

Working Out Your Own Salvation

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In Philippians 2: 12-23 Saint Paul gives a kind of written guide to working out our salvation.

Paul begins with obedience, asking the Christians of Philippi to be obedient in his absence as they have been when he was present. He is not calling on them to obey him, but to follow the example of Christ, who "humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (2:8). It is their duty as His disciples to work out their own salvation "with fear and trembling."

Paul's words are taken from Psalm 2, which is used in Orthodox worship: "Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice in Him with trembling." This great task we are called to should indeed inspire godly fear and trembling in us, because we are doing it hand in hand with God Himself. It is God who is "at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Because He loves us so much, we also rejoice as we work with Him, knowing that our efforts lead us toward salvation and a glorious life forever in His presence.

The words "work out your own salvation" remind us that nobody can do it for us. Each human being is responsible for his or her eternal destiny, even though our life in the Church is a communal one. Paul points out some of those communal responsibilities here, too. We need to be "lights in the world," and we should serve cheerfully, doing everything "without grumbling or questioning."

As he writes this letter, Paul is in jail and awaiting trial. Even in such lonely and frightening circumstances, he is willing to send his closest helper, Timothy, to his beloved Philippians. Paul clearly will miss Timothy greatly, for he writes: "I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare. They all look after their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy's worth you know, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel." It's a generous impulse that makes him send Timothy when he himself would no doubt be heartened by the young man's company.

Paul is already looking toward the life to come, and past his own earthly existence. He is ready for whatever awaits him: "Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all." The Philippians should likewise "be glad and rejoice with me." Readiness to look beyond ourselves and rejoice with others is also part of working out our salvation.

As he faces possible death, Paul knows that it is his obedience, his willing work for other people, and his rejoicing with those others that will enable him, in the day of Christ's coming, to be assured that he did not "run in vain or labor in vain." That is the working out of his salvation.