Philippians: A Context for Joy (2:12-2:18) “Shine Like Stars” Memory Verse: Philippians 2:18

August 31st, 2025 Scripture Reading: James 2:14-28

Have you ever thought about the difference between the phrases “standing out” and “outstanding”? **[SLIDE 1]** One is a negative experience, and one is a pat on the back. One is to be avoided, and one is to be pursued. Yet we use the exact same words to describe both. I have stood out before. Much of my childhood involved me standing out. Maybe it was that time I received a criminally bad haircut, maybe it was the phase in which I insisted on wearing full body matching sweatsuits. There was that time as a teenager when I filled in for a friend and played guitar on the Sunday morning worship team, but I was completely out of tune. I tired tuning it by ear as we were playing and I just made it worse and worse….that is one way to stand out. There was also the time I joined the track team and ran the mile. One of the races was held on a small indoor track. Eight times around was one mile. The gun went off; I found my pace…right in the middle of the pack…no standing out here. As we made some laps, I noticed a man holding a card with the number 4. “Oh, that’s helpful” I thought. “I am on my fourth lap. Or am I? Maybe I just finished my fourth lap. Am I on my fourth lap, or fifth? I could even be my third as far as I know. Not a problem, I will gauge the other runners and use my intuition.” When I felt the time was right, I opened up all the reserves, put the pedal to the floor and accelerated into my beautifully impressive final sprint. I crossed that finish line with outstanding speed and agility only to stand out as the only high school track participant who couldn’t count. I finished the race a full lap early which means I didn’t finish the race at all. I stood out for all the wrong reasons that day. We all have these types of embarrassing moments, moments in which we stood out. How much better to be outstanding! To bring home that report card with top marks, to be the first to finish the race. To be recognized as superlative.

**[SLIDE 2]** Today we are continuing our walk through Paul’s letter to the Philippians. We have already seen Paul’s great love and affection for these Christians. Philippi was Paul’s first established church, and this naturally gives them a special place in his heart. He has updated them on his whereabouts….he’s in jail. But Paul rejoices, even in custody, because he can see that the gospel message is progressing. The story of Jesus cannot be chained! So Paul rejoices. Last week we saw Paul launch into some practical instruction. And he shared with the church a hymn all about the nature and character of Jesus. Paul tells them to have the attitude of Christ. Become humble servants, slaves actually. Live in obedience to God. The song concludes then with the exaltation of Jesus. He is no less than Lord and King. And this position that Christ occupies affects every part of our lives. Paul encourages these church members to, based on Christ’s life and example, **[SLIDE 3]** stand out as outstanding. And I know what you are thinking. You’re thinking, “That sounds really dumb. If someone is outstanding, then they are already standing out. To stand out as outstanding just means that you are outstanding in the first place.” That is very true, but that is not exactly what I mean. Let’s take a look at how Paul explains it.

We turn now to verse 12. **[SLIDE 4]** It begins with one of Paul’s famous “therefore’s”. We have already seen a few of them: verse 1 and verse 9 specifically. And when we come across a “therefore”, it’s always good to ask what it is there for. Well, Paul has just proclaimed this beautiful and wonderful hymn about the supremacy and primacy of Jesus. But it also addresses the humility and obedience of Jesus. **[SLIDE 5]** It proclaims both his lowliness and his exultation. Jesus is a humble slave and Jesus is Lord. **[SLIDE 6]** “Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Many translations will say “work out your salvation.” The Greek word used here even has the connotation of produce or accomplish your salvation. So, because Christ died on the cross, because he is Lord, therefore, we are to work out or accomplish our salvation. Paul just shared this hymn about how Jesus provided for our salvation and immediately following, he tells us to work out that salvation. Seems like a strange command. But we go on, verse 13: **[SLIDE 7]**“God is the one who enables you both to want to and to actually live out his good purposes.” Okay, so Paul comes around full circle. **Salvation begins and ends with God.** **[SLIDE 8]** Jesus undeservedly goes to the cross. He takes on the sin of the world and the wrath of the Father. He absorbs the punishment of death. He dies. The sinless and holy Son of God dies. He is hung on a cursed tree, naked and alone…standing out to all who see him. That should not happen. God should not die on a cross. But it did happen. Because Jesus was obedient. Because he lived as a slave. Because he humbled himself even to the point of dying on a cross. Now, Jesus is highly honored with the name above all names. And it is before him that every knee will bow. He is outstanding to all who see him. This salvation that Jesus earned for us, is then on us to “work out”. But in the end, Paul clarifies, that God enables us, empowers us to live out our salvation. Again, the Greek word used here means to work or to be effective.

((**[SLIDE 9]** Paul is expressing here an incarnational truth. And I want to take a moment to talk about this word in particular. Incarnation literally means **[SLIDE 10]** to “take on flesh”. We talk about Jesus as the incarnation of God. He is God in the flesh. But when we stop to think about this concept, when we parse out what it means, we realize that we really have no word in human language to describe how this works. Jesus does not take on human flesh as though he were God wearing a disguise. He is not God in a man costume. Jesus possesses a **[SLIDE 11]** dual nature. He was born as one of us! We say that he is fully God and fully man, a 200 percent formula that does not work in actual mathematics. So it is with the nature of our salvation. Our coming to Christ is 100 percent worked out by ourselves and 100 percent worked out by God. It is an incarnational truth. We cannot earn our salvation; it is a free gift given by God. But at the exact same time, we must die to ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus. According to Paul, it is God who enables us to work out our salvation. He gives us the desire and the ability to live out his good purposes. The full involvement of both God and man comes together in a mysterious, incarnational way to procure a relationship we call salvation.)) If all of that sounds confusing, think of it in terms of my grandma Dorothy’s **[SLIDE 12]** spaghetti sauce. She had a way of taking normal ingredients: crushed tomatoes, spare ribs, some sugar and spices and combining them in a way that was, I’ll say it, outstanding. She worked in a mysterious way. I mean, we have her recipe and to this day my mom can come close – but grandma Dorothy just had a special way of making something delicious. You might say that love was her secret ingredient, but what happened when grandma cooked was a combination of raw ingredients and heat. Somehow the heat, with the right proportions of ingredients, with the right preparations, produced something outstanding. So it is with our salvation. We bring the ingredients, the raw materials and God brings the heat. He cooks it all together into something wonderful that we can’t fully understand but we can fully enjoy **[SLIDE 13]**. There’s our key word. Like a big plate of grandma’s spaghetti, you can feel the love and it brings joy. Thank God for such an outstanding salvation!

Paul then fills us in on what our involvement in the process looks like. Verse 14: **[SLIDE 14]** “Do everything without grumbling and arguing.” Why? “So that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God surrounded by people who are crooked and corrupt. Among these people you shine like stars in the world because you hold on to the word of life.” We are to shine like stars….we are to stand out by being outstanding! But we do so, not according to the standards of this world. As Paul says, this world is crooked and corrupt. Are we willing to stand out? Are we willing to be called out, singled out, left out? Are we willing to be embarrassed because we don’t do things the same way as everyone else. When everyone else runs laps around the track, are we willing to veer off the beaten path? Are we willing to follow the call of God? Part of how we do this is exceedingly simple…we stop grumbling. We stop complaining. When everyone else jumps on that bandwagon, we let it pass by. When everyone else has choice words to say about this boss or that customer or this situation or that unwelcomed event, we stand out. We remain innocent and pure. We shine like outstanding stars. We can speak words of life in those situations because we hold on to the word of life. And the Word is of course, Christ himself.

**[SLIDE 15]** It’s important to note here that we hold on to Christ, we take him with us into this world. We are not monks. We are not escapists. We are not trying to hide away from the corruption of this world. Rather, by holding on to Christ, by imitating him and living righteously, by working out our salvation, we take Jesus into this world, and live as those who stand out, those who shine like stars.

Paul wants the Philippians to live out their faith so that we can be assured that all his work among them was not in vain. If they can stand out like bright stars in a dark sky then, he says, “This will allow me to say on the day of Christ that I haven’t run for nothing or worked for nothing.” As I shared with you earlier, I know what it is to run for nothing. To work and train and to pour effort into something that does not pan out is demoralizing. It’s a waste and Paul would like to avoid that if possible. And notice what he keeps in focus here: **[SLIDE 16]** the Day of Christ. He lives today with the end in mind. He runs his race now with the finish in mind. He’s not sidetracked; he’s not distracted. The day of Christ is the culmination of it all. Everything will be tested and tried on that day. For many, the end is a horrific thought, but for Paul, it brings him great joy. Verse 17, **[SLIDE 17]** “Even if I am poured out like a drink offering upon the altar of service for your faith, I am glad. I’m glad with all of you. You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!” In other words, even if Paul were to meet his end before Jesus returns, he would die laboring for the faith and in that way, we would be like a drink offering that is poured out. This is an echo of what Paul said in chapter 1 verse 21: **[SLIDE 18]** “To live is Christ and to die is gain.” Even in death we can be glad! That’s another way that we can stand out from the culture of this world. We don’t fear the end, we look forward to it. We rejoice knowing that our salvation has been worked out by Jesus on the cross, that God continues to work in us the desire and ability so that we can put in the work with fear and trembling. That is a convoluted sentence that involves a lot of work. Paul was a man of persistent, diligent, bone-weary work. Jesus literally poured out his blood, sweat and tears as we worked his way to the top of Calvery. And we are not called to sit around in padded pews. We too, are called to work. **[SLIDE 19]** We give our time and money to the church, to missionaries, to other ministries. We work hard at properly understanding this Bible. We work hard to know what it says, to memorize it, to share it with others. We work hard to serve food, we load supplies, to pack resources. We work hard to supervise kids and share with them the love of Christ. We work hard to maintain this building and ensure that it is an inviting place. We work hard to build up one another. We work hard to keep ourselves from sin. We flee from temptation; we put to death our fleshly desires. We work hard to listen well to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We work hard; with fear and trembling to come before God in prayer. We work hard to make sure our needs are always laid before God and that we are always open to his blessing.

Yes, the life of a Christian is a life of hard work: energy-burning, time-consuming, callous producing, hard work. Let us not forget the words of James, **[SLIDE 20]** “I’ll show you my faith by putting it into practice….Faith without actions is dead.” But we never engage in this work alone. It is incarnational work. It is one hundred percent up to us and one hundred percent up to God. And with that as our reality we find that all this hard work results in joy. As Paul says in verse 18, **[SLIDE 21]** “You should be glad about this…Be glad with me!”

We get to work hard and we get to do it together! We get to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and pour ourselves out just as he did. I want to stand out as a hard worker. I want to stand out as one who doesn’t complain or argue. I want to stand out as blameless, as someone who holds on to the word of life. I want to stand out as an outstanding star in the sky who can live in the joy of knowing Jesus Christ as my savior. “I am glad. I’m glad with all of you. You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!” Amen.