

Like Stars in the Sky

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In our townhome, we have giant windows. And, as I lay in my bed, I can gaze at the night sky and, on a clear evening, see one or two stars against the dark canopy. It's nice. There's nothing wrong with it. It's fine.

If, however, you were laying by a dying campfire in the wilds of Wyoming, maybe near Jenny Lake next to the majestic Grand Tetons, and looked up at the sky, it would not be nice. It wouldn't be fine. It would absolutely captivate your attention. You'd find yourself having a hard time looking away or even wanting to fall asleep as thousands upon thousands of stars shined down upon you.

I still remember one evening in Yellowstone, with Natalie, being so captivated by the glory of the stars in the night sky that I fought off sleep and the night's chill just to continue looking at them. The stars were amazing! We are star-deprived here in Chicago. Darn light pollution!

In today's passage, Paul is using that image—of the Grand Tetons' night sky or Yellowstone's night sky, but most definitely *not* Chicago's night sky—to depict how the church is to shine in a dark and fallen world. We're to be captivating people. We're to be a visible people—who together shine forth the Lord's glory.

Let's see what Paul has to say about this.

Philippians 2:12-18

¹² 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, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky ¹⁶ as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

In this text, Paul is giving the church practical instruction about obedience. He's telling us about (1st) the timing of obedience, (2nd) the character of obedience, and (3rd) the reason for obedience. Let's see what we can learn from each of these as they appear in this passage.

1. The (shining) timing of obedience (vv. 12-13).

Here's a little fact about me. I worked at the Memorial Park Aquatic Center of Jefferson City, Missouri one summer while in college. I worked in concessions. Basically, I dealt in slushies, candy, and grade D (but edible) hotdogs all day long. You might be thinking—*Big deal! Who cares?!* And, that would be a fair judgment if it weren't for this little nugget. I was there for just three months but was employee of the month twice. (Boom! Best summertime employee that aquatic center ever had! I even got my own parking spot. It's true.)

Anyhow, there obviously wasn't much to it. If you arrived at work on time and washed your hands, you could be employee of the month. But, our supervisor—who was a really nice guy—had a couple of extra personal expectations for us too. And, one of the big ones was to not sit on the counters. Now, there weren't any chairs in the concession stand. And, when things were slow, the counters looked so nice—so comfortable. So, as you might expect, whenever our supervisor wasn't around, we'd sit on the counters. This led to the only blemish on my otherwise perfect record as the aquatic center's greatest employee ever.

One day, he arrived rather unexpectedly, and I was sitting on the counter next to one of those glass nacho machines—with the warming chips on the bottom and the cheese dispenser up top. Well, I was caught for certain, but I made the best of it by quickly opening the lid to the nacho cheese and grabbing the stainless-steel ladle as if to stir up the cheese—like I needed to sit upon the counter to do *that*, like I was *that* concerned about the consistency of the nacho cheese.

Friends, my supervisor was great. He was gracious. Yet, what do you imagine he thought about my respect for his authority after that? Do you think he believed that, when he wasn't around, I'd follow the rules? And, here's the better question—

If I'm not following the rules unless he's there, am I actually showing him my respect or giving him my obedience at all?

I think Paul would say—*No, absolutely not!* Look at our text again.

...my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose (vv. 12-13).

Dear friends, true obedience has a timing to it. True obedience must happen whenever the boss is around, and true obedience must happen—*even more so!*—whenever the boss isn't around. Obedience, just because you think you'll get caught, is no obedience at all. It's merely an ugly self-serving thing.

Any parent knows this truth well. There's just something extremely gratifying about hearing that your children have acted with respect and kindness and love—even though you weren't there to remind them to do it or, even, force them to do it. The Philippians' obedience, in Paul's absence, is part of what causes him to rejoice *because* he knows it must be God's work in them.

See, here's the other thing about the timing of obedience if you're a believer. Your Supervisor, your Boss, your Master, your God is never absent. He lives in you. He's working to transform you.

I find the prepositions in our text interesting. We are told by the apostle to—“work out” our salvation, *because* it's the Lord our God who “works in” us already. This is super fascinating. It's the way it has to be.

Look, I could follow you around each and every day in order to supervise you. I could constantly stand over you at work and whisper in your ear—*Do everything as for the Lord*. I could sit next to you in the car, when that jerky driver cuts you off, and tell you—*Love your enemy*. I could totally supervise your obedience each day. But, what good is that in the end? If I would go away, you'd simply slack off at work or swear at that jerky driver. Your heart wouldn't be changed by me.

But, Paul is celebrating—because of his absence—the proof of actual change, real transformation. He hears of their obedience, even and especially in his absence, and he celebrates because such obedience is evidence of the Lord's work in them.

He's changing their hearts. He's changing their desires. He's proving their salvation. Their faith is being proved and strengthened because of Paul's absence.

The timing of their obedience is important! It's evidence of a true faith.

Friends, work out your salvation in all those quiet moments when it's just you and the Lord. Acts of obedience at those times, even the smallest acts, are evidence of your salvation—are evidence that it is God who works in you. Praise him for that! Be encouraged by that!

Let's move now to our second point.

2. The (shining) character of obedience (vv. 14-18).

Read verses fourteen to eighteen with me again. This is where Paul discusses and, even, commands us to have a certain character in our obedience.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them [meaning the evil generation] like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me (vv. 14-18).

If you're like me, you may read the first line—the first command from Paul—and immediately break it. I mean as soon as I'm told that I should "do everything without grumbling or arguing" I begin to grumble that that's an impossible command and start arguing with God in my heart about it. It's not in our nature or our character to behave this way.

It is, however, precisely what is to characterize our obedience to God.

Now, at this point it goes without saying that it must be God who works this into us—makes it part of our nature. Nevertheless, I want us to grasp the importance of our worldview or perspective in the crafting of such a character.

God works on the way we see things and, also, thru the way we see things!

How many of you grumble while doing daily tasks like cooking or laundry? I'm not typically enthusiastic when I'm doing these tasks. I even argue with the food or with the washing machine. If a package doesn't open correctly and explodes all over the kitchen, I'll cuss and rebuke it. If my shirts and slacks comes out of the drier with wrinkles, I'll cuss and rebuke the drier. Lots of grumbling and arguing!

What if, however, you're preparing a meal for a celebration like Thanksgiving or Christmas? What if you have that kind of party before you while you're cooking? What if your thoughts are set upon that kind of fun? Are you as likely to grumble about the cooking? What if you're doing laundry to go on a 4-week tour of Europe? When that's the goal for having clean clothing, are you as apt to argue with the drier or curse at the bleach? The answer is most certainly—*No!*

Yet, what has changed? The annoying particulars of cooking haven't changed. In fact, there are probably more of them because a Thanksgiving or Christmas meal is more involved and complex than a typical dinner. The washing machine and drier haven't changed. Your detergent and bleach and fabric-softener are still all the same. So, what then has changed?

Friends, the answer is simply that your worldview has—your perspective has. You're captivated by the joy that's before you and, therefore, grumbling and arguing fadeaway. You're excited by the goal of your work and, thus, you work with energy and with joy. The character of your work has changed.

Do you see? Does this resonate with you? This is what Paul is teaching here about the nature of our obedience. It's not that the work isn't difficult and annoying. It's not that it'll always seem fruitful and fulfilling. These won't stop our grumbling and arguing. These won't make us shine like stars in this warped and crooked world. Only God can do that as he transforms our worldview and sets our sites on the glory which is ours, in the end, through faith in Christ Jesus.

Paul looks forward to “the day of Christ” and is, therefore, able to rejoice now even though he's being poured out like a drink offering (vv. 16-17). His perspective on the end—about what's in store—changes everything about how he sees the world in the now. And, by the power of the Holy Spirit, God wants to do that for all of us, so that we may do all things without complaint or argument.

It is so easy to dwell on momentary trials, but we, friends, have eternal glory before us in Christ Jesus. Don't be distracted. As Sam Storms says, "Rivet your soul on the grace you will receive when Christ returns.... Entertain no diversions.... Devote every ounce of mental and spiritual and emotional energy to concentrating and contemplating on the grace that is to come."¹

Can you imagine the testimony that a local church full of people—like us—would have, if we were to live in hopeful peace, work without grumbling or arguing, and rejoice even in the midst of life's difficult stuff? We would be like the night sky above Yellowstone. The world around us would see and pay attention and, perhaps, even ask us about the hope we have in Christ—"the word of life."

Well, let's move briefly to our final point.

3. The (shining) reason for obedience (v. 12).

Friends, if there's a difference between Christianity and other world religions, then it's this—the God of Christianity is the God who comes down to sacrificially serve and save his creatures. Other gods demand service. Other gods will come down to save but not for free and not sacrificially. Some others aren't even personal beings; they don't (*or can't!*) care for us.

But, the God of the Bible cares deeply and acts powerfully for his lost people. He loves with a great and sacrificial love. He's unlike any other human conception of the divine—powerful yet personal, sovereign yet sacrificial. He's exactly the kind of God people wouldn't think to invent—*like us and, yet, nothing like us at all!*

And, it is his sovereignty and his sacrifice, his holiness and his graciousness, which are to lead us to obedience. Notice that Paul begins the text with a *therefore*. He's pointing us back to God's love in Christ. He's pointing us back to his sacrifice. And he's saying, *Because of that beautiful act of your Creator to serve and to love and to save you—live in obedience. Obey him in public and also obey him in private. Obey him with joy and unity. Obey him rejoicing in all circumstances.*

Friends, Jesus Christ doesn't demand obedience by threatening or bribing us. Rather, it is his faithful and patient kindness which is meant to turn us from our sins to righteousness (Romans 2:4). Isn't this how it works?

¹ Sam Storms, *100 Daily Meditations on Colossians*, cited from [here](#).

Your behavior might be changed by threats, and it might be changed by bribes. But, true transformation only comes through the impact of love. And, friends, this is what Paul basis our obedience on here—the impact of God’s love for us at the cross. True transformation and real obedience begin with the grace and love of Jesus Christ at Calvary, because, as Paul tells us, that’s where we are taught:

...to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...(Titus 2:12).