

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of biblical theology today by continuing to consider the nature of true, saving faith. Dr. Spencer, last time you spoke about living in union with Christ, and made the point that the most important thing we need to know is that Jesus Christ is the supreme Lord of all. You ended by saying that a Christian's ability to obey God is the result of being born again and of God's grace working in us. I'd like to explore that statement today.

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. The first point is that we must be born again. Jesus Christ himself said, in John 3:3, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."¹ This is speaking of a radical change in our inmost being.

Marc Roby: But, many would say that this change is the result of our having decided to follow Jesus. How would you respond to that?

Dr. Spencer: That idea has the cause and effect backwards. It's true that a Christian has decided to follow Jesus. But, remember what we said last time about our nature. No one can choose to do something that is completely contrary to his nature. So, no one will choose to follow Jesus Christ unless his nature has been changed first. And that is what being born again is all about.

God must do a miraculous work in us first, and only *after* God has done that work will we respond in repentance and faith. We make a free-will decision to follow Jesus, but we are only *able* to make such a decision *after* God has given us a new nature. And, further, if God has given us that new nature, we certainly will respond in repentance and faith.

Marc Roby: I want to make sure this point is clear to our listeners, because much of the modern church world has this important point backwards. Many would say that when we repent and believe we are born again. But, that is not the order presented in the Bible, is it?

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't the biblical order at all. And it doesn't make sense. Just like you can't do anything to cause yourself to be born physically, so also you can't do anything to bring about your rebirth. That is the point of the metaphor. We read in Romans 8:5-8 that, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires ... The mind of sinful man is death, ... the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God." And, in speaking about the "sinful mind" here, Paul is talking about unbelievers; people who have not been born again. The sinful nature we are born with affects the mind and prevents an unbeliever from willfully submitting to God's law, or from doing anything to please God. The unbeliever is hostile to God. So how can he choose to follow God?

Marc Roby: That's a good question.

Dr. Spencer: The great 20th-century theologian John Murray gave a lengthier version of the question that I think it would be well worth our time to read. He wrote, "Enmity against God

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must express itself in opposition to every manifestation of his holy will. How then can we expect that man will answer with delight the call to enter into God's kingdom of glory and virtue? How can a man dead in trespasses and sins, and at enmity with God, answer a call to the fellowship of the Father and the Son? How can a mind darkened and depraved have any understanding or appreciation of the treasures of divine grace? How can his will incline to the overtures of God's grace in the gospel?"²

Marc Roby: I'm sure that quote will rile up some of our listeners!

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure it will too. But it is completely biblical. Paul wrote, in Ephesians 2:1-2, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." So, calling us dead in trespasses and sins is a direct quote from the Bible. Murray next said that the natural man is "at enmity with God", which is also straight from the Bible, we just quoted Romans 8:7 a minute ago and it says that "the sinful mind is hostile to God", in the King James version the word enmity is used instead of hostile. Murray next says that the natural man has a mind that is "darkened and depraved". And in Romans 1:21 & 28 Paul wrote that unregenerate people have hearts that are darkened and minds that are depraved. So, if someone wants to take exception to what Dr. Murray wrote, he needs to take it up with God, not Dr. Murray.

Marc Roby: I don't think anyone will get very far taking the issue up with God. And, perhaps it would be good to point out now that the fact that man is hostile to God and unable to do anything that pleases God is part of the doctrine called Total Depravity.

Dr. Spencer: That's right, although the name total depravity can be misleading, so some have suggested giving the doctrine a different name, something like Radical Corruption. The doctrine does *not* mean that we are as bad as we can possibly be. There is no doubt, for example, that many unbelievers do many things that are, in themselves, good things. We are not all serial rapists or murderers or anything of the sort. What the doctrine *does* mean is that there is no part of our being that is unaffected by sin. And that is why we cannot, in our natural estate, respond to God's offer of salvation in the gospel. We mentioned Ephesians 2:1 before, where Paul wrote that we "were dead in [our] transgressions and sins". And dead people don't reach out and lay ahold of a lifesaver that is thrown to them. Dead people do nothing.

Marc Roby: The point you are making, that natural man cannot choose to follow Christ, also fits perfectly with what Paul wrote in Romans 3:11, where he said that there is "no one who seeks God."

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Unless God works first, no one will turn to Jesus in saving faith. Jesus Christ himself said, in John 6:44, that "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him". And the Greek verb used for draw in that verse is ἐλκύω (helkuo), which means to drag, it is not speaking about a mere wooing or even coercion. It is the same word used in Acts 16:9 where we read that Paul and Silas were dragged into the marketplace, and in Acts 21:30

² John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 169

where we read about Paul being dragged from the temple, and again in John 21:11 where we read that Peter dragged a fishing net ashore. So, this is not describing God gently wooing people.

Marc Roby: At this point I'm pretty sure that some, if not many, of our listeners are objecting strenuously!

Dr. Spencer: I'm again sure that's true. And I clearly remember this being one of the points that I found most disturbing before God mercifully saved me. I can remember objecting that the gospel was not a legitimate offer of salvation if I didn't have the power to accept it.

Marc Roby: That is a very common argument.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is. It's a common argument because the unregenerate mind does not think biblically. The bottom line is that before I was born again, I was responsible before God. He created me, and yet I was a rebellious sinner who rejected him and, therefore, deserved his wrath. And the reason I wouldn't accept his offer of salvation was not because there was any fault in the offer or the One making the offer, it was because there was a fault in *me*. I could not humble myself and acknowledge God to be just and true. I could not seek God until he started to draw me unto himself. My sinful nature made me incapable of accepting his offer.

Marc Roby: I'm sure that at this point many people will want to ask the question, "Why would God choose to draw you, but not some other person?"

Dr. Spencer: I would say that is an outstanding question. And I am perpetually astounded that God would choose to draw me! But, the bottom line is that we aren't given the answer to that question in the Bible. What we are told, is that God did *not* choose me because of anything I have ever done or will do. In Romans 9:16 the apostle Paul speaks about God's electing some and not others and writes that it "does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." In other words, the reason for his choice was not based on anything worthy in the person chosen, it was based on his own good pleasure. This is called the doctrine of election.

Marc Roby: And Chapter 9 of Romans, which you just quoted, has a clear presentation of the biblical doctrine of election.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it does. Paul uses the twin sons of the patriarch Isaac, Jacob and Esau, as an example. He writes, in verses 10-13, that "Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.'"

Marc Roby: That is a very difficult doctrine for most of us to accept.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. But we can't determine what is true based on what we like or don't like. There are many things in this life I don't like. I don't like getting sick, I don't like getting old, I don't like it when I can't do something as well as I want to and so on. But I've never noticed any real correlation between what I would *like* to be true and what *is* true.

Marc Roby: Nor have I.

Dr. Spencer: So, as we noted in Sessions 4 and 7, a Christian's ultimate standard for truth is the Bible. If there is something taught in the Bible that I don't like, then it is not the Bible's problem, it is my problem. First of all, what is taught there is true. And secondly, since it is God's word and all that he does is perfect, I need to change. I need to try and understand why the truth that I don't like is displeasing to me and I need to take action to correct my thinking and my feelings.

Marc Roby: Alright, so how do you deal with this doctrine of election?

Dr. Spencer: As I noted before, we all begin with a sinful nature handed down to us from our parents. And, because of that sinful nature, we cannot submit to God's law, nor can we accept his free offer of salvation because we are, in the core of our being, hostile to him. Therefore, if God had only chosen to make salvation *possible* for everyone through Christ's death on the cross, but left it up to us to choose, no one would be saved. We would all reject the offer because of our sinful natures. Therefore, given God's desire to save a people for himself, it was necessary for him to change our natures so that we can accept his offer.

Marc Roby: And we are first told of this monergistic work of God in the Old Testament, aren't we?

Dr. Spencer: That's right, for example, we read about this in Ezekiel 36. But, before I read that passage, let me point out that the word you just used, monergistic, simply means that regeneration is a work of God alone. It is not a work in which we cooperate, it is a work in which we are entirely passive. But we must emphasize that as we saw in the quote from John 6:44, God does work to draw us to him, which is certainly something we'll be very aware of and participate in, and then, once he has regenerated us, we are also active in repenting and believing. So, saying we are passive in regeneration does not in any way imply that we are passive in coming to faith in Christ. We may go through a great deal as God draws us to himself and then we each must individually repent of our sins, trust in Christ, and walk in obedience. God does not do these things for us.

Marc Roby: That is an important point.

Dr. Spencer: But, now let me get to the passage in Ezekiel. In Chapter 36, verses 26 and 27, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." This is speaking of the regenerating work of God the Holy Spirit. It is a work that has been done in every true Christian. And note that three times in this short passage God says "I will"; this is *his* work in us. We must have our hearts of stone removed and be given new hearts of flesh, and we must be given God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to guide us and empower us to keep God's laws.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful passage. But let me summarize what we've covered so far. You've argued that in his natural state, man is not able to repent and believe in Jesus Christ because man hates God. Then you argued that God chose to save some people, for reasons known only to him, and that he then draws these people to himself and regenerates them, or we

could say causes them to be born again, so that they then repent and believe and are saved. Is that an accurate summary?

Dr. Spencer: It is an accurate summary. And the particular doctrine of election we have been discussing, which is the biblical doctrine, is called Unconditional Election. It is unconditional in the sense that God's choosing someone does not in any way depend on what that person has done or will do in the future. And this doctrine necessarily follows from a proper understanding of the pervasive and profound effects of sin in us, which we noted earlier is called the doctrine of total depravity. And it is because of total depravity that we must be born again in order to be saved. Our nature must be changed so that we are able to respond to God's offer of salvation. But, praise God, he causes all those whom he has chosen to be born again.

Marc Roby: But how should one of our listeners deal with this if he or she hasn't been born again. Are they just to sit around and wait for God to act?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely not! That is a common charge made against this doctrine, that it leaves people without hope. But that is the opposite of the truth. If God only made salvation possible, but it depended on us to respond, *then* we would be without any hope because, as we have argued before, no one would respond and be saved.

But given the possibility of new birth there is hope. So, my counsel to anyone who is not yet born again, or isn't sure, is to cry out for God's mercy. Jesus himself tells us in Matthew 7:7, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." So, don't let yourself be concerned about the fact that you can't cause yourself to be born again. If you are becoming conscious of your sin and your need for a Savior, it may very well be the sign that God is drawing you. So don't resist. God tells us through the prophet Jeremiah, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13) So, don't delay, don't waste time probing into the mystery of how to reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility, simply cry out "Have mercy on me a sinner!" Order a copy of the book we offer at the end of each podcast, read it, believe it, and then look for a good church to join.

Marc Roby: Alright. I'm sure we will come back to this critically important topic again, but for now let's move on. We started this session by looking at the statement you made last time, that a Christian's ability to obey God is the result of being born again and of God's grace working in him. We have discussed the first part, the need to be born again, but let's address the second part. What do you mean by saying that we need God's grace working in us to obey God?

Dr. Spencer: Being born again is a radical transformation, but it does not remove sin from us. We have a new nature, which desires to please God, and we have a new ability to obey, but we also still have our sinful nature, which wars against us, as we've said before. We also have powerful external enemies. Satan does not stand idly by and let God rip someone out from under his dominion. The minute we are born again we also enter into spiritual warfare. Satan will come and try to destroy our faith.

Marc Roby: Which is, of course, impossible.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:6 that he was confident that God, having begun a good work in us, would “carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” But, even though the ultimate victory is certain, the war still needs to be fought, and we must fight it. Our enemies are powerful. We must oppose Satan and his demons, the world itself, which is opposed to God’s kingdom, and the indwelling sin that rises up as a traitor within us.

Marc Roby: And that is why you are saying we need God’s grace. So, perhaps it would be good to define what is meant by grace.

Dr. Spencer: People often define it as the unmerited favor of God, which is true. You could go further and say that it is God’s favor granted to those who deserve his condemnation. But, even that doesn’t fully grasp the New Testament usage of the term. To understand the full meaning of the term you need to see how it is used throughout the New Testament. I like how Louis Berkhof defines it in his systematic theology. He says that the most common meaning is that “it signifies the unmerited operation of God in the heart of man, effected through the agency of the Holy Spirit. ... it is in reality the active communication of divine blessings by the inworking of the Holy Spirit.”³ So, perhaps we could say that the grace of God is the source of a Christian’s power to overcome sin, Satan and the world, and to live a life that is pleasing to God.

Marc Roby: And I certainly know that I need help to live that life.

Dr. Spencer: We all need help to live that life. But God gives us the help that we need. In 1 Corinthians 15 the apostle Paul calls himself the least of all the apostles because he had persecuted the church prior to his conversion. He then compares himself with the other apostles and writes, in verse 10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” And, in his second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul is exhorting them to fulfill their promise to give generously to the church in Jerusalem and he writes, in 2 Corinthians 9:8, that “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise. But how does one go about obtaining this grace?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the first thing of course is that we must be born again as we have been discussing. Then, secondly, we need to make use of what are called the means of grace. The 88th question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism deals with this, although it doesn’t use the word grace. The answer reads, “The outward and ordinary means whereby Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption [or we could say, the means of grace] are, his ordinances, especially the Word, sacraments, and prayer; all which are made effectual to the elect for salvation.” There isn’t any magic incantation or anything like that, we are to read God’s Word, seek him in prayer, and join a proper church that preaches the Word faithfully, and which faithfully administers the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Not stated in the answer, but certainly included in

³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996 (combined edition of *Systematic Theology* and *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*), pg. 427

the scope of belonging to a good church, is the idea of Christian fellowship. In addition to needing God's help, we need each other in order to faithfully live out the Christian life.

Marc Roby: I find John Calvin's statement about this encouraging, he wrote the following; "What God demands from us by his word he likewise bestows by his Spirit, so that we are strengthened in the grace which he has given to us."⁴

Dr. Spencer: That is a great statement of God's promise to us in his Word.

Marc Roby: Is there anything else you would like to add before we finish for today?

Dr. Spencer: Yes there is. An important part of the Christian life involves examining ourselves to see if we are in the faith and to see how we need to change to progress in that faith. Paul commands us in Philippians 2:12-13 to "continue to work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." Notice in this verse we see both our activity, we are the ones who are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and we also see God's activity, we can work out *because* he is working in us. In our next podcast I want to explore this aspect of the Christian life.

Marc Roby: Alright, that certainly gives us something to look forward to.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. XXI, Baker Books, 2009, pg. 208