

# Session #3: Philippians 2:12-3.1a

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## Letting your Light Shine before all 2:12-18

As we move away from the hymn offered in Philippians 2:5-11 studied last week, now that we have once again visited the gift of God's salvation Jesus Christ; St. Paul offers in this section what our response should be. Paul calls the community in Philippi (and us as well) to "work out" personal salvation in the midst of a corrupt world thus letting the light of faith shine for all to see.



in  
St.

### **2:12 work out your salvation**

If this letter were written directly to us and therefore this statement made just to us, there most probably would be an overwhelming sense of the impossible. How am I suppose to get myself to heaven, sinful as I am? We must remember two things as we look at this verse. One of St. Paul's main teaching is that we have little to do with our own salvation. It is a gift given by God. The very next verse reminds us of that: *For God is the one...* (verse 13). The second thing to remember is that St. Paul is writing to the COMMUNITY, to the Church in Philippi. So, when he writes "you" it is not in the singular but in the communal understanding of the word. We are responsible for one another. Together we work out our salvation. But it is work we must do. And how do we do that, work out our salvation? By making all effort to live out the gospel supporting one another as we do so. Jesus Christ opened the door to heaven but our walking through that door is dependent on our working towards that goal. And in studying the New Testament we come to know what we must do:

- Working live out the faith in this world (2 Timothy 4:7-8)
- by following the commandments (Matthew 19:17)
- Persevering in good works (Romans 2:7)
- Striving for holiness (Hebrews 12:14)
- Praying in Earnest (1 Thessalonians 5:17)
- Fighting against the forces of evil (Ephesians 6:11)
- Fighting against the selfish demands of the flesh (Romans 8:13; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27)

St. Paul continues that this challenge, this call is so serious that we pursue our salvation **with fear and trembling**. These two words, this concept comes from the Old Testament and means to go forth in awe and all seriousness in carrying out and serving the will of God with a sense of dread should we fail at the task. (Exodus 20:18-20; Psalm 2:11-12) This "dread" is not a freaking out or grand anxiety but a profound sense of reverence and respect and desire not to disappoint.

One last comment. Personally I take great comfort in the words: *work out*. It speaks to me of process and not perfection immediately. When I take on a new knitting or crocheting project with a pattern I am not familiar with, I take time before had to "work out" what the directions are asking for often having to pull out my work and start again. We are meant to keep trying, never stop trying to get it right.

**2:13 for God is at work in you**

So just in case you became overwhelmed at the discussion of the last verse, St. Paul reminds us all that our salvation is not dependent on us. It is both God's will (**both to will**) that we spend eternity with Him in heaven and to accomplish that we simply must cooperate with that will. And (**to work**) God will do what He can, respecting human free will, to make that happen. St. Paul reminds us that God is within each of us moving us to **desire** what is good (i.e. God's will) and then give us the power, the strength to do the **work**.

**2:14 Do everything without grumbling or questioning.**

In St. Paul's masterful writing, what began in verse twelve (fear and trembling) as a reference to the Old Testament now continues here in verse fourteen and will continue in the next five verses with other images drawing on the Old Testament. Can you guess where we might find a story of individuals, having just experience God's saving power grumbling about their circumstances and questioning God's wisdom? If you said the Israelites in the desert you would be correct. (Exodus 16:2-3; 7-8). St. Paul is challenging the community in Philippi to maintain an attitude of gratitude regarding their circumstances regardless of what is happening. The word *questioning* would be better translated as "arguing". We, as Christians, are not meant to live an un-reflected life, one devote of seeking understanding. And all too often understanding comes from those questions we seek the answer to. But, we are not to be like the Israelites who argued with God about their circumstances in the desert.

**2:15 blameless and innocent...in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation**

In this

verse there are several allusions to the Old Testament:

- **Blameless:** St. Paul calls all the faithful to walk closely with God so that they/we are without sin. The idea of blameless was a quality that God called Abram to when renewing the covenant with him. "*Walk in my presence and be blameless*" (Genesis 17:1)
- **Children of God:** This term is used throughout the Old Testament when speaking of the Israelites. They were God's "chosen people" and therefore His children. St. Paul in his writings extends this privilege to all believers in Jesus since we have received "a spirit of adoption" through Christ, therefore, we are the children of God (Romans 8:15-16).
- **Without blemish:** Those animals who were used for temple sacrifice had to be without any flaw, without blemish. In Baptism we are freed from all sin, without blemish of sin. St. Paul's challenge is for us to remain as close to that perfection as we can.

Then St. Paul goes on to recognize that this task is not easy because we must live *in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation*. This too is something we can all understand and relate to, since there has been no generation that has not had it's share of crooked and perverse people. These words, crooked and perverse, also come from the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 32, as Moses is giving his last address to the people, knowing that they would be living among a pagan society, challenges them be strong in their faith so that they might **shine as lights in the world**. The word "lights" would be better translated "luminaries" or "stars". From the beginning of the call of Abraham, as we study the bible we understand that God called a people to set them apart in hopes that they would live exactly as He commanded and wanted – in peace, mercy, compassion and love

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for all. In that this people would be a beam of light in a dark, dark world drawing others to it as a moth to a flame. But how are we to do this? St. Paul gives us the answer in the next verse:

### **2:16 *holding on to the word of life***

Scholars argue for two different meanings to this phrase. First we can understand it to mean that to remain strong in faith, especially in the face of persecution we are to remain strong in our faith and we do that by knowing, believing and holding onto the gospel. The second idea comes from the way one translates the Greek words that we read here as *hold on to*. There are those scholars who offer that a better translation to *hold out* or to *offer*. They suggest, especially following the idea of Christians shining their lights in the world, that what St. Paul is saying is that we are called in faith to hold the gospel out, to proclaim the gospel to all those we meant. It is most likely that St. Paul meant both and intended both in his wording. St. Paul ends this verse proclaiming the personal interest he has taken in this community by talking like a father who wants nothing more than to be proud of the accomplishments of his children –***that in the day of Christ I may be proud (boast) that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.*** The “day of Christ” is to be understood as the day of judgment, whether it be at their/our hour of death or at the end of time.

These next two verses not only bring an conclusion to this section but take us back all the way to 1:27. Through this section, from the introductory comments (1:27-30), the outline of the qualities of a believer (2:1-4), the song of praise (2:5-11) and the section just studied calling all to be lights for the world (2:12-16) come to a conclusion (2:17-18) in a call to continue the struggle for the sake of the gospel.

### **2:17 *poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial service of your faith***

In verse fifteen St. Paul speaks of coming before the Lord “without blemish” alluding to the expectation of perfection for temple sacrifice. St. Paul continues that image here creating the understanding one who lives in faith often must sacrifice their comfort, their time, their wants, their desires so that the gospel might be proclaimed and lived through their actions and words. St. Paul is alluding to the possibility that his life may soon end in execution, but it is a willing sacrifice because just as the “libation” (wine offering) was poured out each morning and evening at the temple along with the animal sacrifice, he will join his sacrifice to the communities in Philippi. For St. Paul, martyrdom was/is the perfect act of worship and the fullest expression of what it means to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. By the way, remembering that this community is primarily gentile, they would still get this image of sacrifice being poured out because it was a common practice in pagan worship as well to offer wine or oil to the deity.

### **Travel Plans 2:19-24**

In this next section we move to more practical matters. St. Paul informs the community of Philippi who he has sent to them and why – Timothy, a longtime companion of St. Paul and Epaphroditus, their messenger who, unfortunately was recently very ill. It may seem strange that St. Paul writes this in the middle of the letter and not at the beginning or end; but scholars believe the method to St.

Paul's "madness" is that he writes this now so as to offer examples of individuals who are living out the teaching he just gave in verses twelve to eighteen.

**2:19 I send Timothy**

The community in Philippi would already know Timothy because he was one of the founding members (Acts 16:1-40). Timothy was from the city of Lystra in Asia Minor and met St. Paul during St. Paul's second missionary trip (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy was the son of a Jewish mother who became Christian and a Greek Father. When St. Paul first meets Timothy, Timothy is at the very least an older teen, well respected in the Christian community in Lystra but uncircumcised. St. Paul, wanting to bring him along on the mission trip has Timothy circumcised. Why? Most likely so that Timothy could speak to the Jewish communities and enter the synagogues they come to in their trip. Some scholars suggest that Timothy was basically a shy and timid man because of what St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:10: *When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.* Because of their close relationship, some would say as a father to a son, Timothy was entrusted with great responsibilities and was the recipient of two letters penned by St. Paul – 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy.

**2:20 I have no one comparable to him**

What a wonderfully kind thing to say, but even more so in reading the original Greek: *isopsychos* meaning of like soul or mind. St. Paul goes on to compliment Timothy by saying: **for genuine interest in whatever concerns you.** It is not that St. Paul is saying that Timothy will be a wonderful conversationalist being able to talk on whatever topics interest you from knitting to sports trivia. What St. Paul is saying is that Timothy has a true heart for ministry and will be genuine in all his encounters, seeking to help out where he can.

**2:21 seek their own interests**

This verse is offered in contrast to the ministry of Timothy and takes us back into the instructions we received in 2:3-4. To refresh our memories: *We spoke earlier of St. Paul's awareness that some were preaching the Gospel in hopes of getting him further into trouble. They were doing the right thing but for the wrong reason. We are challenged here to recognize that even though it happens it is not the true way of walking in the light of faith. All Christians must be aware of their bad or negative actions but just as aware of their motives in doing good. We should always be in a process of purifying ourselves. We can never be perfect but we should never stop trying to perfect ourselves.* (Notes from Session 2 on 2:3)

**2:22 you know his worth**

St. Paul may be referring to their initial contact when establishing the Church in Philippi on that second missionary trip. If they don't remember St. Paul goes on to let them know by saying **he served along with me for the cause of the gospel.** The Greek word used for *served* is *douleuo* which better translates to *slaved*. St. Paul writes in hopes that the readers will connect Timothy along with one of the main themes of this letter of being in service to the gospel. Remember, St. Paul began the letter by identifying himself and Timothy as "slaves" (1:1) and then offered the teaching on incarnation of Jesus as taking the form of a slave (2:1-11). Put that together with the probability that the majority of the Church in Philippi are slaves hopefully places Timothy in high regard.

**how as a son with a father**

All scholarship agree that the relationship between Timothy and St. Paul was a close one. Some will say that this image of a son to a father is the way St.

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Paul felt with all those young men whom he mentored over the years. Other's say that the relationship with Timothy was special to St. Paul if for no other reason it was one of the longest he held during his ministry.

**2:23 *how things go with me***

Most certainly St. Paul is referring to his upcoming trial.

**2:24 *I myself will also come soon***

As we have stated before (1:19), St. Paul, while a realist knows that his death may be eminent, his hope is that the courts will find for his freedom and he will once again be able to join those communities who he has started and supported him.

### **The Return of Epaphroditus 2:25-3:1a**

In this section we hear of another who will be traveling to Philippi – Epaphroditus. The duty of Epaphroditus is very different that of Timothy's. Timothy comes as St. Paul official emissary. In many ways Epaphroditus is a "return to sender" gift. We will read in 4:10-20 that Epaphroditus was sent to St. Paul from the community of Philippi with financial resources and most probably with the intention of staying with St. Paul to be of service in any way he can. But now Epaphroditus is returning to the community. St. Paul writes carefully so as not to bring shame to Epaphroditus in this homecoming making sure the community understands it is because of his illness and no other reason. It is likely that Epaphroditus was a respected leader in the community of Philippi, why else would they have trusted him with their financial gift. So, there may be some embarrassment in his return. There is one other reason that Epaphroditus is being sent home. We will read in 4:2-3 that a division in the community has been created by two women: Euodia and Syntyche. In their respect for Epaphroditus he may have greater success in healing the division.

**2:25 *Epaphroditus***

If there is a familiar ring to the name it is a derivative of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. It was a common name in Greece at the time. We only hear of Epaphroditus here in this letter to the Philippians and what scholars gather from the letter Epaphroditus originates from the Christian Community in Philippi and was sent to St. Paul either with a letter, financial support or to help him or all three. If it was Epaphroditus intention to stay as a servant of St. Paul he is a brave man indeed, because often times when Rome condemned someone to death they would also kill their close servants. They belief was these servants had a hand in whatever was the crime. Epaphroditus went to serve St. Paul realizing this decision could mean his own death. While in service to St. Paul Epaphroditus became deathly ill, and while he has gotten better needs to return home to fully recover.

**2:27 *sorrow upon sorrow***

St. Paul is speaking to the state of mind should Epaphroditus have had died in his service and then having to communicate that to the community in Philippi.

**2:29 *hold such people in esteem***

Remember, the community in Philippi is much influenced by Roman culture. (Remembering the city has a large retirement group of Roman Soldiers.) St. Paul is reminding them (and us) that as Christians we should live by a different honor

code. What should impress them (and us) is not medals, money, power... but individuals who truly live and proclaim the gospel.

**2:30 *risking his life***

This verse is phrased in such a way that it draws us back into the previous verses regarding Christ who suffered and died for the sake of our salvation. It is very likely that St. Paul is working hard to convince the community at Philippi that what has happened to Epaphroditus be seen in that light and not as a failure.

**3:1a *Rejoice in the Lord***

Traditionally this would be something we would find at the end of a letter. Here it signifies a transition ending one topic and moving to another.

**Reflection Questions:**

1. St. Paul talks about “work out your salvation”. In your own life can you give one example of something that you believe you are being called to grow or do?
2. St. Paul talks of pouring himself out as a libation for the community in Philippi. Who were the people in your life that “poured” themselves out for you to nurture and fortify your faith?
3. Who do you relate to more – Timothy or Epaphroditus and why?

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**Gift of salvation presented through Christ: 1811**

**God’s Providence and Secondary Causes: 306-308**

**Help for salvation of the soul: 95**

**Human Freedom and salvation: 1739-42**

**Salvation comes from God alone: 169, 620**

**Saving one’s own soul: 1889**

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- The New Daily Study Bible: The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon by William Barclay
- The Navarre Bible: Captivity Letters
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- Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch
- Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: Philippians, Colossians and Philemon, by Dennis Hamm, SJ