

Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ - Study Guide

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

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Abstract:

In this session, Dr. Matthew S. Harmon examines Philippians 2:12-18, focusing on the biblical command for believers to **actively manifest the salvation** God has placed within them. The text emphasizes that while Christians must exert effort to grow in holiness, it is ultimately **God who provides both the desire and the strength** to obey. Harmon highlights Paul's warning to **avoid the historical failures of Israel**, specifically the habits of complaining and arguing that hindered their spiritual progress. By maintaining a blameless character, believers are called to **act as radiant lights** within a corrupt society, clinging firmly to the gospel. The lecture concludes by illustrating how **sacrificial service leads to mutual joy** between leaders and their communities. Ultimately, the source encourages a life of **diligent transformation** fueled by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

Briefing Document:

Briefing Document: Philippians 2:12-18 — Working Out Salvation

Executive Summary

This document provides a detailed analysis of Philippians 2:12-18, as presented in Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's study, "Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ." The central theme of this passage is the mandate for believers to "work out" the salvation that God has already "worked in." This process, known as sanctification, requires a synergy between divine empowerment and human responsibility. Paul emphasizes that Christian obedience must be vertical (directed toward God) rather than horizontal (dependent on human authority), and should be characterized by a lack of the "grumbling and disputing" that defined Israel's failures in the wilderness. Ultimately, the passage frames the Christian life as a sacrificial offering that produces mutual joy between the apostle and the church.

I. The Command: Working Out Salvation (Verses 12–13)

Paul transitions from the "Christ Hymn" (the example of Christ's humility and exaltation) to the practical application of these truths. The command to "work out your own salvation" is not an instruction to earn salvation, but to make the lordship of Christ evident in everyday life.

Vertical vs. Horizontal Obedience

Paul notes the importance of the Philippians' obedience whether he is present or absent. This distinction emphasizes that obedience is:

- **Vertical:** Accountable primarily to God, recognizing His constant presence.
- **Horizontal:** Not merely performing for human authority figures or leaders.

The Nature of "Fear and Trembling"

Working out salvation "with fear and trembling" involves a specific spiritual posture:

- **Awe and Reverence:** A physical and emotional response to the holy majesty and power of God.
- **Accountability:** The recognition that every believer must stand before a righteous God to give an account of their life.
- **Sobriety:** A serious awareness of a spiritual enemy dedicated to the believer's destruction.

The Mechanics of Sanctification

Dr. Harmon defines this process as "working out what God has already worked in." It is not a matter of God finishing His part and leaving the rest to the individual.

- **God's Role:** He provides both the **desire** (the will) and the **power** (the work) to obey for His good pleasure. This fulfills the New Covenant promise in Ezekiel 36:26-27, where God replaces the "heart of stone" and causes His people to walk in His statutes.
- **Human Responsibility:** Believers are called to use the "means of grace"—including Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and spiritual disciplines—to put themselves in a position to experience God's transformative power.

II. The Caution: Avoiding Israel's Mistakes (Verses 14–18)

Paul uses the history of Israel as a cautionary backdrop, urging the Philippians to avoid the specific sins that led to Israel's failure in the wilderness.

Grumbling and Disputing

Paul identifies "grumbling" and "questioning" (disputing) as the primary obstacles to a blameless life.

- **Grumbling:** A low-toned murmuring or "behind-the-scenes talk." This was the summary sin of Israel in the wilderness (Exodus, John 6, 1 Corinthians 10).

- **Questioning:** A contrarian disposition that seeks to challenge or debate rather than obey.

Contrast with a "Crooked Generation"

By avoiding these sins, believers fulfill a role that unfaithful Israel failed to achieve. Paul draws on several Old Testament allusions to illustrate this:

Reference	Old Testament Context	Application to Philippians
Deuteronomy 32:5	Moses describes Israel as a "crooked and twisted generation" who are no longer God's children because they are blemished.	Believers can be "children of God without blemish" in the midst of a crooked generation.
Daniel 12:3	Describes the resurrected wise who "shine like the brightness of the sky" and "the stars forever."	Believers, having been raised to spiritual life, are to "shine as lights" in a dark world.
Isaiah 49:6	The Servant of the Lord is designated as a "light to the nations."	Believers reflect God's glorious presence to the world.

Holding Fast vs. Holding Forth

There is a linguistic debate regarding verse 16:

- **Holding Fast:** Clinging firmly to the "word of life" (Scripture).
- **Holding Forth:** Evangelistically communicating the word to others.
- **Conclusion:** Both are functionally true in the life of a believer, though "holding fast" is favored by most modern translations.

III. Sacrificial Service and the Day of Christ

Paul situates his current labors and the Philippians' growth within the context of the "Day of Christ"—the final day of history involving salvation for believers and judgment for enemies.

The Drink Offering Imagery

Paul uses sacrificial metaphors to describe his potential martyrdom:

- **The Main Offering:** The "sacrificial offering" of the Philippians' faith and service.
- **The Drink Offering:** Paul's own life/death poured out as a complement to their sacrifice.
- **The Result:** Rather than mourning, Paul views this potential sacrifice as a reason for gladness and mutual rejoicing.

Laboring in Vain

Paul expresses a desire to be "proud" on the Day of Christ that he did not "run in vain or labor in vain." This echoes Isaiah 49:4, where the Servant of the Lord expresses concern over the efficacy of his labor. Paul's joy is tied to the Philippians' perseverance and growth.

IV. Practical Application and Conclusions

The document concludes with four primary takeaways for the transformation of the believer:

1. **Acknowledge God's Delight:** Recognize that God is not a reluctant helper; He "delights" and "enjoys" working in His people to make them more like Christ.
2. **Reject the Lie of Stagnation:** Counter the "lie of Satan" that change is impossible. While some sinful patterns are deeply embedded and require lifelong effort, God provides the power to grow.
3. **Cultivate Hope:** Maintain a joyful expectation of transformation, culminating in the complete change that occurs when Christ returns.
4. **Targeted Prayer and Community:** Identify specific areas of struggle and pray for the desire to obey, while seeking the encouragement and assistance of other believers.

Final Big Idea: God's people must work out what He has worked into them. Grumbling obscures identity, while sacrificial service produces lasting joy.

Study Guide:

Study Guide: Philippians 2:12-18 — Working Out Your Own Salvation

This study guide provides a comprehensive review of Dr. Matthew S. Harmon's analysis of Philippians 2:12-18. The passage focuses on the practical application of the mindset of Christ, the necessity of divine empowerment in sanctification, and the importance of avoiding the historical failures of Israel.

Review Quiz

1. **What is the significance of the word "therefore" at the beginning of Philippians 2:12?** The "therefore" connects the commands in verses 12-18 to the "Christ Hymn" in verses 5-11, establishing that the proper response to Christ's humble obedience and exaltation is to make his lordship evident in everyday life. It indicates that the motivation for Christian living is rooted in who Christ is and what he has already accomplished.

2. **How does Paul distinguish between "vertical" and "horizontal" obedience?** Horizontal obedience refers to being more compliant when a human authority figure, like Paul, is physically present. Vertical obedience, which Paul emphasizes, focuses on the believer's responsibility directly before God, recognizing that one must remain faithful whether human mentors are present or absent.
3. **What three factors characterize the "fear and trembling" mentioned in verse 12?** First, it involves recognizing the holy awesomeness of God, which can produce a physical response of awe and wonder. Second, it acknowledges that believers must eventually stand before a righteous God to give an account of their lives. Third, it reflects a sobriety regarding the reality of an enemy dedicated to the believer's destruction.
4. **What does Dr. Harmon mean by "working out what God has worked in"?** This concept suggests that salvation is not a matter of human effort earning God's favor, but rather the tangible evidence of being delivered from the penalty of sin. Working out salvation means that the reality of God's internal work should produce fruit and a visible way of life where the power of sin is diminished.
5. **What are the "means of grace" believers are responsible for utilizing?** The means of grace are gifts God provides to increase a believer's ability to experience His grace, including Scripture, prayer, and fellowship within the body of Christ. They also include spiritual disciplines and the encouragement or support of fellow believers.
6. **In what two ways does God work within a believer according to verse 13?** God provides both the "will" and the "work," meaning he gives the believer the internal desire to obey and the actual power to carry out that obedience. This fulfills the New Covenant promise found in Ezekiel 36, where God replaces a heart of stone with a heart of flesh and puts His Spirit within His people.
7. **What are the two common errors regarding the pursuit of godliness described in the text?** The first error is "let it go and let God," which falsely assumes God will miraculously produce holiness without any human effort. The second error is "trying harder," which relies on human-made rules and structures rather than relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to transform the heart.
8. **What historical context is implied by the term "grumbling" in verse 14?** In a biblical context, "grumbling" serves as a summary term for Israel's persistent failures and complaints during their time in the wilderness. By using this term, Paul warns the Philippians to avoid the same patterns of rebellion and lack of trust that characterized unfaithful Israel.
9. **How does Paul use Deuteronomy 32:5 to describe the believer's role in a "crooked and twisted generation"?** Paul alludes to the Song of Moses to show that while unfaithful Israel became a "blemished" and "twisted" generation, the Philippians can be what Israel was

not. Through Christ, believers can be "children of God without blemish," standing in stark contrast to the fallen world around them.

10. **What is the meaning of the "drink offering" imagery in verse 17?** A drink offering was traditionally poured out over a main sacrifice as a complement; here, Paul views the Philippians' faith and service as the primary sacrifice. He suggests that even if his own life is "poured out" (referring to his potential death), it is merely a joyful addition to the significant offering of their faith.

Answer Key

1. It connects the passage to the Christ Hymn, showing that Christ's example is the motivation for the believer's response.
2. Vertical obedience is toward God; horizontal obedience is toward human authority (like Paul) only when they are present.
3. Awe of God's holiness, accountability before God, and awareness of a spiritual enemy.
4. It is the outward expression and fruit of the salvation God has already placed within the believer.
5. Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and spiritual disciplines.
6. He gives the desire (the will) and the power (the work) to obey.
7. Passive reliance on a "zap" from God vs. relying solely on human effort and rigid rule-making.
8. It evokes Israel's wilderness wanderings and their tendency to murmur against God's provision.
9. He uses it as a contrast; where Israel failed and became blemished, believers are called to be blameless children of God.
10. It represents Paul's life/death being a complementary sacrifice to the Philippians' primary sacrifice of faith.

Essay Questions

1. Analyze the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility as presented in the command to "work out your own salvation for it is God who works in you."

2. Explore the significance of the "Day of Christ" in Paul's theology. How does the prospect of this future event influence the present-day behavior and "pride" of the apostle?
3. Discuss how Paul utilizes Old Testament allusions—specifically from the Pentateuch and the Prophets—to redefine the identity of the New Testament church in relation to Israel.
4. Dr. Harmon discusses the "lie of Satan" that people cannot change. Based on the text, how does the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the "means of grace" provide a biblical framework for genuine transformation?
5. Examine the theme of "joy in sacrifice" found in verses 17-18. How does Paul's perspective on his potential martyrdom challenge modern conceptions of suffering and service?

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Blameless and Innocent	Sacrificial language used to describe a reputation of purity and being set apart from the stain of sin.
Day of Christ	The final day of human history when God brings salvation to His people and judgment upon His enemies.
Drink Offering	A liquid offering poured out over a main sacrifice; used by Paul as a metaphor for his life being poured out for the Philippians' faith.
Fear and Trembling	A physical and spiritual response of awe, wonder, and reverence triggered by an encounter with the holiness and power of God.
Grumbling	Low-toned murmuring or behind-the-scenes talk; a summary term for Israel's failures and complaints in the wilderness.
Means of Grace	Practices such as prayer, Scripture study, and fellowship that put a believer in a position to experience God's transformative grace.
New Covenant	The promise (found in Ezekiel 36) that God would give His people a new heart and put His Spirit within them to cause them to obey.
Questioning	A contrarian or argumentative disposition that constantly seeks to challenge authority or established truth.
Sanctification	The progressive experience of becoming more holy and reflecting the character of Christ in everyday life.

Vertical Obedience Faithful living motivated by one's direct responsibility and relationship to God, rather than the presence of human authorities.
