

# OpenTheo

## March 8th: Proverbs 7 & Philippians 2:12-30

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A cautionary portrait of the adulteress. Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Proverbs chapter 7. My son, keep my words, and treasure up my commandments with you. Keep my commandments and live. Keep my teaching as the apple of your eye.

Bind them on your fingers. Write them on the tablet of your heart. Say to wisdom, You are my sister, and call insight your intimate friend, to keep you from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.

For at the window of my house I have looked out through my lattice. I have seen among the simple, I have perceived among the youths, a young man lacking sense, passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house, in the twilight, in the evening, at the time of night and darkness. And behold the woman meets him, dressed as a prostitute, wily of heart.

She is loud and wayward. Her feet do not stay at home. Now in the street, now in the

market, and at every corner she lies in wait.

She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows. So now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you. I have spread my couch with coverings, colored linens from Egyptian linen.

I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning. Let us delight ourselves with love.

For my husband is not at home. He is gone on a long journey. He took a bag of money with him.

At full moon he will come home. With much seductive speech she persuades him. With her smooth talk she compels him.

All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast, till an arrow pierces its liver. As a bird rushes into a snare, he does not know that it will cost him his life. And now, O sons, listen to me, and be attentive to the words of my mouth.

Let not your heart turn aside to her ways. Do not stray into her paths. For many a victim she has laid low, and all has slain are a mighty throng.

Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death. Proverbs chapter 7 contains the father's tenth speech, and another extended treatment of the danger of the forbidden woman. The focus on women competing for the attention of the young man in the opening chapters of Proverbs encourages us to recognize that wisdom, or the lack of it, is principally determined by those to whom you will give your heart.

The book of Proverbs frequently moves between the personified women of wisdom and folly and the concrete women the son might encounter, the adulteress, the prostitute, and the wife of his youth. By moving between these figures the reader is supposed to recognize on the one hand the fact that the pursuit of wisdom must be an affair of the heart, and on the other the fact that all of the pursuits of love in the young man's life are ultimately to be understood as expressions of the fundamental quest for either wisdom or folly. A man who has given his heart to sensual pleasure, to the pursuit of many women, to a forbidden woman, or who has taken a foolish or wicked wife, will be compromised in his quest for wisdom in a manner from which there is no easy recovery.

In his pursuit of such women he has been listening to the call of folly herself. Those who have your heart have your devotion, your strength, and ultimately your life. This is one of the reasons why throughout the scripture there is such a concern that the people of God do not marry idolaters and unbelievers.

As the son moves towards young manhood this question becomes a keen one. He will

leave the immediate orbit of his father and mother and there will be various powerful appeals to and claims upon his heart, principally from women. The choices that the young man makes in this area may make or break him.

Marry in haste, repent at leisure. A person can give their heart to the quest for true understanding in the fear of the Lord, something personified in Lady Wisdom, or they can give their heart to foolishness, personified in the figure of the woman Folly. However, one does not just give one's heart to the principles of wisdom or folly, one also has to choose the various persons to whom one gives one's heart.

If you are going to give your heart to wisdom and to trust, fear and honour the Lord, that commitment of heart will determine the other people to whom you will give your love and devotion. The quest for wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, next it involves the honouring of parents and then choosing one's companions and those whom you will love. In choosing your companions you are choosing the path that you are going to walk.

Once you have chosen such a path it is not easy to divert from it. For this reason the father is very concerned that his son be alert to the forking paths that he will encounter. He wants to signpost their destinations so that the son's decisions won't be determined by his desires in the moment alone.

The taking of the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was a decision made on account of the fruit's appealing and promising qualities and the deceptive words of the serpent. The forbidden woman will appear to the young man in a similarly attractive guise and with many of the same deceptive words she will mask her deathly aftertaste. If the son is able to understand the incipients of the sin of adultery in all of its deceptive seduction and connect this with its bitter end he will be well forearmed against the forbidden woman when he encounters her.

In the Book of Proverbs we move beyond the bare prohibitions of the law and are given a more descriptive account of sin. One of the arenas in which wisdom is most demonstrated is in knowledge of the ways that sin operates and shrewd avoidance of it in all of its forms. Wisdom is one of our greatest weapons against sin.

It helps us to recognise its paths and its dynamics more readily. It makes it easier for us to avoid them. It enables us to develop strategies of avoidance, evasion, resistance and preparation that make it less likely that we will find ourselves unwittingly wandering into struggles against sin on its own favoured ground.

Chapter 7 opens with another charge to the son to devote his heart to the teaching of his father and to wisdom. It will only be with such a devoted heart that the son will be prepared to withstand the temptation of the adulterous woman. Once again the language here evokes the relationship that Israel was to have with the law of the Lord, the commandment and wisdom of its heavenly father, another body of instruction that

called for the love and the hearts of the people.

The purpose of devotion to the commandment is protective, the time will soon come when the words of the father compete with the smooth words of the forbidden woman for the son's obedience. If the words of the father have merely been for the son an unwelcome and onerous external constraint, he will soon shrug them off when the attractive adulteress crosses his path. However, if he has delighted in the words of his father, internalised them in memory and in understanding, meditated upon them to the point of developing his own insight and formed his own personal relationship to wisdom through them, he will not abandon them when his father is absent.

Once again we should remember the failure of Adam and Eve in this same area and the way that their failure to trust and obey their heavenly father and to consider the goodness of his commandment made them susceptible to the serpent's wiles. The serpent's temptation began with the insinuation that the commandment of the Lord was not good, that the Lord was fundamentally withholding and legalistically restrictive towards his children, and once Eve was persuaded that goodness was to be found outside of the commandment of the Lord, the course was set. The father paints the picture for the son.

He has witnessed this playing out with a gullible young man and he wants to ensure that his son is not caught in the same snare, so he gives his son an elaborate cautionary tale. The father as a wise man is a person who observes people and their actions. He has learned to size people up, to discern the causes of their different outcomes and to recognize some of the traits that betray their true character.

On one occasion he looked through the wooden shutters or the lattice of his window and witnessed a scene playing out on the street below. The figure he sees is a young man among the sons. This is someone in his own son's position and time of life.

This young man is not going directly to the house of the adulterous woman. Rather he is aimlessly and carelessly striding by the corner where such women would most likely be found. He is the equivalent of a sinful youth wandering through the red light district.

He is doing so in the darkening time of the dusk, when the danger of the temptation is at its keenest. The father's painting of the scene lingers over and accents certain details. He wants his son to recognize what is likely a willful incaution on the part of the gullible young man.

The wise person is alert to the dangers of temptation and is very careful to avoid encountering them on the ground where they are the strongest. While it may not be a sin in and of itself to walk by the corner that the prostitute is on at dusk, it is often an indication of at least gullibility, but more likely also willful and hence sinful resistance to the warnings of wisdom. The wise man, in his struggles with sin, is very wary of the

occasions where temptation's strength is keenest.

Perhaps it is certain company. Perhaps it is when he is in solitude. Perhaps it is when he is tired or in a mood to self-pity.

Perhaps it is when he is aimlessly killing time online. The wise man recognizes that sin is like fire. It requires fuel, heat and oxygen.

He is very mindful of those places where there is fuel for sin, where sinful activities are near at hand, where willing companions in sin might be found. He is alert to those places where the heat of sin is present, those times and places and persons around which or around whom he feels his sinful passions aroused. He recognizes the forms of oxygen that sin can be given, privacy and secrecy, excessive or unchecked power and other such things.

The fuel, the heat and the oxygen that sin require are often not sinful things in and of themselves, but the wise person recognizes the danger of a culpable negligence when negotiating their interactions. For the young man in the father's account, the temptation comes quickly upon him. He didn't go seeking for her, but he foolishly put himself in danger's path.

The suddenness of the woman's arrival, the way that she comes upon the unprepared young man, is conveyed in the words, And behold, all at once she is there. And when she is there, she doesn't just quietly present herself to the man. She takes him by surprise.

She throws him off his balance. She presses and cajoles him. She grabs him and kisses him.

If the young man lingers a moment more, the trap that has been sprung will be impossible for him to escape. Sin isn't waiting around asking for his permission. Nothing short of firm resistance and running away will deliver him.

We might here recall the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. The father was attentive to the gullible young man. He was also attentive to the appearance, character and behavior of the woman.

Her dress communicates something of her moral character and intent. She is dressed like a harlot, flaunting her body, using such a display to arouse the man's lust, so that the heat of his passions might meet the fuel of her sinful intent. Her dress is designed to weaken his resistance.

The father can see that she is cunning and streetwise. She is a shrewd judge of the foolish man's nature. She knows just how to catch him.

In the description of her as watchful or wily, we have a window into a reason why

wisdom is so essential. The wicked have their own forms of wisdom and cunning. They also have insight into the world and into human behavior.

The serpent was more crafty than any of the other beasts, and sinful people like this woman are shrewd, skilled at deceiving, trapping and outwitting others. Faced with many serpents seeking to deceive, tempt and devour us, we need to have a wisdom that matches theirs, by which we will be able to escape them. In our battle against sin, a simple goodness, the innocence of infants, is not enough.

When battling against sin in our lives, we shouldn't merely be flexing our moral muscles. We should also be using our wits and wisdom to avoid stumbling into temptation, to forearm ourselves for when it comes upon us, to know when and where to expect it, to ensure that we face it on the firmest footing we can. When our minds are at their clearest, we should be developing plans to tackle sin, temptation and testing in our lives.

We need to plan and prepare for crisis before the crisis hits. The father continues his description of the adulterous and her manner. She is loud and unruly, someone who is manifestly driven by passions and not self-controlled.

Her feet do not stay at home. She is restless and unsettled. This is seen in the way that she wanders and lurks all over town, in the street, in the market, at the corner.

Wherever gullible young men might aimlessly be making their way, she is prowling and waiting to pounce, hoping to divert them. She is shameless and brazen, seeking to overcome the young man with the boldness of her seduction. Any hesitation on the man's part, any indecision he might flirt with, will be ruthlessly exploited by her.

In verses 14-20 the father records her appeal to the young man. She tells a tale to him. She presents herself as a devotee of a Canaanite fertility cult.

She has made communion sacrifices and would have food in her house. The rituals would be consummated in sexual relations. She has set everything up.

She has prepared her bed with the finest sheets and with costly perfumes. All she needs is a young man to share it with. She flatters the young man by giving the impression that he is exactly the man for whom she was looking.

She has eagerly sought him. He isn't like the others. What great fortune that she has found him! She paints an alluring picture.

He can stay with her all night without fear. They can enjoy each other all night without worrying about being caught. Further to assure him, she tells him that her husband has gone away on a long journey.

He is far away. He plans to stay away for a long indefinite period. He has taken money

with him, so he is clearly on a business trip.

This sin is all the more attractive because it has no consequences attached. The man is now hooked, and all that the woman needs to do is to reel him in. She turns him aside from the way with her speech, aside from his actual path, but also from the path of righteousness.

She speaks smoothly, but that speech compels or forcibly drives him. The father compares the gullible young man to a doomed animal. He is trapped, but he doesn't yet fully appreciate the severity of his situation.

He doesn't realize that he is about to be killed. Having painted this extended portrait of the forbidden woman, the father concludes by underlining the importance of attention to his words once again, with the same note of urgency with which he began this speech. The forbidden woman is an apex predator.

Countless men have fallen into her clutches. Her house is like a den filled with dead men's bones, and those who venture into it will find that it is dark, crooked, and that its uneven paths descend to shield itself. The son is cautioned to guard his heart and his feet against straying into her ways.

He must be respectful of the danger that she represents, and give her an extremely wide berth. A question to consider. Looking at our own lives in terms of the factors that invite the fires of sin, what are the areas of greatest danger, and what are some concrete steps that we personally can take to reduce this danger in our own lives? Philippians chapter 2 verses 12-30 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.

For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain, or labour in vain. Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me. I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how, as a son with a father, he has served with me in the gospel. I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, and I trust in the Lord

that shortly I myself will come also.

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother, and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need. For he has been longing for you all, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death.

But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him therefore that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honour such men.

For he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me. The second half of Philippians chapter 2 continues the point that Paul has been making since chapter 1 verse 27. Paul is concerned that the Philippians live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, in a manner that is fitting to the grace that they have received, and to the master that they serve.

In the first half of Philippians chapter 2 Paul put forward Christ as an example of the mindset that they should follow, showing humility in the way that they treat each other, not seeking their own advantage or engaging in self-aggrandizement, but taking concern for each other and pursuing a loving unity. When we talk about salvation, our discussions of it tend to be dominated by the big question of whether someone is in or out. As a result we often find ourselves wrong-footed by the teaching on the subject in the New Testament.

Here for instance when Paul talks about working out your own salvation with fear and trembling, the instinctive response from many is fear of works righteousness and the idea of earning one's own salvation. However a very great deal that salvation involves isn't concerned with the question of whether one is in or out, with how one gets in, or even whether you need to act in a particular way to stay in. Rather salvation is a term that relates to a far broader reality and we can lose a very great deal when we are simply narrowly fixated upon whether we are in or not, immensely important though that concern may be in its proper place.

Perhaps we could compare this to a child who has been wonderfully delivered from life on the streets by being adopted into a rich and loving family. By the formal process of adoption they become part of the family, they are now in. However the whole point of adoption is not the bare formality of being technically in, but the rich reality of fellowship, love, security, dignity and authorisation that the adopted child enjoys as they live out what it means to be in.

A child that was very concerned to know whether he was technically adopted, but largely ignored his adoptive parents, showed no eagerness to join the family at the meal table



and consistently behaved in a stubborn and rebellious manner would be making a mockery of the reality of adoption, whatever his technical status. Likewise the content of salvation is not so much the narrow concern of whether or not we are technically in, conceived of as little more than a matter of knowing that we aren't going to be eternally alienated from God. It is the enjoyment of true peace and communion with God, living as those engaged in our father's business as sons and daughters of God, experiencing the renewal of our desires and wills by the work of the indwelling spirit, knowing relief from guilty conscience in full and free forgiveness, living in actual fellowship with God and our neighbours, etc.

etc. This is what being in is all about and we get to experience all of this now to some degree through the downpayment of the spirit, in a foretaste of what we will one day know in fuller measure. Here Paul is concerned to impress upon the Philippians the importance of entering into the fullness of the salvation that they have been granted in Christ.

This is something that they need to work out. We should all be growing in our knowledge of God's salvation and maturing in our living it out over time. We should be living in ways that express the release from bondage that we have been given in Christ.

Paul doesn't want the Philippians merely to do this for his inspection so that he won't rebuke them. In his absence as well as in his presence, this should be something that they are pursuing for its own sake. If we have besetting sins in our lives, we should be working out our salvation there.

If we have struggles with fear, despair or discouragement, we should be working out our salvation there. If we lack assurance, we should be working out our salvation there. If we are alienated from a brother or sister, we should be working out our salvation there.

If our love for Christ is weak, we should be working out our salvation there. If we do not find joy in meditating upon the things of God or if our prayer life is lacking, we should be working out our salvation there. None of this is done as those who are trying to earn our standing with God.

We have been given that. Rather our concern must be to receive most fully the gift of God's grace that we have been given, to enter into the very fullest possession of it. We must do all of this with fear and trembling.

As those who have received the most incredible mercy and grace and as those who are living in the presence of a holy God, the fear and trembling does not result from the doubtfulness of God's favour towards us, from the possibility that God is looking for a chance to trip us up or to withdraw his grace as soon as we fail. No, as Paul goes on to argue, we should act in fear and trembling as God himself is at work in us. God's grace is active within us to enable us both to desire what is good and to do it.

God is restoring us in and enabling us to grow in truthful ways of life. We must be concerned not to receive his gifts in vain, not to treat the grace of our Creator as a light thing. We must treasure and pursue his grace, seeking to enter into the fullest measure of it.

Mourner Hooker suggests that Paul plays off the background of Moses' farewell discourses in Deuteronomy here in a way that contrasts with Moses' teaching to the unfaithful Israelites. Moses had compared the Israelites' behaviour in his presence with the way that they would behave when he left the scene in chapter 31, verse 27 of Deuteronomy. For I know how rebellious and stubborn you are.

Behold, even today, when I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the Lord. How much more after my death? Paul's statement to the Philippians in verse 12 is in many ways the complete inverse of this. Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence.

Again, Moses describes the Israelites in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5. They have dealt corruptly with him. They are no longer his children, because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation.

The Philippians, however, are not blemished members of a crooked and twisted generation, but children of God without blemish, in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, the unfaithfulness of Israel was a tragic reality that would doom them to experience the full measure of the curse of the covenant. However, there was the promise held out that, after the curse of the covenant had come upon them, the Lord would circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their children, so that as God restored them, they would serve him aright.

Perhaps Paul is echoing and inverting the text of Deuteronomy, because he wants the Philippians to recognise that, in the new covenant which they are experiencing here and now, all of this is taking place. The Philippians are charged to do all things without grumbling or disputing. Grumbling and disputing were, of course, the most characteristic sins of the wilderness generation.

Unlike the wilderness generation, who failed to enter into possession of the salvation that God held out to them, the Philippians must hold fast to the word of life, persevering in the way of Christ, so that on the day of the Lord, when our salvation is consummated in Christ's unveiling, Paul's efforts on their behalf would not turn out to have been in vain. As they conduct themselves in a righteous manner, holding fast to Christ's word of life, they will shine like lights in the world, displaying this truth to others. Paul's statements to the Israelites were given in the context of his farewell discourse, and here Paul's thoughts seem to turn to the possibility of his own departure in martyrdom.

Paul presents his possible martyrdom as a sort of drink offering upon the offering of the

Philippians' faith. Together, Paul and the Philippians are engaged in an act of sacrificial worship in their response to God's grace in the Gospel. Even if Paul's death is imminent, the worthiness of making such a sacrifice gives him cause to rejoice, a rejoicing that he requests that the Philippians join him in.

Paul's hope is to send Timothy to the Philippians soon. Timothy is Paul's sheliach, the one who personally represents Paul where Paul himself cannot be. As such, Timothy participates in the exercise of Paul's apostolic ministry.

He is the co-author of epistles, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Philemon. He is Paul's personal emissary, as we see in Acts 19.22 and 1 Timothy 1.3. He is the one who served Paul, so that Paul could give himself to his primary task of preaching without any distraction. Timothy participated directly in Paul's exercise of his apostolic power.

Paul and Timothy are a pair, bound together in a single apostolic mission. On occasions the distinction between them is made plain. Only Paul is the apostle proper, while on others their alignment and association is stressed.

Timothy is a co-worker, helper and sharer in Paul's calling. Relative to the churches to which they were ministering, Timothy was to be treated as a bearer of Paul's own authority. However, relative to Paul, Timothy was a subordinate, without an independent commission of his own, but rather a share in Paul's.

The relationship between Paul and Timothy is exceptionally close, and Paul speaks of Timothy as his own son. This language is not merely that of emotional closeness, but of representation. The son represents the Father, his authority, his presence and his interests.

It also points to a relationship similar to that which pertained between Old Testament leaders and prophets and their shaliachs. In Numbers 13.16 we see that Joshua's name was given to him by Moses, who also laid his hands on Joshua in Deuteronomy 34.9. A similar relationship exists between Elijah and Elisha. Elisha receives a double portion of Elijah's spirit, the inheritance appropriate to the firstborn, and as Elijah is taken into heaven, Elisha addresses him as his father.

On this subject, Matt Colvin writes, Paul sends Timothy to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16.10, stating that he is to do the same job as Paul himself. Timothy's work is the same as Paul's. On several other occasions, Paul mentions that Timothy is doing the work of the Lord, or is a fellow worker with me, or a fellow worker with God.

I would suggest that these terms should be taken as vivid expressions of the sheliach role. First of all, as an apostle sent by God or Christ to do Christ's work, and then by Timothy, who, sent by Paul as Paul's own sheliach, is likewise engaged in the same work

as his master, and is thus, as it were, a second order shaliach of Christ. He is referred to by Paul as my fellow worker in Romans 16.21. 1 Timothy 4.6 refers to Timothy as a servant of Christ Jesus.

It is unclear whether this is a more general appellation, or refers to his role as the delegate of Christ's delegate. Nonetheless, the point is clear. Timothy is Paul's plenipotentiary emissary, not a local pastor.

He stands on one side with Paul as Christ's representative, not on the other side with the seven and other elders as the church's representative. He goes on to observe, that Timothy is a virtual copy of Paul is underlined by 1 Corinthians 4.16-17. I urge you, imitate me. For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.

The charge to imitate Paul is accompanied by the sending of Timothy towards the fulfilment of this end, as the son is the pre-eminent imitator and representation of the father. As a participant in his father's ministry, and as Paul's right hand man, Timothy had immense authority to wield, even being given the commission to choose and appoint church officers as Paul's representative on occasions. As the apostolic ministry was temporary, upon Paul's death Timothy would presumably have ceased to be the Apostle's apostle, and would presumably have become a bishop.

Paul has also determined to send Epaphroditus to the Philippians. He is another fellow worker with a close relationship to Paul. Paul gives a three-fold description of Epaphroditus' relationship to him.

Brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, evoking different key governing metaphors for thinking about the church and the service of Christ within it. The church is a family, and fellow members are our brothers and sisters. The ministry of the church is like labour in a field or in a building, and our companions are fellow workers.

The church is engaged in a battle against principalities and powers, and fighting against enemies within and without, and our comrades in this struggle are fellow soldiers. Epaphroditus was presumably one of the Philippians himself, and had borne the Philippians' gift to Paul earlier. In prison Paul would be dependent upon support from friends and relatives, and Epaphroditus had provided such support from the Philippians.

However, he had fallen very seriously ill, which the Philippians had heard about. Both Epaphroditus and the Philippians were deeply distressed by the other party's distress. God had granted Epaphroditus healing though, and now Paul is sending him back to the Philippians so that they might rejoice to be reunited with their brother.

In their rejoicing Paul himself would be enriched, even though he would lose

Epaphroditus' presence with him, as the blessing of others in Christ is something that blesses us all. Paul is concerned that Epaphroditus, who is likely bearing the letter, be welcomed back with joy and honour. He is a faithful servant, who has been obedient in the work of Christ almost to the point of death, following the example of his master.

Those who perform the work of Christ at such personal cost are worthy of honour. A question to consider, how does the concern that people work out their salvation mark Paul's work more generally?