

## 292 *Shining like stars II*

When I write something down and you read it, you could misunderstand it for any number of reasons – language is a slippery customer – plus, I could be wrong, anyway. So when a friend came round and we chatted about my previous article, I found it really helpful.

She mentioned how problems can arise with emails. A great illustration! Clearly, if I'd had an email from her and it sounded as if she was being unpleasant, I'd be certain I'd misinterpreted it, knowing what a lovely person she is.

And that was my point. If you read something in Scripture, and it seems to depict God as finger-pointing and condemning, clearly you've misunderstood, and you need to go back to that passage, think again, talk to God about it, and perhaps look at other passages.

Tom Wright suggests that – from his knowledge of God's Jesus-like character, I guess – that our traditional translation, 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' might be better seen as the paraphrase: *Your task now is to work at bringing about your own salvation; and naturally you will be taking this with utter seriousness.*

That interpretation fits better with the context, anyway: those 18 verses are all about our behaviour and our attitudes, how we relate to other people, how we can shine like stars by – as my Bible titles it – *Imitating Christ's humility*.

And let me illustrate from my own experience (a bit extreme, I know!) just how badly we can go wrong by seeing God as condemning us if we don't do, or believe, the right things.

After 40-odd years as a Christian, I ended up in what was effectively a sect. (I'm more able to talk about it now, as 'Harry' died this year.) It started as just a Bible study that Harry led, and I was happy to go along because he had prophetic and healing gifts, and I thought that validated his teaching. What I didn't spot was that his teaching was slowly but steadily changing, in a 'frog in hot water' way. Thankfully, I suddenly woke up, realised, and left immediately, but it has taken 12 years and a change of churches for me to fully recover.

In that group I eventually became controlled by fear: if I didn't follow Harry's teaching maybe I wouldn't make it and God wouldn't accept me. Scary how a relatively intelligent bloke like me could be so taken in! But to a lesser extent are we allowing ourselves to be controlled by fear? If our behaviour doesn't match up to what the Bible teaches (or what the church *says* the Bible teaches!) maybe we might be condemned by God?

Philippians 2 is about developing our character and behaviour so that we have better and better relationships with others. OK, I had a good relationship with Harry, but my condemning attitude to those outside the group spoilt those relationships and nearly cost me my marriage; thankfully, Sue stuck with me.