

On Working Out Own Salvation

by John Wesley

We must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, but it is God who works in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.

Scripture: Philippians 2:12

Topics: "Salvation", "Divine Grace and Human Responsibility"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the necessity of working out one's own salvation, highlighting that while it is God who empowers us to will and act according to His good pleasure, we must actively engage in our salvation with earnestness and diligence. He explains that the truths of God's nature and the work of Christ were largely unknown to the ancient heathens, and it is through the Gospel that we gain understanding and the ability to pursue holiness. Wesley encourages believers to recognize their responsibility in the process of salvation, which involves both divine grace and human effort, urging them to act with fear and trembling as they seek to fulfill God's will.

Transcript

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Phil. 2:12-13.

1. Some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some measure, to the heathen world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations; So that, in some sense, it may be said to every child of man, "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; even to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." With this truth he has, in some measure, "enlightened every one that cometh into the world." And hereby they that "have not the law," that have no written law, "are a law unto themselves." They show "the work of the law," -- the substance of it, though not the letter, -- "written in their hearts," by the same hand which wrote the commandments on the tables of stone; "Their conscience also bearing them witness," whether they act suitably thereto or not.

2. But there are two grand heads of doctrine, which contain many truths of the most important nature, of which the most enlightened Heathens in the ancient world were totally ignorant; as are also the most intelligent Heathens that are now on the face of the earth; I mean those which relate to the eternal Son of God, and the Spirit of God: To the Son, giving himself to be "a propitiation for the sins of the world;" and to the Spirit of God, renewing men in that image of God wherein they were created. For after all the pains which ingenious and learned men have taken (that great man, the Chevalier Ramsay, in particular) to find

some resemblance of these truths in the immense rubbish of heathen authors, the resemblance is so exceeding faint, as not to be discerned but by a very lively imagination. Beside that, even this resemblance, faint as it was, is only to be found in the discourses of a very few; and those were the most improved and deeply-thinking men, in their several generations; while the innumerable multitudes that surrounded them were little better for the knowledge of the philosophers, but remained as totally ignorant even of these capital truths as were the beasts that perish.

3. Certain it is, that these truths were never known to the vulgar, the bulk of mankind, to the generality of men in any nation, till they were brought to light by the gospel. Notwithstanding a spark of knowledge glimmering here and there, the whole earth was covered with darkness, till the Sun of Righteousness arose and scattered the shades of night. Since this day-spring from on high has appeared, a great light hath shined unto those who, till then, sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. And thousands of them in every age have known, "that God so loved the world, as to give his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And being entrusted with the oracles of God, they have known that God hath also given us his Holy Spirit, who "worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

4. How remarkable are those words of the Apostle, which precede these! "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God," -- the incommunicable nature of God from eternity -- "counted it no act of robbery," -- (that is the precise meaning of the word,) no invasion of any other's prerogative, but his own unquestionable right, -- "to be equal with God." The word implies both the fullness and the supreme height of the Godhead; to which are opposed the two words, he emptied and he humbled himself. He "emptied himself" of that divine fullness, veiled his fullness from the eyes of men and angels; "taking," and by that very act emptying himself, "the form of a servant; being made in the likeness of man," a real man, like other men. "And being found in fashion as a man," -- a common man, without any peculiar beauty or excellency, -- "he humbled himself" to a still greater degree, "becoming obedient" to God, though equal with him, "even unto death; yea, the death of the cross:" The greatest instance both of humiliation and obedience. [Phil. 2:5-11]

Having proposed the example of Christ, the Apostle exhorts them to secure the salvation which Christ hath purchased for them: "Wherefore, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

In these comprehensive words we may observe,

I. That grand truth, which ought never to be out of our of remembrance, "It is God that worketh in us, both to will and to do of his own good pleasure."

II. The improvement we ought to make of it: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

III. The connexion between them: "It is God that worketh in you;" therefore "work out your own salvation."

I. 1. First. We are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance: "It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." The meaning of these words may be made more plain by a small transposition of them: "It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do." This position of the words, connecting the phrase, of his good pleasure, with the word worketh, removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his own work. Otherwise, we might have had some room for boasting, as if it were our own desert,

some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us, which first moved God to work. But this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself-in his, own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy.

2. It is by this alone he is impelled to work in man both to will and to do. The expression is capable of two interpretations; both of which are unquestionably true. First, to will, may include the whole of inward, to do, the whole of outward, religion. And if it be thus understood, it implies, that it is God that worketh both inward and outward holiness. Secondly, ,to will, may imply every good desire; to do, whatever results therefrom. And then the sentence means, God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect.

3. The original words, _~to ~thelein_ and _~to energein_, seem to favor the latter construction: _~to ~thelein_, which we render to will, plainly including every good desire, whether relating to our tempers, words, or actions; to inward or outward holiness. And _~to energein~~_, which we render to do, manifestly implies all that power from on high, all that energy which works in us every right disposition, and then furnishes us for every good word and work.

4. Nothing can so directly tend to hide pride from man as a deep, lasting conviction of this. For if we are thoroughly sensible that we have nothing which we have not received, how can we glory as if we had not received it? If we know and feel that the very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power which conducts it to the end; if it is God that not only infuses every good desire, but that accompanies and follows it, else it vanishes away; then it evidently follows, that "he who glorieth" must "glory in the Lord."

II. 1. Proceed we now to the Second point: If God worketh in you, then work out your own salvation. The original word rendered, work out, implies the doing a thing thoroughly. Your own; for you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone forever. Your own salvation: Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith;" consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as "a grain of mustard-seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds," but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed, from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we "grow up in all things into him that is our Head;" till we attain "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

2. But how are we to work out this salvation? The Apostle answers, "With fear and trembling." There is another passage of St. Paul wherein the same expression occurs, which may give light to this: "Servants, obey your masters according to the flesh," -- according to the present state of things, although sensible that in a little time the servant will be free from his master, -- "with fear and trembling." This is a proverbial expression, which cannot be understood literally. For what master could bear, much less require, his

servant to stand trembling and quaking before him? And the following words utterly exclude this meaning: "In singleness of heart;" with a single eye to the will and providence of God; "not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;" doing whatever they do as the will of God, and, therefore, with their might. (Eph. 6:5, &c.) It is easy to see that these strong expressions of the Apostle clearly imply two things: First, that everything be done with the utmost earnestness of spirit, and with all care and caution: (Perhaps more directly referring to the former word, meta phobou, with fear:) Secondly, that it be done with the utmost diligence, speed, punctuality, and exactness; not improbably referring to the latter word, meta tromou, with trembling.

3. How easily may we transfer this to the business of life, the working out our own salvation! With the same temper, and in the same manner, that Christian servants serve their masters that are upon earth, let other Christians labour to serve their Master that is in heaven: that is, First, with the utmost earnestness of spirit, with all possible care and caution; and, secondly, with the utmost diligence, speed, punctuality, and exactness.

4. But what are the steps which the Scripture directs us to take, in the working out of our own salvation? The Prophet Isaiah gives us a general answer, touching the first steps which we are to take: "Cease to do evil; learn to do well." If ever you desire that God should work in you that faith whereof cometh both present and eternal salvation, by the grace already given, fly from all sin as from the face of a serpent; carefully avoid every evil word and work; yea, abstain from all appearance of evil. And "learn to do well:" Be zealous of good works, of works of piety, as well as works of mercy; family prayer, and crying to God in secret. Fast in secret, and "your Father which seeth in secret, he will reward you openly." "Search the Scriptures:" Hear them in public, read them in private, and meditate therein. At every opportunity, be a partaker of the Lord's Supper. "Do this in remembrance of him: and he will meet you at his own table. Let your conversation be with the children of God; and see that it "be in grace, seasoned with salt." As ye have time, do good unto all men; to their souls and to their bodies. And herein "be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." It then only remains that ye deny yourselves and take up your cross daily. Deny yourselves every pleasure which does not prepare you for taking pleasure in God, and willingly embrace every means of drawing near to God, though it be a cross, though it be grievous to flesh and blood. Thus when you have redemption in the blood of Christ, you will "go on to perfection;" till "walking in the light as he is in the light," you are enabled to testify, that "he is faithful and just," not only to "forgive" your "sins," but to "cleanse" you from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9]

III. 1. "But," say some, "what connexion is there between the former and the latter clause of this sentence? Is there not rather a flat opposition between the one and the other? If it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do, what need is there of our working? Does not his working thus supersede the necessity of our working at all? Nay, does it not render our working impracticable, as well as unnecessary? For if we allow that God does all, what is there left for us to do?"

2. Such is the reasoning of flesh and blood. And, at first hearing, it is exceeding plausible. But it is not solid; as will evidently appear, if we consider the matter more deeply. We shall then see there is no opposition between these, "God works; therefore, do we work;" but, on the contrary, the closest connexion; and that in two respects. For, First, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works, therefore you must work.

3. First. God worketh in you; therefore you can work: Otherwise it would be impossible. If he did not work it would be impossible for you to work out your own salvation. "With man this is impossible," saith our Lord,

"for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Yea, it is impossible for any man, for any that is born of a woman, unless God work in him. Seeing all men are by nature not only sick, but "dead in trespasses and sins," it is not possible for them to do anything well till God raises them from the dead. It was impossible for Lazarus to come forth, till the Lord had given him life. And it is equally impossible for us to come out of our sins, yea, or to make the least motion toward it, till He who hath all power in heaven and earth calls our dead souls into life.

4. Yet this is no excuse for those who continue in sin, and lay the blame upon their Maker, by saying, "It is God only that must quicken us; for we cannot quicken our own souls." For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Every one has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And every one, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.

5. Therefore inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation. Since he worketh in you of his own good pleasure, without any merit of yours, both to will and to do, it is possible for you to fulfil all righteousness. It is possible for you to "love God, because he hath first loved us;" and to "walk in love," after the pattern of our great Master. We know, indeed, that word of his to be absolutely true: "Without me ye can do nothing." But on the other hand, we know, every believer can say "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me."

6. Meantime let us remember that God has joined these together in the experience of every believer; and therefore we must take care, not to imagine they are ever to be put asunder. We must beware of that mock humility which teacheth us to say, in excuse for our wilful disobedience, "O, I can do nothing!" and stops there, without once naming the grace of God. Pray, think twice. Consider what you say. I hope you wrong yourself; for if it be really true that you can do nothing, then you have no faith. And if you have not faith, you are in a wretched condition: You are not in a state of salvation. Surely it is not so. You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.

7. Secondly, God worketh in you; therefore you must work: You must be "workers together with him," (they are the very words of the Apostle,) otherwise he will cease working. The general rule on which his gracious dispensations invariably proceed is this: "Unto him that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not," -- that does not improve the grace already given, -- "shall be taken away what he assuredly hath." (So the words ought to be rendered.) Even St. Augustine, who is generally supposed to favour the contrary doctrine, makes that just remark, *_Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis_*:+ "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves." He will not save us unless we "save ourselves from this untoward generation;" unless we ourselves "fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life; "unless we "agonize to enter in at the strait gate," "deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily," and labour by every possible means to "make our own calling and election sure."

8. "Labour" then, brethren, "not for the meat that perisheth, but for that which endureth to everlasting life." Say with our blessed Lord, though in a somewhat different sense, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." In consideration that he still worketh in you, be never "weary of well-doing." Go on, in virtue of the grace of God, preventing, accompanying, and following you, in "the work of faith, in the patience of hope, and in the labour of love." "Be ye steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." And "the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep," (Jesus,) "make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever!"

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