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The Soteriology of the Epistle to the Philippians

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Abstract

Is the epistle to the Philippians an epistle of classic soteriology? This question makes one who reads it to wonder why Paul explicitly

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speaks about his sufferings, the humility of Christ and Christian sufferings. The reader of this epistle asks questions as to whether the trials and tribulations of this world will make genuine believers fall away or whether suffering is part of the path of salvation. The reader also seeks to know the essence of Pauline theology in Philippians 3:7-21. This paper answered these questions, beginning with the fallen nature of man, and the need for salvation. It also explains that the infinite act of God by which he saves through Jesus Christ brings to man calling and regeneration, faith, justification, sanctification, and glorification. It also explains that genuine Christians would not fall away due to trials and temptations. Suffering is but the very path of salvation, and participation in it leads to glorification. This write-up is a literary work that employed the analytical method of research, using a basic library as its main source. It arrived at its findings that the entire epistle of Paul to the Philippians is soteriological. The elect are saved and are kept and preserved unto glory.

Introduction

The book of Philippians is one of the prison epistles of Paul. In this letter Paul is in his prison experience and with zeal for the gospel of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ, he writes the Philippian Church to encourage, teach and present Christ before them as the good example whose life they must emulate.

Paul also reminds them of his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel, and even for them, that they may share in the glorious kingdom of Christ. He wishes that they become sure of suffering as part of the Christian's life; in fact it is inevitable. How they should then conduct themselves amidst their suffering is his great concern.

For Paul, to effectively arrive at the facts presented above he presents one of the Christological hymns of the New Testament in Philippians 2:6-11, which is without a doubt soteriological. In this hymn Paul explains to them the person of Christ who was in his very nature, God, who for our sake, humbled himself, to the extent that he emptied himself, taken upon him the very nature of man, lived among us, and most importantly died a shameful death on the cross that we may have eternal life. It is in the light of this that Paul says they are all called to share in the grace of God, and are encouraged to lead Christian lives amidst their sufferings. Therefore, in this write-up, I

seek to discuss the concept of soteriology as presented in the epistle of the Philippians.

A. Conceptual Explanation and Some Basic Soteriological Phrases in Philippians

In this section I want to explain the term soteriology in the context of this work, and to point out some basic soteriological phrases as used in the epistle to the Philippians. This, to its end would help one to see how the entire epistle to the Philippians is soteriologically oriented.

Etymologically, the word soteriology is derived from two Greek words σωτηρία and λόγος, meaning salvation and study respectively. Although the word λόγος has varieties of meanings I have chosen to go with the meaning study as it suits more in this write-up. This would literary give us the meaning of soteriology as the study of salvation. It basically deals with the Christian doctrine of salvation. In the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, soteriology is defined as:

The section of Christian theology which treats of the saving work of Christ for the world. It includes not only the doctrines of Atonement and of Grace, but also the doctrine of human nature as affected by the fall and by sin, which is the presupposition of Christ's work, and the doctrine of man's final destiny as the result of that work.²

Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology* views it as “the communication of the blessings of salvation to the sinner and his restoration to divine favor and to a life in intimate communion to God.”³ Berkhof's definition does not exist outside of the first definition as derived from the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. It clearly captures the idea of man in his sinful nature and the work of Christ in drawing man closer to God for a new life as man's final destination.

Berkhof further explains that, since it deals with restoration of man, his redemption and renewal, it can be understood properly only in the light of the original state of man, having being created in the image of God, and the subsequent disturbance of initial relationship

² F. L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1291.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 415.

between man and his God, as a result of the entrance of sin into the world.⁴ This becomes necessary because of the complex work of Christ in restoring man to his proper state since salvation of a sinner is in total the work of God. Since the sinner has no hand in his salvation, Berkhof suggests that it would be better to say soteriology “deals with the application of the work of redemption than to say it treats of the appropriation of salvation.”⁵

In the light of the above explanation of the nature of soteriology, Herman Hoeksema also looks at it as “the locus of dogmatics that treats of the work of God through Christ whereby He realizes in the hearts of the elect His covenant, by making them partakers of all the benefits of that covenant as they have been merited by Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁶ Hoeksema too, ascribes glory to God and His Christ in the work of Salvation. Man is only made to know his salvation through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he is caused to accept this grace as merited by Christ.

In the light of the definition above it becomes mandatory to here mention *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), since God does this to man as he applies all the benefits merited by Christ for the elect. The Dutch refers to it as “*Heilsweg*” and “*Orde des Heils*” the English, as the “Way of Salvation,” and the Germans “*Heilsane ignung*”. According to Berkhof, it describes the process by which the work of salvation, merited by Christ, is realized subjectively in the hearts of believers. This aims at describing the process in its logical order, and the interrelations between the concepts and various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of this work of redemption.⁷

Ordo salutis however, simply stresses the fact that various movements can be distinguished in the process, in a logical order, and that God does impact the fullness of his salvation to the sinner not in a single act. There are many of such biblical passages that prove this idea, however, for the sake of this work, Romans 8:29-30 is considered. It reads; ὅτι οὗς προέγνω, καὶ προώρισεν συμμόρφους τῆς εἰκόνας τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πρωτότοκον ἐν πολλοῖς

⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 415.

⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 415.

⁶ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 437.

⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 415.

ἀδελφοῖς· οὓς δὲ προώρισεν, τούτους καὶ ἐκάλεσεν· καὶ οὓς ἐκάλεσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδικαίωσεν· οὓς δὲ ἐδικαίωσεν, τούτους καὶ ἐδόξασεν (For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified, ESV).

These verses give us an order of salvation, and the foreordination (προέγνω) of God is the brain behind it. “God does not foreknow in the temporal, but only in the causal sense of the word. In that divine and causal sense He predestinates, calls, justifies and glorify the elect.”⁸ Therefore, in Philippians too this order is applied directly or indirectly in Paul’s teaching. The *ordo salutis* is considered in this order; effectual calling and regeneration, conversion, faith, justification, sanctification, and perseverance of the saints into the final glory.

B. Some Basic Soteriological Phrases in Philippians

I have already established above that the epistle to the Philippians is soteriologically oriented. Its content clearly brings its readers to the knowledge of their salvation. There are some notable phrases that Paul uses to some extent deliberately in conveying his message. These phrases identified are:

1. Sharing in the Grace (Phil. 1:7)

Paul reminds the brethren of the Philippians’ Church, of his agony, be it in the heart, in chains, and defending or confirming the Gospel. He still has them in his heart, for they “all share in God’s Grace with me” (NIV). This phrase brings us to the knowledge of the special grace of God by which man in his fallen nature, being alienated from God is been elected, called, regenerated, converted, given faith, justified, sanctified, and kept unto the glory of God. Man does not merit this grace, and in fact the Philippians’ Church does not merit this grace but it is given through the atoning work of Christ.

Paul’s idea of the grace of God here reflects the New Testament conception of eschatological goal secured through the “second Adam”

⁸ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 443.

which was “envisaged already as the reward for a successful probation of the ‘first Adam.’”⁹ Through the first Adam man lost his glory, but with the second Adam man is given righteousness by grace so that he will inherit the kingdom of God. This new covenant “is a covenant of grace in distinction from work inasmuch as it bestows the grant of the kingdom of God on those who had forfeited their right to God’s favor and so lost their hope of glory.”¹⁰

2. Filled with the Fruit of Righteousness (Phil. 1:11)

This phrase is a little debatable, due to its dual nature of interpretation. It could be interpreted subjectively and at the same time objectively. The phrase *πεπληρωμένοι καρπὸν δικαιοσύνης* (filled with the fruit of righteousness) is joined to a genitive just as ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ (the love of God, 1 John 2:5), so, it could have dual interpretations.¹¹ In this case the interpreter is obliged to decide on which aspect to follow.¹²

Considering the above explanation, Ralph P. Martin says that depending on the force of the genitive this phrase may be understood in two ways. In the first view it means the fruit which consists of being rightly related to God. “Righteousness is seen to belong within the framework of Paul’s common forensic metaphor- it is a condition of acquittal which God graciously gives through Christ.”¹³ Here its genitive use is objective because; God is producing in them, fruit of righteousness.

The second view is that which sees in the phrase an ethical sense “Paul is praying that his readers’ lives may produce a crop of moral qualities in right living, which are the fruit of the spirit (Gal. 5:22) and

⁹ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene: Wipit & Stock Publishers, 2006), 145.

¹⁰ Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 145.

¹¹ Along with the objective genitive is the subjective genitive, which conveys a verbal notion. For example, ἀγάπη in the phrase ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ (1 John 2:5) is joined to the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ and designates the verbal idea of “loving.” Now you must decide whether genitive communicates the person performing the action, “God loves someone,” in which case God would be the subject of verbal idea, hence the term “subjective genitive” or decide whether the genitive word expresses the person receiving the action, someone loves God,” this would be the object of the verbal idea, an “objective genitive.” (See S.M. Baugh, *A First John Reader: Intermediate Greek Reading, Notes and Grammar* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 1999), 99.

¹² S.M. Baugh, *A First John Reader*, 99.

¹³ Ralph P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing company, 1976), 70.

made possible in union with Jesus Christ.”¹⁴ In this case the genitive use is subjective; the believers are in themselves producing fruit of righteousness.

In my view, and with the soteriological implication of this phrase, the objective genitive would be taken as the best application, because the work of salvation is never done by man, but by God in man. Therefore, Paul is praying that God would fill them with the fruit of righteousness.

3. God’s Enablement (Phil. 2:13)

Paul again in Philippians 2:12 admonished the believers to work out their salvation; to persevere to the end as they stand firm in their faith. He then in verse 13 reminds them of God’s enablement. God is the one working salvation in them, and he would continue to keep them till they are brought into his glory. Verse 12 poses a great challenge to biblical scholars while critically looking at the implication of the phrase “work out your salvation.” It sounds more of Roman doctrine of grace plus works¹⁵ and removes the Reformed dogma of *sola gratia* (grace alone), since Paul urges the believers to work out their salvation. The big question here is whether Paul does contradict himself, because in his teaching, God is the one who works salvation in man. How then could one work out one’s salvation? Paul is only encouraging them to in total submit to the will of God whether he is or he is not with them.

Moises Silva also holds the same view as he explains verse twelve in the light of its chiasmic nature, as seen below:

- A *Hypēkousate* (obeyed)
- B *en tō parousia mou* (in my presence)
- B’ *en tō apousia mou* (in my absence)
- A’ *Katergazesthe* (work)¹⁶

¹⁴ Ralph P. Martin, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 70.

¹⁵ Romanism destroys this purely gracious character of salvation and substitutes a system of grace plus works. See Loraine Boettner, *Roman Catholicism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), 260.

¹⁶ Moises Silva, *Philippians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 118.

He then concludes, “Whether we wish to press this structure or not, we may reasonably deduce that to work one’s salvation is a more specific or at least a more suggestive way of expressing the idea of obedience.”¹⁷ It is on account of verse twelve that Paul in verse thirteen reminds them of God’s enablement. God is the one who would enable them to keep their faith in total submission to God.

C. The Soteriology of Philippians

Paul, in this epistle demonstrates clearly the Christian doctrine of the application of the works of salvation as divinely merited by Christ in his total submission to the will of God, keeping in total, the covenant of redemption, and earning a divine righteousness that is imputed to the sinner. In doing this, Paul first of all in the letter introduces the lost glory and the total depravity of man.

In the very first chapter of the epistle, Paul gives thanks to God, and rejoices in his chains because he is rest assured that his chains are profitable for the brethren at Philippi. He believes that all he is passing through whether in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, it is to ensure that all share in God’s grace with him (Phil: 1:7).

It is certainly true and of importance to note here that Paul intends to remind the brethren in his thanksgiving of their helpless condition in sin which made it inevitably sure for the coming of Christ in the flesh. This is the reason why in his prayer, he prays that their love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that they may discern what is best, that they may be pure and blameless until the coming of Christ (Phil. 1:9,10).

The total depravity of man lies here in the phrase εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν ὑμᾶς τὰ διαφέροντα (so that you will be able to understand what is the best, Phil. 1:10). The Greek δοκιμάζω in its semantics reading gives us two possible meanings for interpreting Phil: 1:10. In the first place it is explained as “To make a critical examination of something; to determine the genuineness, to put to the test, and to examine”. The second one is to draw a conclusion about the worth on the basis of testing, proving and approving.¹⁸

¹⁷ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 118.

¹⁸ BDAG

Based on its semantics reading translators have given various translations of the translations of the phrase as seen below:

1. So that you may approve the things that are excellent (ASV).
2. So that you may approve what is excellent (ESV)
3. That ye may approve things that are excellent (KJV)
4. So that you may be able to discern what is best (NIV)
5. So that you may approve what is excellent (RSV)

With the above sample one would notice that most translators adopt the second meaning of the word. In the *Greek English Lexicon of New Testament and Early Literature* the two meanings are both possible for the phrase, however, I am also adopting the first meaning of the word, which is another possible meaning. This is the translation adopted by New International version (NIV). Both of these readings are correct because they are addressing the same problem. It directs the readers to focus attention on the saving work of Christ, despite their depravity.

First, it is impossible for Paul to discuss soteriology without stating directly or indirectly the necessity of the atonement. According to Berkhof, the moving cause and necessity of the atonement lies in; first, the good pleasure of God to save sinners by a substitutionary atonement, and Christ himself is the fruit of that pleasure of God. The prophets had predicted that he would come into the world to carry out the good pleasure of God... ‘and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand’ (Isaiah. 53:10). Secondly, it lies not in the arbitrary will of God. The good pleasure of God to save sinners by a substitutionary atonement of Christ was founded in the love and justice of God. It was the love of God that made him to provide a way of escape for sinners (John 3:16). And thirdly, it lies in both the love and justice of God. Atonement must be viewed in both the justice and love of God.¹⁹ God loves but at the same time, he is just. In atonement he shows his love for man and at the same time ensures justice in punishing Christ for the sin of man. It is in the light of the moving cause and necessity of the atonement that Paul wants

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 367-368.

the Philippians to have in them that kind of attitude that was in Christ who provided atonement (Phil. 2:5).

Second, Paul talks about being able to discern what is best. Man in his sinful nature lost the ability to discern what is best. Sin alienated man from God and it became undoubtedly impossible for him to discern the will of God. Thomas Watson in this situation is with the view that the devil rules all the powers and faculties of a sinner. He rules his understanding, blinds men with ignorance, and then rules them. “Satan can do what he will with an ignorant man, because he does not see the error of his way.”²⁰

Paul prays here that the people may receive the knowledge that liberates them from spiritual blindness, which they may discern what the best is; that which he discusses in chapter two, namely, the saving work of Christ. James M. Boice also refers to the love in Philippians 1:10 as love according to knowledge. He says the word *epignosis* is a special word that refers to advanced spiritual knowledge. To him the word is applied in the New Testament “only to spiritual things- to the knowledge of God, to religious knowledge, spiritual knowledge and doctrinal knowledge.”²¹ In Hosea the Lord says “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). Paul wants them to have this knowledge that they may discern the spiritual blessings derived from the saving work of Christ.

Third, Paul’s discussion here would sound contradictory to his theology of justification by faith alone if one would not acknowledge the fact that he wants to point the Philippians to their inability to save themselves. It would sound as if they are encouraged to reason and determine the worth on the basis of testing this basic truth so that in themselves they may be pure and blameless at the day of Christ. But considering it in the light of total depravity, we can then study the rest of the book in the light of application of the work of redemption to the sinner. Based on the above premise Berkhof explains total depravity to mean “that the inherent corruption extends to every part of man’s nature, to all the faculties and powers of both body and soul; and that

²⁰ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburg: Banner of Truth Trust, 1692), 149.

²¹ James Montgomery Boice, *An Expository Commentary: Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1971), 54.

there is no spiritual good, that is good in relation to God, in the sinner at all, but only perversion.”²²

Berkhof’s explanation draws us finally to a conclusion that Paul wants to first remind the Philippians brethren of their inability to discern the best due to their corrupt nature, unless they are given it.

D. Atonement in Philippians: An Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11.

This section of the Bible is viewed by biblical scholars as one of the Christological hymns in the New Testament. Willi Marxsen, in giving highlights of the content of Philippians also notes that “Paul weaves into his exhortations to humble love, to unity and to readiness to suffer, the Christ-hymn (2:5-11), which is traditional but has been expanded by way of commentary.”²³

Before Paul gets to this song, he admonishes the brethren about their self-centeredness. He first reminds them of enemies of the gospel. These enemies are of three categories: first, they are those in Rome who are part of the Christian community yet, they envy Paul and see him as competing with them (Phil. 1:15). The second group is those Paul refers to as “mutilators” (Phil. 3:2). These people are not preaching an authentic gospel, they preach out of selfish ambition and not being sincere (Phil. 1:17). These people preach a gospel similar to those condemned by Paul in Galatians 3:8. The third group consists of Philippians brethren themselves. In the language of Paul, it appears he noticed selfishness, faction and widespread in the church (1:27; 2:2-4, 14).

“In the midst of admonishing the Philippians about their self-centeredness, Paul reminds them of the example of Christ (Phil: 2: 5-11)”²⁴ Insofar as this work is concerned, I am not going to dive into arguments on this hymn as to its origin and usage in the early church; but would focus on how Paul uses it to “inspire the Philippians brethren to more Christ-like living,”²⁵ because how Jesus lived and

²² Loius Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 247.

²³ Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems*, G. Buswell Trans., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 16.

²⁴ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A historical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 315.

²⁵ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 315.

died has a daily bearing on how they ought to be living out their lives in relation to each other (see Luke 9:23).”²⁶

This hymn expresses clearly the atonement of Christ. He was God in very nature, but did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. He emptied himself taking the very nature of a servant. Basically, there are two Greek phrases here to be considered. The first one is ὁς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ (he who was in the image of God, Phil. 2:6) and καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος (and being made in human likeness, Phi 2:7).

According to William Barclay, in the first instance the word *morphe* which means the unchanging and unchangeable essential nature of a thing is used; in the second instance, the word *schema*, which means the changing and altering external form of a person or a thing, is used.²⁷ Paul says that Christ was in the *morphe* of God: which is to say, the essential nature of Jesus is the same as essential nature of God. And he says Jesus was found in the *schemati* of man, which is to say, he temporarily took the form of manhood upon him. Christ belonged to the same sphere of Godhead yet for the sake of the Philippians and other Christians he became a man.

Paul continued that Christ humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross (Phil. 2:8). Elwell and Yarbrough add, “Despite his regal heritage as eternal son of the heavenly King, he gladly lowered himself to serve sinful humans by dying on the cross (2:8).”²⁸ His death on the cross was atonement for the elect since he dealt with the problem of human sin, bringing men into fellowship with God.²⁹

Paul is of course very conscious of the theme of the atonement such that in one form or the other he mentions it in almost all of his letters. Ladd also affirms that in almost every epistle of Paul, he refers to the death of Christ on the cross in one form or the other. He uses different expressions as referring to the death of Christ, (Rom, 5:6:

²⁶ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 315.

²⁷ William Barclay, *Jesus as they saw Him* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 27.

²⁸ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 316.

²⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 423.

1Cor. 8:11; 2Cor. 5:15; Gal. 2:21, 1Thess. 4:14), his blood (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:20), his Cross (Eph. 1:16; Phil. 2:8) or his crucifixion (Gal. 3:1; 2Cor. 13:4).³⁰ Therefore, the Philippians as those who are redeemed must emulate this Character of Christ.

For the fact that Christ humbled himself to the extent of death on the Cross, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name. Paul looks forward to the time when in his name every knee will bow, in heaven, on earth and under the earth; and every tongue shall confess that Jesus is Lord.³¹ Christ humiliation was not overlooked. God glorified him, and exalted him above everything. He shares his very name, κύριος (Lord) with Christ (Phil. 2:11). The very name God is given to Christ that every knee shall bow to him. Elwell and Yarbrough have made a remarkable contribution that should not be ignored. They say that Christ gave himself for others despite being infinitely superior to them by virtue of being equal to, inherently one with, the eternal God. The Philippians should therefore imbibe this character and be willing to gladly swallow their pride, live more for others rather than for self.³²

With this, Paul succeeds in presenting to the Philippians how their salvation came about and what would become of them, if they would allow God to work in them, hence, his discussion in the remaining passages. They are saved through the humility of Christ, and they would be glorified if they follow Christ's example.

E. Essence of Christians' Trials and Temptation in this World

This section seeks to answer the questions as to whether the trials and tribulations of this world will make genuine believers fall away or whether suffering is part of the path of salvation, and participation in it lends to glorification. These questions are often Christians' great concern and have attracted arguments upon arguments between theologians of different backgrounds.

I must begin here with the Reformed Theologians' doctrine of perseverance of the saints. David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas give its meaning as below:

³⁰ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of The New Testament*, 423.

³¹ D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 327.

³² Walter Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 316.

The Elect are not only redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit, they are kept in faith by the almighty power of God. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secured in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined unto eternal glory and are therefore, assured of heaven.³³

As expressed above, this doctrine simply teaches that, God would secure the elect and ensure their safety, until they are glorified. The Armenians however, hold the opposite of this view. To them, “those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc.”³⁴

Now, would an elect truly fall away due to sufferings and trials of this world? I want to clarify here that this doctrine does not teach that “all who profess the Christian faith are certain of heaven. It is saints – those who are set apart by the spirit who persevere to the end.”³⁵ The following passages are biblical proofs for the doctrine of perseverance of the saints (Isaiah 43:1-3; 54:10; Jer. 32:40; Matt. 18:12-14; John 3:16; 5: 24; 6:35-40; Rom. 5:8-10; 8:35-39; 1Cor. 11:7-9; Eph. 1:5,13, 14; Col. 3:3,4; 1Thess. 5:23,24; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 10:14; 1pet. 1:3-5; 1John. 2:19, 25; Jude 1,24, 25).

Paul’s epistle to the Philippians also addresses this issue. In Philippians 1: 27 – 2: 4 Paul discusses the idea of Christian citizenship and clearly states in verses 28 and 29 that God will save them, in their suffering because they are not only to believe in Christ, but to suffer for him as well just as he (Paul) suffers for the cross.

Silva begins this section by identifying the use of the word *πολιτεύεσθε* (*Politeuesthe* Phi 1:27) which he holds that it probably preserves its semantic overtones of the conduct expected of citizens in a state (*polis*). It therefore carries the meaning ‘to be a citizen’ (implying ‘to live as a free citizen’). This term could also be used to mean ‘to deal with,’ to ‘conduct oneself’ and ‘to live.’ This citizenship requires a tenacious attitude in the face of suffering (Phil.1: 27-30).³⁶

³³ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Company 1963), 56.

³⁴ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 18.

³⁵ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, 56.

³⁶ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 80.

The term πολιτεύεσθε gives us a clue to understanding the demand for a Christian; namely, perseverance. Quoting Chrysostom on Philippians 3:18 Silva says “Nothing is so incongruous in a Christian, and foreign to his character, as to seek ease and rest.”³⁷ The Christian should bear in mind that his way is of suffering until he meets Christ in glory if he perseveres.

Paul the Apostle tells the believers in Philippians to continue living their Christian lives properly whether he comes or not. “There is no respite from Christian obligation. Just as Timothy must be faithful in ministry in season or out of season (2Tim.4:2), so also, the Philippians must maintain a consistent witness regardless of their circumstances.”³⁸ Paul’s words here clearly mean that his absence from Philippians is not a justification for the Philippians brethren to relax in their Christian obligation.

Silva continues and points out two other Greek words στήκετε (to stand fast, Phil. 1:27) and συναθλοῦντες (to struggle along with, Phil. 1:27) that stress the importance of spiritual tenacity. The verb *stekō* is simply a late form derived from the perfect of ἵστημι (*histemi*, to stand). They are to stand firm; and in addition to firmness and steadfastness, as suggested by the verb, Christian citizenship requires conscious efforts, as it consists in struggle which is indicated in the second verb, συναθλέω (*synathleo*).³⁹

Silva also indicates that “Paul stresses the tenacity of Christian believers by pointing out the need for unanimity,” as indicated in the chiasmic structure below:

- A *stēkete* (you are standing firm)
- B *en heni* pneumatic (in one spirit)
- B’ *mie psychē* ([with] one soul)
- A’ *synatholuntes* (contending together)⁴⁰

This shows that struggles for Christian citizen must be faced within the fellowship of the believing community. They have to stand firm in

³⁷ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 81.

³⁸ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 81.

³⁹ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 82

⁴⁰ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 82

one spirit and with one soul contending together. It is in the light of this that Alfred L. Greenway also affirms that the “phrase, and in one mind (*miai pseuchei*, ‘with one soul’) pictures a unity which is complete absorption in a common purpose”⁴¹

Silva, finally on tenacity mentions Paul’s reference to spiritual opposition (already implies by the verb *synathleo*) in verse 28 which reads καὶ μὴ πτυρόμενοι ἐν μηδενὶ ὑπὸ τῶν ἀντικειμένων literary translated, “and not being frightened in any way by the opponents.” I am not sure who were the opponents here; they could either be the pagan community or Judaizers, but Paul is sure here that the struggle continues, and the Philippians are likely to be intimidated. Paul warns them not to “be intimidated so as to give up their struggle,”⁴² because it was a sign of the destruction of the enemies, but of their salvation. God would surely keep and preserve them unto glory.

Again, verse 29 speaks of the sufferings of the Philippians for Christ’s sake as part of the Christian’s life. Paul says for it has been granted to them not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for him. The phrase ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη (it has been granted to you) follows the conjunction ὅτι and perhaps it is a causal conjunction. The conjunction ὅτι (*hoti*, for, because) is significantly deposited at the beginning of this verse. Silva also explains that the conjunction γάρ (*gar*, for) is the most frequent transitional particle, which does not assume causal function. But Paul’s use of *hoti* here rather than *gar* assumes a causal function, which explains the surprising statement in verse 28, and particularly the emphatic clause at the end, “and this is from God.”⁴³

The *hoti* conjunction has a great connection between verse 28 and 29 and has brought one to a better understanding of why Paul would tell the Philippians to struggle and not give up while they experience conflicts. The reason is that “suffering is the way to glory, God’s gift of Salvation for his children.”⁴⁴ This means suffering is part of the Christian’s life. It is inevitable. God is graciously dealing with his people in the midst of suffering. He says it is a gift from God hence

⁴¹ Alfred L. Greenway, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A study Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957), 29.

⁴² Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 83.

⁴³ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 83.

⁴⁴ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 83.

the phrase ὑμῖν ἐχαρίσθη (*hymīn echaristhe*, to you it has been granted).

Paul in his theology sees sufferings at all times as part of the Christian's life as it leads to glory. He said to the Romans that it is a condition for glorification (Rom. 8:17, 28-29). Believers are to at all cost view suffering positively, even as they are urged to give thanks and praises while they suffer (Eph. 5:20; 1thess. 5:18; Col. 3:15; Phil. 4:6).

It would be noted that Paul is clear on the type of suffering that leads to glory. It is that which is for Christ's sake (Phil 1:29 cf Acts 5:41). James also encourages Christians to be patient in sufferings until the Lord's coming (James 5:7). He also says, trials that come the Christian's way are only to test his faith. But we must not suffer for wickedness but only for Christ (James 1:2-16).

He calls their attention to his own suffering and insists that the Philippians and he (Paul) are suffering the same course (Phil: 1:30); therefore, "they must realize that suffering for the sake of Christ is part of their calling as believers; it is integral to their Christian witness, just as it was for Paul."⁴⁵ In any case amidst their sufferings God himself would keep them till they are glorified, insofar as they are in unity, and as they humble themselves to the example of Christ, they shall be glorified (Phil. 2:12-18).

The point here is clear; as discussed above, not all who confess Christ that would withstand trials and temptation. In Jesus' parable of the sower we are made to understand that only the elect, who are likened to the seed on the good soil, that was able to yield crops. The other three categories of the seed could not withstand the unpleasant condition (Luke 8:5-8). Kuyper also says "to be sure, not all who are listed as members of the visible church were chosen by God, unto eternal life there are those within the church who are nominal Christians and will never be believers."⁴⁶ For the redeemed souls, they "possess all things in Christ. He is a complete savior. He lacks

⁴⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, one Gospel* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2004), 374.

⁴⁶ R. B. Kuyper, *The Glorious Body of Christ: A Scriptural Appreciation of the One Holy Scripture* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 322.

nothing. Having him we are saved to the uttermost”⁴⁷ only the elect that would stand all trials and temptations, and would be glorified.

F. The Essence of Theology of Philippians (Phil: 3:7-11)

In this section I seek to briefly identify some basic elements that have made up the doctrine of soteriology as related to Pauline theology in Philippians.

1. Living beyond belief (Phil. 3:1-8)

Paul in Philippians 3:7-8 alludes to his conversion, noticeable in his Damascus experience (Acts 9) which he considered as a call (see. Gal. 1:15). Silva maintains that “Paul’s submission to Christ constituted a conversion in its deepest sense.”⁴⁸ He again explains Philippians 3:7-8 as a comparison between old life and new life. The given chart below explains this:

Old Life	New Life
These I have reckoned a loss	- for Christ
I reckon all things loss	- for the value of knowing Christ
I have lost all things	- for whom (i.e. for Christ)
I reckon them dung	- that I may gain Christ ⁴⁹

Paul was given a new birth (regeneration), and so, he was dissatisfied with the previous things he did. The shift from perfect ἡγήμαι (*hegemai*, I have considered, Phil.3: 7) to the present tense ἡγοῦμαι (*hegoumai*, I consider, Phil. 3: 8) indicates that Paul is making some meaningful progress in his Christian life. The perfect used here is “the perfect of completed action. The reference of the tense is thus double; it implies a past action and affirms an existing result.”⁵⁰ Paul has considered his past life as rubbish, and the existing result is the new life in Christ. He explains the purpose of his conversion with the

⁴⁷ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, Henri De Vries, Trans (Grand Rapids: Erdmans Publishing Company, 1900), 452.

⁴⁸ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 156.

⁴⁹ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 156.

⁵⁰ Ernest Dewitt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 37.

clause ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω (*hina Kriston kerdēsō*, in order that I may gain Christ Phil. 3:8). Paul forfeited all his personal achievements to obtain what was truly of most value; namely, Christ and his Kingdom (Phil. 3:10, 11).

2. Striving to Attain Perfection in Christ (Phil. 3: 9-21)

Paul is again emphasizing, justification, sanctification and his hope for glorification. He is sure of what Silva refers to as “spiritual Wealth.”⁵¹ From verse 9 Paul says that he is found in Christ justified by faith and not through a righteousness of his own. In the phrase μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην (*me echon emev dikaisunen*, not having a righteousness of my own Phil.3:9) we can see that Paul does not differ in Philippians on his doctrine of Justification by faith alone (Rom. 3:28; 4:2; Gal. 2:16; Titus 3:7). Alec Motyer also says Paul believes that in Christ, by faith, it is possible to stand under divine scrutiny and to secure a verdict: ‘Paul is in the right,’ ‘Paul is all that require of him,’ ‘Paul is righteous.’⁵² He again describes his experience of sanctification in verse 10. He is sanctified through the power of Christ’s resurrection. The phrase, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ (*symmorfizomenos to thanatol autou*, becoming like him in his death) suggests sanctification. By the death of Christ, he is sanctified to become like Christ, and so, he is certainly looking forward to the glory that would be revealed at the coming of Christ.

Paul is sure of his glorification. The phrase εἴ πως (*ei pos*, if by any means possible Phil. 3:10 ESV) would sound as if Paul is not sure of his glorification. The *New Bible Commentary* explains this situation with a comment that Paul

never lacked assurance that he was a child of God, accepted with him (Rom. 8:15-17 Gal. 4:6). Yet he was never complacent. Faith must endure to the end (cf. Heb. 3:14); the identification with Christ at baptism must lead to continual dying with Christ and life in His risen power, right to the end. Alternatively the phrase if by any means’ (AV, RV) may be regarded as ‘an expression not so much of doubt, as of humility.’⁵³

⁵¹ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 159. (Spiritual wealth means the spiritual benefits one derives from his intimate union with Christ. He is justified, sanctified and he has hope for eternal life in Christ’s kingdom).

⁵² Alec Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 164 -165.

⁵³ D. Guthrie and J.A. Motyer, (eds) *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 1136.

Paul is never in doubt of his salvation as explained above. As an act of authenticating his conversion and his righteousness apart from the law, he humbles himself, and wishes that he continues to strive in faith until he reaches perfection. A Christian must not relax that he has already grasped it, but should continue striving until he gets to be with Christ (Phil.3:12-21).

Glorification is the final benefit the elect derive from the saving work of Christ as enlisted in the *ordo salutis*. It looks forward to the kingdom of God, where righteousness shall reign forever. Paul says that he looks forward to attain to the resurrection from the dead (τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν). This would be the time when the old order of things shall pass away and the new order of things shall be ushered in. Thomas R. Schreiner says that even though the new creation, the new exodus and the coming age are here, they have not yet being consummated. Death which is the last enemy of the elect has not yet been extinguished; and Satan still torments and afflicts God's people. Suffering still Characterizes the existence of the people of God, and Christians still struggle against sin and are not yet free from it entirely.⁵⁴ Since Christians still suffer these, Paul is looking forward to attaining perfection at the final resurrection (Phil. 3:12-14).

In the light of this Silva also says “Paul looks forward to the resurrection not merely because he is interested in a new body. The resurrection represents perfection at every level of his existence, and so it is mentioned here as the culmination of his spiritual pilgrimage.”⁵⁵ Philippians, to whom Paul writes, should also be mindful of this. They need to keep striving in their spiritual pilgrimage, bearing in mind that they would in this world struggle with suffering of all kinds, but would be perfected at the coming of Christ.

Conclusion

The discussion on the soteriology of the epistle of Philippians has led us into basic Biblical truths about Christian spiritual pilgrimage. It richly reveals the fallen nature of man, his helpless condition, and the necessity for the atonement. The book clearly teaches the saving work

⁵⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 802.

⁵⁵ Moises Silva, *Philippians*, 165.

of Christ in his death and resurrection. The elect are thereby called and regenerated, given faith, justified, sanctified and glorified.

In the light of this Paul assures all believers of the inevitability of sufferings and struggles in this life. However, the present sufferings of believers are not purposed to their fallen away, but as part of their Christian path. The elect would be made to stand firm (persevered) until they are glorified.

In conclusion, the Christian life should be such that exhibits a true character of service to God the Father for everything he has done to him, as Paul teaches in the remaining passages of this epistle. He admonishes them to rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 4:4), not to be anxious of things of this world (Phil. 4:6), living by example (Phil. 4:8-9) and he commends their act of giving (Phil. 4:10-20).

I glorify my God and savior Jesus Christ for his mercy upon a poor sinner like me. Having being made sure of my salvation, I am rest assured also that, he will guide and keep me as I struggle with sin and suffering of this world. I also praise him because I am looking forward to my glorification at the New Heaven and the New Earth, where righteousness would reign forever.

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