

The Work of Salvation

Philippians 2:12-18

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

August 8, 2021/11th Sunday After Pentecost

I chuckled on Tuesday morning when I got back from a holiday and read the passage that I would be preaching on this morning. It begins with a word that I've talked about in the past, a word that Jen referenced in her sermon a few weeks ago.

Therefore.

You know what's next by now, surely. Whenever you see a "therefore" in Scripture, you should always ask, "What is the therefore there for?"

And so, what *is* the therefore there for?

In this case, the "therefore" comes after the themes brought out in Jen's sermon a few weeks ago.

She gave you a bit of a Greek lesson if you'll recall. She talked about the *kenosis* (emptying) of Christ that leads to a new *kurios* (lord—new boss, *very* different than the old boss!). She talked about the strange and liberating nature of God's work in the world.

Therefore.... In light of who God is and what God has done...

Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose (Phil. 2:12-13).

This morning, I want to focus on only one question. What does it mean to work out our salvation?

This verse from Paul's joyful letter to the Philippians has (understandably) been the cause of some anxiety for Christians over the years.

Wait, is salvation a work that I'm supposed to do? What happened to all that "For it is by grace that you have been saved through faith" talk, Paul? Ring any bells? Wasn't it you who said that

salvation is “not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast?” (Eph. 2:8-9)

“Work out your salvation” sounds like a step backward into the very legalism that Paul spent so much time railing against.

Anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time knows that we cannot save ourselves. We cannot keep Christ’s law perfectly, try though we might. We know that if salvation depends on what we can do, we are in very deep trouble indeed.

And of course, that “fear and trembling” bit could easily make people, you know, *afraid*.

Is God a severe taskmaster hovering over us making sure that we’re doing the work of salvation, ready to pounce in judgment? Does God want us to be quivering in fear as we put our shoulder to the wheel of faith? This doesn’t exactly sound like the Lord who is described elsewhere as “gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Ps. 103:8).

“Work out your salvation” also rings an ominous note in our particular cultural context where we are constantly being exhorted by someone somewhere to “do the work,” whether it’s the work of antiracism or decentering our voices or acknowledging our privilege or pursuing this or that vision of social justice, where the righteous mob is indeed always ready to pounce in judgment on those who aren’t “doing the work.”

I want to suggest that none of this is what Paul means when he says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

I think what Paul means instead is something like this:

Therefore, my dear friends, in light of the God who we have seen so clearly in Jesus Christ, in light of his love and sacrifice, in light of his emptying for our sake, *continue to work out the implications of this good gospel with reverence and awe. And joy.*

The “joy” part is implicit, I grant. But I think that joy is always lurking just under the surface in this letter.

Paul is not giving the Philippians their grim marching orders under a divine taskmaster. Paul is inviting them—and us—into a lifetime of living in light of the salvation that God has revealed in Christ Jesus.

What does this mean? What does it look like?

I'm going to speak autobiographically for the bulk of the rest of this sermon. I think that as human beings we connect best with stories. I hear this whenever we have Sundays where people share their faith stories.

And so, I'm going to share a bit of my own story today, a bit of how I have tried to work out my own salvation with fear and trembling over a handful of decades.

Faith in Christ was in the air I breathed as a child. God was a given. Church was a given (even when I wished it wasn't). I grew up with a fairly simple evangelical faith. Jesus died for my sins so that I could go to heaven when I died.

My task was to repent, to believe in Christ's finished work. It wouldn't hurt if I was a good person who avoided all the usual nasty behaviours, but the main thing was believing this straightforward formulation.

The church I grew up in sponsored refugees and believed it was important to help the poor. But my sense looking back is that our primary concern was proper belief.

The gospel was a package that I had to believe to secure my afterlife status. I don't recall hearing much about the implications of the gospel for *this* world.

(I say all this acknowledging that I could be a pretty terrible listener as a kid and could have missed a thing or two along the way.)

The work of salvation in my early years meant observing those around me, listening, learning, asking questions. It meant relying on the faith of those who had come before me, those who had experienced the goodness of God in the context of circumstances much more difficult than my own.

It meant encountering Jesus and his call on human life. My church didn't get it all right and I would have to unlearn a few things along the way. But no church gets it all right (even this one!).

In my teen years, I began the important and necessary project of making my faith my own. This is a road that everyone must follow in their own way.

Richard Rohr puts it well in his book *Radical Grace*:

Every generation has to be converted anew. Each generation has to know for itself the fidelity of God. Each generation has to do its own homework and walk its own journey of search and surrender. No person, ritual, or institution can finally do that for you. There are no spiritual coat tails on which to ride, they just give us a good head start...

Until you come to that time in your life when you choose that you have been chosen, when you accept that you have been totally accepted, the real process of personal transformation has not begun. God has no grandchildren, it seems. Only children! And mercifully, many, many of them, because there are as many and varied journeys as there are people.

My own conversion was not a one-time thing, much as I tried to shoehorn it into this paradigm. It was a process, one in which I would take steps forward and backward.

Teenage years can be volatile and unpredictable, and this was certainly the case for me. I would bounce back and forth between full on commitment to Christ to apathy to the usual rebellions that teenagers are drawn toward.

Sometimes I would be very interested in Jesus and the life of faith. Sometimes I very much wished that Jesus would just leave me alone.

This stage of life (at least in the rear-view mirror) reminds me that salvation is not a one-time thing. We are always “being saved,” as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:15, always being brought back to the call and claim of Christ on our lives.

I often quote Brian Zahnd in my sermons. He was once asked how often a person needs to be saved. His response was one that I love, and which has stuck with me: “As many times as we find ourselves in need of rescue.”

In my teen years, **working out my salvation** meant stumbling and lurching forward, trying to figure out what it meant to call this thing called Christian faith my own. It meant trying on a set of clothes to see if they fit.

I went off to bible school with a certain cute girl I met in high school. We got married and I started to live and work, whether on my dad’s farm or driving truck.

I also began to read voraciously. In my early twenties I consumed a good chunk of the catalogue of Russian authors—Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Solzhenitsyn. I would read novels, books of theology, cultural critique, etc.

I would read the kinds of books that I imagined smart people read, even if I barely understood them.

(This was all before the internet, so I still had something like an attention span. Just kidding... sort of).

At twenty-seven, I went off to university to study. Initially I had no idea what I wanted to do, just that I wanted to learn.

Eventually I landed on a philosophy major. Ideas and correct thinking were very important to me at this stage of my life (I would have to unlearn some of this along the way!).

My time in university overlapped with becoming a father. This was the time of life when Nick and Claire came to be part of our lives. Our journey with infertility and opened a whole new window into the nature of God and the path of faith.

I began to think in new ways about what it meant to be an adopted child of God, about what it meant to be part of a family of faith that incorporates all tribes and tongues.

I began to think about faith not as something that I chose but about something (or someone) who chose me. I began to think a lot more about grace.

In my twenties, **working out my salvation** meant a fairly deep interrogation into the intellectual foundations of Christianity and the existential experience of some of the deepest thinkers of the faith.

It also meant entering the most profound experience of my lifetime and of having my theological categories upended and recalibrated by fatherhood.

In my thirties, I headed off to grad school, Regent College in Vancouver. It was here that I began to encounter a more expansive view of Christian faith. Studying with Anglicans and Baptists and Reformed folks and Pentecostals and even the odd stray Mennonite broadened my understanding and experience of Christian faith.

In my reading and in chapels, I encountered well-crafted liturgies and songs with deep and thoughtful words. I came to the Lord's table in new and moving ways. I learned about church history and theology; about Christians whose experience was different than my own.

I encountered a faith that incorporated the personal and the social, that insisted that while Jesus did indeed care about my post-mortem existence, his interests went far beyond this.

It was liberating to find that the Christian tradition was deep and wide and solid, that there were socially engaged Christians who cared about justice and creation and who also had a lively personal faith.

In this context, **working out my salvation** meant expanding my theological categories, learning to combine the best of the evangelical piety of my childhood with a more socially engaged faith. It meant encountering a God who did indeed love the *whole* world and who would not abandon it.

And in the time since then I have been a pastor.

You may imagine that pastors have it all figured out, that faith has become instinctive, that prayer is easy and untroubled, that compassion and care are second nature, that we never have any doubts, that all we really want to do is read our bibles and help people.

I regret to inform that you that this is not the case. (I doubt this is news to you!)

Pastors are human beings who have the same foibles and hang-ups and temptations and doubts as anyone else.

When I was in grad school, one of my professors told us to enjoy this season where we could try on all kinds of theological ideas and experiment because nobody really cared what we thought. “When you’re a pastor,” he said, “this will change.”

My professor was right. Suddenly, I was talking about faith every week and testing what I said alongside the crucible of what I saw and heard in real human lives.

Could I talk about the goodness of God when I knew that so and so in the pews was going through a brutal time and their faith was hanging on by a thread? Could I talk about this or that explosive issue when I knew that there were people in our church who had radically different positions on it?

Things were rapidly moving from the theory to practice, from the textbook to the much messier domain of real life.

Being a pastor obviously puts you in the middle of hard stuff. People go through really hard things in this life, and it’s not always easy to be God’s spokesperson in light of this.

My instinct is always to explain, to defend, to justify God and Christian faith. I have learned that sometimes the only thing that is to be done is to sit in silence, to bring our pain before God, to lament, to wait, to hope.

As a pastor, I have frequently been brought to the end of myself, of what I think I am capable of. I have often thought, “I have no idea what I’m doing here.” To be perfectly honest, there have been times when I have felt like a failure.

There have also been times when I have felt enormously privileged to have a front row seat to the work of God in the life of this church, to learn from dear saints who may have less formal theological training than I do, but who know God in deep and profound ways.

In this stage of my life **working out my salvation** has meant learning and experiencing that God is, indeed, love. That God is merciful and gracious.

It has also meant being reminded that faith is, in the end, a gift of God. It has meant depending again and again, in reverence and in awe, on the truth that God’s faithfulness to me is much deeper and truer and more reliable than my faith in God.

That’s my story thus far. Perhaps some of it resonated. Some of it probably didn’t. But I hope it at least gave you some ways of reflecting on your own stories of faith and on what the road ahead might look like.

Some of you are farther along the journey and know more of what it means to work out your salvation in the later years of life.

The work of salvation is the work of a lifetime. It is a process, a journey, a path that where Christ Jesus is both the faithful guide and the road itself, where he does not abandon us.

To quote Brian Zahnd again, the journey of Christian faith is both a “constant” and a “quest.”

There are some things that are constant, that don’t change. The life, example, and teaching of Christ. His death and resurrection. The forgiveness of sins. The hope of glory. These have never changed, and I pray they never will.

But there is also the “quest” part. There is deconstruction and reconstruction, learning and unlearning unhelpful things, expanding one’s vision (and contracting it, when necessary). The work of salvation is not static and unchanging.

There is no one way in which Christ conforms human beings to his image.

And ultimately, of course, the wonderfully liberating good news of the gospel is the second part of the verse that I began my sermon with.

...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, **for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.**

The work of salvation is ultimately the work of God. We heard this in our first week in this summer study of Philippians:

[H]e who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6).

We are only ever working out the implications of the work that God has already done and will bring to fruition in our lives and in our world.

This is good news. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

