

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 8: Work Out Your Own Salvation - Philippians 2:12-18

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This is Dr. Matthew S. Harmon in his series on Philippians, Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is session 8, Work Out Your Own Salvation, Philippians 2:12-18.

Welcome to session eight of our study in Philippians.

In today's session, we're going to look at verses 12 through 18 of chapter two, and I've entitled this Work Out Your Own Salvation. Before we read the text, we should remind ourselves of what has come before it, and in chapter 2, verses 5 through 11, we looked at Christ the Exemplar, the one who ultimately embodied the kind of life that we as Christians should live, and Paul talks about how Christ emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, becoming obedient to the point of death, and God exalting him, highly exalting him, giving him the name above every name, and we discussed how Paul uses and draws up Old Testament language to pull in the richness of who Christ is and what he's done for us, and that that is not just to satisfy our theological knowledge or curiosity, but it's ultimately to motivate us to live as Christ did, that we have that mindset that Christ himself had, and so Paul concludes that section talking about God's glory.

Then we'll pick up now in chapter 2, verses 12 through 18. Paul writes, "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 wisdom so that in the day of Christ. I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor 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; likewise, you should also be glad and rejoice with me."

So the central starting point here working out your own salvation the passage breaks down into two distinct sections the first is the command given in verses 12 and 13 to work out your own salvation and then the caution given in verses 14 through 18 avoid Israel's mistakes and that might seem like a strange title for that section but I think once we work through it you'll see where I'm getting that from. So just a reminder about the context: the relationship between this passage and Philippians 2:5-11.

The therefore that connects this passage to the Christ Hymn gives us the proper response to who Christ is and what he has done for us. The sense is to make the lordship of Christ evident in your everyday life. If we understand it in that context, it's actually saying something very similar to what was said in Philippians 1:27, where Paul commands believers to live as citizens in a manner worthy of the gospel. In this opening, a couple of verses here, verses 12 and 13, Paul once again mentions his presence and his absence. On the one hand,

he wants to commend their obedience. The Philippians have demonstrated faithful Christian living. Even by mentioning the fact that they have obeyed is a connection back to the Christ Hymn in 2:8 that talks about Christ being obedient to the point of death. So he's already tying in how the Philippians are living to how Christ himself lived.

Paul also wants to remind them that obedience is first and foremost vertical, not horizontal. As we mentioned back in our discussion of Philippians 1:27-28, where Paul talks about wanting to hear about them standing firm whether he is away from them or whether he is with them. Our natural inclination is to be more obedient to an authority figure when that authority is present with us. What that reminds us here, in this context, is that Paul is trying to situate the obedience of the Philippians as being first and foremost vertical rather than horizontal.

In other words, the issue is not first and foremost whether they are obeying Paul. The much bigger issue is whether they are obeying God. Do they recognize that they are responsible before God for living in a certain way? So Paul reminds them of that reality, and he talks about this idea of working out your salvation.

He then goes on to explain it by talking about fear and trembling. You notice that he says there in verse 12 and ends that with work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. So why does he mention this? What does this fear and trembling involve?

Three related thoughts on this: first, fear and trembling recognize the reality of who God is and the eternal stakes at stake. It is easy for us to lose sight of the reality of the holy awesomeness of God. When Paul talks about fear and trembling, that's typically language that comes in contexts that describe an encounter with God himself. It combines this sense of awe and wonder and reverence. It's so powerful, so overwhelming, that it actually produces a physical response of being overwhelmed with the holiness and the power and the majesty of God.

So we do this working out our salvation with fear and with trembling. This fear and trembling also recognizes that ultimately we have to answer to that holy and righteous God. That we will stand before him and give an account of our lives.

Then third, fear and trembling is appropriate because we face an enemy who is dedicated to our destruction at all costs. I think sometimes we lose sight of the fact that we have an enemy whose mission is to destroy us, and that should bring a level of sobriety and seriousness to our approach to working out our salvation.

Now, if you're wondering, so what exactly does Paul mean by this idea of working out your salvation? The language there seems to suggest that we are to work out what God has already worked in. In other words, that the reality of being saved from our sins should produce a tangible way of life. That because we have been delivered from the penalty of our sins, the course of our life should produce fruit. It should produce evidence of sins diminishing power over us. So we work out what God has worked in us.

Now we have to be clear that what Paul is not saying is something like this. He's not saying,

“Well, God's done all his work. Now you get to do yours. I hope it works out for you. We'll see who knows; it could go either way. Hard to tell. It's not like God saves us from the penalty of our sin and then just says, “Well, I hope I'll see you down the road. It's going to be a tough road; I hope you make it. You just better, you know, put in all the effort you can, and we'll see how it shakes out.

In the very next verse, Paul gives us some guidance right here. He says in verse 13, for it is God who works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. So I want to talk a little bit about what this passage tells us about God's role and our responsibility when it comes to, uh, working out our salvation or growing in godliness.

There are multiple ways we could talk about that; sometimes we could talk about it as sanctification progressively and in our experience becoming more and more holy. You might remember Paul begins the letter by referring to the Philippians as saints, holy ones. Well, now we can think about this as more and more reflecting in our everyday lives and character the reality of being holy people.

So what's our responsibility? I would summarize it as using the means of grace to pursue godliness. God has given us different means of grace: he's given us his word, he's given us prayer, he's given us fellowship in the body, he's given us encouragement and support of other believers around us. He's given us spiritual disciplines and practices that can increase our ability to experience God's grace. So it's our responsibility to use those to take advantage of those gifts that God has given us, not as a means of earning God's favor or as a means of simply, “Well, here's a checklist of duties that I have to do, but as ways of putting ourselves in position to experience God's grace. So that's our responsibility.

What about God's role here? This is one of my favorite passages on sanctification in the entire Bible because I love what Paul shows us here. Two things that God does: first, he gives us the desire to obey; that's what Paul means when he says that God works in you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. So the idea is that he gives us the desire to obey.

The second thing he gives us is the power to obey. This is where, even though Paul is not directly using language from Ezekiel 36, he is absolutely drawing his ideas from there, so Ezekiel 36. It is one of the promises that God makes of this new covenant, even though the language of the specific term new covenant is not used here. Ezekiel 36, starting in verse 26, is what God says through the prophet Ezekiel: I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and then listen to this, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

So that was part of the promise that God had made that when this new covenant would come, he would put his spirit inside of his people and give them the desire and the power to obey. That's a remarkable statement because if we're honest, we regularly feel like we don't want to obey that. God says, “Do this,” and we say, “I don't want to do that.” Our God says, “Don't do that” and we say, “But I really want to do that.”

We're not left to just, well, I guess we're stuck here, right? God, by his Spirit, can give us the desire to obey. And so as a result, when we have that tension between I don't want to obey, but I know what God wants me to do, we have the ability to pray and say Lord, please change my desires, please change the longings of my heart, please change my inclinations, so that they align with you and what you want me to do.

Now, as I think about what Paul says here in this text, I think we can come to two common errors when it comes to thinking about how we grow in godliness, how we grow in holiness. The first one I will summarize as "let go and let God." What I mean by this is that we think, well, it's God's responsibility to just sort of zap me into godliness, and so I don't need to put in any effort. I'm just going to wait for God to just miraculously do his thing and make me want to obey and give me that desire. Now, that's one extra. That's not a biblical picture. What God wants us to do is to obey, to put in effort, and to strive for holiness.

Now the other common error that I see is we go the other direction and say I just need to try a lot harder. I need to double my efforts. I need to make more rules and put more structures in place, and if I just create the right rules and structures and principles and follow them as hard as I can, that will produce godliness. So it also relies on trying harder.

I think neither of those captures the biblical heart. The idea is that yes, there is effort involved, but we rely upon the power of God's Spirit to work in us to give us the desire and the power to obey.

So that sets the stage for 12 to 13; that's the command, and then we get to chapter 2, verses 14 through 18, and you notice that I titled that originally as "Avoid Israel's Mistakes." You might be thinking that's an odd way; I don't even see Israel mentioned in there. What is that about? Well, I think if I unpack this for you, you'll see where I'm getting this.

Paul starts by issuing this first command. Basically, he says Stop grumbling; don't grumble, and maybe, if you stop to think, why would he choose that out of all the commands he would start with why grumbling? So what does he mean by grumbling? Well, biblically speaking, grumbling refers to a kind of utterance made in a low tone of voice, kind of a murmuring. Some have described this as behind-the-scenes talk, a very natural kind of human response to circumstances that don't align with our preferences.

But there's more going on here than just this. You see, when Paul chooses this term, grumbling, he is using it against the backdrop of the Old Testament, where this idea of grumbling regularly refers to Israel grumbling in the wilderness. That language gets picked up in the New Testament as well. One of the- it's almost like it's a summary- work of what did Israel do in the wilderness. The short answer: they grumbled. They complained about different things: lack of food, lack of water, all sorts of things. So that term grumbling became this almost summary term that captured Israel's failures in the wilderness. We see this not just in Exodus, but we see it picked up in 1 Corinthians 10 where Paul talks about it. We see it in John 6 where Jesus has the bread of life discourse.

So that term I want to stop short of saying it's a technical term, but I do want to say this is a summary term, that is often used to capture Israel's failures in the wilderness. So this is part

of where I'm getting this idea of avoiding Israel's mistakes. Don't be like them when they were in the wilderness.

Now Paul adds on to that the term questioning. So do all things without grumbling or disputing or questioning kind of has a sense of debating or arguing. It has the sense of this posture of always wanting to challenge. We've all met people that have that contrarian attitude about them where you could say the sky is blue and they said, well, actually, is it really blue, and they want to argue with you over that. Or you say, "Well, the grass is green." Well, is it really green? Though maybe it's more of this shade.

It's this kind of disposition that always wants to challenge, push back on something. So Paul brings these two terms together to capture both outward words as well as inward thoughts and attitudes of the heart. He's saying you, as followers of Christ, should not be characterized by those things. In fact, you should stop doing them altogether. You should not be people who grumble and dispute, and against that Old Testament backdrop, Paul has in view; he's saying, look, you should not be like Israel was in the wilderness after God rescued them from their Egyptian bondage.

So he's going to go on; he's going to continue to unpack what it is that he wants us to be like instead. In verse 15: "that you may be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among them you shine as lights in the world.

So there's a lot to unpack there. Several key phrases in that: the first one is "blameless" and "innocent," this idea of it's almost sacrificial language. This idea of purity of being set apart and that should be our reputation before other people. Now it's linked to this expression which follows: children of God without blemish. This idea is that we are God's children, and we should not have the blemish of grumbling or complaining or the stain of sin upon us. That's the idea there.

He says that we live as we have to experience this reality in the midst of a, as Paul puts it here in verse 15, a crooked and twisted generation, or crooked and perverse, as some translations have it there. Now what we may not recognize initially when we look at that is actually Paul is alluding to another Old Testament passage. He's picking up language from Deuteronomy 32:5. So Deuteronomy 32:5 is the song that God inspired Moses to write that was intended to be a testimony, a witness against them, when they would eventually break the covenant and wander away from the Lord.

So this Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 5 is where he's going to pull language from. Well, actually, we're going to back up and start reading Deuteronomy 32 verse 4. It says, "The rock his work is perfect for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. Now listen to this language here, Deuteronomy 32:5. They, meaning Israel, have dealt corruptly with him; they are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation.

So Paul is picking up that language, and he is saying because of what Christ has done for you and in you, you can be what Israel wasn't. You can be children of God without blemish even

though you live in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. So again, that reinforces that what Paul is saying here is that we need to avoid Israel's mistakes as we live out our faith in Christ. So that's an allusion to Deuteronomy 32:5. We as believers can be what unfaithful Israel could never be.

Now, on that next line it talks about shining as lights. This may be an echo or allusion to Daniel 12:3. We won't look at that one, but if that's the case, Daniel 12:3 talks about our resurrection. Actually, you know what, we are going to look at that. Let's turn to Daniel chapter 12. It's worth pausing and reflecting on Daniel chapter 12. Daniel 12, and this is one of a handful of texts in the Old Testament that explicitly talk about the resurrection from the dead. There are multiple texts that talk about it in implied ways or hint at it indirectly. This is one of the handful of passages that is directly about that.

So Daniel 12, starting in verse 2. Daniel writes, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt." Now verse 3: "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn away or turn many to righteousness like the stars forever. So that idea of shining like stars or shining like lights, Paul could have that Daniel language in mind there when he says in Philippians 2, shining as lights in the world.

If so, the idea would be that because we have already been brought to spiritual life, we have been spiritually raised from the dead. We are able to be a reflection of God's glorious presence. In this fallen house, another possible illusion that we will look at there could also be Isaiah 49:6, where the servant talks about God's salvation and the servant being a light to the nations. That's another text that could be in view there.

Regardless, the idea should be pretty clear that we are to stand out in contrast to the dark world that we live in. So, yeah, Isaiah 49:6 there perhaps could be in you now when you talk about what's the means of being blameless and innocent.

Paul talks about holding fast or firmly to, as some translations put it, or you might be reading from a translation, if you have the original 1984 NIV, they translate the term as "holding out the word of life." And so you can see the difference there, right? The difference in holding fast to or firmly to would focus on us holding on. Holding our grip to the word of life.

But if the idea is holding out, it would be more of an evangelistic idea of communicating the truth word. So there's debate as to which seems more likely; most English translations lean towards the holding fast or holding firmly to, and I think that's probably what is in view. But we should point out that depending on what allusion you might see here, if you think there's an allusion to Daniel 12 verse 3, which we read, it would favor the idea of holding fast. If Paul is kind of depending on the Septuagint or the Hebrew text, the Masoretic text would favor more the idea of holding forth.

Then, if Isaiah 49:6 is in view, it would also potentially favor the idea of holding forth. So I bring that up simply to say that sometimes the illusion can shed light on what a biblical author means by looking at the Old Testament context.

Regardless, the idea is either we are to cling to the word of life, or we are to be communicating it to others. Of course, the reality is both are true. It's just a matter of which one is Paul emphasizing here in this text.

So then when we get to the end of verse 16, notice that Paul also transitions a bit here to the day of Christ, preparing for the day of Christ. What is the day of Christ? Well, we've seen this idea mentioned already back in chapter 1:6 that God will complete the work he began on the day of Christ. That's in Philippians 1 verse 11, that we will stand before God on the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness. So this idea is of the last day of human history, where God brings salvation for his people and judgment on his enemies' way.

So in that sense, even though Paul doesn't use the phrase day of Christ in Philippians 2:9 through 11. That's also what it's talking about there, so we've talked about the presence of that language there in chapter 1 verse 6 and chapter 2 verses 10 through 11.

There is one interesting little potential illusion here: when Paul, at the end of verse 16, says that he may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. He may be borrowing language from Isaiah 49:4, which describes the servant of the lord and one of the things that the servant of the Lord expresses concern about in Isaiah 49 is the possibility that he has labored in vain in his efforts to bring the good news of salvation. So that could be a possible echo or allusion there.

Now Paul concludes this passage with a reference to sacrificial imagery in verse 17. Paul writes, "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."

Now that imagery would have been familiar to the original audience, a little less familiar to us living in a culture that doesn't practice drink offerings. So I think it's helpful here to understand a drink offering was poured out over the main sacrifice as a complement to it. So the picture that emerges here is that what is being the main offering in verse 17 is the sacrificial offering of your faith, Philippians and Paul saying my death would be like a drink offering poured out as a complement to that.

We could put it this way: Paul is essentially saying, let's assume for a minute that I am poured out as a drink offering upon your sacrifice. Your sacrifice refers to the service that comes from your faith; the result would be that he would be glad and rejoice with them, and he would invite them to join him in rejoicing.

Again, it's very foreign for us to think about this, but think about what Paul is saying: if I have the privilege of my life being poured out as a drink offering upon your sacrificial offering, I want you to be glad. I want you to rejoice because that's what I would be doing. Then he reiterates, likewise, you should also be glad and rejoice with me.

So that's some of the dive into the weeds. Let's step back for a minute and think about what the main idea is. It's a big idea that Paul's driving at here. I would summarize it like this: God's people must work out what he has worked into us. God's people must work out what

he has worked into us. So here in this passage we see it fall into two sections: first, God commands us to work out our own salvation, and we do that as something that's not optional, and it's grounded in God's work in us.

Then secondly, God cautions us to avoid Israel's failures. We can note that grumbling obscures our identity as God's children. Sacrificial service produces lasting joy, so that's a summary of what we've seen here. In this rich passage lots to think about.

Let's finish up with some application: what does God want us to think or understand? I would start with the idea that God is at work in me and in us for his good pleasure. Paul stresses the idea that God is the one at work in us to will and to work for his good pleasure; that God delights to work in us. He enjoys it. He's not a reluctant God who says, Well, this is necessary; I guess I have to do this. I've committed to this. He delights to work in us to make us more like Christ.

Second, I believe we need to believe that God can empower us to change. I'm convinced that one of the biggest lies that Satan tells us is You'll never change. You'll always be like this; there's really no hope of you becoming any different than you are right now. I want to stress that I don't say that lightly. There are clearly some deeply embedded sinful tendencies and patterns in our lives that can be very challenging to overcome. I'm not suggesting that God will simply zap us and we will be completely different.

I mean, we've all heard stories of people's dramatic conversions where someone will say, Well, I was an alcoholic, and then I came to faith in Jesus, and I've never had a desire for another drink of alcohol in my life. That happens, but I don't think that's the norm.

The more normal course of things is a person comes to Christ, and before Christ they may have been a very angry person, and for the rest of their life they will likely have to intentionally fight against the temptation to be angry. It will require diligent ongoing effort, but the reality is God can empower us to grow over time in obedience even in very hardened patterns of sin.

Third, we should desire and have hope and joy that God can and will transform us. Not in some sort of flippant way where we're just like, Oh, you know, of course God's going to transform me. But there should be a genuine hope and a joy that, yes, God is at work in me, and he can change; he will change me. Of course, ultimately, when Christ returns, or he takes us home. We will be changed completely, and so we have that hope, and we should cultivate that.

Lastly, I'd suggest identifying one specific area of your life to pray for God to bring transformation. Pick an area that is an ongoing struggle for you and ask the Lord to empower you to change, to give you the desire to obey, to empower you to love Christ more than you love yourself. I would probably add here as well that more than likely you're going to want to seek the encouragement and assistance of others as you pursue growth in godliness in that area.

So that's the picture that emerges here in Philippians 2:12-18 Paul calling us to work out our

salvation and to avoid Israel's mistakes.

In the next section, we'll see how Paul begins to give us examples of what this Christlike mindset looks like lived out in the lives of his co-workers

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