

Working Out Our Own Salvation

by Martyn-Lloyd Jones

Martyn-Lloyd Jones emphasizes the importance of actively developing one's salvation through a combination of faith, obedience, and avoidance of worldly distractions.

Topics: "Gods Glory", "Christian Sanctification"

Description

The preacher delves into the concept of radiance, describing it as the effulgence or brilliance emanating from an original light body, either reflected brightness or refulgence. The radiance of Jesus is portrayed as being begotten of the source, distinguishable yet one with it, representing the sheen of God's glory. Similarly, the glory of God is explained as expressing all that He is in His Being, with Jesus being the flawless expression and exact representation of God's nature, manifesting the Father's glory thoroughly and particularly.

Transcript

We are considering these two verses for the second time because we have found that it is impossible to deal with them adequately in just one study. I have suggested that perhaps the best way of dividing up this statement would be to look at it in three ways: first of all, generally: then theologically, and lastly practically, and in our previous study we dealt with the first two headings.

We also saw that the Apostle's object in writing the words was not to give a disquisition on theology, but rather to make a practical appeal. Yet, as is his custom, he cannot make a practical appeal without putting it in terms of doctrine. That is where the New Testament way of life differs from a merely ethical system. Any appeal to the world to live a Christian life before it has become Christian, is, as we have seen, a negation of Christian teaching. We have here a perfect illustration of the Apostle's method. But it is true also of all the New Testament writers; it is the characteristic way of making an appeal for conduct and Christian behaviour. We are not put under a law but an appeal is made to us. There is a great law of life in the New Testament, but it is what the New Testament calls 'the perfect law of liberty'. This does not mean that the Christian is living a lawless life, but that he has a higher kind of liberty. The New Testament always lays down its doctrine first, and then, having done so, says, 'If you believe that, cannot you see that this is inevitable?' It is an appeal to equity, to fair play. It does not confront us with a way of life, and say, 'Go and live it.' It first of all tells us of certain things that have been done for us, and then says, 'Now then ...' As you make the transition from doctrine to practice in the epistles, there is always a 'wherefore' or a 'therefore', and I am at pains to point out that the essential approach is to be found in such a connecting

word. Without that, there is no appeal, but because of that, there is a very definite appeal to reason and to commonsense.

Perhaps, I can put it like this: is there anything that so thoroughly tests our whole profession of the Christian faith as our reaction to it when it calls upon us to live a certain kind of life? I put it like that for this good reason: do we not all know something in our experience about this unnatural and artificial dichotomy? We may like to hear the gospel with its grand good news and all that it has to offer, but we do not always feel quite so pleased when it goes on to call us to live in a particular way. There are people who say, 'But it is so narrow.' When it outlines a 'straight and narrow way', they say, 'Narrowness again!' Because of the 'wherefore', because of this indissoluble connection between doctrine and practice, because, too, of this inevitable logical sequence from doctrine to behaviour, our attitude towards the appeal tells us a great deal about our ultimate attitude to the doctrine. The New Testament says that these things are really inevitable, they are linked together, so if I object to doing them, it surely implies that there is at any rate something wrong with my view of the doctrine.

There is, then, no better test of my whole position, than my reaction when I am confronted with this amazing call of the New Testament to deny myself and take up the cross and follow Christ, to mortify my 'flesh', 'the deeds of the body', and 'my members which are upon the earth' and all those other New Testament ways of putting it. Now, the Apostle is doing something like that here, so let us try to see what he teaches us, as we approach it from the purely practical standpoint. To assist us in our consideration, I am going to ask three obvious questions. First, what does 'work out' mean? Secondly, how, or in what manner, should I work out my salvation? And thirdly, why should I do so?

What, therefore, does working out our salvation mean? The best answer is to define our terms, and if we discover the answer to the first two questions, I think we shall automatically find out the answer to the last. So let us try to do this. The Apostle tells us to work out our own salvation, and, as he tells us here, and as we are told in every other epistle, salvation is the very essential message of the New Testament itself. It means that I have come to see my own sinfulness and to understand something of the nature of sin. The Philippians had realised that they were sinners, and they had seen themselves as under the wrath of God. They had seen that they were condemned by the law of God and that, therefore, they were guilty in the sight of God. They had come to see that every effort they might make themselves would, in the last analysis, avail them nothing. Paul says the same thing in greater detail in the third chapter. He describes how he was a Jew and a Pharisee, how he had been circumcised, and so on, and yet, says Paul, I came to see that it was all refuse, worthless and useless.

Now these Philippian Christians had come to see that, too, and they had realised that they were really helpless to deliver themselves out of it. But then they had heard and believed this amazing good news of the gospel, that God had sent his only begotten Son to die on the cross in order to make atonement for them. God was giving them salvation as a free gift, saying to them, 'I have punished your sins there; I see you no more as sinners, but as righteous people. I am giving you a gift.' They had seen that they were given a new nature, that they had undergone a new birth. They had received the Holy Spirit and he was imparting to them this new life. They had a new outlook and understanding they really were new people. Furthermore, they were conscious of a new strength and power which was delivering them, conscious of a sense of emancipation. They had become children of God and citizens of heaven 'our conversation is in heaven', which means our citizenship is there. These people had now come to see that in this life they were travellers, sojourners, pilgrims; they had an entirely new view of life.

So that is the essential meaning of salvation, and what Paul's appeal tells them to do is to work out that salvation. And working out means perfecting, bringing to pass, leading to a full result, or finishing something which has already been commenced.

And that is the practical exhortation of the New Testament gospel to us today. I must now perfect this thing which has been given to me. The seed has been planted; I have been given it in embryo. My business is to allow and to encourage this gift to grow and develop, until it comes to its final perfection and full maturity. I have got the gift: I need not be worried lest God is not present and not with me. God is working in me and I must develop it all I can.

Now I am anxious that we should all be convinced of the utter inevitability of this appeal. If I believe what we have just seen about the nature of salvation, then is it not inevitable that I should do these things? In view of the fact that I have received this salvation, what am I to do? Well, first of all I must submit myself entirely to God. The Apostle puts it here in terms of the amazing account that he gives us of the earthly life of our Lord in verses 511. Now that, says Paul, is the very thing that God is demanding of you. He wants you to manifest that same obedience which was to be seen in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ an utter and absolute submission to the will of God. Though he came as a man, our Lord went even further, even to the death of the cross. Whatever God asked him to do, he did it; and that is the first part of the working out of our own salvation. It is to see that in view of this amazing gift that God has given us, he has the right to demand of us this utter submission of our wills. Before I begin to do anything, I must say to myself, 'In view of what God has done for me, in this world I must desire to please him in all things. I must make my will, his. My one concern must be to live to his honour and his glory.' I do not think that that needs any proof. If I believe that God has done this astounding thing for me, is it not inevitable?

Clearly the next step is that I must avoid everything that is opposed to God, what the New Testament calls 'the world': 'Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world' (1 John 2:15). The New Testament tells us that man cannot love God and the world at the same time. It puts this to our common sense and reason. It is perfectly evident that the outlook of life and organisation in this world is opposed to God. We have only to read our newspapers. The world is godless, ready to make fun of God and religion. It is not interested in God; it panders to the flesh, and ridicules everything that is connected with God. But the New Testament says that working out my salvation means avoidance of everything that is opposed to God.

There is no limit to that. I must in no way be concerned with those things, or be interested in them, or allow them to appeal to me or to attract me. I must avoid everything that is opposed to my own best interests. If I believe that this world is a very dangerous place to me, that temptation and sin are all round and about me, and that the whole world is doing its utmost to drag me down, if I see that it leads me to hell and destruction, but that God has delivered me from it all, am I not being contradictory if I go on doing worldly things and enjoy doing them? It is an appeal to commonsense. It is surely ridiculous to say, 'I want to go to God and I thank God I have been delivered', and yet to work in the opposite direction. 'Work out your own salvation'; perfect it. God has delivered you by this amazing act of self-sacrifice; you have been given a new start and nature, salvation is set before you. Turn your back upon the other once and for ever. If we really believe that, there is no need to argue; it is inevitable.

We can summarise it like this. The best way is to consult the textbook on this subject. Here it is perfectly clear: the more I read the Bible and see the picture of the Christian man, the more I understand the nature of sin and life in this world, and what God has done for me in Christ, then the more I shall desire the things of God and hate the other. So I suggest that the best practical step is to read God's word, and to be

thoroughly soaked in it. There is a very simple, practical test that one can apply at this point. I wonder what the result would be if we all kept a chart for one week and put down on paper the amount of time which we spent in reading God's word and things which help us to understand it, and the time we spent reading newspapers and novels or watching films? Now I am just asking the question. We say we believe in salvation. We believe God has given us this gift, so then, I ask, what are the relative amounts of time that we give to these things? Working out our own salvation means that we do everything we can to feed this life, to stimulate it, to enable it to extend and develop and grow.

And the other thing, clearly, is prayer: prayer for an increasing knowledge of God, for a greater measure of the Holy Spirit and for a greater understanding of this word; prayer for guidance, for leading and for understanding. If I believe in God and that he has done this for me, why do I spend so little time with him? Why do I not long for him more and more? That is how we work it out and I must follow and obey every prompting and leading that I am conscious of in this direction. The fathers used to regard the Christian life as a wholetime occupation. They used to spend their time with it and, I feel, it is one of the greatest condemnations of us today that we are guilty of not working out this amazing salvation that God has given to us.

But, then, what is the manner in which we do this? The Apostle says that we are to do it 'with fear and trembling'. Here again we must define our terms. He does not mean that we must do it in fear of losing our salvation. You will find that in the New Testament these words never carry that implication. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians 'I was with you ... in fear, and in much trembling' (1 Cor 2:3), he did not mean that he was afraid that he would lose his soul. Neither is it a kind of craven fear, one of self torment. It means humility and a holy reverence, or, if you like, a holy vigilance and circumspection. It means that as I work out my salvation, I should realise the tremendous seriousness of what I am doing.

I wonder whether this is not the thing which needs to be emphasised most at the present time, not least in the ranks of evangelical people? I wonder why it is that the whole idea of the godly man has somehow or other got lost amongst us? Why is it that Christian people are not described as 'godfearing' people? Why is it that there is such a difference between us and the Christian of a hundred or two hundred years ago, or the Puritan of the seventeenth century? They were truly Christian. 'Methodist', too, was a kind of nickname given to people because of their methodical life. I wonder why it is that somehow or other we have lost this particular sense of the Christian life? I have no doubt but that the explanation is that it is an overreaction on our part from the pure legalism that was so common at the turn of the century when many people had lost the true spirit of the New Testament. They imposed a certain kind of life upon themselves and upon their children; they laid down rules and regulations; and people then reacted and said, 'That is pure legalism, not Christianity.' But now we are so much like everybody else because we have forgotten this about 'fear and trembling', vigilance and circumspection. Sometimes I am afraid we have been so anxious not to give the impression that to be Christian means being miserable, that we have imagined that we must be smiling and laughing all the time and we have believed in this so-called 'muscular' Christianity.

Now I suggest that that is somewhat of a denial of what is taught here. The Christian must of necessity be a serious and sober man. 'With fear and trembling' means a holy reverence and awe of God. I must realise that the God with whom I am concerned is 'the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning' (Jas. 1: 17), that 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all' (1 John 1:5). If he is in the light, I must walk in the light (v.7). Also, I should have a fear of the world in the sense that I realise that the world is opposed to me, that it is there to drag me down and away from God. I should have a healthy respect for it.

I should also fear myself. A man who knows his own heart is a man who cannot be light and carefree and flippant. He knows that in his flesh there 'dwelleth no good thing'. The Christian is one who works out his own salvation with fear and trembling; fear lest he should fail or falter, lest he should not discern the subtlety of the world, the power of sin and his own weakness, and the holiness of God. So he walks with gravity lest he should be unworthy of this great salvation.

So, then, we have seen what it means to work out our own salvation, and how we are to do it, and now, lastly, why should we do it? First of all, as we saw earlier, we should do this because it is exactly and precisely what our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ did. He submitted himself to God; he said, 'For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me' (John 6:38). Is there anything higher for us than to imitate and emulate his example?

The second reason is because of what he has done for us; we believe that Christ shed his blood and allowed his body to be broken that we might be delivered. As Paul wrote to Titus, 'Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar [a special] people, zealous of good works' (Tit. 2:14). It was the reason why he came and went to the death of the cross. It was in order that we might do this.

Then I must work out my own salvation because of his honour and his glory. The world judges him by his people. In that sense his glory and his honour are in my hands. I am dishonouring Christ if I fail. Another reason is that there are others who are watching me. Even the world itself is doing so, and I must so live that I attract them to Christ, warning them of their sinful and terrible condition and trying my utmost to bring them to know him.

And then there is another, powerful reason: if I really believe that I am going to heaven, that I am a citizen of the kingdom of God and that when I come to die I enter this amazing inheritance, then, 'Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure' (1 John 3:3). God is absolutely pure and perfect, and if I say I am going on to him, have I then a moment to waste? I must prepare myself, there is not a second to lose.

And, lastly, I must work out my salvation with fear and trembling, for this good reason: the New Testament teaches me that if I fail to do so myself, then I must not be surprised if God begins to do certain things to me. Do you remember the teaching of Hebrews 12? 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.' It is put still more strikingly in 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul says that there were many in the church at Corinth who were sick, and there were even some, he said, who were dead, and he tells us that the reason for that was that they had not examined themselves before partaking of the Lord's Supper, and were partaking unworthily. Such a man, Paul said, 'eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body' (1 Cor. 11:29).

The doctrine of the New Testament can be put into this form: if God has called you and given you his salvation, he destines you for salvation and he is going to perfect you. His method is to put promptings within us. He energises our mind and whole outlook, but if we fail to practise these things, then God, in his very love to us, is going to chasten us a sickness, an illness, a disappointment, a loss, a sorrow. These are ways which God uses because of our failure and our recalcitrance. 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10: 3 1). The love of God is as great as that. The Christian man who is not doing his utmost to live the Christian life is a fool, and he must not be surprised if certain things begin to happen to him. If you are a child of God, he is going to bring about your perfection and if you do not do it yourself

to please him in this way, then, I say, you may well find that God will do it to you in one of these other ways. That is a very wonderful thing. I am not saying that every Christian who suffers is being chastised, but I do say that God does do that, and if we fail to respond to his appeal, then we must not be surprised if we experience his chastening.

Therefore, my beloved, 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.'

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