

## ECF 11<sup>th</sup> February 2024 Serving Through Obedience Philippians 2:12-18

A few years ago, 67 year old Sabine Moreau set off to drive from her home to pick up her friend from a train station in Brussels. But instead of directing her to drive north to the station, for some reason her sat-nav directed her south.

And Sabine obeyed. In fact she continued to obey as her sat-nav directed across the border into Germany, through Germany into Austria, then into Slovenia, and finally to Zagreb in Croatia.

It was only there that she realised she was no longer in Belgium and that she had gone the wrong way. When she phoned her son to tell him where she was, he'd already reported her as missing to police.

Instead of a 60 km journey to the train station, she obeyed her sat-nav on a two day trip of nearly 1500 km. And of course, she had to drive all the way back as well.

I love Google Maps and depend on it all the time, but I think all of us would agree that when it comes to sat-nav that kind of total obedience is ridiculous.

But in our Christian lives, total obedience to God is essential. Last week we looked at how obedience characterised Jesus' life. He was **"Obedient to death – even death on a cross!"** Philippians 2:8

And we saw how God responded to his sacrifice. **"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place."** Philippians 2:9

But in his letter, Paul went on to write about another therefore. Not this time, God's response to Jesus, but what our response should be to him. And that is nothing less than our wholehearted commitment to serve through obedience.

Philippians 2:12-18: **"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, <sup>13</sup>for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.**

**<sup>14</sup>Do everything without complaining or arguing, <sup>15</sup>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 <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>So you too should be glad and rejoice with me."**

### 1. What We Need To do

What could we do that would be a proper response to the cross? I think many of us reflect the words of that wonderful hymn that says:

Were the whole realm of nature mine  
That were an offering far too small  
Love so amazing, so divine  
Demands my soul, my life my all.

Surely nothing less than this would be an appropriate response to what Jesus means to us. And some people are called to lay down everything, their very lives, because of their commitment to Christ. Paul himself was expecting to be **"poured out like a drink offering."** Philippians 2:17

#### a) Wholehearted Obedience

But what about us who, at present anyway, are not facing violent and brutal persecution? How do we express that same commitment to Christ? Well the answer is this: **"As you have always obeyed... continue."** Philippians 2:12

This is what the Philippians had been doing, not only when Paul was there, but also since he'd left them. They'd been living a life of wholehearted obedience.

And that is how we should respond to the love and sacrifice of Christ. Not to think up some huge sacrifice to impress him and demonstrate our love and gratitude. But, instead, just to daily and consistently obey what he's told us to do.

King Saul had been instructed to destroy the Amalekites and all their livestock. He was to enact God's judgement on them. But he only partially carried out this order as he kept the best animals, claiming that he was going to sacrifice them to the Lord.

However, when the prophet Samuel turned up, he said to Saul: [“To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”](#) 1 Samuel 15:22

What God wants from us is obedience. Not because we’re trying to impress people. Not because other people expect it of us, or are checking up on us. And not because we feel guilty if we don’t. But because obedience is the proper expression of our love for the one who first loved us: [“If you love me, you will obey what I command.”](#) John 14:15

#### b) Working Out Our Salvation

And this obedience is what Paul meant by: [“Continue to work out your salvation.”](#) Philippians 2:12

He didn’t tell the Philippians to work for their salvation. That’s impossible. Nothing that we do could ever make us right with God. And nothing we do could ever add to or supplement the finished work of Christ on the cross.

The Philippians were already [“Saints in Christ Jesus.”](#) Philippians 1:1. Saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone.

So we can’t work for our salvation. But we are called to work out our salvation. To enter more and more into the reality of the salvation that we’ve been given by grace.

You might encourage me to keep working at my marriage. This obviously doesn’t imply that somehow I was not fully married on October 26 1996. Instead it means that I should be entering more and more into my relationship with Lorna and the experience what marriage is supposed to be.

In a similar way, we should be working out what it means to be saved in our lives.

- To grow more like Jesus.
- Daily obeying his commands.
- Trusting in his plan for our lives.
- Deepening in our love for him.
- Growing in our dependence on him.
- Seeking to honour him in everything we do.

#### c) With Deep Reverence

And we should do this, [“With fear and trembling.”](#) Philippians 2:12 This is about having the correct attitude to God.

It’s not a fear of condemnation. As children of God, we come to him with the confidence that he loves us, has accepted us and will never reject us. [“You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship.”](#) Romans 8:15.

So it’s not a fear of what God might do to us. But it’s a fear of the hurt that we might do to God. To care little about how we are living would be to show a total lack of respect, gratitude or love God.

So we mustn’t take our salvation lightly. Instead we should be serious and passionate about our commitment to God and our desire to please him.

- As we experience his wonderful love and his amazing grace,
- As we consider the depth of Jesus’ sacrifice for us,
- And as we grow in our appreciation of the wonder of our salvation,
- We must respond with a true worshipful reverence for him.

#### d) Without Grumbling

And that means we should [“Do everything without complaining or arguing”](#) Philippians 2:14. By nature we often respond to commands by grumbling, answering back, criticising what we’re asked to do, or the person who’s asked us. Sometimes we express this to others. Other times, it just goes on in our heads.

But that’s not the obedient attitude that honours Christ and pleases God. The Israelites were always doing this through their years of desert wanderings. They complained about their food, their water, their hardships, the mission God gave them and the leaders he appointed. God’s response to them shows how seriously he was offended by this attitude.

Instead God wants us to be eager to obey whatever he asks. The emphasis here is on the word [“everything”](#) because selected obedience is no obedience at all. It is merely convenience. We’re called to obey everything God asks of us – not

just what we find convenient.

There's a story about a Bible translator who was translating the Bible into the native language of the tribe he was working with. But he was struggling to find a word for "obedience" as it was something seldom practiced among them.

But as he returned home from the village one day, he whistled for his dog and it came running at full speed. When a neighbour saw this, he said admiringly in the native language, "Your dog is all ear." That's when he knew he had his word for obedience.

Are we all ear? Are we ready, eager to listen to God's voice and obey him, whatever he asks?

## 2. What God is doing!

But the Christian life is not all about what we need to do. It's not all about our responsibility to obey. We're called to work out our salvation because "It is God who works in you." Philippians 2:13

God doesn't challenge us to live a life of obedience and passively leave us to it. He is active in our lives. He is tirelessly working in each of us who've trusted in his Son. It is his energy that is at work in us and through us.

### a) Empowering his People

This is the great encouragement in this passage. We know that so often we can't choose what we know to be right, or we choose it but fail to actually do it. Paul talked about this struggle in Romans 7:15: "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Our sinful nature gets in the way and weakens our desire or ability to obey God's will.

But the wonderful news is that God gives us this power, this energy, "To will and to act according to his good purpose." Philippians 2:13 - to have the power, both choose God's will and to accomplish it.

This doesn't mean that any of us will ever become perfect or sinless this side of heaven. But it does mean that we can live a totally different kind of life! A life that we could never live in our own strength!

This is the balance of the Christian life. Yes we have the responsibility to respond to what Jesus has done in our lives by accepting God's will and obeying his commands. But we're not left on our own as orphans to try to do this. We don't need put up with continual failure and frustration. By his Holy Spirit, God has empowered to live this life of obedience.

And so as we work out our salvation, we do so depending on the one "Who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us." Ephesians 3:20

And this is why we can share in Paul's confidence that "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Philippians 1:6

## 3. What happens when we do

God works in us, as we work out our salvation. And as we do this, some amazing things happen.

### a) We Stand Out

First of all, we stand out as different from this world. The world Paul and the Philippians lived in was a "Crooked and depraved generation." Philippians 2:15. It was morally corrupt, perverse and twisted. It had turned from God and his ways.

And it's been like this since the Garden of Eden. Isaiah spoke against his generation: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness." Isaiah 5:20 And our generation is no different. It has twisted morals, upside-down standards, where evil is called good and good evil!

But we're called to stand out as different. Not that we're perfect or self-righteous but as God works in us for us to work out our salvation, we should be set apart as "Blameless and pure, children of God without fault" Philippians 2:15.

By his grace, God wants to transform our lives. He wants to empower us:

- So that those around us have no reason to condemn us.
- So that there is a real innocence in our hearts.
- So that we're without defect in our character.

Of course this is a work in process. None of us are there yet. The Bible is clear that

each of us will still struggle with sin. But this is God's ultimate goal: "He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Ephesians 1:4 And one day God will complete this work.

But until then, God is calling us increasingly through his power to live out the reality of who we are.

- Through faith in Jesus, we are children of God – so we should live as his children.
- Through the sanctifying work of the Spirit we are saints in Christ Jesus – so we should live separate from this world and separate for God.

We stand out as different from this world, not by trying to be somebody – but simply by living out who we already are in Christ!

### b) We Shine Out

And as we do this we'll, "Shine like stars in the universe." Philippians 2:15 Jesus is the true light of this world. But we've been called to shine his light in this world.

And we do this, as we, "hold out the word of life" Philippians 2:16. This can also be translated "hold onto the word of life" – and maybe Paul meant both.

- Our mission is to hold out the gospel, this message of life through faith in Jesus, to a dark and dying world.
- But at the same time, we need to personally hold onto it in our own lives – living it out each day, allowing it to transform our hearts and minds.

This is the foundation of our Christian witness and the key to our effectiveness. Our behaviour, attitude to others, priorities, lifestyle all preach a powerful message to others, before we ever open our mouths.

### c) We're a Source of Joy

And if we live this way, we'll be a source of joy and encouragement to others. Paul wanted to, "Boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing." Philippians 2:16 He was looking forward to rejoicing that these Christians that he'd served, sacrificed and suffered for had lived the life of obedience that they'd been called to. He wanted to know that all his time, effort and struggle was worth it.

Not that he regretted any of what he'd gone through. In fact, as he contemplated his martyrdom, being poured out like a drink offering, he said, "I am glad and rejoice with all of you." Philippians 2:17

Paul counted it a real privilege to serve God with his whole life. It wasn't a heavy duty, but a real joy! A joy for those who'll see the result of their teaching and encouragement – but also a joy for those who live their lives for God.

That's why he called these believers, even in the middle of strong opposition, "You too should be glad and rejoice with me." Philippians 2:18

So often we think the life of joy and satisfaction is one of freedom to do what we want. Instead, Paul knew that joy is found in living a life of obedience to Christ!

### d) We Serve our God

But the ultimate result of a life of obedience is even more amazing. Paul called their life of obedience, "The sacrifice and service coming from your faith." Philippians 2:17 It was how they served God. It was their worship.

Yes, we can worship God this morning through the beautiful songs we sing. But ultimately, we're called to worship God with our whole life. "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." Romans 12:1

As we obey God:

- we express our trust in his word,
- we honour him as Lord of our lives,
- we display our gratitude for his love and grace,
- and we demonstrate our love for him,
- And so we glorify him, declaring his value and his worth.

## Conclusion

So when it comes to sat-nav, total obedience is foolish. But when it comes to God, it is our proper response:

- This is what we need to do, in response to all that Jesus has done for us.
- But this is also what God is doing in us, working in us from the inside out.
- And what happens as a result, is incredible.
  - We stand out in this world as children of God
  - We shine out the gospel of Christ
  - We're a source of joy to all of God's people
  - And we serve our God, bringing glory to his name.

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