

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 8, Podcast Audio Overview

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Imagine trying to fundamentally change your deepest, most stubborn character flaw. Right. Like, not just putting a polite mask over it, but actually destroying your desire to do it all together.

Which is incredibly hard. Yeah, because, you know, modern self-improvement tells you to download a habit tracker or, I don't know, try a cold plunge or something. Right, some kind of quick mechanical fix.

Exactly. But there's this ancient text, written by a guy locked in a Roman prison, that tells you to prepare for a heart transplant instead. That's quite the contrast.

It really is. So, welcome to the Deep Dive. Today we are basically stripping away this modern absinthe with, you know, self-help algorithms, and we're unpacking an ancient, radically different blueprint for human transformation.

And we're doing this by looking at a theological breakdown by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon. Yes. The source text is, well, it's dense, but it's intensely practical.

It's Philippians chapter 2, verses 12 through 18. Okay. And this section is often given this kind of terrifying title, Work Out Your Own Salvation.

Right, which sounds pretty intense. It does. But to understand how this actually changes you on, like, a random Tuesday morning, you have to look at what immediately precedes it.

Ah, the setup. Yeah, the setup. So, verses 5 through 11 contain what theologians call the Christ hymn.

The Christ hymn. Exactly. It's this sweeping, beautiful, poetic description of Christ just completely emptying himself.

Emptying himself how? Well, it says he existed in the form of God, but he didn't consider equality with God as something to be, you know, grasped or exploited. Okay. Instead, he takes on the form of a servant.

He becomes obedient to the point of a humiliating death on a cross, right before God ultimately exalts him. So, this is definitely not a self-actualization seminar. Not at all.

It is a terrifying standard of self-emptying. Precisely. That is the ultimate example of obedient sacrifice.

Therefore, everything we're about to explore today, this entire blueprint for how you can actually change your deepest flaws, it's a direct, necessary response to that hymn. It's not just abstract theology. It is the raw, mechanical, you know, how-to that follows Christ's example of abandoning cosmic privilege for the sake of obedience.

Okay. Let's unpack this a bit. Because right out of the gate in verse 12, we hit this famous command that feels, honestly, entirely contradictory to everything you just said about grace and sacrifice.

Oh, you mean the working out part? Yeah. It says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. Right.

When the modern brain hears, work out your salvation, we immediately think of a transaction. Like what? Like working a job to earn a paycheck. You put in the labor to acquire something you don't possess yet.

Which is the most common and arguably the most destructive way to misread this text. Right. So, I was thinking about this.

It makes a lot more sense if we think about it like working out at the gym. Okay. I like that.

Because, you know, you don't go to the gym and lift weights to, like, acquire a physical body. Right. You already have one.

Exactly. You already have a body. You exercise to develop and strengthen and manifest the potential of the physical form you already possess.

That's a great way to put it. So, the author here isn't telling you to work for your salvation. He's telling you to work out what God has already worked in.

You've been given this profound internal gift, and your job is to basically push that internal reality outward into your tangible everyday life. That GER analogy actually touches on the core Greek phrasing beautifully. Really? Yeah.

You are making an invisible internal reality visible. But, and this is important, we cannot breeze past the modifier here. The fear and trembling.

Right. Doing it with fear and trembling. This isn't a casual gym session.

Definitely not. In ancient literature, fear and trembling is this visceral, physical reaction to the holy awesomeness of God. It is the awe that hits you when you recognize the eternal stakes of your own life.

Wow. It's the realization that you aren't just tweaking your morning habits. You are dealing with cosmic forces here.

And you are dealing with a very real enemy dedicated to your destruction. Which adds a massive level of sobriety to this workout, so to speak. Absolutely.

Furthermore, the text dictates a major shift here from horizontal obedience to vertical obedience. What do you mean by that? Well, think about human nature. It is incredibly easy to obey an authority figure, say Paul who wrote this letter, when he's standing right in front of you.

Right. Like when your boss is actually in the office. Exactly.

That's horizontal obedience. You perform for the person next to you. But working this out with fear and trembling means recognizing you are always, constantly, directly responsible before God.

So you are basically living for an audience of one. Yeah. Whether Paul is in the room or locked in a prison hundreds of miles away, the obedience remains exactly the same because the true authority is vertical.

Okay. So we have this deep, reverent effort on our part. Right.

We're at the gym, doing the heavy lifting, bringing this internal salvation out into our external lives, and we're doing it with this profound sense of awe. But I'm struggling to see where God fits into this specific equation. Like, if I'm the one sweating and straining to change my behavior, are we splitting the work 50-50? Where is the divine part of this partnership? That brings us to the very next sentence, verse 13.

Okay. This is the divine engine of change. The text explicitly states that God works in you to do two distinct things.

Which are? He gives you the desire, so the will to obey, and he gives you the power, the actual energy, to do the work all for his good pleasure. So he provides the desire and the power. Exactly.

God is the one supplying the engine block and the fuel. I have to pause you there, though, because that sounds great in a theological textbook, but let's talk about reality for a second. Fair enough.

What happens when you genuinely, truly just don't want to do the right thing? We've all been there. Right. You know you're supposed to forgive someone, or, I don't know, you break a toxic habit, and your brain is just screaming, but I really want to stay mad.

Yeah. If God is supposed to give the desire, what do I do when my desire is just completely broken? What's fascinating here is that this specific dilemma is exactly what the biblical narrative has been answering for centuries, long before Paul even wrote this letter. Wait, really? Yeah.

To understand the mechanics of this, we have to pull a thread all the way back to the prophet Ezekiel in the Old Testament, specifically chapter 36. Okay, the Old Testament prophets aren't usually known for their gentle self-help advice. No, they definitely are not.

Yeah. But in Ezekiel 36, verses 26 and 27, God makes this staggering promise to a rebellious people. What's the promise? He says he is going to remove their heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh.

Wow. Furthermore, he promises to put his spirit inside them to literally cause them to walk in his statutes. A heart of stone, that's such a visceral image.

It is. It's dead, it's cold, it's completely unresponsive to anything outside of itself. Exactly.

So to answer your dilemma, when your brain is screaming that you don't want to do the right thing, you don't just sit there stuck in your stubbornness waiting for a magical feeling to wash over you. Because of Ezekiel's promise, you can actively pray for God to change your want to. You can literally ask him to perform the heart transplant.

That reframes the entire struggle. Doesn't it? It's not just, God, help me white-knuckle my way through this miserable thing I hate doing. It's, God, change my internal wiring so that I actually despise this toxic habit and desire what you desire.

Exactly. And if you miss that divine engine, you inevitably fall into two massive opposite errors. Okay, what are they? Well, the first error is the lazy let go and let God approach.

Oh, I've heard that phrase. Right. This is the assumption that if you just float down the river of grace long enough, God will magically zap you with godliness without any effort on your part whatsoever.

Which violates the explicit command we just talked about to work out your salvation. Sweating is required. Exactly.

But the second error is just as dangerous. What's that one? It's the legalistic try-harder approach. This is where you rely entirely on your own willpower.

You create a massive spreadsheet of rules and try to force yourself into being a better person through sheer grit, completely divorced from God's empowering grace. Which eventually just leads to exhaustion. Right.

Or, honestly, worse, incredible pride if you actually manage to pull it off for a few weeks. Exactly. You become insufferable.

So if we aren't floating lazily and we aren't white knuckling our way to perfection, what is the mechanical solution here? How does a listener actually engage this divine engine today? Well, the historical solution is actively utilizing what theologians call the means of grace. Means of grace. These are standard practices like reading the Word, prayer, and fellowship with other believers.

Okay, but I'm going to push back again here. Go for it. Reading an ancient book or drinking coffee with a church group doesn't magically rewire my brain.

How do those things actually change my desire? Well. Like if I think of it like setting up a sail on a boat, I know I can't control the wind. The wind is God's power.

But hoisting the sail seems almost too passive. It's not passive at all when you look at the mechanics of what is actually happening. Take fellowship, for example.

Okay. When you get into a genuine community, you aren't just checking a socialization box. You are exposing your hidden stubborn habits to the light.

Right. Sin thrives in secrecy. By speaking it out loud to another believer, you are literally stripping away the isolation that feeds your bad desires.

Wow. Yeah. Furthermore, when your own desire to obey is incredibly weak, being in fellowship allows you to literally borrow the faith and desire of those around you.

Oh, I love that. You are putting yourself directly in the path of the wind. Exactly.

You are engineering an environment where God's grace has maximum access to your life. Right. That is exactly how the means of grace mechanically change your desires over time.

All right. So we have the divine engine. We know how this internal change is supposed to work.

Yep. Here is where it gets really interesting because next, the text pivots to the friction in that engine. It points out the single most common way we sabotage this entire process.

It does. And out of all the terrible dramatic sins Paul could have listed, he zeroes in on something so mundane it is almost laughable. Yeah.

Verses 14 and 15 say to do all things without grumbling or disputing. Grumbling and disputing. It feels like a massive anticlimax after talking about cosmic salvation and heart transplants, right? It really does.

But, I mean, we all know the disputer in the modern world. Oh, absolutely. They are the ultimate contrarian.

Like, you could be at a dinner party and say, wow, the sky is a beautiful shade of blue today. Right. And they will cross their arms and say, well, actually, it's just the Rayleigh scattering of light.

And technically, it's more of a violet. Right. It is an exhausting, constant, low-level friction against everything and everyone.

It is exhausting. Yeah. But we have to look at the historical weight behind Paul's word choice here.

OK, what's the weight? Grumbling isn't just an annoying personality trait. It is a profound theological failure. In the biblical narrative, grumbling- that low, murmuring, behind-the-scenes complaining- is the summary term for ancient Israel's ultimate failure in the wilderness.

Wait, hold on. Yeah. You're telling me that my complaining about sitting in traffic or, like, venting about a bad boss is spiritually equivalent to ancient Israel rebelling against God in the desert? Basically, yes.

That feels like a massive, melodramatic leap. How are those two things actually connected? They are connected by what the complaining represents at its core. OK.

Think back to the book of Exodus. God rescues the Israelites from brutal slavery in Egypt with these unprecedented, miraculous signs. He literally parts the Red Sea.

Right. And almost immediately, what do they do in the desert? They complain. They murmur.

They complain about the food. They complain about the water. They complain about Moses' leadership.

They literally watch the sea split in half, and like a week later, they're complaining about the catering. Exactly. Yeah.

Because complaining is a declaration that God's provision is insufficient. Oh, wow. It is an accusation against the divine character.

Their baseline posture was chronic dissatisfaction, and that grumbling literally blinded them to the miracles happening right in front of their faces. That's tragic. It kept an entire generation from entering the promised land.

So when Paul says, don't grumble, he's not giving you a tip on how to be a more pleasant coworker. No. He's saying, do not repeat the central, catastrophic, historical failure of your spiritual ancestors.

Precisely. And if we connect this to the bigger picture, Paul is actually setting up a massive historical reversal. What kind of reversal? He is deliberately echoing a very specific Old Testament song, the Song of Moses, in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 5. Okay.

In that song, Moses describes unfaithful Israel as a blemished, crooked, and twisted generation. Man, that is a brutal indictment. It was their tragic reality.

But look at the exact words Paul uses to the Philippians. He says that by avoiding this grumbling and by leaning on God's power, they can become blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation. Oh, wow.

It's a direct mirror. It is. You are being invited to succeed exactly where ancient Israel failed.

By choosing trust over behind-the-scenes complaining, you get to literally rewrite the historical narrative. You are repairing the breach. That elevates a Tuesday morning traffic jam into a moment of profound spiritual significance.

It really does. So, if we actually do this, if we stop the chronic grumbling, if we expose our hidden habits to a community to hoist the sail, if we allow God to give us the desire to obey, what is the ultimate result? Like, how does the world actually experience us? Well, the result is a cosmic contrast. The text says that believers will shine as lights in a dark world.

Shine as lights. Yeah. And once again, Paul is pulling from ancient imagery to raise the stakes here.

Moral testament. Yes. This echoes Daniel chapter 12, verse 3, which declares that the wise will shine like stars in the resurrection.

Oh, nice. It also echoes Isaiah 49, where the servant of the Lord is commissioned to be a light to the nations. It's interesting that the metaphor is light because light doesn't have to force anything.

Its mere existence changes the environment it's in. Exactly. And your role as that light is twofold.

You're called to either hold fast, meaning you cling tightly to the truth of the word of life to sustain yourself. Okay. Or hold out, meaning you actively offer that word of life to the people around you in evangelism.

In both interpretations, you become a beacon in a morally twisted landscape. And all of this effort, this entire developmental challenge, has a specific deadline, doesn't it? The text points toward the day of Christ. Yes.

The day of Christ refers to the culmination of human history. Right. It is the final day of ultimate salvation and judgment.

And Paul is driven by a very specific fear here, echoing the prophet Isaiah once again. What's his fear? He doesn't want to stand on that final day and discover that he labored in vain. He wants the people he poured his blood, sweat, and tears into to actually be standing firm when the end comes.

Which leads to one of the most bizarre yet strangely beautiful metaphors in this entire text. Oh, the drink offering. Yes.

Paul says that even if he is poured out as a drink offering, upon the sacrificial offering of their faith, he is glad and rejoices with them. Right. Let's make this tangible because ancient sacrificial systems don't translate well for most of us.

No. They usually require a bit of context. So think of it like this.

Imagine you were at a lavish, multimillion-dollar wedding. Okay. An absolute masterpiece of a feast has been prepared as the main event.

The ancient drink offering is the equivalent of taking a phenomenally rare, expensive bottle of wine and just pouring it out on the floor in front of the head table as a final gesture of pure celebration and honor. That's a great visual. Or if you prefer art, think of it like the final, clear, glossy glaze you brush over a massive oil painting.

The glaze isn't the painting itself. The poured-out wine isn't the meal. It is a complement to the main event.

That captures the dynamic perfectly. Because Paul is asserting something wild here. He is saying that the main sacrifice, the main event on the altar, is not his apostolic ministry.

Wow. The main event is the Philippians' faith and their service. He is looking at the transformation, their shining like stars, and he is saying, even if my life ends in a Roman execution, even if my blood is literally poured out, it is just a complimentary splash on the altar of your beautiful faith.

That requires an almost psychotic level of humility. It really does. To view your own life, your own potential martyrdom, as just the garnish on someone else's spiritual success.

And this raises an important question about the nature of joy. Paul claims the only logical response to this kind of mutual sacrifice is deep, overwhelming joy. Joy in the face of execution.

Yes. He demands that they rejoice with him even while he faces death. It proves that the mindset of Christ, that self-emptying we discussed in the very beginning, isn't a miserable, dour existence.

Right. It is the pathway to indestructible joy. So what does this all mean for you, listening to this right now? That's the big question.

We've traveled from the gym analogy to heart transplants, through the complaining wilderness of ancient Israel, all the way to pouring out expensive wine on an altar. We've covered a lot of ground. How do you synthesize this massive theological framework into your actual life tomorrow? Well, the ultimate takeaway is a profound, unshakable sense of hope.

You have to understand a fundamental truth about God's character. He actually delights in doing this transformative work in you. He's not annoyed by us.

No. He is not a reluctant mechanic crossing his arms, sighing and saying, fine, I guess I'll fix them. It is his good pleasure to give you the desire and the power to change.

Which means we have to violently combat the lie that whispers in our ear, I will never change. This is just who I am. My desires are permanently broken.

Exactly. That is the greatest lie of the enemy we mentioned earlier. Now, do dramatic overnight transformations happen? Yes.

People walk away from destructive addictions in a single day and never look back. Yeah. But we must be clear: that is not the norm.

Right. The norm is a lifelong, diligent, frustrating fight against deeply embedded patterns. You might struggle with anger or pride or anxiety for decades.

But God can and will empower that change over time if you stay in the process. So the challenge for you, the listener, is to make this incredibly specific. Don't just generally wish to be a better person.

Pick one specific hardened area of struggle in your life. Yeah, narrow it down. Maybe it's that contrarian disputing we talked about.

Maybe it's a hidden habit thriving in secrecy. Pick one thing. And remember, your first step tomorrow morning isn't to white-knuckle your way to victory.

What's going on? Your first step is to pray for the heart transplant. Ask for the actual desire to change. Hoist the sail by bringing someone else into that struggle to launch their faith.

Work out what God is faithfully working in. Because the engine of divine grace is fully fueled and available to you right now. Thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive.

It is always a privilege to explore these monumental ideas with you and figure out how they actually apply to the dirt and grime of real life. It really is. But before you go back to your day, I want to leave you with one final unexplored thought to mull over.

Let's hear it. We spend a lot of time talking about how our mundane, behind-the-scenes bumbling is actually a repetition of ancient historical failures. We know that complaining is a blind spot that keeps us from seeing the divine miracles right in front of our faces.

It tethers us to the wilderness. But what if the exact opposite is also true? What cosmic historical victories might you be participating in right now, in your kitchen or at your office desk, when you choose to practice quiet, behind-the-scenes gratitude? It's powerful. When we started this deep dive, we talked about how modern self-improvement feels like looking for a quick mechanical fix, a shiny new habit tracker to make us marginally more productive.

But maybe true transformation isn't about downloading a new operating system. Maybe it's about stepping back, dropping the exhausting life hacks, and finally letting the master craftsman finish the work. He's already started inside you.

Think about it. We'll see you next time.