

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 4,

Podcast Audio Overview

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I want you to imagine, just for a second, trying to write a letter of profound joy and encouragement. Right. Which sounds nice, but context is everything here.

Exactly. Because here is the catch. You are literally chained to a Roman soldier.

Wow. Yeah. Not metaphorically? No.

Physically shackled. You're sitting in a damp, cold holding cell, day after day, awaiting a trial before the emperor himself. A trial that could very easily end in execution.

Right. You're basically waiting to die. I mean, I think most of us in that situation would write, you know, a desperate plea for mercy.

Or a really grim last will and testament. Yeah, exactly. But the Apostle Paul, he wrote a blueprint for joy.

It's honestly wild when you really step back and look at it. It really is. So today, we are extracting the core insights from a deep dive source we've been looking at.

It's Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's lecture on Philippians, specifically chapter 1, verses 18b-26. It's such a rich passage. It is.

And our mission for this deep dive is to decode exactly how Paul used his extreme, terrifying circumstances to create a framework for facing the future. And more importantly, how you, yes, you listening to this right now, can use this ancient framework to radically reframe your own modern challenges. Okay, let's unpack this.

Oh wait, I can't use that expression. Okay, let's unpack this. Because right out of the gate, Paul makes a very curious choice of words regarding his fate.

He really does. And it's something that completely throws me off. It's a massive pivot in the text.

And you're right to be thrown off by it, because it shifts our entire understanding of his mindset. Paul is sitting there, chained up, and he writes to his friends in Philippi, saying he knows his current situation will turn out for his deliverance. Okay.

But the word he uses in the original Greek text is *soteria*. But wait, *soteria* usually translates to something much heavier than just, you know, getting your jail cell unlocked, doesn't it? Yeah, that is the big dilemma of interpretation we have to start with. *Soteria* is overwhelmingly translated in the New Testament as salvation.

So we are hit with a mystery right away. When Paul says his imprisonment and trial will turn out for his *soteria*, does he mean physical deliverance? Like, does he expect the emperor to

just say, not guilty and let him walk out the door? Right. Or is he talking about eternal spiritual salvation on the last day? I have to be honest.

If I'm chained to a guard who probably hasn't showered in a month. Huh. Yeah, definitely hasn't.

And I'm facing the chopping block. I'm entirely focused on physical deliverance. Of course.

Anyone would be. I'm hoping for the keys. The idea that he might be talking about ultimate spiritual salvation while he's in literal physical agony sounds like, oh, it sounds borderline delusional.

It does sound like a massive disconnect. Is it possible he's just in denial about his impending execution? I mean, it's easy to say, oh, I'm focused on heaven when you're just utterly terrified of your immediate reality. That is such a natural, modern reaction.

We just assume it must be a coping mechanism. Yeah, exactly. But Dr. Harmon's analysis actually strips away the idea that this is just psychological denial.

Yeah. He lays out a trail of clues from the text that proves Paul's genuine conviction that this isn't about escaping Rome at all. He is intensely focused on the ultimate spiritual victory.

OK, I'm skeptical. Walk me through the evidence here. How do we know he isn't just secretly hoping to beat the charges? What's fascinating here is we can start by looking at his own linguistic fingerprint.

His linguistic fingerprint. Yeah. Across all of Paul's letters.

Every single time he uses this exact Greek noun, *soteria*, it points directly to spiritual or eternal salvation. Every single time? Every time. He has a very established, highly consistent pattern of how he uses his vocabulary.

Sure, but vocabulary can be flexible, right? Couldn't he just be using a heavy word for a light situation, like exaggerating? You might think so until you look at his verbs. OK, what about the verbs? Paul often uses an action word, a cognate verb, that's related to *soteria*. And when he does, it again carries that same spiritual weight.

I see. And here is the kicker. If Paul wanted to talk about dodging a physical danger or escaping a literal prison, he had a completely different standard Greek verb that he used for exactly those scenarios.

Ah, OK. I see where this is going. So if he meant escaping prison, he would have just used his standard escaping prison word.

Precisely. The fact that he actively chose not to use his usual word for physical escape is a massive neon sign pointing away from Rome. And straight toward eternity.

Exactly. That makes sense. It's like a doctor choosing a very specific clinical term instead of a colloquial one.

You know exactly what they mean because of what they didn't say. That's a perfect analogy. So what else does Dr. Harmon point out? Well, look at the company the word keeps.

Paul immediately surrounds soteria with intense eschatological language. OK, for those of us who haven't been to seminary, eschatological basically means end times or final judgment language, right? Yes, exactly. Sorry for the jargon there.

No, it's good. So how does he use it? Well, Paul writes about his eager expectation and his hope, and then he specifically says he expects not to be at all ashamed. OK, but isn't shame just, you know, being embarrassed? In our modern culture, sure.

Shame is usually a temporary embarrassment; as you trip on the sidewalk, you feel shame. Right. But in the New Testament, not being ashamed is practically a technical phrase.

Really? Meaning what? It refers to standing before God on the day of final judgment and being completely, totally vindicated. Oh, wow. OK, so he's looking right past the emperor.

Completely past him. But the emperor's verdict is irrelevant to him because he is exclusively focused on the ultimate judge. That really changes the tone of the letter.

It does. And that leads to the ultimate smoking gun that Dr. Harmon uncovers. Oh, I love a smoking gun.

What is it? When Paul says, this will turn out for my salvation, that specific five-word phrase in Greek isn't just Paul being poetic. No. No, it is a direct word-for-word echo of the Old Testament.

It's a quote from Job, chapter 13, verse 16. Wait, Job. The guy who basically lost everything and sat in the ashes, scraping his sores.

The very same guy. Wow. And in that specific passage in Job, Job is declaring that despite all his extreme physical suffering and the false accusations against him, he knows he will be vindicated before God on the last day.

That's incredible. Yeah, Paul is literally adopting Job's exact words to say, my circumstances look like a total disaster, but my ultimate vindication is secure. So it's a bit like a CEO looking at a devastating, catastrophic quarterly financial report.

Right. But instead of panicking about the immediate loss or trying to cook the books, they look at it as the ultimate necessary setup for a 10-year market triumph. Exactly.

Paul isn't sitting in the dark, crossing his fingers, hoping a Roman magistrate will just let him off the hook on a technicality. Not at all. He is utterly convinced that he will persevere in his faith to the very end, no matter what Rome decides to do with his body.

He has totally bypassed the immediate physical threat. It's an incredible mental pivot. It is incredible, but, and maybe this is just my practical side talking, it also brings up a massive logistical problem in my mind.

Which is? If Paul is that hypo-focused on ultimate spiritual perseverance over just surviving the week, how does he actually pull that off? It's a fair question. Because he's human. Facing execution, sleeping on a stone floor, being chained to a guard- that has to wear down your psyche.

Oh, absolutely. You can't just positive think his way through that kind of trauma. And he doesn't try to.

What's brilliant about Paul here is his intense self-awareness about his own limitations. He openly admits he cannot do this on his own. So he explicitly outlines the two means by which he will persevere.

For sure. The prayers of the Philippian believers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Okay, the prayers of his friends and the help of the Holy Spirit.

Yeah. I mean, on the surface, that sounds like a pretty standard expected religious answer. You know, thoughts and prayers and God's help.

It does sound standard in English. But Dr. Harmon reveals this grammatical secret in the original text that is practically invisible in our English translations. Oh, I love these hidden details.

It changes everything about how those two things interact. In the original Greek, Paul uses a single definite article, the word *the*, to govern both of those nouns. Here's where it gets really interesting.

I'm trying to wrap my head around this. You're saying he doesn't say the prayers and the help as two separate items on a checklist. Right.

Exactly. So it's not like I have item A and item B. No. In Greek grammar, using one definite article to cover two distinct nouns is a mechanical way of linking them inextricably together.

Oh, wow. It's a way of saying that while they are distinct elements, they form one unified whole. That's fascinating.

Think of it like a chemical compound. You have hydrogen, and you have oxygen, distinct elements. Right.

But when they bind together, they create a single new substance, water. The grammar here is the chemical bond. It makes human prayer and the Spirit's an inseparable partnership.

Hold on. I want to make sure I'm getting this because that sounds profound. It really is.

Does this imply a sort of lock-and-key mechanism? Like the believers' prayers actively partner with God's provision of the Spirit to keep Paul going. Yes. Exactly that.

So they aren't just sending him good vibes across the Mediterranean. Their prayers are the actual conduit that delivers the Spirit's help. That is exactly the implication.

It is a breathtaking encouragement when you actually pause to think about the mechanics of it. It really is. God answers the prayers of these believers by deploying the help of the Spirit to empower Paul's perseverance.

That is wild. Paul is effectively telling them, I am going to make it to the end. I am going to hold on to my faith.

And the engine driving that endurance is your prayers unlocking the Spirit's power in my dark cell. That completely upends how you view praying for someone who's going through a brutal time. It really changes the stakes, doesn't it? Yeah.

You aren't just expressing sympathy from a distance. You are actively participating in their survival. You are quite literally part of the architecture holding them up.

You are sharing the load in a very real metaphysical way. Man, that's powerful. And because Paul is so confident in this unified partnership, because he is completely certain of his ultimate soteria, his ultimate salvation, it strips away the fear of his trial.

Which makes sense. If you know you can't lose, ultimately, the immediate fear just kind of evaporates. Exactly.

Which leads us to one of the most famous, and frankly, most misunderstood dilemmas in all of history. Oh, we have to be talking about verse 21. You know it.

Yeah. Even if you've only casually brushed up against historical texts, you've probably heard this quote printed on a coffee mug or something. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Yes. That's the one. And it's funny you mentioned coffee mugs, because Dr. Harmon points out that in the original Greek, this text is incredibly punchy.

Oh yeah. It's almost proverbial. A wooden, literal translation doesn't even have verbs softening it.

Wait, really? No verbs? No verbs. It just says, to live, Christ. To die, game.

To live, Christ. To die, game. I love that.

It's very direct. If they had bumper stickers in ancient Rome, this would absolutely be slapped on the back of Paul's chariot. Oh, 100%.

It sounds like a battle cry. But practically speaking, on a Tuesday afternoon, when you're starving and chained to a wall, what does to live Christ actually mean? It means that knowing Christ dynamically is the absolute highest goal of human existence. So much so that it is worth losing literally everything else to maintain it.

Wow. Dr. Harmon brings in a couple of other passages from Paul's writings to unpack the depth of this. Like what? For instance, he points to Galatians 2:20, where Paul writes about being crucified with Christ, saying it is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him.

So the old version of Paul, his ego, his past ambitions, his fear of death- that version is essentially already dead. Right. And Harmon also references 2 Corinthians 5:17, which declares that anyone in Christ is a new creation.

Okay, I see. So when Paul says to live Christ, he's saying that faith empowers his daily gritty existence. It's his fuel.

Exactly. Knowing Jesus intimately is the singular defining purpose of every breath he takes, even if those breaths are taken in a dungeon. Okay, I track with the to live part, but then we hit the dilemma.

Because he is facing trial. Right. And he says he is hard pressed between two potential outcomes.

If he is acquitted and lives, it means fruitful labor. He gets to keep working. Right.

He gets to keep planting churches, keep advancing his message, keep doing what he loves. But on the other hand, if he is executed, he says he gets to depart and be with Christ, which he explicitly describes as far better. It's the ultimate upgrade for him personally.

Absolutely. But wait, let me clarify something here. Does Paul think God is actually letting him choose his own fate from a menu? What do you mean? Like, hey, Paul, door number one is an acquittal and more travel.

Door number two is the executioner's sword in heaven. What will it be today? I'm really glad you brought that up because that is a very common misconception. Oh, Dr. Harmon is quick to clarify that no, Paul does not believe he gets to dictate his own fate from a menu.

Okay, that makes more sense. The emperor will decide the physical outcome, and God is sovereign over all of it. What Paul is doing here is wrestling out loud with his personal desires versus what he knows is strategically necessary.

So he's just stating his preference. Exactly. It's a rare moment of extreme vulnerability.

He's essentially admitting, look, if I'm being completely selfish right now, I want to go. Yes. I'm exhausted.

I've been beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned. I just want the reward. I want to go home.

If we connect this to the bigger picture, it completely redefines the concept of a trial. How so? Well, Paul is not facing a win-lose situation where living is a win and dying is a tragic loss. He has mentally and spiritually framed this as a win-win situation.

Actually, it's an even bigger win-win situation. I like it. If I live, the gospel wins.

If I die, I get the ultimate prize. But he doesn't stay in that selfish desire, does he? No, he doesn't. Selfishly, departing is far better.

But then he looks at the Philippians. Those are his friends. Right.

He realizes that staying, remaining in the flesh, is, in his words, more necessary on your account. Wow. He actively models self-sacrificial service by putting the Philippians' spiritual needs entirely above his own ultimate comfort and rest.

He chooses the hard, painful labor of living because they need him. Exactly. He decides his focus has to be on their progress and joy in the faith, which sounds beautiful on parchment, but it brings us to a really practical question.

What does progress in faith actually look like? For the Philippians back in the first century, and for you, the listener, navigating life today. This is where Dr. Harmon makes a profound intervention into how we misunderstand faith. OK, I'm listening.

We almost always think of faith quantitatively. Oh, I know I do. It's usually taught like liquid in a glass.

Yes. Like, oh no, my faith levels are low today. I just need a little more faith poured into my cup to handle this crisis.

As if it's about volume. We treat it exactly like that. But Dr. Harmon points out that Jesus spoke of faith completely differently.

How so? Jesus said that faith the size of a tiny mustard seed could move mountains. Which completely ruins the liquid in a glass analogy. It really does.

A mustard seed is microscopic. If it were about volume, a mustard seed wouldn't do anything. Exactly.

Because progress in faith isn't about drumming up a massive quantity of your own internal emotional belief. It is about recognizing the sufficiency of the object of your faith. The object of your faith.

Right. Think of faith not as liquid in a cup, but as a password to a highly secure bank vault. Oh, I really like that.

It doesn't matter how loudly or passionately or perfectly you type in the password. The password itself has no intrinsic power. Right.

Yelling the password doesn't make it work better. Exactly. What matters is the massive wealth inside the vault that the password connects you to.

That is such a good way to look at it. You just need the tiny password, the mustard seed, to unlock the total sufficiency of the vault. Growing in faith means your awareness of Christ's power and sufficiency grows, not that you somehow just try harder to believe more.

So what does this all mean for us? How do we take Paul out of a first-century Roman prison and bring this intensely focused mindset into your life right now, today? It's the ultimate question. Because let's be honest, you might not be facing an emperor, but you are absolutely facing hard, heavy things. Right.

And Dr. Harmon poses a challenge here that really stopped me in my tracks. What's the challenge? He suggests we take a specific difficult circumstance in our lives right now and run it through Paul's framework. Okay.

Think about what that is for you. Maybe it's a terrifying economic hardship, a sudden job loss that has you questioning your identity. Or maybe it's a sudden illness.

Yeah. Or maybe it's a really painful, entrenched relational conflict that just drains your energy every single morning. We all have something.

We do. Now, take that exact hardship and evaluate it entirely through the lens of Paul's mindset. This raises an important question.

When hardship hits, our immediate instinctive reaction as human beings is almost always, how do I get out of this? Totally. We want the escape hatch. But Paul challenges us to flip the script.

Instead of just desperately wanting a way out, what happens if we ask, how is this actually a tool for something bigger? That's a heavy question. How might my ultimate purpose advance through this specific pain? It's a radical reframing. It's taking the worst thing in your life and refusing to just label it a loss.

Exactly. You start asking, does my response to this chronic illness demonstrate the sufficiency of the vault to my kids? Yes. Does my integrity during this terrifying financial crisis model my ultimate hope to my coworkers? It shifts the entire focus.

It really does. It's not about pretending it doesn't hurt. Paul wasn't pretending the chains were comfortable or that the cold floor didn't ache.

No, of course not. It's about recognizing that the chains have a purpose. It is about trusting that the circumstances are controlled by something greater.

And not just when you are sitting on a beach, relaxed, but when you are chained to a wall facing the terrifying unknown. Paul proves that you can leverage your deepest uncertainties for an ultimate good. Which brings us full circle on this incredible journey.

It really does. From a damp, terrifying Roman prison cell, we've learned how to completely redefine our outcomes. We learned about soteria.

Right. That ultimate victory isn't always about immediate physical deliverance. Sometimes it's about a much longer game of eternal vindication.

And we saw the invisible, unbreakable grammar of perseverance. Yes. How the unified, chemical-like partnership of your friends' prayers and the Holy Spirit's power is the literal mechanism that sustains you when you can't sustain yourself.

It's such a comforting thought. We also figured out how to turn our deepest fears into a win-win scenario by adopting the ultimate battle cry. To live, Christ.

To die, gain. Absolutely. And finally, we learned to measure our faith, not by its volume, but by the immovable foundation of the vault we are placing that faith into.

It is a total paradigm shift. It is. And it leaves us with one final, lingering thought to walk away with today.

Okay. Paul said that to die is gain, because for him, death meant ultimate closeness to his purpose. Right.

It meant being with Christ, completely unhindered. So I want you to ask yourself, what is the one worldly thing you are most terrified of losing right now? That's a tough one. Is it your status? Your comfort? A specific, carefully curated plan you had for your future? We all have those plans.

We do. Think about that thing you were gripping so tightly, and then ask yourself, is it possible that losing it might actually be the exact thing that removed the barrier between you and your ultimate gain? That is a provocative question to end on, but it is the exact right one to ask if we want to live with Paul's kind of freedom. Thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive into the source material.

Keep questioning the obvious, keep reframing your challenges, and keep exploring.