

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians, Session 12,

Podcast Audio Overview

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Think about, like, the most stressed you've been this week. Oh, yeah. Right? Maybe you've got a deadline looming or your inbox is just an absolute disaster.

Always. Always. Or maybe you're just navigating that kind of constant low-level panic of modern life.

Yeah, that baseline anxiety we all just sort of carry around now. Exactly. Now, I want you to imagine trying to find your inner peace, but not by, you know, booking a weekend at a wellness retreat or something.

Right. But while chained to a guard, sitting under house arrest, and literally waiting to hear if you are going to be executed for your beliefs. Which is just, I mean, it's wild to even think about.

It is. But that is exactly the master class in stress management that we are jumping into today. So welcome to a brand new DeepDive.

I'm glad to be here. We are looking at some really fascinating notes from Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's lecture series on this ancient text, the Book of Philippians, specifically chapter four, verses one through nine. Yeah.

A really crucial passage. It really is. And our mission today is for you.

Whether you are prepping for some highly stressful meeting or dealing with intense personal conflict, or maybe you're just feeling completely overwhelmed by the noise of the culture right now. Which, let's be honest, is all of us. Right.

We are extracting a timeless, intensely practical framework for managing anxiety and finding actual stability. And I think we really have to emphasize that context right out of the gate. Because we are pulling this framework from a source that is frankly astonishing.

The author of this text, the Apostle Paul, is writing in the first century. And he is not sitting in some tranquil philosopher's study. Not at all.

He's in Rome. He's under guard with a literal execution threat just hanging over his head. Okay, let's unpack this because that context fundamentally alters how we have to weigh his advice.

Oh, absolutely. Like, if some wellness influencer posts a highly produced video about protecting your peace from, I don't know, a five-star resort in Bali, I might roll my eyes. Right.

Because the stakes are zero. Exactly. The stakes are zero.

But Paul is writing a letter focused on joy and mental stability while facing execution. That is like receiving advice on how to stay calm from someone who is currently trapped in a sinking submarine. That's a great way to put it.

You can't just brush it off as theoretical. You have to lean in and say, wait, what do you know that I don't? Like, how are you not losing your mind right now? It forces you to take his words seriously. And he doesn't just suggest joy as a nice idea to try if you have time.

Right. He actually commands it. He writes, rejoice in the Lord always.

Again, I will say, rejoice. Which is pretty bold from House Arrest. Very bold.

Yeah. And he's reiterating a command he gave earlier in the letter, just making sure they don't miss it. But what's fascinating here is the specific phrasing.

Okay. He does not say, you know, rejoice in your circumstances. He says, rejoice in the Lord.

The object of the joy is God himself. Okay. So it's focused outward.

Right. And the reason that distinction matters is that God is a fixed, stable anchor. Because that anchor doesn't change.

Your joy doesn't have to rely on the shifting sands of whatever crisis you happen to be dealing with today. I mean, I have to push back on that, though, just on behalf of anyone listening who is going through something genuinely awful right now. Yeah.

Because on the surface, hearing someone say rejoice always can sound incredibly dismissive. It can feel very jarring. Yeah.

It borders on that toxic positivity we see everywhere today. Like someone handing you a smile through the pain bumper sticker while your life is actively falling apart. Right.

Right. It just feels like a flippant command from someone who doesn't understand real human suffering. And it would be incredibly toxic if it meant ignoring reality.

Yeah. But remember, the sinking submarine. Oh, right.

Paul is actively suffering, as he writes it. So he isn't speaking from a place of naive optimism. Dr. Harmon clarifies a really crucial point here regarding how human emotions actually function.

Well, joy and sorrow are not a mutually exclusive on-off switch. You are not forced to be just one or the other. Wait, really? Because it usually feels like you have to choose one.

I know. But you can experience profound, stabilizing joy based on that unmovable anchor, who God is, while simultaneously being completely overwhelmed with grief. Wow.

You know, over the loss of a loved one, or a terrible medical diagnosis, or a massive life transition. So it's a parallel track. You aren't plastering a fake smile over the pain.

Precisely. You're allowing them to coexist. Joy isn't about ignoring the storm.

It is about cognitive focus. I like that. Cognitive focus.

Yeah. It's about what you are choosing to hold on to while the wind is howling. A pain is real, but the anchor is also real.

Focusing on the anchor keeps you from being swept away. That makes a lot of sense. But if you've got this internal anchor, though, how does that change the way you crash into other people? Oh.

Because if my joy is anchored internally, rather than being entirely dependent on how the people around me are behaving, it seems like that would fundamentally alter my external reaction. It absolutely does. Yeah.

Which brings us to Paul's very next rapid-fire command. And it is entirely about how we treat people when the pressure is on. Okay.

What does he say? He writes, let your reasonableness be known to everyone. Reasonableness. That feels a bit, I don't know, dry.

Well, yeah. The English Standard Version uses that word reasonableness, meaning being level-headed, not easily swayed by every passing emotion. But if you dig into the underlying Greek dictionary, a primary lexicon called BDAG, the word has this beautiful specific nuance.

It actually means not insisting on every right of the letters of law or custom. Oh, interesting. Yeah.

Other translations use the word gentleness. It is a disposition that actively seeks to diffuse conflict rather than win it. And this wasn't just some abstract philosophical concept for the people receiving this letter, was it? Not at all.

Right before this section, Paul actually had to call out two specific women in the congregation. Oh, wow. Name-dropping.

Yes. Euodia and Syntyche. He was urging them to reconcile their conflict.

So this command to be gentle, to intentionally not demand every single one of your rights in an argument, is a direct, highly practical instruction for a community dealing with internal friction. Here's where it gets really interesting, especially for us today. Just look at our modern culture.

We literally prize the exact opposite of this disposition. A 100%. Our entire digital culture runs on outrage.

It rewards bold, dramatic claims demanding your rights and utterly destroying your opponent in the comments section. It's all about owning the other person. Exactly.

We equate gentleness with weakness, as if compromising or stepping back makes you a loser. Right. But looking at the mechanics of what Paul is saying, true strength might actually be the immense restraint required to show gentleness.

I mean, think about it. It takes way more power to defuse a bomb than it does to just let it blow up. That is the perfect way to look at it.

Restraint as a marker of strength. And Paul gives a specific motivation for why we should live this way right at the end of that sentence. What's the motivation? He says the Lord is at hand.

And Dr. Harmon points out that there is an intentional ambiguity in the original text here. Ambiguity how? Well, it could be temporal, meaning the Lord is returning very soon. So keep the big picture in mind and don't obsess over petty squabbles.

OK, that makes sense. Or it could be spatial, meaning the Lord is currently present, like right here with you. Both of which essentially do the same thing, right? They shrink your current conflict down to its proper size.

Yes, exactly. If God is standing right next to me or if he's returning tomorrow, I suddenly don't need to win this petty argument on the Internet. You realize how small it is, right? But taking a breath and being gentle sounds great when you're just annoyed.

What happens when the internal reality isn't just annoyance but pure, unadulterated panic? Oh, the deep anxiety. Because how are you supposed to be reasonable and gentle when your brain is literally screaming that the sky is falling? And that is the critical pivot in the text. It introduces what might be the single hardest command to obey in all of this material.

OK, lay it on us. Paul writes, do not be anxious about anything, which, by the way, directly echoes Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, chapter six. Just hearing that command, do not be anxious about anything.

It makes my heart rate spike. It does. Because it feels completely impossible.

You can't just command a feeling to go away. It is incredibly difficult, which is why Dr. Harmon takes the time to really validate that for us. We live in an increasingly anxious, hyper-stimulated age.

Understatement of the year. Right. But Paul doesn't just drop that seemingly impossible command and walk away.

He immediately provides the comprehensive cure, the mechanism for how to process the anxiety. OK, so what is the mechanism? He says, do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. Notice the comprehensive scope there.

Anything and everything. I think the natural human tendency, though, is to self-censor our prayers. What do you mean? Well, you watch the evening news, you see wars and massive global conflicts, and you think, well, God has a whole universe to run.

My stress over this Friday work presentation or the fact that my toddler won't sleep or my car making a weird noise- it's way too silly to bother him with. Ah, yeah. We diminish our own struggles.

Exactly. So we don't pray about the small things. We hold onto the anxiety ourselves.

We treat prayer kind of like the instruction manual for Ikea furniture. Oh, that's a brilliant analogy. You know the drill.

Right. You open the box, toss the paper aside, and just start hammering dowels into particle board, completely convinced you can figure it out. And you inevitably mess it up.

We only finally look at the manual after the furniture is completely shattered and we're sitting on the floor in tears. We use prayer as an absolute last resort for emergencies instead of a first priority for daily management. We do.

And that is a fatal flaw in how we handle stress. Paul specifically uses two words here to combat that tendency. Prayer, which refers to general communication and worship with God, and supplication, which is specifically asking for things.

Okay. The asking part. Right.

He's telling you to bring the small things, the weird car noises, the mundane work presentations. There is absolutely nothing too small because bringing it to God is the very mechanism for fighting the anxiety. Got it.

And then he adds the required attitude: he says, with Thanksgiving. But mechanically, how does Thanksgiving actually help? Like if I'm actively panicking about a medical test result or a job interview, I don't necessarily feel thankful. Mechanistically, panic forces your brain to hyperfixate on the unknown future.

It's just a spiral of what ifs. Yes, the doom spiral. Exactly.

Thanksgiving, on the other hand, forces your brain to look at the known past. When you thank God for what he has already done and for who he is, it acts as a psychological circuit breaker. A circuit breaker.

Wow. Yeah. It grounds you in the reality of a faithful father who actually hears you rather than the terrifying void of the unknown future.

It shifts your focus from the problem to the problem solver. But, and this is important, Dr. Harmon is also very careful to point out that this is not a magical Band-Aid. Right.

It's not like taking an aspirin where 20 minutes later, the anxiety headache is just gone forever. And if it comes back, it means you prayed wrong. Exactly.

It requires repeatedly coming back to the source. You will likely have to bring that exact same anxious thought to God 10 times in one hour as it creeps back into your mind. Because we're human.

Right. It's an ongoing, continual dialogue, not a one-and-done transaction where you just check a box. So if I'm doing this, if I'm making this repeated prioritized choice to bring the panic to God, what is the actual payoff? We hear this promised result in the text: a peace of God.

Yes. The famous peace of God. But I think our culture has severely skewed what that is actually supposed to feel like.

If we connect this to the bigger picture, the peace of God Paul is talking about is not just a subjective, warm, fuzzy feeling in your chest. Right. It's not a suddenly empty, perfectly calm mind or a complete lack of uncertainty.

Dr. Harmon explains that this peace is actually a glimpse of the endgame. What theologians call eschatological salvation. Eschatological salvation.

That's a big term. It is. But basically it's the ultimate state of wholeness, completeness, and restoration that God promises at the end of time.

And through prayer, you get to experience a piece of that future stability right now. Oh, I see. And his function is incredibly active.

Paul says this peace will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. So it acts as a guard, like a watchman standing at the door. Yes.

But think about what a watchman actually does. A watchman doesn't make the enemy army outside the walls just magically disappear. Right.

They're still out there. The watchman stands at the gate, checking IDs. He stalks the threat from infiltrating the command center.

Anxiety is still going to knock on the door of your mind. The circumstances causing the stress are still outside the wall. Right.

But the peace of God stands at the door and prevents that panic from taking over your heart and mind. And it does this in Christ Jesus, which is the spiritual reality, the sphere in which believers live. This is such a critical distinction, and it completely shatters how we usually talk about this.

I hear people say all the time, well, I just don't have peace about this decision. Oh, yeah. We hear that constantly.

They treat the concept of peace like a magical green traffic light in their emotions. The logic goes, if I am supposed to take this new job or move to this new city or have this hard conversation, God will make me feel perfectly calm and relaxed about it. Right.

And until my stomach stops turning, I shouldn't move. That is a huge paralyzing trap. Dr. Harmon issues a very strong reality check here regarding how we operate.

The Bible never, anywhere, lays out having a calm feeling as a criterion for decision-making. Wait, really? There is zero biblical precedent for the peaceful, easy feeling as a green light? None. Because if that's true, we have completely miswired how we make life choices.

We really have. You can seek wise counsel. You can read the scriptures.

You can make a thoroughly sound, biblically right decision and still have a completely tossing, turning stomach. Yeah. Why? Because stepping into obedience is often deeply uncomfortable.

Doing the right thing is usually the harder thing. The peace of God is the profound bedrock reality that you belong to him, which gives you the confidence to move forward and do the right thing despite your emotional turmoil. Wow.

It doesn't always remove the turmoil. It gives you the stability to walk straight through it. So if peace isn't just an empty, calm mind, my brain has to be doing something while that watchman stands guard.

Because if I'm not actively focusing on something else, my mind is going to default right back to doom, scrolling and panic. Nature abhors a vacuum. And so does the human mind.

You cannot just tell a brain, stop being anxious. It's the classic psychological problem. If I tell you not to think of a white bear, what are you instantly picturing? A white bear.

Right. You have to displace the thought of the white bear with a superior object. You have to picture a blue elephant.

And that is exactly what Paul introduces in his final commands. In verse 8, he fires off the list of superior objects to actively think about. Wait, what's on the list? He says, focus your mind on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise.

That's a comprehensive list. It is. He is stressing that we must actively direct our thoughts.

We're not just helpless recipients of whatever random anxiety-inducing ideas pop into our heads. Which is so easy to forget. We often feel like victims of our own brains, like the anxiety just happens to us and we just have to sit there and take it.

We do feel that way. But Dr. Harmon points out that sin and anxiety almost always gain a foothold in our lives through unchallenged, unprovoked thoughts. If you don't actively evaluate and replace the thoughts coming in, they take root.

That makes sense. So Paul gives this representative list of where to point your mental energy to displace the anxiety. And importantly, this isn't restricted just to explicitly spiritual or strictly biblical things.

I love that because it means the tools are all around us. They are. The words lovely and excellent have a very broad scope.

A beautifully composed piece of music, a stunning sunset, an impressive act of human kindness in your neighborhood, a masterfully painted piece of art. All of these things fit the criteria. How practical.

You can direct your mind toward the beauty and excellence of God's creation in the everyday world to help push back the darkness in your own head. And then he takes it from the realm of internal thought into the realm of external action in verse nine. He tells his

audience, basically, whatever you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things.

And the Greek idea behind that word practice isn't a one-time event, right? It implies repeated, habitual action. It's the repetition that builds the stability, yet to keep doing it. And notice the subtle, beautiful shift in the promise here at the end.

Earlier, the promise was that the peace of God would guard them like a watchman. Now, Paul says that if they practice these things, the God of peace will be with them. It shifts from the gift of peace to the very presence of the Creator who establishes peace.

So what does this all mean? Synthesizing all of this, Harmon is really giving us three daily pillars from Paul's ancient framework. One, focus on the Lord, not on yourself or your constantly shifting, terrifying circumstances. Let him be the unmoving anchor.

Two, pray about everything. Turn it into an ongoing daily dialogue to short-circuit the panic, not just an emergency ripcord you pull when the IKEA furniture is broken. And three, follow the right examples.

Actively practice replacing your anxious thoughts with things that are excellent and lovely. It's a complete framework. It really is.

So for you, the listener right now, it is incredibly easy to let the culture dictate your internal state. It is so easy to be reactionary, to assume the sky's falling, and to let anxiety just run rampant through your mind, unchallenged. But you do not have to live that way.

Dr. Harmon offers a brilliantly practical challenge. It's like a great challenge. Sometime today, pull up that list in Philippians 4.8. Look at those words: true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent.

Challenge yourself to actively identify just one specific thing in your life today that fits each of those qualities and force your mind to dwell on it for a minute. Displace the anxiety. Take back control of your mental diet.

This raises an important question, though, as we wrap up. If we accept this framework, if the peace of God is actually a watchman checking IDs at the door of your mind, regardless of your chaotic feelings, and if profound joy can genuinely coexist alongside deep grief, how does that change the way you are looking at your biggest stressor right now? That's the real question. Are you stubbornly holding out, waiting for the storm to completely pass before you allow yourself to experience any joy? Or are you ignoring the watchman that is already standing in the rain right next to you, offering you a way to stand firm? That is a thought that will definitely stick with you.

Stop waiting for the submarine to be patched before you start learning how to breathe. Thank you so much for joining us on this deep dive. We hope this framework gives you some solid ground to stand on this week.

Take care, and we'll catch you next time.