

Philippians - Commentaries by John Thomas Mawson

Scripture Truth: Volume 1, "Your Own Salvation" (2:12-13)

J. T. Mawson

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure."
(Phil. 2:12-13).

We were sitting in a room where played a little baby boy; he had just begun to walk and talk, and was putting his new found powers to the test. As he tremblingly ran from one chair to another, we heard him say to himself, "Mind the fender, C." A careful mother had warned him of the danger that lurked just there, and he was now repeating her warning to himself, and so working out his own salvation in respect to it.

God has warned us, in His word, as to where the dangers lie, and as we keep His word in mind, and are obedient to it, we too work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. "Concerning the works of men, by the word of Thy lips I have kept me from the paths of the destroyer" (Psa. 17:4).

But not only are we preserved from danger by the wholesome fear of it, but also by the attraction of something greater and better than the temptation presented. In ancient Greek mythology we read of the Sirens, beautiful in voice, but malignant in soul. They lived by the sea, and sang their sweetest songs as the ships sailed by, in order to lure the mariners to destruction on their treacherous shore.

When the Argonauts set sail for Pontus in search of the Golden Fleece, they knew that they must pass this point of danger, and that they might not be turned from their purpose by the seductive songs of the Sirens, they induced Orpheus, the greatest poet and singer of those mythical times, to accompany them.

Every day of that voyage he poured forth his most enchanting strains in the ears of those sailors, so that when they came to the point of danger the Sirens sang in vain, the Argonauts passed them with contempt — for the charm of the inferior music had been broken by the sweeter strains that filled their ears.

It is thus that God works in His grace. Christ is presented to us in all that wonderful charm that has won our hearts, and with the eye and heart filled with His surpassing beauty, our souls are proof against the false glamour which only attracts to destroy. The same holy Word of God which warns us of danger around, also unveils for us the excellencies of Christ.

But this passage is often used as though it meant work for salvation. This is altogether wrong, for Scripture cannot contradict itself, and there we read, "By grace are ye saved... not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:7-8).

The passage supposes that there is that within — life, nature and power — by the exercise of which we are preserved in the path of God's pleasure; and this is only found in those who have been saved by the grace of God.

When in the Transvaal, we went down into one of the gold mines there, and saw the quartz being worked out from the bowels of the earth; then presently we saw the bars of yellow metal all ready for shipment for the English mint. The gold was there in the mine first of all, but it had to be worked out to be of profit to the owners. So it is with us who believe, there must be exercise, and diligence, and work, so that that which God has placed within us may be worked out for His praise and glory.

But only a gold mine can produce gold, you would work in vain for it in any other mine. And so it is only the truly saved person who can work out salvation.

But there is still a point of greatest importance in the passage, which must not be overlooked; "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." We have no power in ourselves naturally (a great deal of the disappointment in the lives of Christians is because this is overlooked), but God works in both the will and the energy. As some mighty electric-dynamo supplies the factory with the force needful for the production of that for which it was erected, so God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, works in us His will and way, so that we may follow the Lord wholly, and give pleasure to Him who has bought us at so great a cost.

Our place is to obey Him, to yield ourselves to Him alone, having no confidence in the flesh.

Scripture Truth: Volume 1, On Philippians 2 and 3 (2:3,5-8)

H. Nunnerley

Going down and pressing up.

Philippians 2:3, 5-8

“Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

Philippians 3:7-10

“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but dung, that I may win Christ. And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection”

THE secret of peace among Christians is found in Philippians 2, and the secret of progress in Philippians 3.

If strife and vainglory disturbed the peaceful circle at Philippi, Paul directed their thoughts to Christ in humiliation; or if earthly greatness attracted them, he turned them to Christ in glory.

In these two chapters there are two mountain peaks with the valley of death between.

How graphically the apostle brings before them in Philippians 2 The mind which was in Christ Jesus. He begins with the lofty height whence Christ came. Subsisting ever in the form of God, He thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Seraphim veiled their faces as they cried one to another, “Holy! Holy! Holy!” Angel and archangel did homage to Him as Lord and Master; their honor, as their joy, was to do His bidding. His dwelling was in light unapproachable—a light too bright for mortal sight. Very God in form and substance.

The first step in His downward pathway was to lay aside the form of God. The net to take upon Him the form of a servant; but His Person was unchanged. A monarch does not cease to be the same mighty potentate when his robes of State and throne of dignity are laid aside. Christ did not cease to be what He was before when He became flesh and dwelt among us.

In days like these, when His Manhood is exalted at the expense of His Godhead, we cannot insist too much on His deity, or dwell too fully on the incommunicable glory of His Person. Mighty in power, and wonderful in working, He — who in the form of a servant became a real, true, blessed man, made of a woman — was, is, and ever will be, “God over all, blessed forever!”

Scripture constantly reminds us of this. The smitten Shepherd is Jehovah’s fellow. The betrayed Savior, crucified in weakness, is the great I AM. The lowly Man, who sat wearied on Sychar’s well, is the “Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary.” The Man whose days were shortened, and strength weakened, is the same whose years have no end. He who carries the lambs in His bosom, has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand. He who slept in the storm could still that storm with a word. The Person is one, though varied in His circumstances, form, and condition. Jesus and Jehovah are one in essence and being.

Going downward, and passing by all angelic beings, He took the form of man — a lower grade of creation than angels. He emptied Himself, and became the dependent One. He who had been accustomed to command, now stooped to obey. Never was obedience like His! His meat was to do the Father’s will. His life was lived on account of the Father. In a world where everybody sought to go up, He sought to go down.

He was meek and lowly in heart. He lived a life of constant dependence, unflinching obedience, perfect confidence, and unbroken trust. He knew the blessedness of the man who trusteth in the Lord. His ear was open morning by morning to hear as a learner. He could wait two days before going to the grave of Lazarus; but having got the commandment, all the enmity, hatred, and murderous plans of the Jews could not stop Him.

This is the Man whose mind is to be in us. This is the corrective for strife and vainglory, and the secret of practical unity. We have no height from which to descend, no reputation to lay aside, no stoop to make. It ill becomes us then to seek to go up where He went down.

The self-emptied One not only became the dependent One, but also the humbled One. What a mighty stoop this was! a stoop expressing more fully the mind which was in Him. The law had said that obedience to its precepts would ensure to the obedient one, continuance of life; then death could not claim Him. He had a right to live, for He had magnified the law and perfectly shown what a man should be for God. He had neither inherent nor contracted sin. He could have rightly claimed when His life on earth was finished, a convoy of angels to carry Him back to the heights of glory. Instead, He chose the way of death, for obedience lay there.

What a death! A cross between two malefactors. He, the only one who needed not to taste death, voluntarily descended into the lower parts of the earth, and endured a malefactor’s cross with all its shame and ignominy. What a pathway! Lower and lower, down and down, less and less, until He reached the deepest and darkest point of degradation.

Disobedience brought Adam into death.

Obedience brought Christ into death.

Disobedience in Eden grasped at the highest.

Obedience brought the high and lofty One down to the lowest.

Going down is not pleasant to nature. Giving up, and giving way, is that to which we are all averse. It is only as Christ fills the vision of our souls, and the dove which rested upon Him in His earthly pathway controls, that peace, unity, and like mindedness will form and mold a company of saints. They all kept rank in David’s day, because all were of one heart to make David king.

Philippians 3 presents Christ Jesus once more in the place from whence He came. He left the mountain top to come down, has passed through the valley of death, and has now ascended again.

He is the same Person, but how changed His circumstances from those which were His when here! He is still a Man, but Man set in the highest dignity. He is no longer in degradation. The humbled One is now the exalted One. The shameful cross, and the borrowed tomb, have been exchanged for the glorious throne of the Majesty on High. The despised Nazarene now bears a name to which beings heavenly, earthly, and infernal must bow. None humbled himself as He. None has been exalted as He. The glorious height, where the emptying began, has welcomed Him back again; the Man Christ Jesus is Lord of all.

He still retains a servant's form, and is as truly and really a man as in the days of His flesh, but man in new accompaniments of being. Weakness and weariness over, He is the same Jesus in a glorious spiritual body. He that descended is the same also that ascended. No change in the Person. A Man is in the glory of God, and yet Himself is the God of Glory. Paul calls Him "My Lord," and esteemed the knowledge of Him to be the very highest knowledge; so the calling on high of God in Christ Jesus was that upon which his whole being was set.

Paul could not empty himself, but he could strip himself. One after another the rags of self-righteousness were cast on the dust heap. Forgetting the things that were behind, he pressed on toward the mark, the prize of the high calling of God. Christ Jesus had laid hold of him, he longed to lay hold of Christ Jesus; to grasp all that for which he had been apprehended.

If the descent carried his blessed Master to a self-sacrificing death, Paul was willing to travel that road, if he could but be in company with Him. If the ascent carried Christ into a scene of glory, Paul would gladly part with everything that would bind him to earth and the flesh, in order to join his Master there. He could weep for those whose minds were set on earthly things, for his was engrossed with things of heaven.

Devoted servant of a once humbled and now exalted Lord, his word to us is "Follow Me." His conversation was in heaven, his living links were there.

It was from thence he looked for his Lord, as Savior, so that in every way he might be perfectly like his Master, in a body fashioned like to His glorious body.

May we learn from Him how to go downwards, and how to press upwards.

How to tread Christ's pathway here, and seek Him in glory there. How to follow in humiliation, and reach Him in exaltation. Thus, and thus only, shall we be free from strife, vainglory, and earthly-mindedness, and walk in peace with one another.

Let us remember, Christ in humiliation is our Exemplar.

Christ in exaltation is to be our Magnet.

The glorified One would produce in us the gracious traits of the once humbled One.

The true Christian is an anomaly, he must go down and go up at the same time, nor can be exalted but as he humbles himself.

Scripture Truth: Volume 1, Fellowship in the Gospel (1:3-5)

E. E. Curtis

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now (Phil. 1:3-5).

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"The gospel" is a wonderful expression embracing all the witness of redeeming love in its infinite length and breadth, and depth and height; and fellowship in this is accordingly a privilege of the highest order.

But the gospel sets God forth, active in His love; and fellowship in the gospel is therefore necessarily active and practical.

Such was the Philippians' fellowship in the gospel which in the verse before us the beloved Apostle Paul so joyfully recalls whilst himself lying bound in a Roman prison. From the last chapter of the epistle we learn how in the beginning of the gospel, when Paul departed from Macedonia, no assembly communicated with him as concerning giving and receiving, but the Philippians only. Even in Thessalonica they sent once and again to his necessity, and he speaks of having received the things which were sent by them "an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God" (Phil. 4:18).

Such today also is "fellowship in the gospel": it is always active and always practical, for still in wondrous grace is God active in His love.

Let an incident of yesterday illustrate this fellowship in one of the many and varied ways in which it may express itself. The following letter reached me by the morning post: Dear Brother, If you are disengaged could you come over tomorrow? I know a man who is very ill near X Station. I could go with you to see him. The train leaves — at 1:40 p.m. If you could get here about 12, we could have a little dinner before starting. It is an urgent case; I do not think he can possibly last long — cancer is his complaint ... Yours very affectionately in Him.

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The writer of the letter is a hardworking tradesman with a large family; but the thought of that poor dying man on the canal-side at X, who had led a godless life, troubled him. He remembered, moreover, and could not dispel it from his mind, how the Lord took that journey of thirty miles to meet the women at the well (John 4).

Feeling some incompetency to himself meet the case, but earnestly desiring to partake in the outgoings of the gospel towards this needy one the letter was sent.

I found upon meeting him, that all that was incidental to thus carrying the message had been taken into account — provision for the needs of the poor sufferer, the rail expenses, etc. An empty compartment in the train served as a place for prayer, and “two” were agreed as touching this one thing asked for — the blessing of the soul of him we were to visit (Matt. 18:19).

Upon reaching the bedside of the poor dying signalman, it became evident that God had been before us preparing the soul for the reception of the blessing. A Christian mother’s prayers and sayings had been recalled, and repentance had already taken place. How easy then was the task which was mine in unfolding to that penitent soul “the glad and glorious gospel” of God’s grace to men, my fellow worker backing it home by speaking of the joys which that same gospel had brought into his own life, and which made him long that this poor sufferer should also share in the blessing which God is ever waiting to pour into any broken heart.

Deep then was the joy which was ours when we heard him confess Christ as his Savior and his Lord, and exclaim in his new found gladness, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” whilst his prayers and thanksgiving mingled with ours, and on taking our leave a little later we could not but feel how real and how precious a thing is “fellowship in the gospel.”

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