God the Son into the world to die so that he might purify us from every spot or stain, making us blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish, shining like lights in the world as we hold fast to the gospel. In the knowledge of what God *has* done in Christ, how God *is* working through the Spirit, and what God *will* complete on the Day of Christ Jesus, we can strive, stretch, push, and pull as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and by grace.

The Cost: Poured Out with Joy (Phil. 2:16b–18)

Up to this point in the section, Paul has mingled his indicatives and imperatives—that is, he has focused on urging the Philippians toward what they must *do*, but with an eye toward who they already *are* in Christ. In this final section of the passage, Paul turns his attention forward toward the eschatological goal of the completion of God’s good work in them on the day of Christ.

Complete on the Day of Christ

Paul reveals his longing to see them growing in the faith to help him recognize that he *himself* did not waste his time and energy in laboring among them in ministry: “so that in the day of Christ I

may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain” (Phil. 2:16b). Just as in Philippians 1:6, 10, Paul again mentions the “day of Christ” as the goal toward which he is laboring. Furthermore, while Paul urges the Philippians forward, he writes from a confidence that God *will* finish the God work that he began. After all it is God who is working in them, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

In this verse, Paul uses the phrase “in vain” (*eis kenon*) twice. Earlier, Paul had urged the Philippians to do nothing from “conceit” (*kenodoxian*; Phil. 2:3), a compound word meaning “empty/vain (*keno*) glory (*doxan*).” Then, Paul had contrasted that “empty glory” with the glorious condescension of Christ, who willingly “emptied” himself (*ekenōsen*; Phil. 2:7) by taking the form of a servant. By pulling through the same word for “empty/vain” again, Paul continues to build on his contrast between the empty glory of the world through rivalry and the true glory exemplified in Christ’s emptying of himself: when we pursue fullness, we become empty; but, by emptying ourselves, we become full. Here, Paul is praying that his own self-sacrificial ministry would not ultimately be “empty.”

Then, in Philippians 2:17, Paul simultaneously builds on this contrast of being “empty” while also returning to the sacrificial imagery he had employed in Philippians 2:14–15. He describes the lengths he is willing to go for the sake of his ministry to the Philippians in this way: “Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith...” Through his willingness to be *poured out*, Paul has dedicated himself to following in the footsteps of his Master, who *emptied* himself by taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7). Remember, there is a very real sense for Paul in which being “poured out” for the gospel will mean losing his own life—but if not, then being “poured out” will mean more lifetime dedicated to serving the Philippians in ministry (Phil. 2:21–26). Either way, Paul’s life is poured out for the sake of others and for the sake of Christ.

But, Paul’s sacrificial imagery here is not written to suggest that Paul is like the old covenant priest, offering a sacrifice *for* the Philippians. Rather, he and the Philippians are *themselves* the sacrifice. His ministry to them is as a drink offering, poured out alongside the sacrifice that the Philippians are offering to God in the form “the sacrificial offering of your faith.”²⁶ This is where all of Paul’s Old Testament allusions and quotations in the previous section come together. The Philippians themselves must be blameless, innocent, and without blemish because they *are* the sacrifice. Believers under the new covenant cannot behave as the old covenant Israelites did because Christ, through his sacrifice, has already secured full atonement, so that we are to offer *ourselves* in obedience in a way that the Israelites living before Christ never could. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, we can attain the eschatological goal held out for Israel in the Old Testament by offering our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1) through working out our salvation with fear and trembling as God works in us.

Therefore, Rejoice!

In response to this, Paul states again that he not only “rejoices” on his own (*chairō*; cf. Phil. 1:18), but that he “rejoices with” (*sugchairō*) the Philippians.²⁷ Then, in Philippians 2:18, he urges the Philippians to do the same thing in response: to “rejoice” (*chairete*) and to “rejoice with” him (*sugchairete*). There are two major implications we should consider from the ending to this letter.

First, Paul once again leads us deeper into the mystery of how Christians can experience joy in the midst of suffering. Namely, we rejoice in our confidence that we will persevere all the way to the

end. In our sanctification, we work out our salvation in fear and trembling, knowing that God is the one working in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure, and in so doing, we become through Christ what Israel failed to be. We have a better covenant, enacted on better promises, built on a better, once-for-all sacrifice. Therefore, none of our labor in ministry is in vain, but we will rather be proud on the day of Christ. When ministry becomes discouraging, we would do well to remember throughout that it is *God* working in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Second, Paul joins together the themes of rejoicing with the underlying theme of *koinōnia* fellowship in this letter. As Gerald Hawthorne puts it, “The repetition here of words for joy (*chairō/chairete*) and togetherness (*sugchairō/sugchairete*)—twin themes of this letter—is striking.”²⁸ None of us rejoices in isolation, but our joy is in the work that God is doing in all of us collectively. Certainly, each individual must work out his or her own salvation by looking to the interests of others, but this shared mission brings shared joy along with it. As we stand together, laboring side by side for the gospel, helping one another to obey in humility, we gain a glimpse of our shared glory on the day of Christ. No matter what is happening around us, in *this* we can rejoice!

Discussion Questions

1. Is our growth in grace (that is, our *sanctification*) a passive activity on our part? What do Paul’s words that we should “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12) tell us about the effort and exertion that we need to put toward our sanctification? In terms of work and effort, how then does our *sanctification* compare to our *justification*? How might we be tempted to avoid working out our salvation in fear and trembling?
2. Do we bring about our sanctification from our own strength? Do we fuel our sanctification from our own willpower and desires? How does the theology of Philippians 2:13 balance out the exhortation of Philippians 2:12? To what degree can we claim the glory and praise for our sanctification? What does it look like to strike this balance of working out our salvation with fear and trembling, while also recognizing that God is the one who wills and works in us toward his own good pleasure?
3. Why do you think Paul draws such an explicit contrast between the failed sanctification of the old covenant Israelites and new covenant believers? How do we see discontinuity and continuity between the old and new covenants? As we see God working to some degree in old covenant Israel, and to a greater degree in the new covenant church, what might we learn about God’s eternal purposes to sanctify a people for his own possession through Christ?
4. What will it cost us to pursue the sanctification of ourselves and of others? In light of what we stand to lose, why does Paul insist that he will be “glad and rejoice,” and that we should “be glad and rejoice with” him (Phil. 2:17–18)? What is the source of Paul’s joy? How might we follow Paul’s example by growing in that same joy?

Notes

1. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 274. This is the word *hōste*, a different word for “therefore” from *dio* that we looked at in Philippians 2:9.

2. Silva, *Philippians*, 117.

3. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 274–75.

4. Frank Thielman helpfully applies this verse as a theological corrective against the excesses of the Second Great Awakening, which were manifested in the form of “unbiblical quietism that passively awaits an infusion of divine energy before obedience can begin” (Thielman, *Philippians*, 145.) The same argument could be made applied to multiple movements throughout church history, including the extreme forms of mysticism, Pentecostalism, and the Keswick movement.

5. Eugene Peterson writes that the fear of the Lord “means far more and other than simply being scared. But, and here’s the thing, it *includes* all the emotions that accompany being scared—the disorientation, the not-knowing what is going to happen to me, the realization that there is far more here than I had any idea of. And the ‘more and other’ is God. When that happens, we begin to get in on the fear-of-the-Lord.” (Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 2005), 122.)

6. See Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 119–20.

7. Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 279–82.

8. Where Frank Thielman had argued that Philippians 2:12 is the corrective against unbiblical passivity, Thielman also points to Philippians 2:13 as the corrective against the Pelagian notion “that salvation is a matter of our own untainted free choice and that by our own efforts we can ‘work for’ (JB, NJB) our salvation with fear and trembling.” (Thielman, *Philippians*, 145.)

9. Silva, *Philippians*, 122–23.

10. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 65. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom42.iv.iii.iii.html>>

11. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Books, 1961), Book X, §29, p. 233.

12. Gordon Fee most helpfully works through the extensively “sudden and profuse influx of echoes from the OT” in *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 240–48. In this section, he presents the data and then asks, “But what to do with this phenomenon? On the one hand, both its uniqueness in the corpus and the sudden profusion of language not found elsewhere in Paul suggest something more intentional than otherwise; moreover, it seems to ‘work’ too well to be mere chance or coincidence. On the other hand, this might be just our discovery, with nothing intentional on Paul’s part at all; after all, he is a man steeped in the story of Israel and is quick to see its application to the people of God newly constituted by Christ and the Spirit. Perhaps there is a middle way, that this reflects something sermonical or some former teaching (and is thus intentional in that sense), of a kind that Paul can draw on at will and weave into a single, meaningful sentence that specifies the kind of obedience he is calling them to, while at the same time placing the imperative within a larger biblical framework that assures the Philippians of their place in God’s story” (242–43).

Drawing heavily on Fee’s work, the following section is my own attempt to find that “middle way.”

13. e.g., Ex. 15:24, 16:2, 7, 8, 9, 12, 17:3; Num. 14:2, 27, 29, 36, 16:11, 41, 17:5, 10.

14. Gottlob Schrenk, “*διαλέγομαι, διαλογίζομαι, διαλογισμός*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 97.

15. See Silva, *Philippians*, 124.

16. Thielman does not think that this line of suggestion has sufficient support: the idea “that the Philippians’ discontent may have been discontent against their leaders in the same way that Israel’s discontent was directed against Moses...seems unduly speculative.” (Thielman, *Philippians*, 139, footnote 6.

17. “μέμφομαι,” *NIDNTTE*, vol. 3, 271.

18. Gerhard Kittel, “ἀκέραιος,” in *TDNT*, vol. 1, 209.

19. Kittel, “ἀκέραιος,” 210.

20. The corresponding word without the negating alpha privative in the LXX (*mōmeta*) “reflects a cultic setting (= full of blemishes).” (Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 245.)

(In Greek, an “alpha privative” gives a word a negated meaning by adding the letter alpha (our letter ‘a’) to the front of the word, which is reflected in some words that we carry into English. For example, a “theist” is someone who believes in God, but an “atheist” is someone who does *not* believe in God.)

21. “ἄμωμος,” *BDAG*, 56.

22. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 242.

23. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 242. Fee then offers this helpful reconstruction between the Hebrew text (“those who lead many to righteousness as the stars”), the Greek text (“those who hold strong to my words as the stars”), and Paul’s adaptation of this verse for his letter to the Philippians (“holding fast to the word of life”: “Since that would be a rare sense for this verb [*katischuō*, “hold strong”], Paul simply substituted *epechontes*. This seems to make the best sense of the unusual features of this phrase, both the choice of this verb and the unique reference to the gospel as ‘the word of life.’ This is the new way that ‘my words’ have made their way into the world.” (p. 247, footnote 33)

24. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 246, footnote 28.

25. Additionally, although beyond the scope of this book, some scholarly work has been done to understand the census of Israel in Numbers 1, the arrangements of Israel’s camp in Numbers 2. and even the lifespans of some of the patriarchs as Genesis in terms of astronomical symbolism. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 73–76.

26. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 310.

27. The ESV uses “glad” and “rejoice with,” which makes it difficult to see that Paul is using the same word, but with the addition of the prefix that means “with” in the second word.

28. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 106.