

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 7, Podcast Audio Overview

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Welcome to today's deep dive. So today we are looking at a really fascinating piece of ancient text from the early Christian church. Yeah, specifically Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 through 11.

Right, which is, you know, frequently referred to by historians and theologians as the Christ hymn. And we have an incredibly detailed lecture from Dr. Matthew S. Harmon to help us sort of unpack this. And it's really dense, elevated prose.

I mean, it's packed with meaning. It really is. And our mission for this deep dive is to discover how this like 2000-year-old piece of theology was meticulously designed to completely flip our modern and frankly ancient understanding of power, privilege, and leadership upside down.

Yeah, setting the stage here is just crucial because we aren't looking at this passage for, you know, theological trivia. Paul the Apostle didn't write it to simply tickle the intellectual curiosity of his readers in the first century. According to Dr. Harmon, the primary goal of this ancient text was to move the early Christians to adopt a radically different kind of social and mental framework.

It's fundamentally a text about producing a highly specific countercultural mindset for you to live out. And it's a mindset that challenges how we view the very concepts of up and down in society. To give you an idea of how jarring this text would have been to a first-century Roman.

I mean, just think about how completely normal it is today to see someone walking down the street wearing a cross necklace. Oh, sure. It's just fashion.

Right. It's standard jewelry. But if you took a time machine back to ancient Rome, like in the city of Philippi, and walked around with that same necklace, you wouldn't just get strange looks.

People would be physically repulsed by it. Exactly. You'd look like someone today walking around wearing a silver chain with a tiny, highly detailed electric chair dangling from it.

Or like a miniature lethal injection gurney, right? Yeah. Because in the Roman world, crucifixion was not a religious symbol. It was the ultimate brutal instrument of state-sanctioned terror.

It was so gruesome and shameful that you literally did not bring it up in polite conversation. Never. I mean, Roman citizens were legally exempt from it entirely.

It was reserved exclusively for rebellious slaves and Andrians of the state. Which is exactly why we have to look at how this passage redefines ultimate power, because it ultimately

leads to that cross. The text begins in verses five and six by outlining the starting point of Christ, describing him as being, quote, in the form of God.

Now, when modern readers hear that word form, they sometimes accidentally think of something lesser. Like a shadow or a mold. Right.

Or a mere copy. But Dr. Harmon explains that in this specific Greek context, the term refers to the visible outward appearance of an inward reality. So the text is asserting that he was fully God.

Exactly. The outward manifestation and the inward essence perfectly matched. But OK, right here in the text, there is a massive grammatical debate about a single word, and it's one that changes the entire engine of the sentence.

It really does. The text says, though he was in the form of God, and Harmon points out this is translating a Greek participle. Some translators argue it should be read as although he was in the form of God, while others argue it should be because he was in the form of God.

Yeah. The concessive versus causal debate. Right.

But I have to stop and push back on this, because it sounds like we are just getting into the weeds of ancient grammar here. Like, why should you, the listener, care about the nuance of a 2000 year old Greek participle? Because it entirely changes the motivation behind the action. OK, how so? Well, if you translate it as "because he was in the form of God, he didn't exploit his power.

It implies that his divine nature was the inherent reason for his humility. That humility is just what God is like by default. Right.

But Dr. Harmon argues heavily for translating it as although the concessive sense. And the reason is it highlights a massive intentional cultural contrast. Ah, because the Philippians lived in a world steeped in Greek and Roman mythology, right? And they were governed by the Roman patronage system.

Precisely. I mean, think about the Roman social ladder. Society was built on a strict system of patrons and clients.

You owed favors to people above you. Exactly. If you had power, wealth, or status, you used it to extract loyalty and favors from those below you.

You climb the ladder by stepping on others. And if you look at their pantheon of gods- Zeus, Apollo, Mars- their defining characteristic is using their immense power to advance their own selfish, often petty agendas. They crushed their enemies.

They took whatever they wanted. Yeah. So against that cultural backdrop, if someone is described as being in the form of God, the absolute unquestioned expectation of a Roman citizen is that this being will exploit that status for maximum personal dominance.

Wow. Okay. Which means translating it as although basically says, even though he had the ultimate power that anyone else in Rome or on Mount Olympus would have used to dominate, he did the exact opposite.

He refused to leverage his status, which leads to the next phrase, stating that equality with God was not something to be grasped. And the Greek word there is *harpagnos*. *Harpagnos*.

And translators apparently lose sleep over this word because it is exceedingly rare. Extremely rare. I think this is the only time it shows up in the entire New Testament.

The King James Version famously translated it as robbery. Other modern translations say something to cling to or something to be exploited. Yeah.

And while the exact English equivalent is elusive, Dr. Harmon explains the core mechanism is clear. Christ did not view his equality with God as a prize to be seized, held selfishly, or, you know, weaponized for personal advantage. Unlike the Roman emperors.

Exactly. They actively declared themselves divine to secure absolute political authority. But Christ didn't look at his divine status and ask, how can I use this to benefit myself? Because he refused to exploit his status, we are left with a really natural question.

What did he actually do with it? He took the exact opposite route. Right. Verse seven says he emptied himself.

And there is a huge paradox in this text here. Usually when we think of emptying a vessel, we think of like taking a cup of water and pouring the liquid out on the ground. You are losing something.

Exactly. You are subtracting from the total volume. Yeah.

But the source material stresses that Christ emptied himself by taking something on. Yeah. This is a concept theologians refer to as *kenosis* Christology derived from the Greek word *kenosis*, which means emptying.

Kenosis. Okay. And a common misconception here is that Christ gave up his divine attributes, that he subtracted his omniscience or his power, becoming somehow less than God.

Which would contradict the previous verse. Right. It directly contradicts it.

He didn't empty himself by subtracting his divinity. He emptied himself by adding the form of a servant. The Greek word used there is *doulos*, which literally means slave.

So it's the equivalent of emptying yourself of your status as a billionaire, not by giving away all your money, but by intentionally putting on the uniform of the overnight janitor and scrubbing the floors. That's a great way to look at it. You didn't lose your bank account, but you completely subverted your social status by adopting a lowly role.

And notice that the word form appears again there. Just as he was in the form of God, meaning his outward appearance matched his inward divine reality, he now takes the form of a slave. Right.

In Roman society, a *doulos* was the absolute bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. They were legally considered property, not persons. So for a deity to willingly adopt the form of a slave would have been utterly incomprehensible.

It would be disgusting to a Roman patrician. Furthermore, Harmon notes that Paul is intentionally drawing heavily from the Old Testament here, specifically the suffering servant imagery found in the book of Isaiah, chapter 53. Where a servant bears the griefs and sorrows of the people.

Exactly. And then the text follows this by saying he was born in the likeness of men and found in human form. That phrasing is meticulous.

The likeness of men echoes all the way back to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, where God creates humans in his own image and likeness. Yeah, the point Paul is driving home to the Philippians is the full, unmitigated humanity of Christ. From eternity, he possessed the form of God, but at a specific point in history, he added the form of a servant, becoming fully human.

He is simultaneously fully God and fully man. Yes. And that dual reality leads us directly into verse 8. The text states he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Which is where that electric chair analogy really hits home. It does. Christ didn't just become human.

He didn't just become a lower-class citizen. He bypassed every rung of the social ladder and went to the absolute lowest, most humiliating, most excruciating exit possible in the ancient world. Yeah.

Roman philosophers like Cicero called crucifixion the extreme and ultimate punishment of slaves. Just brutal. The physical torment and the slow suffocation were unimaginably brutal.

But the text and the broader early Christian belief system assert that the suffering was far more than physical or even social. Right, because of the spiritual weight. Exactly.

Dr. Harmon points out that on the cross, he was taking on the spiritual weight of the punishment for humanity's sins. Christ went as low as it was universally possible to go. So he starts at the absolute highest conceivable height: equality with God.

He descends to become human. He descends further to become a servant. And then he plummets to the absolute rock bottom, a criminal's execution.

But that total descent is exactly what triggers God's dramatic response in verses 9 through 11. Right. Verse 9 abruptly shifts the subject.

We move from what Christ willingly did to himself to what God the Father did in response. It reads, Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name. A lot of people, when they read this narrative, visualize the story as a V-shape.

Oh, sure. Yeah. Like you start at the top left of the V in heaven.

You go all the way down to the bottom point on earth at the cross. And then you bounce right back up the other side to where you started in heaven. You end up exactly where you began.

But our source material makes a fascinating distinction here. It's actually not a V-shape at all. Right.

It's a checkmark. Yes, a checkmark. Because the ending point is actually structurally higher than the starting point.

Wait, how is it higher? Well, before the incarnation, he was in the form of God. But after the cross, he is highly exalted as the God-man. And he is bestowed with a specific, unrivaled title.

The name that is above every name. Tracing that concept of the name through the biblical narrative is one of the most illuminating parts of Dr. Harmon's lecture. Let's pull that thread starting all the way back in Genesis 11 with the Tower of Babel.

Yeah, at Babel, humanity gathers together in direct defiance of God's command to spread out. And what is their stated motivation in the text? They say, let us make a name for ourselves. Exactly.

They construct a massive ziggurat, a tower reaching to the heavens, entirely to secure their own glory and legacy. And as a result of that hubris, God judges their pride, confuses their languages, and scatters them across the earth. But then you turn the page to Genesis 12, and God makes a covenant with a man named Abraham.

God doesn't wait for Abraham to build a tower. God simply says, I will make your name great. The contrast is deliberate there.

The biblical narrative is establishing that humans cannot manufacture a truly great name for themselves through pride or power-grabbing. It has to be given. Right.

A great name can only be bestowed by God as a gift of grace. And this thread weaves through the Old Testament. King David is promised a great name, and it culminates right here in Philippians with Jesus, who is given the name above every name.

And the result of that name completely reverses the curse of Babel. Oh, absolutely. Like at Babel, human pride caused people to be scattered and divided by a confusion of languages.

But look at the New Testament event of Pentecost. The Spirit falls, the apostles preach the name of Jesus, and people from all those different scattered nations are suddenly brought back together, miraculously understanding the same message. The scattered nations are regathered by the name of the exalted Christ.

And Dr. Harmon notes, this anticipates the final vision in the book of Revelation, where people from every tribe, tongue, and nation are unified in worship. It's a complete cosmic reversal of human pride. It really is.

Now, there's another piece of theological math happening in this passage regarding that worship. In verse 10, Paul writes that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow and every tongue confess. Yeah.

And that is not just poetic, elevated language. Paul is directly quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, specifically chapter 45. Yeah.

And to understand the weight of that, you really have to look at the context of Isaiah 45. In that passage, Yahweh, the God of Israel, is speaking. And Yahweh declares, I alone am the true God.

And to me, every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance. In a world filled with idols, it is an exclusive, fiercely guarded claim to divine worship. But Paul takes that exact language strictly reserved for Yahweh and applies it directly to Jesus.

Exactly. So the theological math is undeniable. If this exclusive worship only applies to Yahweh and Paul applies it directly to Jesus, then Paul is asserting that Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh.

Which utterly shatters a very common historical misconception. Which one? Well, for a long time, there was a prevalent theory in secular scholarship that early Christians didn't actually believe Jesus was God. Oh, right.

The telephone game theory. Exactly. The theory suggested it took decades, maybe a century, of slow mythology building a kind of historical telephone game culminating in the Gospel of John for the early church to finally elevate Jesus to divine status.

But the dating of this letter to the Philippians totally wrecks that timeline. Completely. Even the most skeptical critical scholars agree that the Apostle Paul wrote Philippians, and they firmly date it around 60 to 62 AD.

That's early. Very early. Furthermore, many scholars believe Paul is quoting an existing hymn that was already circulating among early Christian communities, which pushes the origin of these lyrics back even earlier into the 50s AD.

So that means within 20 or 30 years of the crucifixion, Paul is writing this to a church in Greece, fully expecting them to sing it and agree with it. Right. He isn't aggressively arguing or defending the idea that Jesus is God against skeptics inside the church.

He's casually referencing it as an already established, universally accepted foundational fact. Wow. This proves the early church worshipped Jesus as Yahweh decades before the Gospel of John was even drafted.

So we have this staggering cosmic theology here. Jesus existing as God, refusing to exploit his power, emptying himself to become a slave, descending to the brutal execution of the cross, and then being exalted with the divine name. It's incredible.

But we have to ask the ultimate question. If the early Christians believed this, what were they supposed to do with it? How does a first-century believer in a Roman colony apply cosmic theology in their living room? Well, we have to circle back to the very first verse we looked at, verse five. Have this mind among yourselves.

Right. Paul writes, have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus. And that phrase, yours in Christ Jesus, is the linchpin.

Why is that the linchpin? Because without it, this passage is just the most depressing, impossible standard ever set. If this is simply a moralistic, what would Jesus do command? As in, hey, Jesus was God and he humbled himself to be crucified. Now you go try really hard to do the same.

Every single person would fail. Yeah. You can't just bootstrap that kind of humility.

Exactly. Dr. Harmon emphasizes that this is not merely a picture to imitate. It is a declaration of empowerment.

In Paul's theology, this radical self-emptying humility is only possible because of the believer's mystical union with Christ. Okay. So you are empowered by the very same Christ who lived this out, enabling you to live that way yourself.

Yes. But the source material also highlights a very sobering reality of the text. Yeah.

Verse 10 states that every knee will bow. In the worldview of this hymn, that is an unavoidable universal truth. It's going to happen.

Right. However, the manner in which they bow will be vastly different depending on their relationship to that name. Yeah.

Dr. Harmon points out that for those who follow him, that bowing of the knee will be a joyful, enthusiastic celebration. But for those who oppose him. The text implies that for those who oppose him, they will bow out of terror and compulsion, recognizing his absolute authority only when final judgment has arrived.

Harmon argues that understanding this stark contrast should deeply motivate Christians to urgently share their faith. There was a specific convicting observation from Dr. Harmon's lecture about how our environment affects that urgency. Oh, about comfort.

Yeah. He noted that when our earthly lives are highly comfortable, when our finances are secure and our circumstances generally aligned with what we want, we tend to stop longing for Christ's return. We get too comfortable here.

Constant comfort makes us spiritually lethargic. It perfectly mirrors the Roman citizens in Philippi who benefited from the patronage system. When you are at the top or at least comfortable in the middle, the status quo seems perfectly fine.

You don't want anything to change. Right. It's only when you are suffering that you desperately long for the world to be made right and for a true king to return.

Harmon suggests this passage is designed as a wake-up call to recapture that original first-century eagerness. So how does Dr. Harmon suggest you, the listener, practically apply the mind of Christ tomorrow morning? Well, his challenge is incredibly straightforward, though definitely not easy. Not at all.

He challenges the audience to find one specific act of self-sacrificial service to perform this week. Look at your calendar. Look at your bank account.

Identify resources, money or time that you had fully intended to use for yourself, for your own entertainment or comfort, and redirect it entirely to serve someone else. Willingly lower your own status or comfort to elevate another person. Exactly.

That is the practical boots-on-the-ground application of kinetic theology. You empty yourself to serve. So to recap the journey we've taken through this ancient text today, we have seen how the Christ hymn completely subverted the Roman and modern understanding of power.

It flipped it upside down. It did. We watched the narrative trace a path from the absolute highest heights of divine equality down through the lowest dregs of society to the unthinkable brutality of a Roman cross, only to rebound in that checkmark shape, culminating in the exaltation of the name above all names.

Within the logic of this text, it proves that the path to true lasting glory isn't found through grasping, exploiting, or climbing over others. It is found exclusively through radical humility. And Dr. Herman's analysis of this text leaves us with one final provocative thought to mull over, especially when we consider the contrast with the Tower of Babel.

We live in a modern culture, whether it's corporate ladders, social media landscapes, or political arenas, that is utterly obsessed with building towers. Oh, absolutely. The default human setting is to make a name for yourself, to construct a personal legacy, and to grasp for every ounce of influence you can get.

Right. So based on the stark reality presented in Philippians 2, what would it look like in your own life this week if you completely cease trying to manufacture your own legacy? What if you trusted that the only path to true significance is to willingly lower yourself and serve the people around you?