

Introduction

I'm sure that most, if not all of us, saw the recent Tokyo Olympics. But I want you to imagine that as you watched the various sports, and the finals and medal ceremonies, that you actually made a life-changing decision. I want you to imagine that you made the decision to compete in the next Olympics, Paris 2024. Wouldn't that be awesome? You'd be so excited. You'd choose the events to participate in. You'd tell your family and friends. And you'd look forward with eager anticipation.

But I think we all know that you'd very quickly discover that making the decision is only the beginning. You'd quickly realise that taking part in the Olympics is no simple matter. You'd have to change your whole life. You'd have to prepare and train and equip yourself for your particular sport. You'd have to modify your diet and routines and priorities. You'd have to quit your job and devote all your time, money and energy to attaining the standard and gaining a place on the team.

You could say that while deciding to compete is one thing, getting there is quite another. You could say that while it's easy to have an Olympic dream, it takes a lot of effort and commitment to work out that dream so that it comes to fulfilment.

And you know I think that's a bit like what Paul's talking about in Philippians 2:12. For in this verse he says, "Therefore, my dear friends, ... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling". He's just reminded us that Jesus came to earth and humbled himself, becoming obedient to death on a cross. And as a result, God exalted him to the highest place. But now he says "therefore", he says as a consequence of what Jesus has done, there's a response required of us.

Paul says that while deciding to follow Jesus is one thing, living out that commitment for a lifetime is quite another. He says it's relatively easy to put your faith in Christ and be saved, but it takes a lot of effort and commitment to continue to work out that salvation every single day. But we need to think about what that really means, for it's not a concept we often use. We always talk about salvation as something we receive when we repent and believe. But what does it mean for us, to "continue to work out your salvation"?

Well that's what we're exploring today. And we'll do that in 3 parts. First we'll look at Paul's definition of working out our salvation. Then we'll consider some examples of working out our salvation. And finally we'll see the outcome of working out our salvation.

Definition of "working out our salvation"

So we start with the definition, the way Paul describes what this really means. And central is the concept of obedience. Paul says "as you have always obeyed ... continue to work out your salvation". He uses these 2 terms in parallel, showing that they mean essentially the same thing. Working out your salvation means growing in obedience. And what's that obedience? It's obedience to God's Word.

Now it's 100% true that we're saved by grace and grace alone. We could never attain God's favour by being good enough. We only need look at our own failures every single day. We don't even come close. But that's exactly why God sent Jesus, his own beloved Son, to take our place. Jesus actually lived the holy and righteous life that we never could. And he died the atoning and sacrificial death that we so desperately need. For on that cross he took on himself the judgement

and punishment that should have been ours. And thus God in his mercy forgives the sin and rebellion of all who believe, declaring us perfect in his sight, and all because of Christ. As it says in Ephesians 2, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”

But the thing we need to realise is that when God saves us by grace, that doesn’t leave us unaffected. That’s why in Ephesians 2, straight after telling us that we’re not saved by our works, Paul says “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” And that’s why in our text Paul says “as you have always obeyed ... continue”.

Now this isn’t the first time Paul’s spoken of obedience in Philippians. At the start of chapter 1 he spoke of their “partnership in the gospel”, saying “he who began (this) good work in you will carry it on to completion”. Later he prayed that they “may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness”. Later still he said “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel” In chapter 2 Paul wrote, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves”. And just before our text he spoke of the supreme example of Christ’s obedience.

It’s so sad when so-called Christians convince themselves that obedience doesn’t matter. They say they’re saved by grace, so God’s law is irrelevant and concepts like holiness and righteousness are old-fashioned. They say God wants them to be happy and so it doesn’t matter if they give in to sexual desires, or worship worldly things, or if they’re lazy or deceitful or selfish or proud. But nothing could be further from the truth.

We’re most certainly not saved by obedience, but we’re not saved without it either. For from one end of the Bible to the other, it calls us to live according to God’s will. Now we’re not talking about perfect obedience, if we were then the cross would be obsolete. But we’re talking here about a humble, sincere, determined and growing obedience. And that is within our reach.

And Paul tells us how. Back in our text he says the Philippians should obey, “not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence”. There’s something similar in 1:27 when Paul says “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel ... whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence”. It seems the Philippians may’ve had an issue with obeying only to impress Paul. And I’m sure we’ve done the same. Haven’t you ever done the right thing, but only to impress other people. Maybe people in general, or at church, or the minister, or your parents or spouse or friends? It’s such an easy trap to fall into. But we must learn that authentic obedience is a response to our Lord. For he’s the one who made us, who we’re accountable to, and who loved us so much that he paid the ultimate price to rescue us, adopt us and reserve us for his heaven. If we want to work out our salvation, then we need to learn obedience for the sake of God.

But Paul also says, “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”. This reminds us that the Lord is awesome in power and perfect in all his ways. To him we look like ants or grasshoppers or slugs. And not just any slugs but hopeless and rebellious slugs. So how can we be arrogant or self-important or blasé in our relationship with him? How can we think that intentional, unrepented sin has no consequences? This goes directly against our human nature and everything we’re taught in this world. But the truth is that we’re minute and he’s vast, and we don’t deserve his mercy or love. And so we should approach him with fear and trembling, with awe and veneration. If we want to work out our salvation, then we need to learn obedience in deep reverence for our God.

But we also need to take note of verse 13. For having said that we should “work out our salvation”, Paul adds “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” And

isn't that amazing. Having just placed the responsibility on us to work out our own salvation, we're now told that it's actually God who's working it out in us. You see sometimes we can feel like it's all too hard to live a life worthy of God. We do things we're deeply ashamed of, we keep falling into sin, we fail to do what we know we should, we fixate on past failings, and we feel like we're getting nowhere. And as a result we can fall into a deep pit of guilt and despair. But perhaps we're forgetting that we're not doing this on our own. For the Lord has given us with his Holy Spirit, whose task is to make us holy. Isn't this just an amazing example of our responsibility described right alongside the Lord's sovereignty. It is our task to obey, but yet never without divine motivation and strength. And so if we want to work out our salvation, then we need to learn obedience with the strength of our God.

So that concludes our first point. In these 2 verses Paul provides a definition of what it means to work out our salvation. It means to have a humble, sincere, determined and growing obedience to God's will. But we'll only ever achieve that if we seek to obey for the sake of our God, in deep reverence for our God, and with the strength of our God.

Examples of "working out our salvation"

That now brings us to our second point, which is examples of working out our salvation, some ways in which we can exhibit this kind of obedience in real terms. And the first is in verse 14. For Paul says, "Do everything without grumbling or arguing". Now at first glance this may seem like a bit of a random example. Of all the commands in God's Word, of all the sins he could choose to focus on, why would Paul start with this? Well I think the reason lies in the theme of his whole letter, that theme of Deeper Joy. For I ask you, what greater obstacle is there for joy and rejoicing than grumbling and arguing?

And these 2 activities need little explanation, do they? Grumbling is the expression of discontent and unhappiness and complaining. And arguing is the conflict and dispute that follows. We know what they are, we know all too well. For there's not one of us who doesn't fall into bouts of grumbling and arguing, and there are some of us who are experts in the field and have made them a way of life. In fact I'd say that we're so used to these attitudes that we can even forget that they're sinful.

But Paul says, do everything without grumbling or arguing. Do you hear that? He doesn't say try to reduce these things, he doesn't say get them down to a reasonable level. No, he says get rid of them altogether, eradicate them, remove them from your life. Can you even imagine what it would be like to live without these attitudes? Imagine work or school, imagine life at home or here at church, imagine social interactions? Wouldn't it be great? Well Paul's calling every one of us to give this our serious attention. For he says a central part of our obedience, a key step in working out our salvation is to do everything without grumbling or arguing.

But a second example is in verse 15. For Paul goes on to say, "so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life." Paul's now suggesting that as we work out our salvation, that we must aim to become blameless, pure, and without fault. But that's tricky isn't it? Because again it's starting to sound like perfection, and we already know that's beyond us. So what does Paul mean?

Well my friends while Paul's not suggesting that we'll overcome all sin, he is suggesting that we'll reach a point of holiness that genuinely sets us apart from the rest of society. He's suggesting that when unbelievers look at us, they'll see a real difference, a notable difference, an attractive

difference. You see when the world looks at the church, they shouldn't see financial corruption or coverups of sexual misconduct or blatant lies. They shouldn't see a group where foul language is commonplace, or where gossip and discrimination go unchecked, or where materialism, arrogance, domestic violence or drunkenness are acceptable. They should not see a church full of grumbling or arguing, they should not see a church where there's no forgiveness or grace.

They won't see a perfect church but what they will see is a group of people who humbly and genuinely want to do what's right and loving and pure. And if that's what we are, then we'll shine like stars in the sky. What Paul's getting at here is that there'll be a stark contrast. For when you look at this world around us you see so much darkness. But a church that's genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit, honestly striving to serve God, sincerely endeavouring to work out their salvation, well they will shine bright in that darkness as they receive the gospel, are transformed by the gospel, and spread that gospel.

Is that your desire for us here at Riverbank, what you pray and strive for? I know that I do! For how awesome it would be to shine brightly in the darkness of Riverside and Launceston and beyond, pointing to Jesus and calling on many to turn to him.

Outcome of "working out our salvation"

But now there's one more thing to see in this passage. We've looked at Paul's definition of working out our salvation, and his examples of what that means. But now we need to consider the outcome. What's the result of us continuing to work out our salvation with fear and trembling? Well he tells us in verses 16 to 18.

And the first thing he says is this, "then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain." You see we need to remember that the apostle Paul had given his all for the sake of the gospel. He'd worked and toiled and struggled in many ways. And even as he wrote he was in chains for Christ, imprisoned for the gospel. But what if he'd done it all for nothing, what if his efforts and his suffering were wasted? Well Paul says that if the Philippians continue to work out their salvation, continue to shine like stars, that Paul will be able to boast, not in a proud way but a joyous way, that his efforts were not in vain.

And he adds to this saying, "I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith". He says you're giving of yourselves for Jesus Christ, giving your lives for the sake of the gospel. And in the end you'll receive the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls and life everlasting. But he says that his own suffering is like another offering being poured on top of theirs. For this is the whole point of his ministry, to see churches like theirs stand firm in faith and serve the Lord.

But then Paul concludes by saying that as a result of all this, "I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me." And here in his final words he returns again to the glorious theme of this letter. Right from the start Paul has stacked up reason after reason why we can experience a Deeper Joy, a Joy that the world cannot understand, a Joy not based on outward physical circumstances but on inward spiritual truth. And here we have one more.

My friends, if we truly want to experience this Joy, then we need to listen to Paul's message. He calls us to work out our salvation, to respond to God's grace with humble and sincere obedience to his Word. He calls us to do that for the sake of God, with deep reverence for God, and with the strength that God provides. He calls on us to live that out by doing everything with the right attitude, and by striving to be blameless and pure in the eyes of the world, shining like stars in the

darkness. And he calls on us to keep going, knowing that our sacrifice is not in vain, but has an awesome eternal purpose. That he says should make us glad and rejoice.

Conclusion

So as I said at the beginning, we as Christians are a bit like Olympians. It's not enough to just make a decision, but we need to work at it, we need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But what might that mean for each one of us today?

Well perhaps we've realised that we need to recommit ourselves to living a genuinely holy life, a life soaked in prayer, devoted to God's Word, keenly aware of the Spirit's leading, and humbly considering where repentance and growth are required. Perhaps we've fallen into that trap of being Sunday Christians, just putting up the façade of righteousness when we're here, but living like the world the rest of the week. Perhaps we've become satisfied with our spiritual growth, or our lack of spiritual growth and no longer take these things seriously. Perhaps we need to have a good look at those very real areas of grumbling and arguing and consider if our attitude honours God. Perhaps we need to consider if we want our lives to shine like stars in the darkness of our society.

My friends as we think, talk and pray about these things, we can be assured that the Lord will help us and strengthen us and transform us. As we sincerely seek to work out our salvation, we'll find our calling and we will surely experience Deeper Joy. Amen.