

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

Reflection 26 in the series “Salvation: The Quest”

When we read, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” we almost always fail to realize that Paul’s intent here in Philippians 2:12 is communal. In context, it’s about the group. You guys – as a group – work out your salvation, Paul is saying. And in the book of Philippians he is telling us how. He writes in 2:3-4, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit – that’s all empty glory. Instead in humility consider others better than yourselves, not just advancing and promoting your own interests but also the interests of one another.” And then in 2:5ff: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the very nature of a servant.” That, Paul says, is the Spirit of Christ Jesus, not grabbing, not grasping, not holding on to one’s rights and privileges, not insisting on things going one’s way, but emptying oneself.

Remember that! It’s always about emptying ourselves. So whatever you face, whatever you’re up against, whatever the challenge, the solution is always emptying yourself. It’s all about humility. It’s all about being aware of our own limitations; always being open to learning from one another; not forcing our way of thinking on others, however right we may think we are; becoming the servants of all; taking out the garbage; cleaning up after one another; seeking to understand one another; taking care of one another; never knowingly doing what hurts and discourages others; considering the needs of one another to be as important as our own.

And then Paul breaks out in cosmic triumph, with Jesus Christ, the one who emptied himself being exalted to the highest place, every knee bowing at his name, every tongue confessing that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. It ends well. God’s love wins through. It ends in loving reconciliation. Every knee freely bows in recognition of this God who takes the very nature of a servant or a slave. Every tongue freely confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord because one day people get it. After all the wasted years, all the unnecessary pain and loss and suffering, all the fear and anxiety, all the unnecessary anger and violence, they get it. And now Paul says, “Therefore, in light of all this, my dear friends – Don’t forget how much I love you! – as you have always obeyed, not in the sense of following some set of rules but in the sense of being devoted to God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

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. As a group. Leaving no one behind.

So one Monday evening in the cold of January I found myself at the Bridgeport Correctional Center to see a friend. My friend grew up here in this church, but he’d been taken away from us some years ago and had fallen on hard times (it’s a pattern I’ve often

seen) and was now in Bridgeport Correctional. I'd worked hard to make that Monday night happen, filled out all sorts of paperwork, called the Chaplain's office over and over, faxed the Chaplain's office over and over, made several wasted trips to the center. But now I'd cleared every hurdle, so I showed up in the Center Lobby to check in and spoke to the officer behind the thick glass, trying hard to hear him, to read his lips. I was in luck. He even came out into the lobby and gave me directions for driving around to the North Wing where my friend was.

So I got in my car, turned left out of the drive, left again at the next street and then pulled left again through the barbed wire security fence. But nothing there made sense, only a security booth in complete darkness. I got out of my car and warily approached the booth. And there was an officer inside and he redirected me again down the long parking lot to another entry. So I went there.

I pressed the buzzer, spoke into the intercom, but nothing happened at first. Then I heard voices shouting from inside, "Open the door," which I did and found myself in a room with maybe twenty women of various ages, wives, girlfriends, mothers and sisters of inmates. They all knew one another. They were the Monday night regulars at Bridgeport Correctional's North Wing. And I was the new guy and would become their entertainment for the evening. But first I had clear myself at another security window (only this one had blackened glass and there was no reading lips) and then join the group and wait for the 7:00 visitation.

At 6:58 an officer came out and started taking us through security – the same kind of security we go through at an airport, just even more officiously. And my pockets were stuffed and it took ages, or what seemed like ages, clearing me. Finally we were all taken into a holding room, the one door locked and other opened, and then ushered into an antiseptic, fiercely bright room, with a bank of antiquated telephones facing security glass again. Inmates came in.

My friend was first bewildered, and then recognized me, and a big smile lit his face. He looked like he always had, not like his mug shot. But the fun was just beginning.

There were no workable instructions on how to activate the phone, and though my friend tried to shout through the glass, it took one of the Monday night regulars to take pity and guide me through the process. So now I was on the line but in a glass-lined room filled with the loud voices of twenty others – a nightmare for someone with hearing loss. But we got down to what was not an easy conversation anyway: what to ask and what not to, how to catch up on a life in its darkest moment and see my way to being what help I could be. All in all, it was a good night, the right thing to do, but it was also an exercise in, well, emptying myself – things completely out of control and frequently funny at my expense. And still the right thing to do. trembling.

All this, is part of working out our salvation with fear and trembling. You guys – as a group – work out your salvation. Don't mess up the group. Don't mess up one another. Be alert. Be vigilant. Catch the urgency here. Nothing casual is happening here. This

togetherness that is church is not take-it-or-leave-it. It's not just Sunday morning if I didn't party too hard the night before. Not just this church if I like the music. Not just this church if my kids like it. Not just this church if no one here annoys me. Not just this church if lifestyle issues permit it. Not just this church so long as its ministers knock it out of the park every Sunday. Instead it's a matter of if church is committed to salvation, if church understands salvation holistically, in healing, reconciling ways that will one day lead to the saving of the world.

Work it out with fear and trembling, with deep, abiding reverence, with awe at what you're a part of, with humility and with no empty glory. This is stuff you do with fear and trembling because the welfare of your family, and the welfare of your soul, and the welfare of the world depend on it.

– Dale Pauls