

WITH FEAR AND TREMBLING, WORK OUT YOUR OWN SALVATION

The relation between God's sovereignty and Man's responsibility has been the source of perennial debate. One extreme is to make mankind mere puppets in God's hands; the other extreme is to make God completely dependent on mankind's decisions. The Bible allows for neither of these, asserting instead both God's sovereignty and mankind's responsibility based on free will. Philippians 2:12-13 presents God's sovereignty and mankind's responsibility clearly, yet somewhat paradoxically. This exegetical paper will focus on these two verses and especially on the nature of the work being done by the Philippians and by God. First, the context of these verses will be established in relation to the whole letter. The debate surrounding the "sociological" vs. "theological" nature of the verses will then be addressed. Next, the Philippian's work and God's work as expressed in these verses will be considered. Finally, two tangential points that arise from the discussion will be brought forward for consideration.¹

Context of Philippians 2:12-13

The focus of this paper is Phil. 2:12-13, but these verses have a context. They are part of the biblical canon, the Pauline corpus, the letter to the Philippians, and within that letter they form the final part of a unit consisting of 1:27 – 2:18.² This unit is particularly concerned with the

¹ There are no textual issues related to the topic of this paper. The only significant textual variant in these two verses is the inclusion or exclusion of *ὡς* in 2:12; however, its inclusion is considered certain. The meaning of the text is not changed either way (Bruce Manning Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 546).

² James P. Berkeley, "Self-Emptying of the Church (Phil 1:27-2:18)," *Foundations* 9 (January 1966): 70.

question, “what is a manner of life worthy of the gospel?” (1:27-30).³ Such a manner of life will necessarily include humility toward one another (2:1-4). To emphasize his point, Paul sets before the Philippians the paradigm / model / archetype of Jesus, in what is commonly known as the “Christ-hymn” (2:5-11), whose attitude and focus they are to share (2:5).⁴ The conclusion to 1:27-2:18 begins with 2:12 which opens with “therefore,” which is there for pointing the reader back to 1:27-2:11 in such a way as to apply “1:27-2:5, now by way of vv. 6-11” to the Philippian congregation.⁵ In light of Christ’s obedient life and subsequent exaltation, the Philippians are to “work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [them]” (2:12-13, ESV). This working out of salvation will include “do[ing] all things without grumbling or disputing, that [they] may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish ... lights in the world” so that Paul can rejoice in them and they in him “in the day of Christ” (2:14-18).

Sociological vs. Theological Interpretation of “Salvation”

In modern scholarship, the proper definition of “salvation” (σωτηρία, soteria) in Phil. 2:12 has been hotly debated. The two opposing camps have been labelled as the “theological” and “sociological” views.⁶ The theological view understands “salvation” in this passage in its normal Pauline usage, i.e., individual salvation; however, those holding this view are often quick to point out that such personal salvation is not isolationist, but occurs within the context of the Christian

³ Duane Frederick Watson, “A Rhetorical Analysis of Philippians and Its Implications for the Unity Question,” *NovT* 30 (January 1988): 60.

⁴ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, rev. ed., WBC 43 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 137.

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995), 231-232.

⁶ Stanley E. Porter, “Fear, Reverence,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 293; Gerald F. Hawthorne, “Philippians, Letter to The,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 277-280.

community.⁷ The sociological view insists that, in the context of Phil. 2:12-13, Paul is referring to the corporate well-being of the Christian community and not to individual salvation.⁸

Reflecting on the text of Philippians and the arguments that have been mustered by each side, Gordon Fee concludes that much of the debate on this subject has been unnecessary due to the false dichotomy of the two views.⁹ Likewise, Joseph Hellerman points out that both views have legitimate points, which “has led recent commentators to avoid a strict dichotomy between the two views.”¹⁰ After all, individual salvation will necessarily include pursuing right relationships with others (i.e., corporate well-being) and a community is by definition a collection of individuals.¹¹ Similarly, one cannot separate what the church is from the salvation of its members.¹² This idea will be pursued further below.

So how should “salvation” be understood in Phil. 2:12? As many commentators point out, Paul’s standard use of the term σωτηρία has in view individual salvation.¹³ Since this is generally

⁷ See O’Brien, *Philippians*, 277-280 and Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 119-121 for defenses of the theological view. For a thorough treatment of “salvation” in Philippians that concludes in favor of the theological view, see Paul S. Cable, “We Await a Savior: Salvation in Philippians,” PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2017.

⁸ See Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 139-140 and James L. Boyce, “‘Work out Your Own Salvation’: Wholeness of Willing and Doing in Philippians 2:12-13,” *Word & World. Supplement Series* 7 (October 2017): 25–31 for defense of the sociological view. This view came to prominence in the 20th century and its popularity is often accredited to the article by J. H. Michael, “Work Out Your Own Salvation,” *Expositor* 12 (1924): 439-450, which was itself supposedly precipitated by J. H. Burn, “Philippians ii.12,” *ExpTim* 34 (1923): 562 and P. Thomson, “Philippians ii.12,” *ExpTim* 34 (1923): 429.

⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 234-235.

¹⁰ Joseph H. Hellerman, *Philippians. Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 130-131.

¹¹ Silva, *Philippians*, 119.

¹² Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon*, 72-73.

¹³ Boyce, “Work Out Your Own Salvation”, 27-28; Porter, “Fear, Reverence,” 293; Silva, *Philippians*, 119-120; Hellerman, *Philippians*, 130-131; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 280; I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, (London: Epworth Press, 1992), 61.

agreed upon, it seems that, unless there is overwhelming evidence to the contrary, σωτηρία should be understood to have individual, final salvation in view.¹⁴ While the sociological view has perhaps served to counter an overemphasis on the individual, the pure-sociological view seems to be reductionistic and fails to fully persuade.¹⁵ Therefore, here as elsewhere, salvation should be understood as an individual being placed in a right relationship with God. Having said that, individual salvation should not be understood as isolationist or in a way that divorces justification, sanctification, or eschatological (i.e., final) salvation.¹⁶ Rather, “σωτηρία is a final, eschatological reality, an end, fundamentally related to Christ-likeness at the individual level but also indicated or foreshadowed by salutary effects on the health of the community.”¹⁷

How is Salvation to Be “Worked Out”?

If it is insisted that “salvation” in Phil. 2:12 refers to individuals’ final salvation via life in the Christian community, in what way are the Philippians to “work out” such salvation? First, in light of the arguments of the sociological view, it will be determined if Paul is speaking to a corporate whole or to individuals. Second, the meaning of “work out” will be established. Third, the meaning of Paul’s statement that the Philippians are to work out salvation *with fear and trembling* will be considered. Finally, God’s role in the Philippians’ work will be discussed.

¹⁴ Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 242.

¹⁵ Hellerman, *Philippians*, 130-131; Fee, *Philippians*, 234-235; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 277-280.

¹⁶ “Because it is directed toward both the eschatological future and the presence of the kingdom brought by Christ, salvation is at the same time a single experience that is already in the past for Christians (1 Cor. 15:2; Eph. 2:5), a process Christians are undergoing in the present (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 1:18; Phil. 2:12), and a future experience (Rom. 5:9–10; 13:11; 1 Cor. 5:5; cf. Phil. 3:20); the single term stands for all phases of what God has brought in Christ.” Allen C. Myers, “Salvation,” *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 905; Gerald G. O’Collins, “Salvation,” *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. by David N. Freedman et. al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 913.

¹⁷ Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 260-261.

Work Out Salvation... Corporately or Individually?

Those promoting the sociological view often point to the fact that Paul is addressing the Philippian congregation as a whole by using the plural “you” throughout the letter, including verse 12.¹⁸ However, the use of the plural does not necessarily mean that Paul is not addressing individuals.¹⁹ Also, by definition, a community is composed of individuals. To speak to a community is necessarily to speak to individuals; for a community to change, the individuals that compose the community must change *individually*. While Paul is concerned about the well-being of the congregation, this well-being is only possible as each individual acts out their faith in Christ.²⁰ As Moises Silva puts it, “To state that the passage refers *not* to individual salvation but to the church’s well-being already assumes a conceptual dichotomy that is both false and lethal.”²¹ For the Philippian congregation to collectively work out its salvation, each individual member must work out their own salvation.

Another argument put forward in defense of the sociological view is that Paul has been focusing on looking to the interests of others (2:1-4), so for him to begin referring to self-interested work would be too abrupt of a change.²² However, Paul shows himself in Gal. 6:1-5 to be capable of moving seamlessly between corporate and individual concerns.²³ Not only that, but “even in the exemplum of Christ, the attitude exemplified is an individual one.”²⁴

¹⁸ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 140.

¹⁹ Hellerman, *Philippians*, 133; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 278-280.

²⁰ Michael Parsons, “Being Precedes Act: Indicative and Imperative in Paul’s Writing,” *EvQ* 60 (April 1988): 120; Fee, *Philippians*, 234-235; Marshall, *Philippians*, 66; Silva, *Philippians*, 119.

²¹ Silva, *Philippians*, 119.

²² Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 139-140.

²³ Silva, *Philippians*, 120.

²⁴ Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 247.

Work Out Salvation... In the Manner of κατεργάζομαι

We now turn to the meaning of the phrase “work out” in verse 12. The Philippians are told to κατεργάζεσθε (katergazesthe, work out) their salvation; this is the only occurrence in the Bible in which “salvation” is the object of the verb κατεργάζομαι (katergazomai).²⁵ This verb, κατεργάζομαι, means to *achieve, accomplish, bring about, produce*²⁶ and contains the idea of consciously exerting oneself to the completion of a goal.²⁷ Paul is calling upon the Philippians to exert sustained, conscious effort to holy living and he does so in a way that makes the force of his statement “impossible to tone down.”²⁸ As Jesus was exalted only after a life of obedience, so the Philippians must share Christ’s obedience if they wish to share His exaltation.²⁹

Does This Not Lead to Salvation by Works?

On the sociological view, there is no concern over works-salvation because individual salvation is not at all in view; however, if salvation is understood in the traditional sense, and the Philippians are to exert themselves to attain it, does that not lead to salvation through works instead of grace?³⁰ Some have tried to avoid such implications by focusing on κατεργάζομαι as

²⁵ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 277.

²⁶ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 531.

²⁷ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 41; John Piper, *Providence*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 652; Paul A. Holloway, *Philippians, Herm* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 131; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 280.

²⁸ Silva, *Philippians*, 122.

²⁹ Fee, *Philippians*, 229; Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 247-248; Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of Paul*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 221; J. Ross Wagner, “Working Out Salvation: Holiness and Community in Philippians,” pages 257-274 in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, ed. by Kent E. Brower and Andy Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 259; Holloway, *Philippians*, 130; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 274.

³⁰ John Piper refers to Paul’s phrasing in these verses as “risky” (Piper, *Providence*, 652).

bringing forth the fruits of what is already acquired as opposed to attaining what one does not yet have, similar to how one can own a goldmine or farm but must “work it out” in order to make profitable what is already owned.³¹ This is also expressed in the terms of “imperative and indicative” or “being what you already are.”³² There is certainly some truth in these arguments, but Stephen Geiger, while sympathetic to such views, notes that “the vast majority of times *κατεργάζομαι* is used with a direct object, the direct object is the consequence of the working.”³³

Another option to avoid any idea of works-righteousness is “to tone down human activity by appealing to divine grace.”³⁴ But, as Silva goes on to point out, “The text itself, by its very juxtaposition of those two emphases, cries out loudly against any such attempts at resolution.”³⁵ It seems that much of the problem is caused by an attempt to separate aspects of salvation that, while distinct in some ways, defy any attempt to be separated – more on this below.

Work Out Salvation... With Fear and Trembling

Paul tells the Philippians, not simply to work out their salvation, but to work out their salvation *with fear and trembling*. Not only is this a strong phrase of itself, but Paul even words the sentence so that this attitude of *fear and trembling* is emphasized.³⁶ Paul does not mean to indicate that the Philippians should fear that they are not in a right relationship with God or that

³¹ John Warren, “Work out Your Own Salvation.” *EvQ* 16 (April 1944): 125; Anthony A. Hoekema, “Created Persons.” *Reformed Journal* 36 (March 1986): 11.

³² M. J. Harris, “Colossians,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 324.

³³ Stephen Geiger, “Philippians 2:12-13: Work out Your Own Salvation with Fear and Trembling,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 107 (Fall 2010): 284-286.

³⁴ Silva, *Philippians*, 121-122.

³⁵ Silva, *Philippians*, 122.

³⁶ Holloway, *Philippians*, 131; Marshall, *Philippians*, 61; Geiger, “Philippians 2:12-13,” 289.

they should in any way be disheartened at the prospect of failing to attain salvation – after all, Paul is writing a letter of joy and encouragement, not one of anger and discipline.³⁷ In the immediate context, Paul has even commended the Philippians for their prior obedience (2:12). To understand what Paul does mean, we need first to look at other uses of this phrase in the Old and New Testaments.

The general concept of fear is pervasive in the OT and NT and includes “various degrees of anxious dread or terror”; however, the most frequent and important kind of fear is that directed toward God.³⁸ This fear of God includes the concept of reverence and awe, is often “precipitated by the overwhelming brilliance and sheer magnificence which surround divine theophanies,” and is connected to loving and obeying God.³⁹ While the general concept of fear, in its various usages, is found throughout the OT and NT, the exact phrase *fear and trembling* (φόβος και τρόμος, phobos kai tromos) is also found.⁴⁰ In the LXX (the Greek translation of the OT), the phrase is used thirteen times, usually indicating the “appropriate response [of Israel’s enemies] to God’s mighty acts.”⁴¹

In the NT, the use of the phrase *fear and trembling* is unique to Paul and is found in four places: 1 Cor. 2:3, 2 Cor. 7:15, Phil. 2:12, and Eph. 6:5.⁴² In the three instances other than Phil.

³⁷ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians: A Theological Introduction*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), Chapter 4, Kindle location 941.

³⁸ S. E. Porter, “Fear,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 497.

³⁹ Myers, “Fear,” 378.

⁴⁰ Many commentators have noted that *fear and trembling* appears to be a stock phrase. See Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 141; Hellerman, *Philippians*, 130; Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 251.

⁴¹ Hellerman, *Philippians*, 130; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 284. Two exceptions to this phrase being related to God’s enemies are Psalm 2:11 and Genesis 9:2, but both of these instances are still related to God’s powerful acts (O’Brien, *Philippians*, 284).

⁴² Porter, “Fear, Reverence,” 293.

2:12, humans are the immediate object of the fear and trembling – a point that those of the sociological view stress when arguing that Paul has human relationships exclusively in mind.⁴³ However, even Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin – advocates of the sociological view – conclude that “The phrase [fear and trembling] comes from Jewish piety and may mean... an attitude of “obedience” or “holding oneself in weakness” toward the will of God according to the pattern of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ Paul S. Cable seems correct when he concludes that “In each Pauline case, the “fear and trembling” appears to be a response to the reality of God’s presence or agency in the actions of human beings rather than a “manward” or horizontal attitude of humility.”⁴⁵

In light of the general concept of the fear of God in the Bible and the specific use of the phrase *fear and trembling*, Phil. 2:12-13 should be understood as indicating the proper attitude of the Philippians toward God as they strive to be holy as the Lord is holy (1 Peter 1:16). This attitude toward God, however, will necessarily be reflected in the Philippians’ attitude toward each other.

Work Out Salvation... By God’s Working

The appropriateness of an attitude of *fear and trembling* becomes clear by Paul’s statement in verse 13.⁴⁶ In verse 12 Paul instructs the Philippians to apply themselves in fear and trembling and with all diligence toward the goal of salvation. However, lest the Philippians (or us) fall into despair at the magnitude of the task, Paul immediately follows with the reason the Philippians

⁴³ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 141.

⁴⁴ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 141-142. Such an understanding of *fear and trembling* begs the question: how can obedience to God and conformity to Christ *not* be associated with an individual’s salvation?

⁴⁵ Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 251; see also O’Brien, *Philippians*, 282-284 and Fee, *Philippians*, 236.

⁴⁶ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 280; Fee, *Philippians*, 236

are to work in such a manner: “for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13).⁴⁷ Yes, the Philippians are to work, but they can work confidently, for *God* is working in them. Both instances of the word *work* in verse 13 translate the word ἐργάζομαι (ergazomai, to work), a word closely related and roughly equivalent to κατεργάζομαι.⁴⁸ Some commentators, however, emphasize that ἐργάζομαι is always used of supernatural activity and indicates that the action is sure to succeed.⁴⁹

The important point is that God *is working* in the Philippians. Paul says that God works in the Philippians so that they both have the desire and the ability to work toward God’s good purposes (εὐδοκία, eudokia).⁵⁰ The word *God’s* is not explicitly within the text, leading some to argue that εὐδοκία should be understood as general, brotherly goodwill; however, even advocates of such a view concede that “εὐδοκία usually refers to the “benevolent purpose” or “goodwill” of God.”⁵¹ There is good reason to understand εὐδοκία as referring to *God’s* good pleasure / purposes and nothing compels the reader to understand it otherwise.⁵² The “good pleasure” toward which God is working is ultimately the Philippians’ (and our) salvation.⁵³

⁴⁷ John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians,” in *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. W. C. Cotton and John Albert Broadus, vol. 13 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 219.

⁴⁸ Silva, *Philippians*, 118 note 1; Morna Hooker, “Philippians” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. X, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 144. Cable, however states that the two verbs are always distinct, though “their semantic ranges do overlap considerably” (Cable, “We Await a Savior,” 243).

⁴⁹ Kenneth Willis Clark, “The Meaning of ΕΝΕΡΓΕΩ and ΚΑΤΕΡΓΕΩ in the New Testament,” *JBL* 54 (1935): 95, 101; O’Brien, *Philippians*, 287; Barclay, *Philippians*, 41.

⁵⁰ Marshall advocates the translation “for his own chosen purpose” (Marshall, *Philippians*, 62).

⁵¹ Hawthorne and Martin, *Philippians*, 142-143.

⁵² Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon*, 74; Wagner, “Working Out Salvation,” 260; Hellerman, *Philippians*, 134. This is also reflected in almost every major English translation.

⁵³ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 289.

But How Does God Work in the Believer?

If God is working in the Philippians so that they desire and have the ability to work toward their final salvation, how does He do this work? Paul does not explain the mechanism of God working in the Philippians, but he does assert the fact. The Philippians' conscious effort is called upon to the utmost, but they can have confidence because God is working in them so that they desire and have the ability to do His will. This growing in holiness is commonly referred to as *sanctification*.⁵⁴ While Paul does not explain in these verses how God works in the Philippians, based on other passages (e.g., John 3:5-6; Acts 2:38; Romans 8; Ephesians 1:13-14; Titus 3:5) it seems that the most natural understanding is that God works within the Philippians, and believers in general, via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ As Jack Cottrell notes, in sanctification, "God Himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is at work in us, to help us both to *want* to do what is right ("to will") and to help us actually to *do* it ("to work")."⁵⁶

What are the mechanisms of this indwelling? In what way can God indwell us? How can God work within us so that we want to do His will while allowing us to retain our free will, even calling upon us to exert ourselves towards salvation? We do not know. "The mode of the Spirit's operation in sanctification is encompassed with mystery."⁵⁷ While mystery remains, recognizing

⁵⁴ Hoekema, "Created Persons," 10; Geiger, "Philippians 2:12-13," 294-295; Jack Cottrell, *Power from on High: What the Bible Says about the Holy Spirit*, (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2007), 352-353.

⁵⁵ Cottrell, *Power from on High*, 358; I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 315; John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 99. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit (or lack thereof) has been the source of no small debate within the Restoration Movement. Already in 1864, Moses Lard found it necessary to "vindicate" the indwelling of the Holy Spirit because many of his brethren denied it (Moses Lard, "Spiritual Influence as it relates to the Christian," *Lard's Quarterly* Vol. 1 (1864): 225). Unfortunately, space does not allow a treatment of the subject here.

⁵⁶ Cottrell, *Power from on High*, 357.

⁵⁷ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 101.

that humans are “created persons” is a helpful model: we are created, and therefore dependent on the Creator; we are persons, and therefore have independent wills.⁵⁸

Tangential Theological Concepts

Before concluding, two theological concepts that arise tangentially from the discussion above will be briefly addressed.

Monergism vs. Synergism

The debate between God’s sovereignty and Man’s responsibility manifests itself in the debate between monergism (i.e., it is exclusively God working for our salvation, no effective human input involved) and synergism (i.e., that an individual, even if only by using actual free will to turn to God in faith, cooperates with God to bring about his salvation).⁵⁹ Consider the following statements from self-identifying Calvinists (i.e., monergists) related to Phil. 2:12-13:

God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that because God works, we work⁶⁰

What Paul makes plain here in Philippians is how fully our own effort is called into action. We do not wait for the miracle; we act the miracle. We are not deluded into thinking that our action is unnecessary, or that it is decisive. It is neither. On the contrary, our effort in the pursuit of final salvation is necessary. And God’s willing and doing are decisive.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Hoekema, “Created Persons,” 8.

⁵⁹ C.G. Fry, “Monergism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 1025; C.G. Fry, “Synergism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 1552.

⁶⁰ Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 104.

⁶¹ Piper, *Providence*, 652.

they are encouraged to work out their salvation precisely because it is God who is at work in them, both at the level of their wills and at the level of their actions. God's sovereignty functions as an incentive to work, not a disincentive.⁶²

The point of including these quotations is to illustrate that, even though there is often a retreat into some form of, "but it is actually God working," the fact remains that a believer is called upon to exert himself. Perhaps there is a theoretical, abstract sense that could be described as monergism, but at every person's *experiential* level, synergism is the appropriate descriptive term. Yes, salvation is completely a gift of God, and yes, God even works within us to effect salvation, but we are still called upon to exert conscious effort. At the experiential level at least, synergism can only be avoided by twisting the definition of the term beyond recognition.

What God Hath Joined Together

The Bible presents us with some difficult concepts, such as God's sovereignty and Man's responsibility, that can create difficult paradoxes; however, there is danger in trying to break such concepts apart in order to relieve any perceived tension. Take for example the concept of God as trinity: we can focus attention on either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit, but we run into error when we speak of one without keeping the other two in view. Likewise, salvation. In different senses we can say that we have been saved, are being saved, and yet will be saved. But if we speak of one aspect of salvation without keeping the other two firmly in view we will inevitably run into error. It is a three-legged stool: remove one leg and the whole thing falls.

This tendency to divorce parts of a concept seems to be at the root of at least some of the confusion over Phil. 2:12-13. The separation of "community" and "individual" has already been addressed in this regard. Similarly, the tendency to divorce aspects of salvation from the totality

⁶² Donald A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *WTJ* 54 (1992): 23.

of salvation (justification-sanctification-eschatological) causes confusion over the use of the term “salvation” and creates the fear of legalism or works-righteousness. The fact is, we can focus in on justification, sanctification, or eschatological salvation, but as with the trinity, so here: all three must be held as a unity, even when focus is placed on an individual aspect. When we exert ourselves toward sanctification, we do so based on the fact of our justification and looking forward to our full, future salvation when Christ returns. Likewise, we cannot claim justification or eschatological salvation if we do not have sanctification. The Bible has intertwined the various aspects of salvation in a way that makes it clear that they are not to be separated. There can be an ordering of the aspects, but there cannot be a separation. What God hath joined together, let not man separate.⁶³

Conclusion

So, what are we to make of Paul’s exhortation in Phil. 2:12-13 for the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”? The Philippians are to exert themselves fully toward the task of conforming themselves to Jesus’s example. This conforming has individual salvation in view, but will necessarily manifest itself within human relationships. The Philippians are not called to rely upon their own power; rather, Paul alerts them to the fact that their willing and doing is in fact *God’s work*.⁶⁴ God is at work in the Philippians’ lives to sanctify them, to lead them into

⁶³ Or, as James Burton Coffman rather undiplomatically puts it, “Scholars are entirely too sensitive about “work” and sinners, or Christians either, “saving themselves.” No apostle, or other NT evangelist, had any of the foolish notions on this subject which clutter the minds of so many today” (James Burton Coffman, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians*, (Abilene, TX: A.C.U. Press, 1984), 271).

⁶⁴ “Even where human responsibility is stressed in the practical ‘outworking’ of salvation (Phil. 2:12), the emphasis is on assurance of the comprehensive divine ‘inworking’ (Phil. 2:13)” (M. J. Harris, “Salvation,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 765).

conformity with His Son. And this is the amazing fact of the Christian life: *God Himself* is working within the believer to effect His good purposes, both in our daily lives and ultimately to our eternal salvation. What is the appropriate response to God's mighty acts? No less than *fear and trembling*. Paul is using the language of theophany, and the appropriate response to theophany is that of Isaiah: "woe is me... here I am, send me!" (Isaiah 6:1-8).⁶⁵ It would be hard to express it better than Stephen Geiger when he says,

My sanctified Christian life is a place where the God of all creation is most intimately and powerfully in action... I treat sanctification not as mundane, but as a matter of divine importance... And in the end, I pursue Christian living with fear and trembling because at some level I don't understand ... I don't understand exactly what it means that God himself could be creating my thoughts and producing my actions. I don't understand precisely how this could be. All I know is that it is. It is the fact: God himself is crafting the good works of my mind, my lips, my hands, and my feet. And if that's true – and it is – and if it is mighty, and if it is divine, then it is no surprise that one's natural and inevitable reaction is one of fear and one of trembling... I sense my smallness.⁶⁶

Because God has chosen to work in us, we work with all our might.⁶⁷ Because it is *God* who works in us, we approach the task of sanctification with the reverence and awe due Him. This interplay of man's work and God's work is undoubtedly a paradox that resists exact definition; let us rejoice in its truth rather than get distracted by what we do not understand.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Wagner, "Working Out Salvation," 263.

⁶⁶ Geiger, "Philippians 2:12-13," 294-295. Ellipses are in the original.

⁶⁷ Cottrell, *Power from on High*, 358.

⁶⁸ Marshall, *Philippians*, 62-63. Cf. Deuteronomy 29:29.

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