

Work Out Your Salvation

Series on Philipians

George Barna has been a researcher of religious life in America for over 20 years. But, after questioning more than half a million churchgoing Christians over a 20 year period, Barna came to the conclusion that very little actual life transformation appeared to be occurring in their lives. In his 2005 book, "Revolution" he gives some findings about the 32% of Americans who describe themselves as 'born-again'.

- only 9% of 'born-again' Christians have a biblical worldview, that is, believe that the Bible is accurate in its teachings, that Jesus lived a sinless life, that absolute moral truth exists, that Satan is real (not symbolic), that all believers have a responsibility to share their faith with others, that salvation is by God's grace,
- the likelihood of a married couple who are born-again Christians getting divorced is the same as couples who are not disciples of Christ.
- the typical born-again believer will not lead a single person to faith in Christ during their lifetime
- few 'born-again' Christians define success in spiritual terms. Most describe success in terms of professional achievement, family happiness or material prosperity.
- the only time 'born-again' Christians generally worship God is in church

I suspect that if the Apostle Paul had read Barna's book, he would have written the same letter to the church today as he wrote to the Philippian Christians 2000 years ago.

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life--in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me". (Philippians 2:12 - 18)

Last Sunday, when we studied part of Paul's letter to the Christians at Philippi, we talked about imitating Christ. Being made into the shape of a slave. Setting the GPS of our life to the destination of Jesus, so that we become more and more like him. Last Sunday many of us said to the Lord that we wanted to be like Jesus. This week the scripture is telling us how to do that. It's about putting our faith into practice. It's about putting the commitment of last Sunday to work in the perspiration of Monday. Paul tells us that we are to work out our salvation.

1. What Christ Has Worked In To Our Lives Has To Be Worked Out.

Work out our salvation? Is this the same Paul who wrote "***For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast***". (Ephesians 2:8-9 NIV) Doesn't Paul teach that salvation is by grace and not by works?

When the New Testament writers talk about being saved, they use that term in one of three ways. I have been saved. I am being saved. I will be saved. I have been saved by all that Christ has done for me through his death on the Cross. I am being saved through the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, making me more and more like Jesus. I will be saved when I finally stand before God the Father in heaven. When Paul talks about working out our salvation with fear and trembling, he's referring to the process of being made into the likeness of Jesus. But what is the fear and trembling part? He's talking about you and I being Quakers. People who have such a respect for the power and

majesty of God, that we reverence him as the Almighty. We are children of a holy God, and the last thing we want to do is disappoint him. The fear is not a fear of punishment. It's a fear of disappointing someone we love very much.

2. God Will Keep Working It In As You Work It Out.

It's a cooperative venture. The great thing about this salvation is that we don't have to work it out on our own. Understand this: **"It is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose."** While we as followers of Jesus are doing good works, the Holy Spirit is at work within us, making us more like Christ so that Christ can work through us. We are doing the work, but the wonderful thing is that God is working through us. Do you realise that doesn't happen to other people? It only happens to those who are God's children. It only happens to those who have invited Jesus Christ to live his life in them and through them. Before you become a Christian, God didn't work through you. He worked **on** you to bring you to faith in Christ. He worked **in** you to begin the process of separating you from sin. But now he is working **in** you so that he can work **through** you, so that you will act according to his will and purpose. Before you received the Holy Spirit, you were living life in your own strength. You were making decisions according to your own wisdom. You were navigating your own way through life, and a lot of the time you were getting it wrong. But now, the Spirit of God is in you, and he is living out Christ's life through you. That's why you hear the promptings of the Spirit, urging you to say things and do things and think things you wouldn't naturally do. When we read the Word of God, and keep asking ourselves the question "What did Jesus do?" the Holy Spirit begins to shape our thinking so that our mind becomes more like the mind of Jesus. He shapes our actions so that the things we do become like the things Jesus did. He shapes our speech so that we find ourselves saying the things Jesus said. As we obey the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we find ourselves becoming more like Christ. Isn't that cool! It's not our efforts making us more like Jesus. It's God at work in us.

Last week I talked about re-setting our GPS so that the destination is Jesus. If we will trust the GPS, we will get to the destination. Now here's the thing. I can have the GPS set to the right destination, but I can still ignore it. If I'm going in the wrong direction, my sweet little lady in the GPS will do her utmost to get me back on the right track. She will say things like "Turn around when possible." She will even put a map up for me showing which way I'm going, with an arrow pointing back the other way to show me visibly I'm going in the wrong direction. But sometimes I'm just too smart for my own good. I think I know better. I ignore the map and navigate myself. If I don't like my GPS woman harping on at me, I can even hit the mute button and shut her up.

The Holy Spirit really wants to help us get to be like Jesus. He speaks to us all the time, guiding us to our destination of Jesus. Nothing brings the Lord greater joy than seeing us being made into the image of Christ. But if we ignore the voice, we are on our own. We only get to the destination of Jesus if we co-operate with the Spirit. **"It is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose."** Becoming like Christ is very much linked to listening to the voice of the Spirit and obeying what he tells us to do. That's what Jesus did. He said **"I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."** (John 5:19 NIV) Do you want to be like Jesus? Then do what the Holy Spirit tells you to do.

Ignace Jan Paderewski, the famous Polish composer-pianist, was once scheduled to perform at a great American concert hall for a high-society extravaganza. In the audience was a mother with her fidgety nine-year-old son. While the audience was waiting for the great pianist, this nine year old slipped away from his mother, and found his way up to the big Steinway Grand piano on the stage. No one took much notice until he sat down at the stool and began playing "chopsticks."

MJ begins doodling playing "Chopsticks"- then stops

There was a murmur in the crowd that turned into a roar as hundreds of people yelled, "Get that boy away from there!" Paderewski was still backstage when he heard the crowd roaring. He grabbed his coat, walked on stage, and stood behind the boy. This world class concert pianist reached around behind the boy and began playing a countermelody, all the while whispering in the boy's ear "Keep going. Don't quit, son, don't stop, don't stop." That's how God helps us "work out our salvation." We think we are doing it all, but in fact he takes our feeble efforts, and turns them into something amazing. And all the time he is whispering in our ear "Don't stop!"

3. Work Out Your Witness In The World Where You Live.

Paul draws a picture of us shining as stars in a dark world. He says "***So that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life***"

And he was pretty realistic about the world the Philippians lived in, for he had experienced their culture close up. What he said about the world then still applies to the world we live in. Paul says it's crooked and depraved. It's a dark world. He got arrested for confronting a fortune-teller who was scamming people out of their money. That's a crooked world. He got beaten up and put in jail for speaking the truth. That's a depraved world. It's a depraved world when it's hard to find a movie or a TV programme that isn't full of foul language, sex and nudity. It a depraved world when the lawmakers in the UK are being sent to jail for fiddling their expense accounts. It's a depraved world when the 75 year old Prime Minister of Italy is cavorting with girls young enough to be his grandchildren. It's a dark world when human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world. It's as big as the arms trade, and is predicted to become bigger than drug trafficking. The United Nations estimates nearly 2.5 million people from 127 different countries are being trafficked around the world.

But it's not just darkness on a world scale. Every one of us here today could tell stories of shady business deals, bullying at schools, corrupt public officials, pressure to act in unethical ways at work, and other evidences of the moral darkness closing in on Europe. 200 years ago Christians in Europe used to send missionaries to darkest Africa. Today darkest Europe is in need of African Christians to come and bring us the light.

The more darkness there is around us, the more we need to shine as stars. One of the things tourists from Japan and Europe comment on when they come to New Zealand are our clear skies and bright stars. When the sky is black, the stars stand out. We live in a world filled with depravity. That gives us the opportunity to shine brightly for Christ. And remember that scripture calls us stars. Stars don't have light of their own. They just reflect the light from the sun. The more you and I become like Jesus, the more of his light we will reflect into dark places.

4. Work Together Until The End.

The New International Version says "***hold out the word of life,***" but a better translation is to "***hold on to the word of life.***" Paul is encouraging the Philippians to hold onto their convictions no matter what. He is encouraging them to not give up or compromise. They had enemies who wanted to shut them up and drive Christianity out. But Paul is writing to them, encouraging them to persevere in working out their salvation.

Nearly 300 years ago, England was a spiritual desert. Yet in that spiritual desert, God laid his hand on John Wesley, and called him to work out his salvation in the society where he lived. John Wesley shone like one of Gods bright stars in a dark sky. It wasn't easy for him, but he persevered until the end. I want to read you some extracts from his diary. They encourage me to keep on shining in a dark world. I hope they encourage you too.

Sunday, A.M., May 5 - Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.
Sunday, P.M., May 5 - Preached in St. John's. Deacons said "Get out and stay out."
Sunday, A.M., May 12 - Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.

Sunday, A.M., May 19 - Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

Sunday, P.M., May 19 - Preached on street. Kicked off street.

Sunday, A.M., May 26 - Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.

Sunday, A.M., June 2 - Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.

But John Wesley was not a man to give up on what God had called him to do. Listen to this diary entry for that same afternoon.

Sunday, P.M., June 2 - Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

Don't give up. ***"It is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose."***

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland