

“‘Work Out Your Own Salvation...’ Wait. What?”

I. Introduction: Why the Uncertainty of Phil. 2:12 Is Out of Place

The city of Philippi is unique among the featured cities of the New Testament both because of its history and population. Even though the city occupied a wide valley in Greece, the citizens of Philippi were largely Roman citizens and the city itself was considered significant even in Rome because of what had happened there.

If you think back to Roman history or Shakespearean literature, you know the story of how Julius Ceasar was betrayed by his friend Brutus, murdered on the ides of March in Rome, and eulogized by Marc Antony. So after Julius Ceasar’s death, the empire was divided, and a civil war commenced among the rulers there: Marc Antony and Octavian waging war against Brutus and Cassius. These four met on the plain of Philippi in 42 BC, a vicious battle from which Marc Antony and Octavian emerged victorious. Octavian returned to Rome, and Marc Antony went to Egypt, effectively dividing the empire in two for ten years until these two men went into battle, not on land but at sea off of the coast of Philippi. This time, Marc Antony and his new companion Cleopatra lost what is now called the Battle of Actium and fled back to Egypt. Octavian returned to Rome as the sole and triumphant ruler of the Roman Empire and was given a new title by the Roman Senate. They named him Ceasar Augustus.

Ceasar Augustus populated Rome with heroes and veterans of the two battles that were fought there and granted large land grants on the plain of Philippi to those heroes. Citizens of Philippi were granted Roman citizenship and enjoyed both the favor and protection of Rome.

Yet Paul, writing from prison in Rome some 20 to 30 years later, warns the Christians of Philippi of persecution which is coming from — of all places — Rome. Phil. 1:27-30 — *“Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. 29 For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, 30 having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me.”*

Paul, under house arrest and chained to a member of Ceasar’s personal

guard, is a witness to the change that Nero is going through and understands that Nero is going to turn Rome against Christians — even Roman Christians.

So Paul's letter is his most personal letter, His most passionate, and a letter which is intended to strengthen and encourage the Philippians when this anticipated wave of persecution falls upon them.

In this circumstance, it would not only be totally out of character but also cruel and thoughtless to write anything which would inject further stress and self-doubt into the hearts of the Philippian believers whom Paul is wanting to encourage. And yet, we find this verse in the vast majority of Bible translations.

- II. Phil. 2:5-12 — *“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.** 13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”*

How in the world can the Apostle Paul write this when he had penned so many other verses that would contradict what appears to be written here?

Eph. 2:8-9 — *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.”*

Rom. 4:4-8 — *“Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. 5 However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. 6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 7 “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 8 Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”*

1 Cor. 1:30 — *“But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption.”*

Gal. 3:1-3 — *“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? 2 This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? 3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?”*

- II. So how could Paul write in Phil. 2:12 that we are to *“Work out our own salvation with fear and trembling”*?

And the answer is that Paul didn't write Phil. 2:12 as we read and interpret

it in most translations. What Paul wrote was something that even the original translators didn't understand and therefore translated incorrectly.

III. So what is correct? What is this verse that is translated in such a way as to put us under fear and almost certain condemnation?

A. Let's begin with the verb, to work out. The Hebrew word here is kah-terr-God'-zo-mai, and it means "to perform, accomplish, achieve to work out i.e. to do that from which something results; to fashion i.e. render one fit for a thing"

Rom. 5:3 — And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh G2716 patience;

Rom. 7:8 — "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced G2716 in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead."

Rom 7:15 — "For what I am doing G2716, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do."

Rom 7:18 — "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform G2716 what is good I do not find."

2 Cor. 7:10 — "For godly sorrow produces G2716 repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."

As an actor, my brother Jed is regionally renowned for his performances every year playing Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. When he walks on to the stage in character, Jed has a script and a particular character to become on the stage. We could say that he "performs" *A Christmas Carol*, as "to perform" is the first definition of kah-terr-God'-zo-mai. In the same way, an actor might tell Jed, "Wow, Jed! You've really 'worked out' the character of Scrooge!" — using "worked out" in the same way that Paul is using the word kah-terr-God'-zo-mai. I think the best translation of Phil 2:12 would tell us to "walk out" our own salvation — not to "work out."

What you and I are doing is not "walking out the role of a character in a play." When we first received Christ, each one of us as believers stepped into a new identity. Our old man was dead. Our sins were forgiven and our past put behind us. We received a new identity, a new and eternal life. We were ordained with a particular calling that was shaped for each one of us taking in mind the our geographic setting, our education and personality. And the Holy Spirit was breathed into our body where He fused Him-

self with our own spirit so that He and I, He and you, He and each and every believer become one. Then as we surrender to His will, His voice, His direction in our lives, we are “walking out” our own Earthly purpose, our own story, our own divinely ordained role, our own salvation.

B. So what about this “‘fear and trembling’ thing” — this “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

- 1. Well, the bad news about “fear” is that the Greek word for fear, “pho-bos” means exactly what we think it means and can be defined as “great fear” or “terror.” BUT, according to Strong’s Concordance, phobos also means, “the reverence one should give to a husband.” As Christ becomes more and more known to us, every believer should come to a place where they know Him as their bridegroom, as their Lord and spiritual husband. There is no terror in such a relationship but there is a passionate and reverent respect.**

1 John 4:18 — “There is no fear G5401 in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: G5401 because fear G5401 hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love.”

- 2. “Trembling” also seems to be a bad-news for us because Strong’s defines the Greek word for trembling as “a trembling or quaking with fear; with fear and trembling, used to describe the anxiety of one who distrusts his ability completely to meet all requirements, but religiously does his utmost to fulfil his duty”**

Psalm 2:11 — “Serve the Lord with fear, And rejoice with trembling.”

Mark 5:33 — “But the woman fearing and trembling, G5141 knowing what was done in her, came and fell down before him, and told him all the truth.”

Luke 8:47 — “And when the woman saw that she was not hid, she came trembling, G5141 and falling down before him, she declared unto him before all the people for what cause she had touched him, and how she was healed immediately.”

2 Cor. 7:15-16 — “And his (Titus) affection for you is all the greater when he remembers that you were all obedient, receiving him with fear and trembling. 16 I am glad I can have complete confidence in you.”

Eph. 6:5 — “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ.”

IV. So How Might We Reconstruct Phil. 2:12?

*“Wherefore, my loved ones, as ye have always obeyed, not just in my presence presence only but now much more in my absence, **walk out the path which the indwelling Holy Spirit defines for you day-by-day as He works to conform you to the perfect image of Christ. Surrender fully to Him in reverential awe and trembling at His goodness.** 13 For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”*