Lights in a Dark World
Philippians 2:12-18

Leading up to our move into our new building, we're looking at how, as Christians, we're called to take the gospel - the good news of Jesus - out into the world, and at what it looks like to live as representatives of Christ in a sometimes hostile world.

And today, we're going to do that by looking at this passage from Philippians 2. And if you know what's come before the bit we read, you know it's extraordinary. Because Paul has just written of how Christ, though equal with God in every way, humbled himself, and entered our world, and became a man. More than that, he became a servant. More than that, he died the death of a slave in our place, But now, God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name above every name so that, v10-11, 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'

Which, if you're a Christian, is heart-stirring stuff - because it tells you that however good - or bad - or reluctant - we might be at talking about the gospel, or however hostile, or just plain indifferent others might be at hearing it - the outcome's certain. Jesus will be honoured and God will be glorified.

And yet, Monday morning still comes doesn't it? And the truth of who Jesus is, and what he's done for us, can stir our hearts on Sunday morning, but tomorrow there's the breakfast table with the kids who haven't had enough sleep, or there's the office, or campus, or school gate. And how are you supposed to live out that high and lifted up stuff, in the low down, and sometimes depressing grind of daily life?

Well, that's what we're going to look at this morning: The Call, the Problem, and the Answer.

The Call
Look at v12, '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.'

So, if you're a Christian, you've been saved, Paul says. You've responded to the gospel and it has worked salvation in your life. And you've repented of your sin, and you've bent the knee to Jesus and you've confessed him as Lord, so… what do you do about that? You're to work out all the implications of that in your life.

I mean, it would be crazy not to, wouldn't it? You see, imagine it's Friday and a friend of yours has just bought himself a new pair of skis. And it's snowing. But tomorrow the sky's going to clear and it is going to be a bluebird powder day. So you say to your friend, 'tomorrow's going to be awesome, let's go skiing and you can try out your new ones.'

What would you think if he replied, 'er, no, I think I'll just stay home and read up on their spec, and admire the box they came in, or maybe run my thumb down their edges a couple of times.' Wouldn't you think - man, those things are for using, they're for taking out and putting to work, wouldn't you?

Or imagine another friend who's been in plaster for a broken leg for weeks. But last week the plaster was finally removed, and you pop round to see her but she's still sat in her wheelchair holding the cast, and stroking it. And you ask her, 'er, shouldn't you be up and mobilising? Shouldn't you be getting out and putting that leg to work, just a bit?' To which she says, 'I don't

think so… I'd rather sit here, with my cast, cos we've kind of got used to each other.' You'd think she was crazy, wouldn't you?

And Paul's saying, in Christ you have been given something wonderful, something that makes life worth living, something that on the darkest of days clears the clouds and lets the sun shine. And your life used to be broken, but now, in Christ, you've been healed. So… don't stay home, go out and work out that salvation in every aspect of your life.

But did you notice how we're to do it? 'With fear and trembling.' Er, I thought you just compared the gospel to a bluebird powder day. Cos when I think fear and trembling I am not thinking blue skies and bright sunshine and skiing through knee deep powder with an overflowing heart. I'm thinking dark skies, and stuff that scares.

So why, if God loves you so much Christ would die for you is there need to live that out with fear and trembling?

Because God is so holy, and his anger against sin so great, that Jesus had to die for us. That for us to experience the blue skies of his love, he had to endure the darkness and the sun's light failing at the cross. And for us to be healed, he had to be broken, as God's wrath for our sin was poured out on him.

What should that do to how you think about God, or your work, or who you date, or how you see your sin? It should be like a bucket of cold water poured over any frivolous or superficial thinking, shouldn't it? It should be like a slap round the face that sobers us up to the realities of eternity.

You see, look again at how Paul wraps up his description of Jesus humbling himself at the cross and God exalting him to the highest place. Verse 11, it is all 'to the glory of God the Father.' And in the Old Testament, the word for glory meant 'weight', or 'heavy'.

And here, Paul follows up talk of God's glory with talk about our obedience - about the way we live: v12, 'as you have *always obeyed*, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence…' In other words, let the weight of God's glory, let the immensity, the heaviness, of what he has done for us in Christ weigh upon you. See it, feel it, sense it. Don't be casual about it. Don't just shrug off your sin as if it doesn't matter. Don't treat or interact with others as if life is trivial. Don't live indifferently to what Christ has done for you. Work out that salvation *with fear and trembling*.

Not because we've got a bad case of stage fright in front of a hostile world, but because we get the seriousness of life and death and sin and glory and eternity and Christ.

But then, in v13, he gives another reason for working this out: 'For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' So why apply yourself to working out what it means to be a Christian? Because you realise it's God who's working in you. So life is not 'my body, my choice.' It's not, 'YOLO or One life, Live it and I want to squeeze everything out of life that I want.' It's that God's at work in my life to will and to work, both in what I want to do and in my doing it.

So when your conscience pricks you, or a godly friend encourages you or challenges you to obedience in some area, that's not something to be ignored, Paul's saying. That's God at work in your life, stirring your will, working on your desire to do what's right. So don't ignore it, Paul says. Don't dismiss it or squash it. Be deadly serious about it.

And as God gives you those desires to do what's right, and the ability to do them, did you notice he does it 'for his good pleasure.' Which means as you work out your salvation as he works it in you, he smiles upon you. You might think, 'I'm just not making any progress', but he sees you becoming more like his Son, and he likes it.

All of which sounds great - if it weren't for where you have to do it.

The Problem

Verses 14-15, '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*.'

Now, it's not immediately obvious, but what Paul's doing is drawing a contrast between these Philippian Christians, and you and me, and Old Testament Israel wandering in the wilderness. Because just like God has saved us from slavery to sin, and made us his children, so God had saved Israel from slavery in Egypt and made them his people.

Except, as they lived out and worked out that salvation in the wilderness - what marked them? What could describe their behaviour and attitude? Grumbling and complaining. To the point that Moses says, "They have dealt corruptly with [God]; they are no longer his children because they are blemished; they are a crooked and twisted generation" (Deut 32:5).

But you're different, Paul is saying. What was true of Israel is *not* true of you. *But*… it *is* true of the world around you. The world in which you're called to work out the gospel. It's crooked and twisted.

Which is not exactly flattering, is it. Except, think what it means. You see, the word for 'crooked' there is *skolias*, which, if you know your pathology, is where we get our word *scoliosis* from. And a scoliosis is a curvature, a misalignment, a failure-to-grow-in-the-right-direction of the spine. Or think of a line drawn by an architect. And it's supposed to be straight. But it's not, it's crooked. And the problem is, the builders take those plan and, to use Paul's words, *work out* those plans, and the result is something even worse than the Rolex Learning Centre, if that were possible. And it's not just got sloping floors, it's got crooked walls.

Or think of the word 'twisted'. Currently I'm building a spare bathroom in our garage. Except one of the wooden uprights for a wall I've put in is 2m away from the other wall at the bottom, but 1m90 at the top. Was it my measuring that was wrong? No, it's that the wood's warped and twisted.

And Paul's saying, that's what the world's like. Morally, and spiritually, and ethically, there is such thing as a straight line, but the world's deviated from it. It's crooked. Like a scoliosis, it's curved in on its self, and away from God, so instead of worship and sacrifice, there's self-centredness and pride. And whatever it tries to build is never quite straight. And because it's twisted it's out of line with the grain of creation - so things never quite work like they should.

Now, why raise that in the context of the call to live out what it means to be a Christian? Because, firstly, it can make the world hostile to the straight line of God and the gospel. Because when we're curved in on ourselves, none of us like to be told we're out of line - because we think we are the line.

But secondly, because we're not immune from the influence of the world, are we? Because its out-of-line-ness can leave us bent out of shape.

I mean, for Christmas I bought Su two small trees… which I know is probably *the* most romantic present ever. And both of these little trees came with a stick - to train the tree and help it grow in the right direction.

Now, what if those sticks were crooked, or tilted off at an angle, or twisted out of line? The tree's going to follow suit.

And it's the same with our lives. Let the world be your guide, let the social media you consume, or the politics you observe, or the culture of your office, or campus, be the thing that trains you and shapes you, then you'll just naturally think 'this is what straight is. This way of talking about others, or dating others, or using my money, or spending my time, this is normal.' When in reality we're becoming more and more curved in on ourselves.

And yet, Paul highlights one area in particular where this can show itself: in grumbling and disputing. Grumbling and complaining.

You see, just like ancient Israel, twist and turn *away* from God and you inevitably we turn *towards* nother gods. And what if that's the god of success or pleasure? That influenced by the world around you begin to think that reaching the top, whatever the cost, or having as much fun as you can, is what life is about. Well, when life is going well and you're enjoying success, you'll be happy. But if life stalls, and things are not going the way we want, we grumble.

Or what if it's the god of power and control? Well, all the time I'm in control and people are doing what I want, I can smile upon them. But when they don't, I begin to complain, and unity becomes frayed.

Or what if it's the god of legalistic religion, and we turn away from grace and to keeping the rules and observing the rituals. The we being to notice how people are not keeping the rules how we are. They're not as righteous as I am, so I grumble about them.

So we live in a world curved in on itself and twisted away from God. A world in which we are called to be different and work out our salvation and live out the gospel.

Question is, how do you do it?

The Answer

Firstly, look what Paul says is already true of you. Verse 15: you live 'in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, *among whom you shine as lights in the world*.'

As Paul says to the Ephesians, ‘At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.’ (Eph 5:8).

So is the world of Monday morning dark? Sure. But you go into it like a star shining in the night sky. Not because you stand in self-righteous judgement on the crookedness and twistedness of others. But because God in his grace saw you in the dark and brought you into the light, and made you a light to shine in the dark.

It’s why Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden… In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see you good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven” (Matt 5:14,16).

In *The Lord of the Rings,* Sam and Frodo are deep in Mordor, the Land of Shadow. And Sam is weary and afraid. And one night he crawls out of their hiding place to look up at the sky. And Tolkien writes, “There, peeping among the cloud-wrack above a dark tor high up in the mountains, Sam saw a white star twinkle for a while. The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him. For like a shaft, clear and cold, the thought pierced him that in the end the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach.” (The Return of the King (Book VI, Chapter 2: "The Land of Shadow”).

And as you work out what God has been and is working in you, as you live out what it is to be a Christian, there will be some, Jesus says, who will realise they’re in the dark and want the light. who will realise their line is crooked and want the straight. Because against the backdrop of a dark night, you’re that hint of hope, that vestige of beauty that tells your friend or colleague, there is such a thing as light and high beauty that no darkness can ever extinguish.

But look how we’re to shine. Verses 15-16, ‘Among whom you shine as lights in the world, *holding fast to the word of life*.’

Except the verb Paul uses for *holding fast* can either mean holding fast, or holding forth. Holding on or holding out. And some Bible translations translate it one way, and others the other. So which is it? Do we shine by holding on to the gospel, and not deviating from it, or do we shine by holding out the gospel so others can take hold of it?

And commentators argue, Paul is almost certainly, and intentionally, using a word that means both. That how do we shine as stars in a dark night? By holding firm to the gospel and holding it forth. By holding on to the gospel and holding out the gospel.

You see, when you live day-in and day-out in a crooked and twisted world, when you are constantly being told that this crooked line is straight and this is what normal is, it would be surprising if you didn’t begin to think that it’s Christians who are crazy, and the Bible that’s wonky. And as you do, your grip on God’s word, and it’s grip on you, begins to loosen. And you begin to adopt the ethics and the lifestyle of the world around you. And you see how others speak of their opponents and you begin to follow suit. You see how others sleep with their boyfriend or girlfriend and you think that’s what’s normal. You see how others cut corners at work, or are economical with the truth to customers, and you begin to do the same. Or you listen to criticism of Christianity and your doubts grow and your grip lessens.

Or, maybe that's not you at all. Despite everything, you hold on to God's word, but that hostility against it makes you retreat. Maybe you've had your hand bitten once too often. And you're holding on to the gospel, but are you still holding it out?

But listen, Paul says, you are God's beloved child. And it's not you who's crazy. And it's not his word that's crooked. And people might think you're crazy, but they thought Jesus had a demon. And they might bite your hand, but they nailed his. And he was *the* Light of the World who was enveloped by darkness that you might be called out of the darkness. And he gave his life, that you might have life, so hold out that word of life for them, Paul says.

Tell them how the hope of the gospel helps you face the dark times of life. Tell them how you came to realise there is such a thing as light and high beauty that no darkness can extinguish. And I know it might sound crazy, and depending on how the conversation's going, but suggest they read a gospel or offer them a Bible.

I mean, I grew up in a totally non-Christian family. But in my teens at school I was given a New Testament, and encouraged to read it. Which I did, literally under the duvet at night with a torch, because I was afraid of what my family might think. And the more I read, the more realised, 'o boy, I am in the dark and I need the light. My life is crooked and twisted and I can't straighten myself.'

And then I had a new physics teacher, a guy called Mike Gouldstone, and he was just a normal teacher, except he shone like a star because he was nice and kind, and good at teaching, but also because he was open about his faith, and talked about Jesus, and explained the gospel to me. And one November afternoon in Physics Lab Room 13, he asked me, 'Do you want to become a Christian?' And I said, you bet I do.

But it began by someone giving me the word of life, and Mike, who's just a normal guy, explaining it to me.

So hold that gospel firm Paul says, and hold it out. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in the Message: "Carry the light giving message into the night." And if the thought of doing that scares you, or even if it doesn't, come along to the Salt and Light evenings beginning next Sunday to learn more about how to do it.

Church, Christ humbled himself to save us. So go work that out in every part of your life, Paul says. Shine in the night, hold on to and hold out the gospel of life. Because it's not just you he's come to save it's that others might hear his call through you.