

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. Philippians 2:12-18

As we gather together this morning, we do so in the midst another election season - in both British Columbia and the United States. The elections this year are beyond compare to any other elections in not only the scope and depth of the political drama and division and propaganda – but more so in the trauma and distress and division and fear and anger and pain and suffering and death brought on by a viral pandemic, that has literally affected our lives and all the world. One of the clearest consequences of this emotional perfect storm of negativity seems to be growing is the growing common practice of “complaining” – which comes from being grouchy, grumpy, irritable, cantankerous, cranky, or crabby about something we don’t like and you are going to hear about it – whether it be Donald Trump or John Horgan or social distancing or wearing masks or being stuck in quarantine (if you might be sick) or being stuck in isolation (if you are sick).

Complaining – i.e. grumbling, whining, whimpering, murmuring – is common to all of us, to varying degrees. We find a great deal of complaining in the Bible. Some well known biblical characters were world-class whiners - Jacob, Naomi, Elijah, and Job to name a few. The trophy for longest and most sustained whining goes to the nation of Israel. They grumbled their way from Egypt to Mount Sinai, and for almost another 40 years in the wilderness. If we were honest with ourselves, we would probably all have to admit that there is a great deal of the whiner in us as well. We who claim Christ have even found ways to justify and spiritualize our griping and complaining. We know that because the apostle Paul speaks about this in our text for today. What we will find in our text is that grumbling is sin, a serious sin and one that often occurs when times get tough. In our text for today Paul gives us clear instruction regarding whining, and he we will also tell us the cure.

If anyone had an excuse for complaining, it would have been the Apostle Paul. Ever since his conversion from Pharisaism to Christianity, he had been hounded and opposed by unbelieving Jews. At Philippi, Gentile businessmen opposed Paul, angered by the fact that he and Silas cast a demon out of slave girl who was a fortune-teller. destroying their profitable business venture. Later, Paul took a generous gift from the Gentile churches to the saints in Jerusalem. While he was there, he sponsored a few young men who went to the temple to offer sacrifices. There he was observed by Jews who falsely accused him of bringing Gentiles into a forbidden area of the temple. This provoked a riot and led to a very long legal process, ending up with Paul’s appeal to Caesar.

Paul wrote this Epistle to the churches in Philippi some ten years or so after his first visit to this city. The Philippians stood with Paul as he passionately preaching the gospel wherever he went. They alone financially assisted him and defended his proclamation of the gospel. The eyes of all were on the Apostle Paul as he awaited trial before Caesar. Most continued to remain loyal to Paul and to stand with him in his defense of the gospel. A few chose to take advantage of Paul’s incarceration as an opportunity to attack Paul’s credibility, while enhancing their own standing at his expense. As Paul wrote this letter, he clearly had cause to complain and whine and murmur.

This would have been a perfect opportunity for Paul to do a little whining to the Philippians. They, of all people, would be sympathetic to his complaining. Yet Paul's letter to the Philippian church is one of the most triumphant and joyful books in the entire Bible. In chapter one Paul begins by expressing his deep love and concern for the Philippian saints (1:3-11), and then he describes the travail his present circumstances, and why he could rejoice in them (1:12-18a) – telling them that even if his trial should end in death, he finds this outcome something to rejoice about (1:18b-26). Paul then turns from his personal circumstances, attitude, and conduct in 1:1-26 and shares his desire that the Philippians attitudes and conduct will reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ as he exhorts them by saying: *“let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents”* (1:27-28).

Paul shares these words because just like himself, these saints are beginning to suffer for their faith in Christ. And also like Paul, they needed to recognize their suffering as a gift from God, just as their salvation was a gift of God's grace (1:29-30). Paul opens chapter two by telling the Philippian saints to maintain the same love and unity towards one another as he has shown towards them (2:1-4). He goes on to say that the basis for Christian unity is humility, a humility which purposely sets the interests of others above our own. The ultimate example of this kind of humility is our Lord Jesus Christ, who although equal with God, set aside His privileges as God and humbled Himself by adding sinless humanity to His perfect deity. He subordinated His interests to those of God the Father, thus accomplishing the work on the cross in Calvary, which will result in the universal acknowledgement of the Lordship of Jesus Christ to the glory of God (2:9-11). He then writes:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Philippians 2:12–13

Now, after having set out the conduct that the gospel requires in general terms, Paul speaks in more specific terms in verses 12-18. In these words, Paul gives us four very specific commands, using the imperative form of the verbs: *“work out”* in verse 12, *“do”* in verse 14, and *“be glad,”* and *“rejoice”* verse 18. It is significant that Paul introduces his instruction here with the words, *“my beloved”* emphasizing the depth of the relationship he had with those in the Philippian church. The tone of these commands are in stark contrast of Paul's words to those in the Galatian church where Paul was dealing with heresy. This intimate friendship and bond of love permeates the entire letter to the Philippians. We see that tone as Paul urges his beloved friends to persist in what they are already doing in that they have a history of obedience. He is not calling for repentance, as we see him doing with the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 7:9-10; 12:21). Here Paul declares: *“keep up your good work!”*

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” The Greek word in the original language for the English phrase *“work out”* is an imperative, a command, which literally means *“to work out fully, accomplish, finish.”* The word is also in what's called the middle voice, which means it is something we must do *but we need help doing it.* This reflects the biblical truth that we desperately need God's power to break through our dead calloused souls and ignite the fire of life in our hearts so we could come to faith in Jesus – *and* empower us to live above our fallen, sinful nature after we come to faith in Christ. Know that this is not a command to *“work for”* our salvation. Paul is clear about the fact that we only are saved by faith in Jesus Christ and he expects his readers to understand that we are not saved by anything we could ever do. In Ephesians 2:8-10 he writes: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”*

In the context of Paul's command in Philippians 1:27 to "*Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ*" - "working out our salvation" means *fully living out the faith we have in Christ*. And so working out our salvation is a life-long process. It is something we always "keep on doing." This "*working out*" of our salvation also reflects the reality that salvation is not just an event, but more of a series of events, a process. Our salvation began in the past and we are working out our salvation in the present and someday our salvation will be completely worked out in the future. Notice also the emphasis on salvation as "*your*" or "*your own*." There is always discussion about this as to whether the salvation spoken of here is individual or corporate. While there is a corporate dimension to salvation in the church, but Paul is focusing primarily on individual salvation. The phrase "*your own*" seems to suggest that each and every Christian should, as some would put it "tend to their own knitting," How easy it is to focus on how others should live out their faith in Christ and keep the focus from ourselves. The living out of our personal faith is *our own* personal responsibility.

The emphasis of verse 12 falls on the attitude of the Christian to "live out their faith in Jesus Christ." We are commanded to do so "*with fear and trembling*." Paul is not talking about working out our salvation "*with fear and trembling*" because if we don't, we could somehow lose our salvation. Our salvation is based on the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ, the finished work of his cross. What Paul is saying here is that we need to take our salvation *seriously*. Our salvation is a life or death issue. Our salvation has eternal implications for everyday life. We should never take our salvation for granted. In fact if we do take our salvation for granted, it very well might mean we are not saved – in that we have convinced ourselves that we know God but we really don't. That should cause us some "*fear and trembling*." Our forgiven, cleansed, transformed, renewed, restored souls are a precious, underserved gift of God's love, mercy and grace. Salvation is a serious and precious gift.

"*For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" Paul is telling us here that God empowers us to fully live out faith in Jesus Christ in at least two ways. He empowers us both "*to will*" and "*to work*" (to do) what is pleasing to God ("*for His good pleasure*"). Without God's power within us, there would be *no will and no desire* for us *to do* anything that is pleasing to God – and if even if we had the will and the desire to do what was pleasing to God - we would not have the power, to do so! We can never take credit for anything good or godly we have done because "*it is God who works in*" us "*both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*" Now there is, and there always has been, and always will be a debate about how God "*works*" in us like this. We still suffer from the lack of humility and disobedience we started with in the Garden because this debate has to do with us – how much good is in us, how sinful we really are, and how much free will that we have regarding our salvation and our ability to walk with God. There is a truth in tension here that cannot be solved with our human minds. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God declares: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*"

God's word clearly tells us the "*work*" of our salvation - and our desire and ability to work out our salvation in a manner that would please God - is absolutely and totally dependent on God. He is the source of our power. He is the One who is always working with His power within us. We are to work out our salvation with "*fear and trembling*" because we know that no good work is truly our work. This is not about putting ourselves down but rather about lifting up God above all things. We are commanded to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with *humility*, because God is the One who is working in us, prompting us to desire and to carry out His will. How can we be proud of any good thing we do when we know that anything good really comes from God? James 1:17 tells us: "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.*"

Deep down inside our souls we all know this. Deep down inside we know that before Jesus Christ was in our hearts we were dead to the things of God. And when Jesus did come into our hearts – we came alive! But some of us have forgotten what it was like without Jesus. Some of us have forgotten how lost we were before God graciously intervened. The danger in forgetting is that we become spiritually numb to anything outside of ourselves and then we become spiritually blind to the reality of our ongoing sinful nature. But the Apostle Paul did not forget. In Romans 7:18 he wrote: *“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”* Without God’s power we are powerless; without God’s power we do not have the ability to fully live out our faith in Jesus Christ. In Galatians 2:20 the apostle Paul said: *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”* God’s work of faith in us is His empowerment to joyfully live out the fullness of the humble obedience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

We live out our lives, we make choices, we laugh, we cry, we rejoice, we despair, we celebrate, we mourn, we work, we play, we get angry, we forgive, we come to faith, we struggle with our sin, we feel like we are losing the battle, we feel powerless and we complain and we can still live for God - because God is at work in us *“both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* God created us in His image out of dust of the ground. He breathed life into our bodies and souls. He chose us before the foundations of the world to know Him and love Him and live *for* Him and live *with* Him forever. We praise God that *“in him we live and move and have our being”* because left alone our fallen, sinful, prideful, rebellious nature will always cause us to wander off into the corner of the darkness of our own shadows. God loves us too much to let us have our own way. He sent Jesus to die for our sins, so we might know his life *today and forever*. And He sent the Holy Spirit to live within us, so we might live above the battle. God Himself *“works”* in us *“both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* – because without God’s power working in us, our wills would work for our own good pleasure.

Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. (2:14-18)

Paul now what that the power of God to fully live out the fullness of the humble obedience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ should look like - as we work out our own salvation in fear and trembling *within the context of community*. In verse 12 we read of the imperative, the command that we are to *“work out”* our *“own salvation with fear and trembling”* - and now here we read of a second imperative, the command that we are to *“do all things without grumbling or disputing.”* The pride of grumbling and disputing are the opposites of humility of fear and trembling. Obedience which flows out of self-centered complaining, grumbling, disputing and blaming is the opposite of humble obedience that flows out of the power of God working inside of us. In other words if we are really working out our salvation with humble fear and trembling, we will do so without complaining about each other or arguing with one another. That’s the power of God working in us living out our faith.

By the tone of and context of Paul’s letter it is evident that there was some friction about this in the church. We see that more specifically in Philippians 4:2 as the apostle Paul exhorts two women to *“agree in the Lord.”* We don’t know the nature of it but we do know that Paul tackled the problem by urging humility and obedience and unity for the sake of the gospel. *“Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent”* he said. The truth is, for the most part, we don’t set out looking to get into conflict with others. Most often we run into it when we bump into someone who sins differently than we do – which happens whenever people get together.

The real question for all of us – especially for those of us who claim to the following Christ – *is how we deal with our differences*. We didn't start out well; the first relational conflict in the Garden of Eden resulted in one brother murdering another brother. Just as the Apostle Paul describes our ongoing war with sin within our hearts in Romans 7:23 – so is it our tendency to be at war with one another, whether it be with bullets or hard feelings or harsh words. That is the way of fallen humanity in a fallen world. But that's not God's way. In Christ we are to acknowledge and celebrate our differences. God created us to be different from one another. In God's family we are to celebrate differences. And so with fear and trembling we are to humbly and obediently *work out* and *work with* our differences without grumbling and disputing.

Paul states his purpose for his command to “*do all things without grumbling or disputing*” when he says: “*that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life.*” The ultimate concern here is about our witness to the world. In other words, our relationships with each other reflect our individual and corporate relationships with Jesus Christ. People who do not know Jesus will base their opinions and beliefs about Jesus on how they see us behave when we are with them and in how we relate to each other - differences and all. Our relational witness, Paul says, should be seen as “*blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation.*” If God is working in us living out our faith, we will “*shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life*” as we will then humbly and obediently relate to one another with mercy and grace and love.

We “*hold fast to the word of life*” when we openly believe in the gospel and share the gospel and live out the gospel – that God the Father sent his only Son Jesus Christ to die on a cross for the forgiveness of sins for those who receive him as Lord and Savior, so we might be redeemed and restored back into the relationship with God that they were created for. The world needs to see that Jesus is Lord and Savior. The world we live in needs the light and life of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The crooked and depraved generation we live in is living in the darkness. The gospel of “*the word of life*” offers the light of Jesus Christ. The crooked and depraved generation live in is not only living in the darkness, it is dying, slow but sure. The gospel of “*the word of life*” offers new life and eternal life of Jesus Christ. The world needs to see that they can receive new life through Jesus Christ. But the world will not see those things until they see God's work of faith in us - as He empowers us to joyfully live out the fullness of the humble obedience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. Philippians 2:17-18

These two verses are a unique closing to Paul's appeal for unity and harmony. Suffering is often the occasion for grumbling and arguing. We see this in Israel's history in its years in the wilderness. But Paul has a very different attitude toward suffering: he encourages us to embrace it! Paul considered it a joy to be a “*sacrificial offering*” for the sake of the gospel. He could do so because God was working in him “*to will and to work for His good pleasure.*” When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are called to a sacrificial life of humble obedience. Our text takes this matter of humble obedience even farther. Paul insists that we should seek to please God – and in order to be pleasing to God, our humble obedience must be joyful. Complaining, whining, grumbling Christians are sinning, because they are being disobedient to God's clear command to be joyful and not to grumble. They are unhappy, and their discontent is contagious. They often cause division and strife. Discontent is also the first step toward rebellion against God. Think of it; before Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, they had to become discontent with all the blessings God had given them. Murmuring Christians are just one small step away from active rebellion against God.

Our text not only teaches us that we should be joyful, it also requires that we be joyful even in the midst of suffering and adversity. Joy and sorrow are not opposites in the Kingdom of God. When we pursue a life of living out our faith of God working in us, we will experience both sorrow and joy at the same time. Our church family has been and is still are experiencing this right now at the passing of our dear brother Hugo Lambrechts. After battling a serious illness for a number of months, the Lord finally took Hugo home. His death is, in one sense, a very sad event. But on the other hand, there was much rejoicing, as we would talk with him and Terشيا at his bedside. We rejoice because Hugo is with Jesus! There is no greater joy! This is precisely what Paul is calling for in our text. Christians are to face pain, suffering and death with joy-filled hearts. We are not to become sour and bitter. We are not to feel sorry for ourselves, nor are we to whine or grumble or complain about politicians or elections, or social distancing or wearing masks or being stuck in quarantine/isolation, or taxes or the economy, or getting a flu shot or a virus or sickness or death.

Grumbling and whining and complaining are sins. The cure for this murmuring and can be summed up in one word: *worship*. In Psalm 73 Asaph whines and complains to God because he has concluded that the wicked are prospering while the righteous are suffering. It is only when he comes to worship that Asaph begins to see things clearly, and his bitter spirit melts into one of praise and gratitude: *“When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works!”* Psalm 73:21-28

“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” Isaiah 64:4 declares: *“From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who WORKS for those who wait for him.”* God’s Word tells us that *“God works”* for means we can’t do the work. We desperately in need of God’ help. That glorifies God, not us. The Powerful One gets the praise. But that is not our normal Christian experience. It’s true we have another life within us: God’s life. But our lives, hearts and wills are involved in this too. It is true that we will never be saved apart from him. But it is likewise true that he will never save us apart from ourselves. We do the living and the choosing and the acting, but we know a secret - that all along it is God who is living, acting and choosing through us - as Paul so wonderfully puts it in Galatians 2:1-20: *“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*

That is what Paul has beautifully taught us this morning. He tell us that if Christ truly lives in us, we are to do our own choosing and living, and as we do it, God will be at work in us both to will and to work in ways that will please God. The proof that God’s work of faith in us - is that His empowerment will cause us to joyfully live out the fullness of the humble obedience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Paul considered a joy to be a *“sacrificial offering”* for the sake of the gospel. He could do so because God was working in him *“to will and to work for His good pleasure.”* In the midst of a world full of grumblers and whiners, may we know that same power, as we obediently seek to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people!

When we walk with the Lord, in the light of His Word, what a glory He sheds on our way;
While we do His good will, He abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey.
Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.