

Philippians 2:12-18

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 October 2012

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] And as I've already indicated, our concern this evening is especially to think of the language that he uses there in that passage, comparing believers to stars in the universe.

I don't know if you've ever been told that you're a star. We sometimes use that language maybe in speaking to children. Maybe they've done something very well, they got a good mark in an exam, or they were helpful in the house, or they scored a goal in the football field, and they say, you're a star. And we speak in those terms. But maybe once we get a little bit older, we tend not to hear that language certainly used of ourselves.

Well, last week, those who were able to be here last week will remember that we were considering the words of Jesus directed to the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount.

Then in Matthew chapter 5, you are the light of the world. And we made, as we considered those words of Jesus, we made fleeting reference to the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians, where he compares believers to stars in the universe. We've read the passage. We can just remind ourselves there in verse 14 of Philippians chapter 2. Paul is speaking to the Christian in Philippi in Philippi, and he says to them, do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation in which you shine like stars in the universe. In which you shine like stars in the universe. It's very vivid language, very suggestive language. It's exciting language. Paul would think of Christians and compare Christians, the believers in this case in Philippi, and of course, by extension, we ourselves also as stars in the universe. Well, I want us to spend a little time this evening thinking about this picture that Paul uses and what it has to teach us. And I think there are three matters to consider. First of all, to consider what we are, to think about this language that Paul uses describing us or certainly comparing us to stars in the universe. We want to think a little bit about the words that Paul uses and the implications of them and the different ways in which they can be understood, all under this general heading of what we are. What are we? But then also to ask the question concerning where we are to shine, we'll discover, and we only need to read the passage to discover that we're lights, we're stars, that's what we are. But where are we to shine? That is a matter that Paul also addresses in this picture that he uses. But then also finally, and perhaps in a way, most importantly, how are we to shine? We thought last week of the way Jesus developed the picture of light and how he developed the idea of how we are to be light in one particular way. And the way Jesus developed it on that occasion was in the manner of the good deeds that we perform. In that way, we are to shine in the world. Paul, we'll discover in a moment, develops this idea of how we are to shine in a different way, a complementary way, but a different way to the manner that Jesus does in Matthew's gospel.

So, the first thing we want to think about is what we are. Paul is writing a letter to Christians. He's writing a letter to the church in Philippi. He's writing to those that in the very passage that we're looking at are described as children of God, children of God. And to the children of God, to the believers, to the Christians, he assures them that they are like stars in the universe.

[4 : 13] Well, let's think about this phrase. First thing we have to note, we've already said it, and in a sense it's very obvious, but the language is picture language. We are like stars. You are to shine like stars in the universe. We're not actual stars, which I trust is not too much of a disappointment to anybody this evening. You're not an actual star. You're like a star. That's still pretty good, but it's picture language. We are like stars. We are to shine like stars in the universe.

But we can, and I hope with some profit, explore the language that Paul uses a little more, and especially this phrase, stars in the universe. The phrase involves or includes three key words, three key words that are translated in the version of the Bible that we're using, the church Bible, the three words that Paul, of course, when he originally wrote, wrote in Greek to the church in Philippi. The three words that we want to think about a little are the words that are translated stars, the little word in, which doesn't seem very promising, but we'll find is significant, and the word universe. Shine like stars in the universe. Now, that first word, if we just think a little bit about that first word, translated in our version as stars, the word that Paul uses literally is a word that means lights. It's a general word. It can mean stars, but the word itself is more general than that, and it can be used of different kinds of lights. Indeed, it can be used in both the sense of light itself or radiance, which would tie in with the idea of a star, but it can also be used in the sense of a light bearer, like a lantern or a torch, and I would especially encourage you to have in your mind the picture of a torch, not an electric torch, but the kind of torch we've seen recently with the Olympics and the torch relay. So, this word that Paul uses can have or can be used in different ways, and of course, how it is translated into English will be determined by the context in which it is used.

Now, the New International Version that we are using opts for the very attractive option of stars. It's an entirely legitimate translation. Of course, having opted for translating this Greek word as stars, the version really is almost obliged to then translate the next important word or the third word, cosmos. We were thinking about cosmos a few weeks ago. That's the word we have here in verse 15, translating it with the word universe. Normally, the word cosmos is translated by the English word world, but of course, when you're, you've already decided if you wish, if you've opted for translating the first word as stars, then of course, it makes sense to then translate cosmos as universe, because stars in the universe makes more sense than stars in the world, because that's where stars are. They're in the universe, rather than just limited to a particular planet. So, stars in the universe, it's a legitimate way of translating what Paul says. But there is an alternative. It doesn't make a huge difference, but we'll see that it does make some difference. And one way of understanding what Paul is saying is simply that he's saying that as believers, we are to shine like lights in the world, lights in the world.

In a way, it's a, at first glance, it's a less exciting translation than stars in the universe. But I think we'll see in a moment as we develop this that it does have some interesting implications how we translate what Paul is saying. Either way is legitimate. I want to be, you know, I want to stress that. But I do think that there, it's interesting to consider the possibility that lights in the world, which is the way some translations opt to translate this phrase, is in many ways richer in terms of its implications. So, let's just go down that route of understanding what Paul is saying as not so much the idea or the picture of stars in the universe, but of lights in the world. And before we develop that a little further, there is one other question that we want to give some thought to, which I think is an interesting question to ponder on. And that is that as Paul addresses the church in

[9 : 06] Philippi, as he addresses the Christians in the church in Philippi, as he speaks to them and says, you are like stars in the universe or like lights in the world, is his primary intention to speak to the individual Christians so that each individual Christian should take this as a challenge? Well, I as a Christian am a star in the universe, or I am a light in the world. Is that what he principally has in mind, or is he rather addressing the whole community, the whole church as a body, and saying to the church as a body, you are light in the world, you are a star in the universe.

What does Paul primarily have in mind in the language that he uses, or in this challenge that he addresses? In actual fact, that same question can be asked of the previous verses, verses 12 and 13. And asking that question of the previous verses in many ways is even more interesting and intriguing. Notice we're not going to do that. We're just going to notice the possibility. But there in verses 12 and 13, where Paul says, therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence, continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling. But it's God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Is Paul there principally concerned with each individual Christian and the need for each individual Christian to work out their salvation with fear and trembling? Is he principally concerned with the idea of God working in each of us to act according to his good purpose? That is how it is generally understood.

But it's interesting to consider the possibility that what Paul has principally in mind is actually the church as a body. And the concern of Paul that the church as a body, as a community, would work out their salvation with fear and trembling, and that God works in the church as a body, to will and to act according to his good purpose. Of course, both of these things are true, that God works in the church as a body and works in individual believers. The question is, what does Paul have principally in mind here? Of course, you could avoid the debate, I suppose, by saying, well, both of these things. And it may be that he has both of these things in mind. Well, that's something that we're not going to go further into. But rather, what we want to do is, having suggested that, in terms of the phrase that we're particularly concerned with, this phrase that in our version is translated, stars in the universe, but that can perhaps more helpfully be understood as, or translated as, lights in the world. What does that say to us as we go to the second element of our thinking or of our sermon this evening? The matter of where we shine, where we shine.

And this question of where we shine is also affected by how the phrase is translated. You see, if you go for stars, then cosmos becomes the universe, and the picture is very much of light twinkling, shining against the backdrop of a dark sky. But if we understand that what Paul is saying is that we are to shine like lights in the world, then especially the word world becomes much more suggestive, because there we can legitimately understand Paul's use of the word cosmos, translated world, as not simply a reference to planet earth, not simply a geographic reference, well, that's where we happen to be, but rather a reference to humanity in its fallen and corrupt state. So, we are to shine in a world that is a dark place, darkened by ignorance and sin. We are to shine, to pick up on the very language that Paul uses, in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation. And of course, to shine against such a backdrop is a richer concept, and is much more suggestive as to how we are to shine in such an environment of a world that is fallen, of a world that is dark, of a world that is blind. In such a world we are to shine. Now, this picture of us shining in the world, in this dark, fallen world, this picture is further enriched by the word that we mentioned just a few moments ago, but haven't touched on yet, the word in. Now, that seems an innocent enough preposition there in the phrase that Paul uses, you are to shine like stars in the universe or like lights in the world. But in actual fact, the word that Paul uses isn't the normal word that would be used, the normal simple preposition in. But rather, it is a preposition that carries the idea of in the middle of, not just in the world, but in the middle of the world, or in the midst of the world, or in the thick of the world.

And what Paul seems to be wanting to stress, and of course, this is, we can capture it much more if we understand what he's saying as lights in the world. What Paul is seeming to stress is that the church, corporately, and indeed Christians individually, are to be in the middle of the world. Yes, it's a dark world. Yes, it's a sinful world. It's a fallen world. It's a corrupt world. You know, it's a jungle out there. But that's where we are to be. We are to shine in the midst of the world, in the middle of the world, in the thick of all this bad stuff that we find scary and frightening, and that our natural inclination would be to avoid. And Paul says no. He says you Christians are to shine. There's no point shining in a closed building. There's no point shining where it is light already. You have to shine when it's dark. That is your calling in the middle of the world, in the midst of the world. The church is to be visibly present and active in society and in our communities. And yet, though we are to be in the very midst of society, we are not to be like the world or like the society we are in the middle of, because the whole idea is of contrast. The idea being portrayed is of a dramatic contrast between light and darkness, between the pure and the crooked, between the redeemed and the depraved, to limit ourselves to the very language that Paul uses around this phrase that he employs. We are to be in the world, in the midst of the world, but we are to be radically different to the world that we are in the midst of. And of course, in challenging the believers in this way, Paul is simply picking up on and reflecting the teaching of Jesus himself, especially as we find it in John chapter 17, where Jesus speaks of his disciples as being in the world, but not of the world. It's really the same truth being developed by Paul in a different or in an alternative way. So the question fought us as we think of where we are to shine. We're lights in the world. So where are we to shine? We're to shine in this dark, fallen world. We're to shine in the midst of the world. And having recognized that, the question really fought us is, are we? First of all, we can ask, are we in the midst of the world? You know, are we in the middle of society? Are we visible and present? I think very especially as a church, the application can be an individual one. But I think the primary concern of Paul is of the corporate application that the church of Jesus Christ, the congregation in Philippi, this congregation,

[17 : 30] Bon Accord, are we in the midst of the world? That's one question. But of course, there's another question. If we were able to answer that question in the affirmative, I'm not saying that we're able to do that. But if we were able to answer in the affirmative, there's another question. And that is, if we are in the middle of the world, do we simply merge with the world, or do we stand out in dramatic contrast? You see, the church generally is guilty of one of two mistakes. And they're more than mistakes.

We could call them, without wishing to be too dramatic, acts of treason to our calling. One mistake is isolation. So, we withdraw from the world because the world is bad, and the world is sinful, and oh, it's just such a terrible place. So, we're going to withdraw into our holy huddle, to use language that we sometimes use. So, the mistake there, this act of treason to our calling, act of treason to our calling, is to be guilty of isolation. It's a big mistake.

But of course, the other mistake that can be made is we can be guilty of imitation. So, we say, yes, we're in the world, we're in the midst of the world, but actually, we're just the same. So, there's no contrast. There's no impact, no light shining because we're just the same.

And we know that there are churches that can be guilty of that. And when I say that, I'm not suggesting that we're not guilty of that or are not in danger of being guilty of that. But we know that's the case. Churches that say, well, we want to be attractive to the world. We want people to come to church. We want people to like us. So, we'll be just like them. We'll think like them.

We'll say what they want to hear. And then, of course, they've abandoned their calling. Well, perhaps our mistake, the danger that we face is more of isolation rather than imitation. But let's not be complacent on the danger of imitation as well, maybe especially in our own individual lives as Christians. Well, there's much that could be said as we think about these matters, but we have to move on. We want to move on to the third element, and that is how are we to shine?

[19 : 51] What are we? We're lights in the world. We're to shine in the world. In this difficult, fallen world, that is where we are to shine, in the very midst of it. But how are we to shine? And I think there are two aspects to this that are best understood if we visualize the picture being used by Paul as the picture of a torch that needs to be carried or held out. And again, I remind you of what I said before about the torch. The best visual image to have in your mind is the image of the Olympic torch.

So there's a torch that is held out, and there's a flame that's shining. But there's somebody carrying the torch. So have that picture in your mind, and that will help you as we develop this matter of how we are to shine. Now, if we think of the Olympic torch, we've all seen it. Some of you maybe saw it in the flesh. I don't know if you see a torch in the flesh, but anyway, you saw it passing by.

It passed by Northeast Side Road, and we were so slovenly, we didn't even walk down Quarry Road to see it. But there you go. It was very close, even if we didn't actually see it. But we all saw it on TV. The Olympic torch as it made its way around the country. Now, what were the two essential elements for that torch relay? Well, I would suggest the two essential elements were the torch itself and the runners. The two were necessary for the relay to happen. And as we consider how we are to shine in the world, we can also identify from the text, from these verses, these two elements.

The torch is the light that we hold out, to use the language of Paul, the light that we hold aloft. And what is that? Well, there in verse 16, we're told. He says, shine, and let's use the translation of lights in the world, shine light, lights in the world as you hold out the word of life. So, what's the torch that we hold? Paul says it's the word of life, the word of life. So, that's the torch. But there's also the matter of who holds the torch. Paul makes reference to that. He says, as you hold out the word of life. And who are the you? Well, they're the children of God. They're the Christians. And Philippi says, as you Christians hold this torch, as you hold this word of life, then you will shine. So, there's the torch itself, which is identified with the word of life, and there are those who hold the torch, which are the believers. Let's think of each of these two elements. First of all, the torch itself, the word of life. That phrase is a wonderful phrase.

The word of life. Well, what is the word of life? Well, the word of life surely is the gospel, the good news concerning Jesus Christ, the message of salvation, that though we are all sinners, there is forgiveness for sinners, there is salvation available for us. We can come to know and to enjoy friendship with God, even though we have rebelled against God. There is this word of life, life giving and life imparting, a word that brings life to those who are spiritually dead. And this is the light that we are to hold. This is the torch that we are to hold out or to hold aloft the good news about Jesus.

[23 : 26] And it needs to be held out. It needs to be declared. It needs to be announced. Where? In the middle of the world. It's no good just announcing it in here. We need to hold it aloft out there. Again, if we think of the Olympic torch relay, we know what the purpose of the organizers was. Their concern was that this relay would go around and the torch would go around the whole of the country. And their express intention was that as many people as possible would see the torch for themselves as a means of stirring up greater interest in and enthusiasm for the Olympics. And so the route was so arranged that as many people as possible would see the torch. And of course, the concern was not only to go through the great cities, but even through the towns and the villages. And obviously, it couldn't go everywhere. But there was this express intention of having as many people as possible see the torch. Well, that surely is a very good illustration of what Paul is saying here. He's saying that this torch, the word of life that you hold, you are to hold it aloft in the world, in the midst of the world, and you are to do so in such a way that as many people as possible can see it and can hear this good news. This is the motivation and purpose that must characterize and drive us, as many people as possible being presented with the word of life.

So that's the torch, the word of life, the gospel, the good news. But what about the one who carries the torch? There is also this matter of the runners. We know that with the Olympic torch relay, there was a process to select suitable runners who had to run in an appropriate and fitting way.

Just imagine, and it's a foolish thought, but just imagine a runner who was part of the Olympic relay, and he's running along, and you can just tell from looking at him that he's bored out of his skull, he's dragging his feet, and maybe he's just got a short distance to run, but at some point he just sits down and has a wee rest, or he pops into the pub and then comes out again. You would say, well, that's just not fitting. It's not appropriate. You know, it's not right that he run in that manner. It's not right that that he would carry the torch in that way. It's just inappropriate. So with us, as lights in the world, or those who carry this torch that is the gospel, we need to run in a manner that is consistent with the message that we proclaim. The reason I began our reading in Philippians in chapter 1 in verse 27 is that that verse really tells us very vividly or very eloquently this matter, because what does

Paul say there? He says, whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. As you hold aloft this torch, the torch is faultless. The gospel is perfect, but the way you hold it aloft matters. The way you present it in the midst of the world, that matters. The lives we live are to authenticate the message we proclaim. This is true of us as individual Christians, but also of us as a church. And this matter of how we are to live, how we are to hold aloft the torch is dealt with or certainly touched on by Paul in these verses, in verses 14 and 15 especially, do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation. He's saying, these are the kinds of people who are to hold aloft this word of life. What does Paul say? We can't deal in any detail with what he says there in verses 14 and 15, but just very fleetingly. Do everything without complaining or arguing, but interesting how he begins, do everything. Paul doesn't actually specify any particular activities, and he doesn't do so for the simple reason that everything we do should be done in a manner that is fitting and consistent with who we are and the message we proclaim. So it's not just when we're telling people about Jesus that we have to be in our best behavior, but that in everything we do, in all the lives that we live, we are to live in a manner that is consistent with, worthy of the gospel of Christ. Do everything. He then gives an example of how we are to do everything.

Do everything without complaining or arguing. A very practical example. We need to just move on. And then what does he say? So that you may become. Interesting, the language of becoming, that you may become, which implies progress and development in our Christian walk, that we would conduct ourselves in a manner ever more worthy of the gospel of Christ. You know, we always fall short. We're never going to live a life that is altogether worthy of the gospel, but the challenge is that we would live lives that are ever more worthy, that they would be more worthy tomorrow than it was yesterday, that you may become. Become what? Blameless and pure.

[28 : 57] This word blameless carries the idea of irreproachable and highlights, I think, our reputation with those outside the community of faith who are looking in and on. What do they see? Are we irreproachable?

Or is it rather the case that they say, well, they preach a fine message. What a lovely, what lovely words they speak, but look how they live. Look how they squabble among themselves. Look at the manner in which they conduct themselves. So I can't imagine what they say is true, given the manner that they live. And so Paul says, no, you have to be irreproachable, so that when people look on, there is nothing in your life that would shut out the message that you proclaim. Blameless and pure, without fault in this crooked and depraved generation. Without fault. Of course, it's true that we will never be without fault this side of eternity, but it remains our calling to seek with God's help to be without fault. It's also true, of course, that in Christ we are in a very real way without fault.

Interesting that the word that Paul uses here in Philippians, translated without fault, is the same word that Jude uses in the benediction. We were thinking about it midweek. To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without faults and with great joy.

And he goes on. In Christ we are without fault, but in the lives that we live we are also to endeavor practically and in our daily walk to be and seek to be, to become more and more without faults. Why?

Well, one of the reasons is that as we carry this torch aloft of the gospel, the word of life, there would be a consistency, there would be a cogency between the word that we declare and the lives that we live. How we carry the torch is important. The gospel is without fault. It is a message that responds to the deepest needs of every man, woman, and child in the world. But it needs to be heard, and it needs to be credible. And the way we live our lives will directly impact on the credibility of the message we proclaim. It doesn't become any less true if we present it in an irresponsible way. But its credibility in the eyes of others will be and is affected.

[31 : 38] So as we draw things to a close, what are we? We are lights in the world. We are to shine in the midst of a world. And in the measure that we do, let me just say that again. We are lights in the world.

We shine in the midst of the world in the measure that we contrast with a crooked and depraved generation. And we shine by holding aloft the word of life underpinned by lives as individuals and as a community that is or are blameless and pure and without fault. Well, may God help us so to shine. Let us pray.