

Sermon 85  
**ON WORKING OUT OUR OWN SALVATION**  
 by John Wesley

*“A landmark sermon, written late in Wesley’s life – exact date unknown. It is the most complete and careful exposition Wesley ever made of the mystery of divine-human interaction, his subtlest probing of the paradox of prevenient grace and human agency.”* Albert Outler

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(paraphrased and edited by Mike Graef,  
 with section headings and *[added words]* by Mike Graef)

*The Setting and Context in World History and Human Knowledge*

1. Some great truths seem to be accepted – at least in part – virtually everywhere. Such as whether God exists and what God is like; common notions of moral good and moral evil, etc. The traces of truths like these are found in all nations. In some sense it can be said of everyone ever born: “God has shown you, O mortal, what is good. [...] to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6.8) God has in some measure given to everyone “The true light that [...] was coming into the world.” (John 1.9) So even those who “don’t have the Law”, that have no written copy of the Old Testament Law, nevertheless see the “Law in themselves.” (Romans 2.14) These people of the world “show the proof of the Law”, in their lives. They understand the basic principles of it. Though they don’t have the actual Scriptures, still the Law is “written on their hearts” by the same hand which wrote on the tablets of stone, “their consciences affirm it”, whether they end up being faithful to what they know or not faithful to it. (Romans 2.15)

2. Even-so there were two pillars of Christian faith, two vital truths from God, of which even the most exceptional un-churched minds in the ancient world were totally ignorant. We find this to be true today as well. The most intelligent people in the world remain just as ignorant of these truths

as they were in Bible times: I mean those truths which relate to 1) the eternal Son of God and 2) the Spirit of God. About the Son, they don't comprehend that "He died in our place to take away our sins, and not only our sins but the sins of all people" (1<sup>st</sup> John 2.2). About the Spirit they are clueless that He is able to make us "new, becoming like the One who made (us)." (Colossians 3.10) Even after all the hard work done by the brightest and best (people like that great nobleman Andrew Michael Ramsay, 1686-1743) attempting to find some traces of Son-truth and Spirit-truth in all manner of endless and trivial worldly writings, the results they come up with are weak, so weak that one needs a lively imagination just to see the connection. And even these weak traces are found in only a few places, and only in the best writings of the deepest thinking minds throughout the generations. It's certain that the bulk of the population who have walked the earth have not been influenced in the least by even the best of the world's philosophers. Most people therefore have remained untouched by the great truths of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, as untouched as say even dogs, cats or bears.

### *The Great Revelation And Game Changer*

3. It is certain, then, that truths concerning the Son of God and the Holy Spirit were not known to common people – the bulk of humankind – nor to the majority populations in any nation. This remained so until these truths were "brought [...] to light through the gospel." (2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 1.10) So even with sparks of understanding of Son and Spirit in some places, the whole earth was virtually covered in darkness. But then the "Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4.2) arose and scattered the shades of night. Since that time, since this "Day-spring" (Luke 1.78 KJV) has come to us from heaven, a great light has "shined on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death;" (Luke 1.78-79) with the result that thousands in every age have now come to know that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3.16) And these same ones having been entrusted with "the very words of God" (Romans 3.2) have learned also that God "gives his Holy Spirit" (1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 4.8) who "enables you

both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.” (Philippians 2.13)

*What Does This Have To Say To Us?*

4. How amazing then are the words which we find from the Apostle Paul just before Philippians 2.13: “Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus: Though he was in the form of God” – in other words, the very being and nature of God from eternity to eternity – “did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.” (Philippians 2.6) This means Jesus was so confident of his equality with God that he didn’t need to prove it to anyone. The word “equal” there is meant to be descriptive of both God’s fullness and his incomparable greatness. Now take the next verse. We learn that Jesus “emptied himself” of the fullness and greatness of God, hiding his equality with God from all people and angels. Then “taking” (by that act of emptying) “the form of a slave, by becoming like human beings.” (2.7) “When he found himself in the form of a human,” – a common human being, no more beautiful or excellent than any other – “he humbled himself” even more than before – “by becoming obedient” – to God, though he was equal with him – “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2.8) – the greatest instance of combined humiliation and obedience the world has ever seen.

Having just put Jesus Christ before them as the truest example, Paul now urges them in the strongest possible terms to make this salvation their own, the salvation which Christ has purchased for them: “carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. It is God who works in you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.” (2.12-13) [*Wesley is working with the King James Version: “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.”*]

These verses comprise a comprehensive teaching, from which we must make special note of three things: 1) first that there is a bedrock truth which should never be far from our active thoughts: “It is God who works in you both to want (to will) and to actually live out (to do) his good purposes.” And 2) second, that the purpose of knowing this is that it

should be put into practice by: “carrying out our own salvation with fear and trembling.” And finally, 3) third, that we’re invited to see the connection between the two: “It is God who works in you,” therefore, “carry out your own salvation.”

### *How This Becomes a Possibility for Us*

I.1. First we want to closely study the great and important truth which should never be far from our minds, “It is God who works in you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.” The meaning of these words may come clearer by a little interpretation. ‘It is God’s “good purposes” which create in you both the “want to”, and the “actual living.”’ The position of the words makes the message quite clear. When you connect “God’s good purposes” with “work” you see immediately that human beings are not doing this work themselves. Notice people get no credit for this working. The Scripture is telling the reader that the whole glory goes to God for being the One who does this work, God’s own work. If we didn’t take time to notice this we might have thought to boast a little for ourselves, as if this working were a much deserved reward for us, based on some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us – that we motivated or pushed God to work by our own efforts. The Scripture stops all such vain notions in their tracks by clearly showing that God is moved toward us in this work by his own heart, from his own being. It is God’s grace and unmerited mercy that move him.

2. It is God’s own grace and heart of mercy alone that made him decide upon this plan of action: to will this for us, and to accomplish this in us. *[Following Wesley we keep the KJV’s wording in mind “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure”.]* We see that this verse can be interpreted in two ways, both of which shed good light on the matter. First, “to will” points to our inner life, our thought-life, soul and spirit-life. “To do” references the behaviors, words and actions which result. Taken together the Scripture is teaching that God is at work both in the inner and in the outer parts of our discipleship, the inner and outer aspects of our spiritual life, our inward and outward holiness. Secondly,

“to will” can also refer to every good desire that we might have, such as our passion to know and serve Christ. “To do” would then apply to the results that come from our good desire. The sentence then would convey this meaning: ‘God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect.’

3. The original Greek New Testament words lead also to this meaning. The Greek word which is translated “to will” or “to want” clearly includes every good desire, whether relating to our emotions, words, or actions, those parts of us which become receptive to inward or outward holiness. The original Greek word which is translated “to do” or “to actually live out” points to the power which comes directly from God; the purposeful energy and influence which the Holy Spirit sends to work in us a willingness and dedication to God’s good purposes; afterward, outfitting us by supplying us with the good words we’re able to bring to others, and the good works we get busy doing.

4. Nothing is as successful at keeping people from the danger of false pride as a deep and lasting conviction of this. For if we really understand that we have nothing which we have not received, how can we puff ourselves up – pretending that we had not received it? If we know and feel that the very first motion within us toward good is from above, as well as all of the power which carries it through to action – if it is God that not only causes good desire to well up in us, but who also follows through on it, sustains and accompanies it (or else it would vanish away) – then we proclaim along with Paul, “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1.31)

*The Order of Salvation, “Ordo Salutis”*

II.1. On to the second point. If God “enables you”, then “carry out your own salvation.” The original Greek word for “carry out” implies that this action is done to completion, thoroughly. “Your own” means you yourself must do it, or it will never be done at all. “Your own salvation” refers to

salvation – which begins with what is best and most commonly referred to as “prevenient grace”.

[NOTE: Wesley’s text says “preventing grace.” Today we say “prevenient grace”. In the 18th Century, “prevent” could mean as it does today: 1. To stop, keep, or hinder (a person or other agent) from doing something.” But it could also mean (as this is the sense Wesley is using it): 2. *To act before, in anticipation of, or in preparation for (a future event, or a point of time, esp. the time fixed for the act); to act as if the event or time had already come. To meet beforehand or anticipate (an objection, question, command, desire, want, etc.).* 3. *To act before or more quickly than (another person or agent); to anticipate in action.* 4. *To come, arrive, or appear before, to precede; to outrun, outstrip.* 5. To forestall, balk, or baffle by previous or precautionary measures. 6. To cut off beforehand, debar, preclude (a person or other agent) from, deprive of a purpose, expectation, etc. Now rare.

Bishop Robert Schnase describes God’s prevenient grace thusly: “According to Wesley, before people ever consciously come to faith, they have inner desires for relationship to God that are stifled, forgotten, neglected, ignored, or denied. By the grace that precedes awareness or decision, God creates readiness for faith in the individual and fosters the nascent eagerness to please God. By God’s grace, people may be more ready than we realize to accept the invitation and initiative of Christ . . . ” *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, pg. 14-15]

**Prevenient grace** includes everything from the very first wish a person has to please God, to the very first insights a person has concerning God’s will, and through to the first sense – be it ever so shallow – the person has of acknowledging their participation in sin the great flaw common to all, i.e., human brokenness in which we all sin against God. Each one of these first human insights demonstrate that within that heart is an inclination to seek and to choose life. Some degree of salvation is present in all persons touched by prevenient grace. There is noticeable in them the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, a heart which formerly was quite oblivious to God, unaware at all of the things God values.

The next step in the salvation is carried on by ‘convincing grace’, usually in Scripture termed repentance or turning. **Convincing grace** brings the conviction that one knows oneself better now, and owns one’s brokenness in a deeper way. Conviction leads the soul to turn toward God, to be delivered by grace – away from one’s former heart of stone.

After prevenient grace and convincing grace have done their part, the pilgrim experiences the true Christian salvation. It is in actual salvation that 'through grace' we 'are saved by faith' (Romans 3). There are two parts to this authentic Christian salvation, two great aspects of it: justification and sanctification.

By **justification** we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to full acceptance and fellowship with God, by the grace of God. God's wrath for our sins no longer hangs over our heads and no longer troubles our worried minds. We are placed securely in the light, knowing that God delights in us and loves us unconditionally.

By **sanctification** we are saved from the power and root of sin and restored to the image of God. In sanctification God's salvation uproots the hold sin has on our psyches and our habits, and replaces that with an unshakeable confidence that nothing can prevent us from becoming all that God has meant for us to be.

A Christian's experience (as well as his/her study of Scripture) will show that this authentic salvation is both an 'all at once' experience and a 'growing over time' experience. [*Wesley's words are 'instantaneous' and 'gradual'.*] Salvation then begins instantly the moment we are justified in the holy, gentle, patient love of God and human and it gradually increases from that moment.

### *The Great Tree*

Jesus' teaching illustrates this point with a metaphor – a 'grain of mustard seed, which at first is the least of seeds, but' gradually 'puts forth large branches', (Matthew 13.31-32). Full salvation (also named perfect love, entire sanctification or holiness) can be seen as a great tree or a great goal, out there ahead of us. The great tree is the spiritual goal we're journeying toward. [*We begin the journey when we're "justified". We arrive at the tree*

*when we're "sanctified".]* The great tree, according to Jesus, is full salvation. Arriving at the great tree should be thought of as an 'all at once' instantaneous event – like saving faith but different.

Picture an event, a moment in time, somewhere out in the future for us who are moving through the steps toward full salvation. Suddenly, there in that future moment, we experience a state of grace in which, behold!, our heart is truly free of all worry, envy, strife, bitterness. In that moment we are fully and completely free of sin – no longer so weak as to be helplessly prone to sin; whether by words, acts or thoughts. *[Free from sins committed, free from the sin of good works left undone.]* We are filled from bottom to top with pure love to God and all people of the earth. Moment by moment this becomes our normal way of being and acting in relationships. Day by day we live with this love, this peace. This is the soul in perfect love.

So Jesus is simply imaging this state of grace as a great tree, and saying that the salvation process is always moving toward this tree. Salvation is a process with a goal. The goal is a complete filling of our soul with agape love. God's love follows God's design and purpose, increasing more and more for the Christian, till we 'grow up in all things into him that is our head' (Ephesians 4.15), 'till we attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ'. (Ephesians 4.13)

*With "Fear" and "Trembling"*

2. But how are we to "carry out" this salvation? The Apostle Paul answers: "with fear and trembling." *[Philippians 2.12, "The Message" Bible uses the words: energetic, reverent and sensitive.]* There is another place in Paul's letters where this expression occurs. "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything [...]." Paul is counseling slaves to obey earthly masters because this is the worldly-wise thing to do, keeping in mind, however, that one day soon they will be free. Slaves should practice this worldly obedience, "with the single motivation of fearing the Lord." (Colossians 3.22) This "fearing the Lord" expression is proverb-like, and must not be taken



literally. No master could tolerate much less expect a slave to stand before him physically shaking and trembling. The next verse in Colossians 3 makes it doubly clear we're not talking about physical shaking and trembling: "Whatever you do, do it from the heart for the Lord and not for people." (vs 23) Or again, as Paul says in another place, "carry out God's will from the heart" (Ephesians 6.6) therefore with all of one's inner strength. It is easy to see that these strong expressions from the Apostle make clear two things: 1) first, that everything be done with complete sincerity and earnestness of spirit – as in 'with fear' – and 2) second, that what is attempted should be done to perform to the highest standards imaginable, in work-ethic, speed, punctuality, and focus – as suggested by the phrase 'with trembling'.

3. "With fear and trembling" is therefore very easy to apply to our lives as we continue to work to "carry out" our own salvation. Simply take your cue by observing Christian disciples on jobs in the workplace. They have a keen desire to make the boss proud, they come with a good work ethic. Just so Christians work to please their Master that is in heaven. First they bring to this 'carrying out' their highest and best devotion of spirit, with all their human attentiveness and caution. Second they bring to their personal salvation-work the best diligence, speed, punctuality, and focus they can muster.

*The General Rules: first "By Doing No Harm"*

4. Now what steps does the Scripture direct us to take, in the carrying out of our own salvation? The prophet Isaiah gives us an overall answer pointing to the first steps we are to take: "**Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right.**" (Isaiah 1.16-17, NIV) If it is your desire that God should grow in you the kind of faith which connects you to salvation now and salvation eternally, then, by the grace you've already received to this point, speed away from all sin as determinedly and quickly as you would flee from the scary jaws of a sea monster. **Carefully avoid any alignment with evil** in your public life, in your use of words and actions. Be sensitive to even the slightest connection with evil in your speech and deeds.

*second "By Doing Good"*

And **"learn to do right."** Be eager to pitch in to **good works**; both works which outwardly build up faith (piety), and works which simply offer help to those in need (mercy).

*third, "Attending Upon All The Ordinances of God"*

Take advantage of the discipline of family **prayer**, and when you are alone with God hold nothing back. Cry out, be honest. Fast but let no one know you're **fasting**, and "your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." (Matthew 6.4) **"Study the Scriptures."** (John 5.39) Hear the Bible read in public worship. Read Scriptures in private at home, and meditate on what you've heard. Every chance you have to **receive the Lord's Supper** do so. "Do this" communing "in remembrance of" him, (Luke 22.19) and expect the Living Christ to meet you at his own table. **Converse often with the children of God.** In other words, seek out Christian brothers and sisters regularly for conversation. And see that your own speech in those opportunities "be always full of grace, seasoned with salt." (Colossians 4.6) As moments present themselves, widen the reach of your love and **"do good to all people"** (Galatians 6.10), both to their souls and to their bodies. And in all these things, **"stand firm. Let nothing move you.** Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord." (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15.58)

*The Way of The Cross*

Once you've established this way of life there is only one more thing to do. In the words of our Lord, **"deny yourselves and take up your cross daily."** (Luke 9.23) Jesus is saying here that self-denial becomes the lifestyle of all who work to carry out their own salvation. To practice self-denial form the habit of avoiding the kinds of entertainment, reading, diversions, worldly pleasures, etc., which do not lead naturally to including God, and which do not help you to take pleasure in God. But

while learning to habitually avoid pleasures disconnected from God, go on to open your heart and mind to embrace all the positive ways you find to draw near to God. Open yourself to these ways even if they include a cross, even if they open the possibility of physical pain and suffering. Following this path you will arrive at a place of peace and assurance in your soul. You will have confidence that redemption in the blood of Christ is yours. You will know of a certain that you are counted among those who are “going on to maturity” (Hebrews 6.1, “perfection” in the KJV). And this will continue until the story of your faith journey parallels that of the Apostles. So much so, that as you “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1<sup>st</sup> John 1.7), you will be enabled, as was the Apostle John, to testify that “he is faithful and just”, not only to “forgive your sins” but also to “cleansing you from all unrighteousness.” (1<sup>st</sup> John 1.9)

### *Countering the Passivity Objection*

III.1. Some will counter, and say, ‘The passage conveys two truths which need to be connected and interpreted. The two parts of this passage as it stands are opposites.’ [*The passage again is: “carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. It is God who works in you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes.” Philippians 2.12-13*] They say, ‘if it is God who works both to want and to actually live out salvation, then there is no need for us to “carry out” any part of it. The greatness of God’s work surely covers anything human beings bring to the table. Doesn’t the passage intend to say that, since it is God who “works in you,” therefore the human contribution should be seen for what it truly is: out of place and redundant?’ They say, ‘If you agree that God does all the work then just admit – there is no work left for us to do.’

2. Reasoning like this is unspiritual. When we first hear someone say this sort of thing, we might feel, ‘oh yes, that makes sense.’ But it is not sound. We will see the great flaw in it emerge when we look at the matter more deeply. The evidence is in the passage itself. It will say clearly to us that there are no opposites here at all, no opposition between “it is God who works” and “carry out your own salvation.” Instead of opposition what

we actually find here is harmony, indeed the closest possible connection. The connection jumps out at us in two ways: first, it is God who works therefore human beings *can* work, and second, it is God who works therefore human beings *must* work.

*Every Christian Has An 'Eye of the Needle' Story*

3. First the positive. God truly does enable the 'wanting to' and the 'actual living out' of God's good purposes. Because of God's work in you, you *can* carry out your own salvation. (Philippians 2.12-13) But note, otherwise it would be impossible. In other words, if God did not enable it, it would be – practically speaking – impossible for you to carry out your own salvation. To clarify we should bring to mind our Lord's teaching wherein he said that it will be very difficult "for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 19.23) His disciples were troubled the day he said that, and asked, "Then who can be saved?" (vs 25) Jesus' reply was, "For people this is impossible." Let's isolate Jesus' reply for a moment. His phrase "For people this is impossible" catches the disciples and us in a teachable moment. His reply perfectly explains to us how we should understand the context of carrying out our own salvation. The Lord's teaching is clear: carrying out our own salvation is impossible apart from God's enabling, working energy. No human aptitude or capacity makes this possible.

*Every Christian Has a Lazarus Story*

No natural born human being can move an inch toward carrying out their own salvation apart from God's help. Actually the Bible teaches this in several places. The Bible teaches human beings are by nature spiritually sick. Reference James 5.14 which indicates that physical illness can have a spiritual source. But even more than sick, people are as Ephesians 2.1 puts it: "spiritually dead." Dead, "because of your sins and the things you did against God." So the Bible is clear. It is not possible for people to do anything positive toward the "carrying out" of their salvation; that is until God figuratively raises them from the dead. (Romans 6.4-5) In the story of Lazarus, it was possible for the dead Lazarus to "come out" of the cave

alive when the Lord gave him life. (John 11:43) The Lazarus story is our story too. Knowing it is impossible for us to ‘come out’ of our sins, or even to make the least movement toward coming out of our sins on our own, we wait for the One who has all power in heaven and earth. He calls our dead souls, Lazarus like, into life.

#### *Countering the Solitary/Natural Human Objection*

4. Even-so, no one should excuse themselves and continue in sin, blaming their Maker for their sin saying: ‘God alone has the ability to make our souls responsive to God; we can’t offer any help in this.’ We’ve established that according to the Bible the souls of all people are dead by *nature*. But that fact excuses no one because the Bible also teaches that no living human being can be found to exist in merely a natural, i.e., completely secular, state. No living person is ever completely void of the grace of God, unless they themselves have quenched the Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 5.19) It is also false to argue that this is really about ‘natural conscience’. Some go on and on making the point that no living person is completely untouched by what is commonly called ‘natural conscience.’ But you see the Apostle is not talking about natural conscience. When he speaks of God “working” or “enabling” us to live out God’s good purposes, he’s talking about one thing alone: grace. The active energy Paul is talking about, that which is supplied to help us carry out our own salvation, is not natural conscience at all, but rather it is “prevenient grace.”

#### *How A Christian Views Other People, All Other People*

It is certain that every man and woman has some measure of prevenient grace – great or small –at work in them. What does the Bible teach concerning prevenient grace? According to Scripture, God takes the initiative in sending prevenient grace. It is not held by God at the ready pending a person’s request for it. There are signs of the presence of prevenient grace at work. For instance everyone has a desire to do good. For some this comes early in their life, for some later. Every man and woman has good desires in them; this is true even though most people stifle these desires before they can really blossom; before they become the

core of the person's character, or produce fruit to any great degree. Scriptural examples of prevenient grace abound. For instance John's Gospel says every person has some measure of that light that "was coming into the world" the light "which enlightens everyone" (John 1.9) Some faint glimmering ray has reached them. Looking at the world we observe that for some this light comes sooner, for some later in their life. Some apprehend more of the light, some less, but all receive it. Observation also shows us that everyone notably feels more or less uneasy when he or she acts contrary to the light of their own conscience. This also is a sign of the presence of prevenient grace, and it holds true except in the cases of the small number of those "whose consciences are seared with a hot iron." (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 4.2) What do we conclude from all this evidence? Simply this: no person sins because they do not have grace. They sin because they do not use the grace they have.

### *You Can Do This!*

5. Therefore having been assured that God "enables you", it is certain that you are now able to "carry out" your own salvation. Let's look at this first from the positive side: he works in you for his own good reasons – doing what pleases him, and without any deserving of yours. His leading brings you to both parts of the salvation journey, the "want to" and the "actually live out". Take it to heart: because of God's work, it is possible for you to fulfill all righteousness. (Matt 3.15) It is possible for you to 'love God, because God first loved us', (1 John 4.19) and to 'live your life with love', (Eph 5.2) after the pattern of our great Master. The Christian disciple feels inwardly the word of Jesus to be absolutely true where he said, 'without me you can't do anything'. (John 15.5) But on the other hand the disciple is just as sure that, 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me.' (Phil 4.13)

### *Countering the Mock Humility Objection*

6. So as we go along let us remember that God has joined these together in the experience of every believer. And therefore we must take care not to imagine that they are ever to be pulled apart. (Matt 19.6) For example, there is a mock humility to watch out for. Some will feel justified by Scripture to excuse their willful disobedience by saying to themselves, 'Oh, I can do nothing.' They'll smugly sit there without even once including the grace of God in the conversation.

To the one who is prone to this error I say: think again. Consider what you say. My great hope is that you'll self-correct on this. Because, you see if you don't, if it turns out to be really true that you can do nothing, then you have no faith. And if you have no faith, then you are in a wretched condition. Reason with me. It is not true that you can do nothing. You can do something as Christ strengthens you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace. (2 Tim 1.6)

*This Grace Only Comes With Use*

7. Secondly let's observe it from the negative side. Since God "enables" you; you *must* "carry" this out otherwise he will stop sending you enabling grace. Scripture is clear that we must be found to be those who 'work together with him'. This is the way the Apostle Paul puts it in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6.1. There is a general rule on which God's grace proceeds without exception, and it is this: "Those who have will receive more, but as for those who don't have (in other words those who do not improve the grace already given), even what they seem to have will be taken away from them." This is how we read Luke 8.18. Even the great St. Augustine agrees. He is generally supposed to weight things in favor of all the work being on God's side. Nevertheless he makes this remark, *Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis* – [Wesley's translation]: 'he that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves.' So you see God will not save us unless we are actively participating, involved, responsive, collaborating, cooperating in "being saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2.40). God will not save us unless we ourselves "compete in the good fight of faith, and grab hold on eternal life" (1 Tim 6.12); unless we "make every effort to enter through the narrow gate," (Luke 13.24); "deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily" (Luke 9.23); and work, by every possible means, to "confirm our call and election" (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 1.10).

*The Way To Blessing . . . Action!*

8. Sisters and brothers, the Bible is teaching us that we are blessed when we act: when we work, "not for the food that doesn't last, but for the food that endures to eternal life" (John 6.27); when we say as Jesus said (though in a somewhat different sense for us than for him) "My Father is still working and I am working too" (John 5.17); when we stay with it, "never tiring of doing good" (Gal 6.9, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Thess 3.13), knowing that God is always present in us, constantly working through us, his grace enabling us each moment. I say to you: Go on! in "the work that comes from faith, in the perseverance that comes from hope, and in the effort

that comes from love.” (1<sup>st</sup> Thess 1.3) Go on, on the foundation of the grace of God working ahead of you [*Wesley: preventing*], accompanying you, and following after you. “Stand firm and unshakeable, excelling in the work of the Lord as always.” (1<sup>st</sup> Cor 15.58) And “the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the Sheep”, -- Jesus -- “make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever!” (Heb 13.20-21)

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## On Working Out Our Own Salvation

By John Wesley

### Sermon 85

(text from the 1872 edition - Thomas Jackson, editor)

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*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Philippians 2:12-13*

**1.** Some great truths, as the being and attributes of God, and the difference between moral good and evil, were known, in some measure, to the heathen world. The traces of them are to be found in all nations; So that, in some sense, it may be said to every child of man, "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; even to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." With this truth he has, in some measure, "enlightened every one that cometh into the world." And hereby they that "have not the law," that have no written law, "are a law unto themselves." They show "the work of the law," -- the substance of it, though not the letter, -- "written in their hearts," by the same hand which wrote the commandments on the tables of stone; "Their conscience also bearing them witness," whether they act suitably thereto or not.

**2.** But there are two grand heads of doctrine, which contain many truths of the most important nature, of which the most enlightened Heathens in the ancient world were totally ignorant; as are also the most intelligent Heathens that are now on the face of the earth; I mean those which relate to the eternal Son of God, and the Spirit of God: To the Son, giving himself to be "a propitiation for the sins of the world;" and to the Spirit of God, renewing men in that image of God wherein they were created. For after all the pains which ingenious and learned men have taken (that great man, the Chevalier Ramsay, in particular) to find some resemblance of these truths in the immense rubbish of heathen authors, the resemblance is so exceeding faint, as not to be discerned but by a very lively imagination. Beside that, even this resemblance, faint as it was, is only to be found in the discourses of a very few; and those were the most improved and deeply-thinking men, in their several generations; while the innumerable multitudes that surrounded them were little better for the knowledge of the philosophers, but remained as totally ignorant even of these capital truths as were the beasts that perish.

**3.** Certain it is, that these truths were never known to the vulgar, the bulk of mankind, to the generality of men in any nation, till they were brought to light by the gospel. Notwithstanding a spark of knowledge glimmering here and there, the whole earth was covered with darkness, till the Sun of Righteousness arose and scattered the shades of night. Since this day-spring from on high has appeared, a great light hath shined unto those who, till then, sat in darkness and in the shadow of death. And thousands of them in every age have known, "that God so loved the world, as to give his only Son, to the end that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life." And being entrusted with the oracles of God, they have known that God hath also given us his Holy Spirit, who "worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

4. How remarkable are those words of the Apostle, which precede these! "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God," -- the incommunicable nature of God from eternity -- "counted it no act of robbery," -- (that is the precise meaning of the word) no invasion of any other's prerogative, but his own unquestionable right, -- "to be equal with God." The word implies both the *fullness* and the supreme *height* of the Godhead; to which are opposed the two words, he *emptied* and he *humbled himself*. He "emptied himself" of that divine fullness, veiled his fullness from the eyes of men and angels; "taking," and by that very act emptying himself, "the form of a servant; being made in the likeness of man," a real man, like other men. "And being found in fashion as a man," -- a common man, without any peculiar beauty or excellency, -- "he humbled himself" to a still greater degree, "becoming obedient" to God, though equal with him, "even unto death; yea, the death of the cross:" The greatest instance both of humiliation and obedience. [Phil. 2:5-11]

Having proposed the example of Christ, the Apostle exhorts them to secure the salvation which Christ hath purchased for them: "Wherefore, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; For it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

In these comprehensive words we may observe,

I. That grand truth, which ought never to be out of our of remembrance, "It is God that worketh in us, both to will and to do of his own good pleasure."

II. The improvement we ought to make of it: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

III. The connexion between them: "It is God that worketh in you;" therefore "work out your own salvation."

## I.

1. First. We are to observe that great and important truth which ought never to be out of our remembrance: "It is God that worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." The meaning of these words may be made more plain by a small transposition of them: "It is God that of his good pleasure worketh in you both to will and to do." This position of the words, connecting the phrase, *of his good pleasure*, with the word *worketh*, removes all imagination of merit from man, and gives God the whole glory of his own work. Otherwise, we might have had some room for boasting, as if it were our own desert, some goodness in us, or some good thing done by us, which first moved God to work. But this expression cuts off all such vain conceits, and clearly shows his motive to work lay wholly in himself-in his, own mere grace, in his unmerited mercy.

2. It is by this alone he is impelled to work in man both to will and to do. The expression is capable of two interpretations; both of which are unquestionably true. First, *to will*, may include the whole of inward, *to do*, the whole of outward, religion. And if it be thus understood, it implies, that it is God that worketh both inward and outward holiness.

Secondly, *to will*, may imply every good desire; *to do*, whatever results therefrom. And then the sentence means, God breathes into us every good desire, and brings every good desire to good effect.

3. The original words, *to qelein* and *to energein*, seem to favor the latter construction: *to thelein*, which we render *to will*, plainly including every good desire, whether relating to our tempers, words, or actions; to inward or outward holiness. And *to energein*, which we render *to do*, manifestly implies all that power from on high, all that energy which works in us every right disposition, and then furnishes us for every good word and work.

4. Nothing can so directly tend to hide pride from man as a deep, lasting conviction of this. For if we are thoroughly sensible that we have nothing which we have not received, how can we glory as if we had not received it? If we know and feel that the very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power which conducts it to the end; if it is God that not only infuses every good desire, but that accompanies and follows it, else it vanishes away; then it evidently follows, that "he who glorieth" must "glory in the Lord."

## II.

1. Proceed we now to the Second point: If God worketh in you, then work out your own salvation. The original word rendered, *work out*, implies the doing a thing thoroughly. *Your own*; for you yourselves must do this, or it will be left undone forever. *Your own salvation*: Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) *preventing grace*; including the first wish to please God, the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency toward life; some degree of salvation; the beginning of a deliverance from a blind, unfeeling heart, quite insensible of God and the things of God. Salvation is carried on by *convincing grace*, usually in Scripture termed *repentance*; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby, "through grace," we "are saved by faith;" consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God. All experience, as well as Scripture, shows this salvation to be both instantaneous and gradual. It begins the moment we are justified, in the holy, humble, gentle, patient love of God and man. It gradually increases from that moment, as "a grain of mustard-seed, which, at first, is the least of all seeds," but afterwards puts forth large branches, and becomes a great tree; till, in another instant, the heart is cleansed, from all sin, and filled with pure love to God and man. But even that love increases more and more, till we "grow up in all things into him that is our Head;" till we attain "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

2. But how are we to *work out* this salvation? The Apostle answers, "With fear and trembling." There is another passage of St. Paul wherein the same expression occurs, which may give light to this: "Servants, obey your masters according to the flesh," -- according to the present state of things, although sensible that in a little time the servant

will be free from his master, -- "with fear and trembling." This is a proverbial expression, which cannot be understood literally. For what master could bear, much less require, his servant to stand trembling and quaking before him? And the following words utterly exclude this meaning: "In singleness of heart;" with a single eye to the will and providence of God; "not with eye-service, as men-pleasers; but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart;" doing whatever they do as the will of God, and, therefore, with their might. (Eph. 6:5, &c.) It is easy to see that these strong expressions of the Apostle clearly imply two things: First, that everything be done with the utmost earnestness of spirit, and with all care and caution: (Perhaps more directly referring to the former word, *meta phobou, with fear*) Secondly, that it be done with the utmost diligence, speed, punctuality, and exactness; not improbably referring to the latter word, *meta tromou, with trembling*.

**3.** How easily may we transfer this to the business of life, the working out our own salvation! With the same temper, and in the same manner, that Christian servants serve their masters that are upon earth, let other Christians labour to serve their Master that is in heaven: that is, First, with the utmost earnestness of spirit, with all possible care and caution; and, secondly, with the utmost diligence, speed, punctuality, and exactness.

**4.** But what are the steps which the Scripture directs us to take, in the working out of our own salvation? The Prophet Isaiah gives us a general answer, touching the first steps which we are to take: "Cease to do evil; learn to do well." If ever you desire that God should work in you that faith whereof cometh both present and eternal salvation, by the grace already given, fly from all sin as from the face of a serpent; carefully avoid every evil word and work; yea, abstain from all appearance of evil. And "learn to do well:" Be zealous of good works, of works of piety, as well as works of mercy; family prayer, and crying to God in secret. Fast in secret, and "your Father which seeth in secret, he will reward you openly." "Search the Scriptures:" Hear them in public, read them in private, and meditate therein. At every opportunity, be a partaker of the Lord's Supper. "Do this in remembrance of him: and he will meet you at his own table. Let your conversation be with the children of God; and see that it "be in grace, seasoned with salt." As ye have time, do good unto all men; to their souls and to their bodies. And herein "be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." It then only remains that ye deny yourselves and take up your cross daily. Deny yourselves every pleasure which does not prepare you for taking pleasure in God, and willingly embrace every means of drawing near to God, though it be a cross, though it be grievous to flesh and blood. Thus when you have redemption in the blood of Christ, you will "go on to perfection;" till "walking in the light as he is in the light," you are enabled to testify, that "he is faithful and just," not only to "forgive" your "sins," but to "cleanse" you from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9]

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### III.

1. "But," say some, "what connexion is there between the former and the latter clause of this sentence? Is there not rather a flat opposition between the one and the other? If it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do, what need is there of our working? Does not his working thus supersede the necessity of our working at all? Nay, does it not render our working impracticable, as well as unnecessary? For if we allow that God does all, what is there left for us to do?"
  
2. Such is the reasoning of flesh and blood. And, at first hearing, it is exceeding plausible. But it is not solid; as will evidently appear, if we consider the matter more deeply. We shall then see there is no opposition between these, "God works; therefore, do we work;" but, on the contrary, the closest connexion; and that in two respects. For, First, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works, therefore you *must* work.
  
3. First. God worketh in you; therefore you *can* work: Otherwise it would be impossible. If he did not work it would be impossible for you to work out your own salvation. "With man this is impossible," saith our Lord, "for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven." Yea, it is impossible for any man, for any that is born of a woman, unless God work in him. Seeing all men are by nature not only sick, but "dead in trespasses and sins," it is not possible for them to do anything well till God raises them from the dead. It was impossible for Lazarus to come forth, till the Lord had given him life. And it is equally impossible for us to *come* out of our sins, yea, or to make the least motion toward it, till He who hath all power in heaven and earth calls our dead souls into life.
  
4. Yet this is no excuse for those who continue in sin, and lay the blame upon their Maker, by saying, "It is God only that must quicken us; for we cannot quicken our own souls." For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by *nature*, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called *natural conscience*. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed *preventing grace*. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Every one has, sooner or later, good desires; although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which, sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And every one, unless he be one of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace which he hath.
  
5. Therefore inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation. Since he worketh in you of his own good pleasure, without any merit of yours, both to will and to do, it is possible for you to fulfil all righteousness. It is possible for you to "love God, because he hath first loved us;" and to "walk in love," after the pattern of our great Master. We know, indeed, that word of his to be absolutely true: "Without me

ye can do nothing." But on the other hand, we know, every believer can say "I can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth me."

**6.** Meantime let us remember that God has joined these together in the experience of every believer; and therefore we must take care, not to imagine they are ever to be put asunder. We must beware of that mock humility which teacheth us to say, in excuse for our wilful disobedience, "O, I can do nothing!" and stops there, without once naming the grace of God. Pray, think twice. Consider what you say. I hope you wrong yourself; for if it be really true that you can do nothing, then you have no faith. And if you have not faith, you are in a wretched condition: You are not in a state of salvation. Surely it is not so. You can do something, through Christ strengthening you. Stir up the spark of grace which is now in you, and he will give you more grace.

**7.** Secondly, God worketh in you; therefore you *must* work: You must be "workers together with him," (they are the very words of the Apostle) otherwise he will cease working. The general rule on which his gracious dispensations invariably proceed is this: "Unto him that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not," -- that does not improve the grace already given, -- "shall be taken away what he assuredly hath." (So the words ought to be rendered.) Even St. Augustine, who is generally supposed to favour the contrary doctrine, makes that just remark, *Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis*: "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves." He will not save us unless we "save ourselves from this untoward generation;" unless we ourselves "fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life; "unless we "agonize to enter in at the strait gate," "deny ourselves, and take up our cross daily," and labour by every possible means to "make our own calling and election sure."

**8.** "Labour" then, brethren, "not for the meat that perisheth, but for that which endureth to everlasting life." Say with our blessed Lord, though in a somewhat different sense, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work." In consideration that he still worketh in you, be never "weary of well-doing." Go on, in virtue of the grace of God, preventing, accompanying, and following you, in "the work of faith, in the patience of hope, and in the labour of love." "Be ye steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord." And "the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep," (Jesus) "make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you what is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever!"

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### **Acknowledgements**

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