



# Philippians

RBS  
Philippians 2:12 – 3:1

## Lesson 4: Shining Lights in the World's Darkness

***“Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life” (Philippians 2:14-16a).***

***Doctrinal Focus:*** Because Christ obeyed to the point of death on a cross for us, Christians are called to embrace the salvation he won through our obedience, love, contented trust, and purity, relying on the God who is transforming both our desires and our actions. We see what Christ's selfless love looks like in the examples of servant-leaders such as Paul, Timothy, and Epaphroditus.

Read Philippians 2:12 – 3:1.

In the preceding passage (Philippians 2:5-11) Paul presented a majestic exposition of the selfless humility of Christ, who, though equal with God, took a servant's role as man, died on the cross, and was exalted as Lord over all. Paul had fixed his readers' attention on Jesus to show the mindset that was theirs because they were *“in Christ,”* and that must be displayed by their placing others' needs before their own (Philippians 2:3-4).

In the text now before us Paul returned to the attitudes and actions that are our appropriate response to Christ's self-giving, others-serving humility and love. This response is expressed in two commands: (1) *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), and (2) *“Do all things without grumbling and questioning”* (Philippians 2:14). These commands are surrounded and supported by words of encouragement and hope (Philippians 2:12-13 for the first command, 2:14-16 for the second).

Then Paul reminded his Philippian friends that, though they had not seen Jesus' self-humbling sacrifice in person, they could observe his attitude in men whom they knew well; Paul (Philippians 2:17-18), Timothy (Philippians 2:19-24), and their own emissary Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25-30). The compassion of Christ, which they must extend

to each other, could be seen “up close” in leaders whom they knew.

**Persist in obedience with seriousness and confidence (Philippians 2:12-13).** Paul surrounded the sobering command at the heart of this sentence, *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,”* with four forms of encouragement to give motivation and hope to obey. First, Paul opened with “Therefore” to show that his directive flowed from the humble suffering and glorious exaltation of Christ (Philippians 2:6-11). Christ had accomplished the salvation that believers must now “work out” in their obedience.

Second, Paul called them “beloved” (he would again in Philippians 4:1), reminding them of his own affection for them, which expressed *“the affection of Christ”* (Philippians 1:7-8). They should see Jesus' love reflected to them through Paul.

Third, Paul had already seen in them the godly response that he now urged them to maintain and deepen: *“as you have always obeyed.”* In their gospel partnership with Paul from his arrival in Philippi, Paul had seen evidence that God had begun a good work in them (Philippians 1:5-7). This sovereign God would bring his saving work to completion in believers at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6). Because they were united

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to Christ by faith, their *obedience* was an echo of Jesus' own *obedience* (Philippians 2:8) to the plan of God that led him to the cross for us. And because the Lord not only sustains his work in our hearts but also deepens it, Paul expected to hear that the Philippians' obedience had grown greater in his absence than it had been when he was among them.

Fourth, Paul followed his sobering summons with the reassurance that God was at work in these believers "*both to will and to work for his good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:13). Paul's command emphasized Christians' duty to pursue Christlikeness seriously ("fear and trembling"); yet he combined that stress on human responsibility with a reminder of God's sovereign grace, which transforms both our desires and our deeds. Others have seen a contradiction between human responsibility and divine sovereignty (for instance, the objectors answered in Romans 9 – 11), but Paul knew that Christians *could* trust and obey only because *God acted first* to change hearts.

By "*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,*" Paul was not denying what he preached and wrote elsewhere: "*by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*" (Ephesians 2:8). He had already assured the Philippians that their salvation was "*from God*" (Philippians 1:28). Later he would stress that he saw no value in "*a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,*" but rather looked to "*that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith*" (Philippians 3:9). Yet the salvation that Christ accomplished in his life and death, which his Spirit now gives by grace through faith, includes rescue not only from sin's *guilt and penalty* but also from its *enslaving, destructive power*. Receiving rescue from sin's tyranny in our daily lives involves our *intentionally internalizing* the reality that our union with Christ in his death and resurrection broke sin's power to curse or control us (see Romans 6:1-14). Our new identity in Christ, bestowed by grace and received by faith, must now define who we are and therefore how we behave—in this context, especially how we treat each other. Here, "*work out your own salvation*" is a summons not to pursue perfection privately but to commit to each other in compassion. We

do so "*with fear and trembling*" because God's grace does not foster complacency but reinforces our sense of the eternal consequences of living together by faith.

**Stand out from the dark and twisted world through trusting contentment and purity (Philippians 2:14-16).** Paul's second command showed the specific application of the general mandate, "*work out your own salvation.*" When Christians succumb to self-centered rivalry and conceit, as some in Philippi were doing, grievances over rights denied are expressed in grumbling against others or questioning God's goodness. On the other hand, when we express the others-centered mindset that is ours in Christ Jesus, believers "*do all things without grumbling or questioning.*" God's grace should free the Philippians from envy toward others and from resentment toward God.

Paul punctuated his summons to contentment and purity with Old Testament echoes. These echoes implied that God's new covenant of grace enables believers to respond to trials and conflicts very differently from ancient Israel in the wilderness. They grumbled and questioned Moses' call as leader (Exodus 15:24; Numbers 11:1-6; 14:1-4). Moses later said that they were "*no longer [God's] children*" because they were blemished, "*a crooked and twisted generation*" (Deuteronomy 32:5). By contrast, the Christians of Philippi were to show that they were "*children of God without blemish,*" even though they were surrounded by "*a crooked and twisted generation.*" God had promised a new covenant, unlike that made at Sinai, in which he would write his word on his people's hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34). When the Philippian believers responded to the gospel with trust, to outside harassment with joy, to each other with humility, and to their society's defiling influences with purity, their lives showed Jesus had established this new and better covenant (Hebrews 7:22; 8:6).

They may have felt like outsiders in a society driven by selfish greed and immediate pleasure. But Paul picked up another Old Testament picture to place their loneliness in a different perspective. God had promised that on the day of resurrection "*those who are wise shall shine like the brightness*

*of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever*” (Daniel 12:3). In Paul’s Greek Bible he read “shine as luminaries [plural],” and those lights were “the stars” in a midnight sky. That was how Christians in Roman Philippi should see themselves: bright points of light in a pitch-black universe.

When Christ’s people pursue peaceful contentment and purity in a culture controlled by ego and appetites, both the church’s survival and its witness benefit. That was Paul’s point in explaining his friends’ radiance as “*holding fast the word of truth*” (Philippians 2:16). Perhaps Paul chose it here for that very reason: like stars in the sky, believers must not only *sustain* their light but also *spread* it into the darkness—holding the word *fast*, but also holding it *out* (NIV) to those who need it. As the believers held fast and held forth God’s truth, it would show that the seed that Paul had planted into their hearts had been watered by the Spirit of Christ: he did not “*labor in vain*” (echoing God’s new creation promise in Isaiah 65:22-23).

**The mind of Christ is seen in the joyful readiness to suffer so that others’ faith grows strong (Philippians 2:17-18).** Paul resumed his strategy of instructing his dear friends by placing before them human leaders who were examples of the Christ-like virtues that they must embrace and exhibit. Paul himself had shown from his own experience that suffering could be borne with joy when Christ was one’s chief treasure (Philippians 1:12-26).

Now he referred again to the possibility that his service on earth would soon end in death: “*if I am to be poured out as a drink offering. . .*” (see 2 Timothy 4:6). In the Old Testament, wine was poured over sacrificial animals to enhance the “pleasing aroma to the Lord” when the offerings were consumed by fire (Numbers 15:3-10; 28:7-8). Paul’s point was that he was prepared to die, if necessary, to further others’ growth in grace; and he saw his service, even to the death, as having a supportive role to the Philippians’ worship and sacrifice (see Romans 12:1). Paul was content just to enhance the fragrance of the church’s priestly service of love to her Lord. In his suffering Paul shared his friends’ joy in the salvation they had received by faith. Since they too shared sufferings

for Jesus’ sake (Philippians 1:29-30), they must rejoice in that gift of God, and in turn share his joy in Christ.

**The mind of Christ is seen in the loving readiness to value others’ welfare above one’s own (Philippians 2:19-24).** Since Paul’s legal situation was still pending, he was not yet at liberty to come to his friends in Philippi and refresh their joy with a face-to-face reunion. But he could provide two other models of self-forgetting commitment to others for Jesus’ sake and he planned to send these colleagues, Timothy and Epaphroditus, to Philippi before he himself could travel there.

The excuse for these men’s travels to Philippi—Epaphroditus immediately, and Timothy as soon as a verdict came down on Paul’s case—was to bring news for which the Philippians anxiously awaited. Paul’s pastoral reason for sending them, though, was deeper. Both men had been so transformed by grace that they exemplified the heart of Christ, and so placed others’ interests before their own.

Timothy was a young man when Paul and Silas recruited him on their way through Lystra, in central Asia Minor (Acts 16:1-3). When Paul was summoned to cross the Aegean Sea and help Macedonians come to know the living God, Timothy accompanied Paul to Philippi (Acts 16:11-12). He remained in Macedonia when Paul moved south to Achaia (Philippians 17:5). Later he returned to Macedonia to convey Paul’s concern for those new believers—and to allay Paul’s concern by returning with news of their vibrant faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-10). Timothy was well-known and no doubt well loved by the churches of Macedonia. Paul’s plan to send Timothy soon was the next best thing to Paul’s coming himself, since Timothy had worked side by side with Paul as though he were his own son (Philippians 2:22; see 1 Timothy 1:2). Better yet, Timothy was “genuinely concerned” for the believers’ welfare (unlike those whose motives were insincere, Philippians 1:17). Though others focused on “their own interests,” Timothy cared for “those of Jesus Christ,” so the believers could see in Timothy’s care for them precisely what Paul meant when he urged them to look not only to their own interests but also to those of others (Philippians 2:4).

**The mind of Christ is seen in the humble**

**readiness to risk life itself to serve others (Philippians 2:25-30).** The Philippians were worried not only about Paul but also about their own brother Epaphroditus, who had carried their contribution to Paul (Philippians 4:18). Either traveling to Rome or while helping Paul there, he had fallen deathly ill. His home church did not know whether he had survived or not. So Paul would send him immediately, probably carrying this letter.

God had healed Epaphroditus, so Paul was eager to send him home to reassure his alarmed congregation. When he arrived, they must honor this man who had followed his Savior without hesitation, who had “nearly died” for Christ, even as Christ had obeyed “to the point of death” for his

own. He and Timothy dared to risk all for Christ’s cause, and in them believers could see reflections of their self-giving Lord.

Paul’s conclusion and transition to a new theme returned to the motif of joy and to the only abiding ground of joy: “*rejoice in the Lord*” (Philippians 3:1). He did not mind repeating himself, and would do so again (Philippians 4:4). Epaphroditus’ recovery and return would give his fellow Philippians joy (Philippians 2:28), and his death would have piled grief on grief for Paul (Philippians 2:27). But as these believers looked not to their circumstances but to their Savior for their source of joy, rejoicing “in the Lord,” their spiritual welfare would be “safe,” and Paul’s repetition worthwhile.

**Recommended Commentary**

*Philippians* by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



# Philippians Lesson 4

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## Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 2:12 – 3:1.

1. In view of Romans 4:1-6 and Galatians 3:7-14, when Paul commanded, “*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,*” was he teaching that we are saved by our works? If not, what did he mean?
2. Some people think that our salvation rests on our trying hard to be holy. Others hold that, since God saves, we do not need to strive after holiness or love until his Holy Spirit makes our obedience effortless. How does the relationship between Paul’s command, “*Work out your own salvation,*” and his assurance, “*God is at work in you*” show that both views are imbalanced?
3. Contrast Romans 7:18 (“*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out*”) to Paul’s confidence that “*for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure*” (Philippians 2:13). What hope does this give you in your war against your sin and your struggle to grow in love and holiness as a “*child of God without blemish?*”
4. Why did Israel grumble against Moses and question God in the wilderness? Was the problem in their situation or in their hearts? What factors in the Philippians’ situation may have tempted them to grumble and question? In what circumstances do you grumble and question? Why?
5. When Christians are outnumbered in a society that ignores God and worships self, a “*crooked and twisted generation,*” we may be inclined to compromise and blend in, or else to withdraw and stay aloof. What alternative response, different from either of those extremes, does Paul present in his picture of bright stars in the midnight sky and his summons to hold fast/hold out God’s Word?

6. How could Paul, who so stressed God's grace and glory, speak of being "proud" (the Greek says, "that I may boast") when his children in the faith like the Philippians live boldly for Jesus? How can we tell the difference between self-centered boasting and Christ-centered boasting?
  
7. What qualities made Timothy an ideal messenger to bring the news of Paul's trial and Paul's continuing affection for the Philippians?
  
8. What Christians in your experience demonstrate the virtues of Timothy? In what actions and choices have you seen their sincere concern for others and their readiness to place Christ's priorities ahead of their personal interests?
  
9. How can you cultivate a heart that reflects the self-forgetting, others-serving mindset that the Philippians could see in Paul, in Timothy, in Epaphroditus, and ultimately in the Christ proclaimed in the gospel?
  
10. State the significance of each of the five titles by which Paul described Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25). Does each of the five "fit" the way you view others in your church? How can thinking of others in these terms deepen your unity in the "battle" for Christ's kingdom?