

“Work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Part One)

Reflection 25 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

Now in our series on “Salvation: The Quest” we come to a text in the book of Philippians, Philippians 2:12-13. This text reads in the words of the apostle Paul to the church in Philippi:

“Therefore, 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,
for it is God who works in you
to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

Just two verses. But they strike a discordant note both in the Philippians letter which is all about joy, and in our series on “Salvation: The Quest.” Recall Ephesians 2:8-9, the focus on grace, the critical point that “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.” And all of this means an end to, well, fear and trembling in all its many forms. But here in Philippians 2:12-13 we have, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”

We are reminded again that Scripture always – almost always – does this to us, gives us a point and then a counterpoint, and presses us to think, to wrestle with the text, to resolve the apparent conflict, to find the higher truth, the transcendent truth. Of course this is what all great thought does, all great literature, all great art, all great music, all great lives. This is how truth is always processed. Always. A theme is set forth. It’s clear. It may be beautiful. But there is a counter theme, maybe equally clear, maybe equally beautiful, that challenges the first theme. And now these ideas clash in our minds, first, one theme, then the other, then just snatches of one or the other. Ideas tumble over one another. Nothing seems clear, and we long for the clarity of one theme or the other. Until one day we break through to a resolution. We see one theme or the other from a slightly different perspective. In musical terms, we change the key. And now we can see how both themes do belong together. And we can feel the music in our souls again.

Something like this is happening in our current text and, in fact, happens throughout Philippians. The dominant theme is joy, and it is. But here now we have fear and trembling, as in, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” And so we seek resolution. And resolution begins in this case with remembering what salvation really means. We read a text like this, and if we were schooled by fundamentalists or by Hellfire T.V. evangelists, we hear, “Work your own way out of going to Hell with fear and trembling.” But this is at best a very partial notion of salvation. It’s largely misguided

– by which I mean, it’s wrong. And certainly in terms of our text and its context, it’s wrong.

The biblical notion of salvation is so much larger and so much more life-affirming than this. Salvation’s root meaning is “to be roomy or broad” as opposed to be hemmed in, imprisoned or restricted. So in Jesus’ day it meant “to free, come to the help of, give aid to, deliver or rescue,” as in God saving Israel from Egypt. Primarily it’s to be saved from danger, from harm, from disease, from evil intent or violence, and it’s very much a hands-on, this-world, here-and-now, real-life understanding of salvation. It begins here. It begins now. And it changes, heals, rescues, transforms, saves the whole world. It’s not just personal.

So we may hear our text as, “Continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” but we hear it wrongly. Salvation is not just personal. It’s communal. It’s even global. It’s not just about individuals. It’s about groups. It’s about the whole world. It’s about the world being saved (as Jesus says in John 3:17).

So with that in mind, let’s go back to the text. It begins with “Therefore,” in light of what Paul’s just been saying. So Paul in our text is going back to Philippians 1:27, to when he urged the saints, the called-out ones in Philippi, to “stand firm in one spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel,” that is, to be a band of brothers and sisters devoted to one another, absolutely devoted to one another.

The salvation in this context, in light of all that has come before, is communal. It’s about the group. You guys – as a group – work out your salvation, work out the implications of what you now know about God and his salvation. Do it as a group. Leaving no one behind.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week