PEOPLE THE GOSPEL CREATES · WEEK 7

God at Work in Us

November 8, 2026 · Philippians 2:12–16 · Pastor Bart Denny

THE BIG IDEA

Because God is at work in us, we can live in obedience that makes the gospel visible.

This guide works two ways. On your own, take one section a day through the week, or use the daily readings near the end. In a group, plan on about an hour: read the passage aloud, talk through the background, then choose the questions that fit your group. Nobody has to answer every one.

Read **Philippians 2:12–16** at least twice, once quietly and once aloud. If you have time, start back at 2:1 so you hear what Paul says about Jesus before he says "therefore." Last week we were in Colossians 3, where Paul tells believers to clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. This week asks a harder question: when those qualities don't come naturally, what can we expect God's grace to do in us?

Where this passage sits

Paul wrote Philippians from custody (1:7, 13) to a church he loved. He had planted it himself. Acts 16 tells the story: a businesswoman named Lydia, a slave girl set free from a spirit, and a jailer who came to faith in the middle of the night. These people had supported Paul's work from the first day (1:5), and the letter is warm from beginning to end.

It isn't a letter to a perfect church, though. Paul urges them to be "like-minded" and to do nothing "out of selfish ambition or vain conceit" (2:2–3). Later he names two women, Euodia and Syntyche, and pleads with them to agree with each other in the Lord (4:2). Real people were wearing on each other.

In 2:5–11 Paul answers with Jesus Himself. The eternal Son "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (2:8), and God exalted Him so that every knee will bow. Our passage begins right after that: "Therefore, my dear friends." The way Jesus loved us is to shape the way we treat each other. Right after our passage, Paul holds up Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19–30) as people who already live that way.

A few words worth a closer look

"Therefore" (2:12)

This word ties everything in our passage to the picture of Christ in 2:5–11. Paul's call to obey rests on who Jesus is and what He has done.

"Work out" (2:12)

The word means to carry something through to completion. Paul is writing to people who already belong to Jesus, so he isn't telling them to earn salvation. He's telling them to live out the salvation they've been given, all the way into their ordinary relationships.

"Fear and trembling" (2:12)

Paul uses this phrase elsewhere for humble seriousness (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:15). It describes reverence before a holy God. It doesn't describe a believer cowering in fear of losing God's favor.

"Works in you ... to will and to act" (2:13)

Paul uses the same verb for what God does ("works") and what we do ("to act"). God's work doesn't replace our effort; it produces it. The "you" is plural, so God is at work in the congregation as well as in each believer.

"Grumbling" (2:14)

The Greek Old Testament uses this word family for Israel's complaining in the wilderness (Exodus 16; Numbers 14). The word sounds like what it describes: a low, steady muttering.

"Blameless and pure" (2:15)

Blameless means there's no fair ground for an accusation. *Pure* means unmixed, without hidden motives; Jesus used the same word when He told His disciples to be "innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

"Shine ... like stars" (2:15)

The word means lights or luminaries. It may echo Daniel 12:3: "those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

"Hold firmly" (2:16)

This verb can mean to hold fast or to hold out, and translations differ. Either way, the church's light depends on its grip on "the word of life," the message of Jesus.

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1 God enables the obedience He commands

READ Philippians 2:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 15:9–10

Paul's command sounds heavy: "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling." Then verse 13 gives the reason we can do it: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."

Notice the two things God works in us. He reaches our actions, and He reaches our *will*, the wanting underneath the doing. That's good news, because most of us know how to do the right thing while resenting every minute of it. We can serve someone and keep a quiet record of what they owe us. Pastor Bart opened with the car that sits through a green light, and the conversation we start having with a driver who can't hear us. Nobody plans that reaction. It arrives before we've thought about it, and it shows how quickly another person becomes an obstacle in our eyes.

God's grace goes after that inward resistance. Wesleyans have always taught that grace goes before us. God moves toward us first, awakens the desire to please Him and gives the strength to follow through. Our part is to respond. John Wesley preached on this very passage and summed it up: "First, God works; therefore you can work. Secondly, God works, therefore you must work."

Corrie ten Boom's story shows what that looks like in a hard place. Years after the war, a former guard from the camp where her sister died held out his hand to her after a church service. She couldn't make herself feel forgiveness. She

prayed, “I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.” She took his hand, and she found that Christ supplied the love she didn’t have.

Her experience isn’t a promise that every hard feeling will change in a moment. God’s work may come through a long struggle, and some struggles need the help of other believers. But a struggle doesn’t prove grace is absent. Paul worked hard in ministry, and he said of that work, “yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10).

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Think of a small, everyday moment (traffic, a slow line, an interruption) that reliably irritates you. What does your reaction tell you about what you want?

2. Have you ever done the right thing while resenting it? What did that feel like?

3. Why do you think Paul puts the command (v. 12) and the promise (v. 13) side by side? What goes wrong when we keep one and forget the other?

4. Wesley said, “God works; therefore you can work … God works, therefore you must work.” Which half do you need to hear most right now?

5. Corrie ten Boom prayed, “I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.” Is there a situation where you need to pray something like that?

6. “I’ve tried before. Why should I expect anything different?” How would you answer someone who said that to you? How would you answer yourself?

2 God makes His grace visible through our life together

READ Philippians 2:14–15, Exodus 16:1–12 and Acts 16:22–34

Paul moves straight from God’s work inside us to the way we sound. “Do everything without grumbling or arguing.” *Everything* covers the ordinary jobs, the inconvenient ones and the ones we agreed to before we knew what they’d cost. It’s possible to finish the job and still make everyone around us wish we hadn’t volunteered.

Grumbling gives resentment a voice, sometimes loudly and sometimes in a quiet conversation that keeps a grievance alive. Arguing turns a difference into a contest. Paul borrows language from Israel’s story here. God rescued His people from Egypt, and in the wilderness they grumbled against Him again and again. Moses later called them “a warped and crooked generation” (Deuteronomy 32:5). It’s possible to know the story of God’s rescue and still resist Him in the way we treat each other.

Paul expects something different for the Philippians: that they "may become blameless and pure." That doesn't mean we stop making mistakes, misunderstanding each other or needing more information. Faithful people can still be falsely accused; Jesus was. It does mean God's grace can clean out the malice and deceit that spoil our relationships, so that our conduct looks like the family we belong to.

And people notice. The Philippian church began on a night when Paul and Silas, beaten and locked in stocks, prayed and sang hymns at midnight "and the other prisoners were listening to them" (Acts 16:25). Before any earthquake, other people heard their trust in God. Then the jailer who had locked them up washed their wounds and brought them home for a meal. The gospel was spoken, and it showed up in changed relationships.

A guardrail: Paul isn't asking a church to pretend everything is fine. Scripture makes room for lament, and Jesus confronted wrongdoing. Honest correction and honest disagreement can serve the good of God's people. Grumbling and arguing work against that good when they feed resentment, recruit allies or turn a person into an enemy.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Where are you most tempted to grumble: at work, at home, at church or on the road?

2. What's the difference between honestly naming a problem and grumbling about it? How can you tell which one you're doing?

3. Read Exodus 16:1–12. What did Israel's grumbling reveal about how they saw God?

4. Paul and Silas prayed and sang in a jail cell, and the other prisoners listened. Who is listening to how you talk when things go badly?

5. "Blameless and pure" can sound out of reach. What does Paul mean by it, and what doesn't he mean?

6. How does the way our church talks about people who aren't in the room help or hurt our witness in Saranac?

3 Hold firmly to the gospel until Christ returns

READ Philippians 2:16, 1 Thessalonians 3:1–8 and Philippians 1:3–11

A church can only shine as long as it stays attached to the source of its light. Paul says the Philippians will shine "as you hold firmly to the word of life," the gospel of Jesus, who humbled Himself, died for our sins, rose and will return. Believers never outgrow their need for Him. Our words explain the hope our conduct shows, so the message and the life belong together.

Then Paul looks ahead to "the day of Christ," when he hopes to "boast" that he "did not run or labor in vain." That boast is joy, not pride: the joy of seeing people he loves still holding on to Jesus at the end.

We hear the same longing in 1 Thessalonians 3. Paul had to leave that young church while it was suffering, and eventually he couldn't stand not knowing how they were doing. He was afraid "that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labors might have been in vain" (3:5). So he sent Timothy. When Timothy came back with good news, Paul wrote, "For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord" (3:8).

Until Timothy came back, though, Paul had no report. He kept praying and kept working anyway. Many of us know that kind of waiting: praying for years for a child or grandchild, staying faithful in a hard marriage or at a job where nothing seems to change. Paul measures that faithfulness by the day of Christ, not by this week's results. He was "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). That verse doesn't promise how any one person's story ends. It does promise that God hasn't stopped working, and that the praying and the showing up aren't wasted.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who first held out "the word of life" to you? What do you remember about how they lived?

2. What could loosen a believer's grip on the gospel? What helps you keep holding on?

3. Paul's "boast" was about people, not accomplishments. Who are you hoping to see standing firm on the day of Christ?

4. Have you ever waited a long time without a "report" on something you were praying about? How did you keep going?

5. How does Philippians 1:6 encourage you without promising more than it says?

Make one response

READ Philippians 2:12–16 again

Pastor Bart ended the sermon with an invitation to make one response to God in one specific place. First, bring Him the resistance honestly. Where do you know what love requires, yet find yourself unwilling? Give it a name. It might be a person's face, or an attitude you've defended so long it feels like part of who you are. Then pray something like: *"Father, this is where I have resisted You. I need You to change what I want. Make me willing to love and obey You here."*

Second, choose one obedient step. If you owe an apology, make it specific: "I was wrong to speak to you that way. Will you forgive me?" If resentment has kept you talking *about* someone, start an honest conversation with the person who can help with the concern. You can't control how anyone else responds, and an apology may only begin a longer conversation. If going to someone directly wouldn't be safe, talk first with Pastor Bart or another believer you trust.

If you came into this week wondering whether a familiar struggle could ever be different, notice that wanting to stop defending it is already a sign God is at work.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What did God bring to your attention through this passage?

2. What would a faithful response look like there? What will you do, and when will you begin?

3. Who could pray with you or check in with you about it this week?

Through the week

☐	**Monday**	Philippians 2:1–11. Read slowly through what Jesus did. Which part of His humility is hardest for you to imitate?
☐	**Tuesday**	Philippians 2:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 15:9–10. Ask God to work in your *wanting* as well as your doing, and name one place you need it.
☐	**Wednesday**	Exodus 16:1–12. Notice what Israel's grumbling said about God. Listen for your own complaints today and what they say.
☐	**Thursday**	Acts 16:16–34 and Matthew 5:14–16. Who might be watching how you handle a hard day? Pray for them by name.
☐	**Friday**	1 Thessalonians 3:1–13 and Philippians 1:3–11. Pray for someone you're waiting on, and thank God that He finishes what He starts.

Try this

The next time a green light turns into an irritation (or a slow line, a missed text or an interruption) pause long enough to notice what's underneath it. Then pray one sentence for the person in front of you. Before the week ends, take the one obedient step you named on Sunday.

Close in prayer

Father, thank You for saving us through Jesus Christ, and thank You that Your grace reaches both what we want and what we do. We bring You the places where we have resisted You. Forgive our selfishness and the ways we have wounded others. Cleanse our hearts and fill us with love for You and for the people You have placed around us. Make us willing to obey, and give us strength to take the steps You have made clear. Shape our life together so our neighbors can see Your goodness and hear the truth about Jesus, and keep us holding firmly to the gospel until the day we see our Savior. In Jesus' name, amen.

Notes

Watch the sermon online

Scan the code or visit **pathwaywes.com/sermons/god-at-work-in-us** for the video, this guide and Pastor Bart's blog post on this week's message.

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