

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-2-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 1:6
Additional Bible reading: Romans 8:28-39

Introduction

This is a key verse in the epistle to the Philippians. It contains the whole foundation of Paul's confidence about himself and his own future, and also that of the church. It is one of those magnificent and profound statements leading us to depths of Christian truth.

What is the best work God can ever do for a man? Keep him in health and strength? Make him comfortably off? Make his children prosper? Make him successful in business, well liked, and in a good position? Paul is confident of this, **that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus** (Philippians 1:6). Remember that Paul was in prison as he wrote this, having experienced persecution, attack, and knowing that people were trying to cause trouble in all his churches. He knew well the difficulties at Philippi. And now he was imprisoned, in discomfort and wretchedness, chained between two soldiers, knowing that his execution could be at any time.

But Paul makes this confident ringing statement about God, His power and purposes and His people. If we grasp this truth, it will banish a great deal of the worry, anxiety and unhappiness in our lives.

Too often we are good starters and bad finishers. Think of that gardening job, almost completed but not quite. Or that bit of decorating which you started enthusiastically, but is still not quite finished. But there are no half measures with God. If we look at the stars through a telescope or a plant through a microscope, we see perfection and completeness in God's work. Once God has really begun a work, He will finish it in a man's soul. If truly saved, the job will be completed. The final perseverance of the saint, the "eternal security of the believer".

This is the other side of the coin in our experience. We often stress the repentance, faith, obedience, holiness and Christian living, that are the human side of the work to be done. Here we are called to consider God's side – the enabling power. Despite our problems, we need to keep the balance.

The good work begun and to be completed

Paul is telling the Philippians that a Christian is someone in whom God has begun a work. Paul did not begin it; God did. It is God's work, through Paul's ministry.

Everything about Paul's life and service had its source in God. The only explanation of Paul is God's prior action. He was originally a blasphemer and persecutor. The Lord revealed Himself to Paul on the road to Damascus. **God revealed His Son to me** (Galatians 1:12). On his first missionary journey he gave an account, not of what he and Barnabas had done, but **all that God had done through them** (Acts 14:27). On his second missionary journey Paul wanted to go somewhere else, **but the spirit of**

Jesus would not allow them to (Acts 16:7), and God sent a vision directing him to Macedonia. As he preached at the riverside, it was not Paul who made Lydia a Christian, but rather **the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message** (Acts 16:14). The slave-girl's deliverance was brought about by the power of God (Acts 16:18), and the earthquake that led to Paul's rescue from the prison was God's doing (Acts 16:26). Behind everything there was God.

So Paul is confident that if God has started a work in their lives, He would see it through, right up to the Second Coming. The emphasis is on God's action and activity; God from first to last. **Salvation comes from the Lord** (Jonah 2:9). The glory is His alone. This was the great watchword of the Reformation.

God never starts a work, only to abandon it. He will carry it through to the end. He will be faithful to His promise for He is totally reliable. So ultimately, our hope is not dependent on our will or power, but on His promises, purposes and power. This is where the emphasis is laid. Spurgeon said, "I would not bother to preach the Gospel if it could not guarantee full salvation."

This is reinforced by other passages in the Bible. The words of Jesus: **Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him shall have eternal life and I will raise him up at the last day** (John 6:40). **I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand** (John 10:28). **Simon, Simon. Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail** (Luke 22:31,32). The words of Peter: **Who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time** (1 Peter 1:5). And Paul's words about God's eternal purposes and plans: **And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified** (Romans 8:30). Notice "glorified" here in the past tense – Paul is so certain, he sees it as already done.

Does this not accord with our experience? It is all a great mystery, but we know it is true.

*"He sought me long before I heard,
Before my sinful heart was stirred."*

It was not an accident that we went to that meeting, or heard that sermon, or that that person spoke to us. It was not good fortune that we were born into a Christian family. If it had been left to us and our choices, we would still be in the world, on the broad road leading to destruction. We are where we are because of the work and grace of God. It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.

Let us remember in our prayers to thank God for His directing, guiding, working and saving us. Let us always recall His work in us and with us. It began with regeneration, the new birth. That was not just a surface improvement, not just made a bit better and reformed, but it was a vital work at the centre of our life. "The life of God in the soul of man" (Henry Scougal). Hence it was a most profound change.

God has awakened us to our condition as lost and guilty. He has created a desire for God, and desire to keep from sin; opened our eyes to Christ and His atoning death;

enabled us to repent and believe; granted us forgiveness; made us aware of new life and nature. Am I still the same person? How can I be, if I am starting to like what once had no attraction to me – prayer, Bible, Christian fellowship, services of worship?

Then God continued His work, through His Word and our circumstances, teaching, controlling, directing, restraining, urging us on, chastening and shaping. He smoothes our rough edges, chisels, shapes and bends. We are God's workshop, and He is forming and fashioning us. Sometimes there are upsets and disappointments. These are allowed as part of God's process in developing character and keeping us close to Him. He is dealing with us all the time. We are being prepared for the Day of Christ – when Christ returns to reign and there will be a new heaven and earth. Then we will be made perfect and will enjoy the inheritance awaiting us. The world may rob us and deny us much, but it cannot touch this inheritance. This is absolutely certain. Our guarantee is the word and character of God.

Do we recognise His work in our lives? Do we have love for God, Christian fellowship, desire after holiness, hatred of sin, desire to please God, gratitude to Him? These things are not the mark of unconverted, worldly and godless men. If we recognise these things in ourselves, evidently God has begun a work in us. And He will continue it. And do we not also have a sense that our life is in higher hands, that things are working to a plan and a purpose?

Two problems which arise

We accept the teaching of the texts mentioned, but two objections are likely to arise.

- (a) Warning passages, e.g. in Hebrews, seem to suggest that the saved can be lost. **It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance** (Hebrew 6:4-6). The balance of Scripture affirms that once saved, always saved. Texts suggesting otherwise are capable of other interpretations. But these texts serve a very important function. They warn us that our eternal security is never meant to be a reason for careless living. The only real evidence of the new birth is a holy life. This is a vital sign.

Anyone making a profession of faith, returning to sin and the world, wholeheartedly and gladly renouncing his Christian profession, with no remorse, and continuing like this to the end, merely shows he was never truly born again, and is eternally lost. Despite good appearances at the start, there is no lasting evidence of a change of heart in subsequent life.

So these warning passages are very applicable. "Say not that thou hast royal blood in thy veins unless thou canst give proof of thy pedigree by daring to be holy" (William Gurnall).

- (b) But Christians do sin. They do become cold, and slip. They may remain in the church but feel very far from God. Their initial zeal can disappear, and they

become compromised before the world. There are plenty of examples in the Old and New Testaments – Noah, Abraham, David, the disciples, in particular Peter. They failed, but did not totally and permanently reject God. They sinned, but were not utterly lost. Overtaken by sin, but did not perish.

When we backslide and fall into sin, God continues His work. He does not ignore us. He disciplines us, prods us, and woos us. He may allow us to become miserable, even break our lives in pieces to get us back on the road He has mapped out for us. Backsliding can be a real and regrettable fact. True Christians can fall a long way. But if God has really been at work, we shall never completely lose our spiritual awareness. There will remain some degree of desire to return to God, and an unease and misery in our present state.

This is very different from the apostate who was never a true believer. He entirely loses all moral and spiritual interest and concern. He openly and totally rejects God and spiritual things, and is glad to do so. The best of Christians backslide, but God prevents final apostasy. Sooner or later they return to Him. **He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames** (1 Corinthians 3:15). Their life's work will be destroyed, but they themselves will be saved.

“A Christian is like a man making his way uphill. He may slip, but his face is still towards the summit” (A.H.Strong). “The believer is like a man on board ship. He may fall again and again on the deck, but he does not fall overboard.” (C.H.Spurgeon). If we are worried about our state, and unhappy because we have backslidden, this is a good sign, and proof of grace in the soul. And if God is making life difficult for us at present in our backsliding, we should see it as His summons for us to return to Him.

Practical inferences from this truth

We need to ask ourselves these solemn questions. Is God at work in my life? Are there evidences of it? – faith in His Son, love of holiness and the Word, hatred of sin, a longing to please Him? Is there proof of God's power in our lives at present? If the answer is no, then you need to be saved. Ask God to work in your life, to show you your sin, reveal Christ to you, and give you new life. If the answer is “I once made a profession, but deliberately rejected it all”, you also need to be saved. A first profession is no proof of conversion. There needs to be evidence of God's power changing your life and drawing you to Him. Many who claim they were once Christians will hear His voice saying, “I never knew you. Depart from me.” One day the secrets of our hearts will be revealed. We need to be saved.

Maybe you are not saved, yet would like to be. Maybe you feel drawn to Him, but have a fear of letting the Lord down because you could not keep it up. This promise assures you that He will carry on the work and continue to manifest His power. You will hold your way, and grow stronger and stronger. Cast in your lot with Christ and the Gospel. Build on the rock, and not on the sand.

Maybe the evidences are there. Then, despite all your weaknesses and failures, you can still say with Peter, **Lord, you know all thing; you know that I love you** (John

21:17). Take heart. Thank God for His dealings with you. The power and faithfulness of God will see you through to the end. **The Lord will fulfil His purpose for me** (Psalm 138:8). If you feel depressed at present, extreme anxiety, experiencing personal trial, doubts, wondering if God will see you through to the end, remember this: **I the Lord do not change** (Malachi 3:6). You cannot be a child of God today, and not tomorrow.

*“Once in Him, in Him forever.
So the eternal covenant stands.”*

But let us not take assurance that we shall be finally saved as an excuse for careless living or laziness. Rather the reverse – it should give us fresh incentive to holiness, obedience, watchfulness, redoubling our efforts. Have the confidence of our eternal safety. God will continue to work, we shall arrive safely at the Father’s house, we shall be perfected, and presented faultless in His presence one day. This is our highest incentive to watch, pray, fight, persevere, walk in holiness and carefully.

Confidence in His unfailing purpose gives us earnestness of purpose, gratitude to God, deep trust in Him (and not in ourselves). Willing to be nothing that Christ may be all. Resting solely and simply in grace which is in Christ Jesus. Also do not worry about the future of the Christian church. Picture it at present as a grain, but it is in safe hands. Do not tremble for the cause of God.

*“My name from the palms of his hands
Eternity will not erase.
Impressed on his heart it remains
In marks of indelible grace.
Yes I to the end shall endure
As sure as the earnest is given.
More happy but not more secure
Are the glorified spirits in heaven.”*