

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles that we use to properly interpret the Bible. Dr. Spencer, at the end of our last session we started to discuss how to properly understand prophecy. And you noted that the prophets were, first and foremost, speaking to their contemporaries, even when they made pronouncements about the future, and that we need to keep that in mind and also to understand the historical context in order to properly understand them. Can you give us an example?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. Let's take a look at the book of Ezekiel. In Chapter 11, Verse 16, we read that God told the prophet to tell the people "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone."¹ Now, this is a very important verse, but how are we to understand the real importance if we don't know to whom Ezekiel is speaking and what their circumstances were? Or if we don't understand the importance of the sanctuary to them?

Marc Roby: That would seem to be impossible.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would. We need to know that Ezekiel is prophesying to the exiles in Babylon. We need to know that the united kingdom of Israel, which existed under King David and his son Solomon was, after Solomon's death, split into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. And we need to know that because of its severe wickedness in God's sight, the northern kingdom was destroyed and the people carried into captivity by the Assyrians, culminating in the destruction of the capital city of Samaria around 721 BC. The southern kingdom was also wicked and was defeated by the Babylonians, culminating in the destruction of their capital city of Jerusalem in 586 BC. We also need to know that the Jews living in Jerusalem had not believed this would happen because the temple of God was there and they thought he would never allow it to be captured and destroyed.

Marc Roby: And they knew that there had already been one miraculous deliverance when God drove off the Assyrian army, who was besieging Jerusalem in 701 BC. So, they did have some reason for confidence.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But unfortunately, they were not putting their personal trust in God himself, they were simply trusting that God would protect Jerusalem because his temple was there. They were missing the most important point; the temple of God was merely a symbol of his presence among his people. It was meant to remind them of God's presence so that they would live holy lives. They thought they could go on living their lives as they saw fit and God would bless them no matter what because they were his chosen people. But God doesn't work

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that way. He had told them, way back in Leviticus 19:2 to “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.”

Marc Roby: And God had also recently warned them about that false confidence in the temple. Sometime in the last couple of decades before the fall of Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah had warned them, as we read Jeremiah 7:3-4 where he proclaimed, “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’”

Dr. Spencer: It’s hard to imagine how God could have made the warning any clearer than that. The temple of the Lord is just a building. If God himself is not pleased to dwell there, it cannot help you. So, getting back to Ezekiel, when he tells them that God said, “Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone”, he was pointing out that the true sanctuary, in other words the true place of peace and security, is not a building. In fact, it is not any physical location, it is being in a loving relationship with God himself.

In the early verses of this chapter, Ezekiel Chapter 11, God had told the captives that the people left in Jerusalem were thinking that *they* were better than the captives and that things would soon get much better.

Marc Roby: It seems to be a common, sinful human tendency to look at the troubles of other people and smugly think that we don’t have those troubles because we are somehow better than they are.

Dr. Spencer: It is very common. But, in this case, God goes on to encourage the people in captivity in Babylon. In Ezekiel 11:17 the prophet tells them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.

Marc Roby: That must have been an incredible encouragement to these people.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it must have been. And the prophet went on, in Verse 18, to tell the people that “They will return to it [meaning Jerusalem] and remove all its vile images and detestable idols.” Then in Verses 19-20 he gives them the greatest promise of all. God says “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

Marc Roby: And that final statement, that “They will be my people, and I will be their God” is the heart of God’s covenant with his people.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. What could possibly be better? Put yourself in the position of these people, captive in a foreign land many miles from your homeland and imagine what a great message of hope this would be.

And, to get back to the topic of properly interpreting this passage, we could not possibly grasp the full significance of these statements if we didn't understand the historical context.

Marc Roby: And yet, these statements are of even greater significance to us today.

Dr. Spencer: They most definitely are. That will not be true of all passages in the Old Testament of course. Some portions of Scripture serve to give us the context necessary to understand other passages that have greater theological significance. But this passage in Ezekiel is definitely one that has greater meaning for us, so we don't want to stop at just understanding what the passage meant to the people at the time.

We who live after the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and who have the New Testament available to us, live in a time of much greater revelation. We know a great deal more about God's plan of salvation and so we can have an even fuller understanding of these historical events and the pronouncements God made. We know that when God promises to "give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them" and to "remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh" he is speaking, ultimately, about regeneration or new birth.

Marc Roby: What is the biblical warrant for making such a statement?

Dr. Spencer: When we look in Jeremiah 31:31 and 33, we see that he made a very similar statement. In Verse 31 he wrote that "'The time is coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.' And then, in Verse 33 he wrote that "'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the LORD. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'" This last verse is similar Ezekiel 11:20, which we just looked at. Remember it said, "Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God." The writer of the book of Hebrews uses the verses from Jeremiah 31, in Hebrews 8, to talk about the new covenant of which Jesus Christ is the high priest forever.

In addition, later in Ezekiel the prophet repeats the same idea presented in Chapter 11, but adds to it the idea of cleansing from sin. In Ezekiel 36:24-28 he tells us the God said "I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. 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. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God."

Marc Roby: I see where you are going with this line of thought. This idea of being cleansed by water and given a new heart is also part of what Jesus Christ said to Nicodemus in John 3. In Verse 5 of that chapter, we read that Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." And then in Verse 7 he added, "You must be born again."

Dr. Spencer: That is a key passage in tying this all together. The passages in Ezekiel 11 and 36 and Jeremiah 31, combined with Hebrews 8 and John 3 all come together to give us a much more complete picture of what it means to be saved. In the original context of Ezekiel 11, as we have been discussing, the people who heard him were, no doubt, thinking solely of being returned to Jerusalem and living under God's blessing. In other words, of being saved from their captivity in Babylon.

But, from our perspective, having received much greater revelation, we can see that there was a deeper meaning to these same words. We can be saved from our captivity, or we could say slavery, to sin. As the great 20th-century theologian John Murray wrote, "because of the unity of revelation and the unity of what we call both Testaments, what is patent in the New is latent in the Old."²

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful way of putting it. And when you mentioned being saved from slavery to sin that immediately calls to mind Romans, Chapter 6, where Paul wrote, in Verses 20-22, that "When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life."

Dr. Spencer: That passage adds even more depth to the discussion, although it also introduces another idea that needs explanation for people in our generation to understand it properly, and that is this notion of being a slave. At the time the Bible was written, slavery did not always have all of the negative connotations it does now. We don't have time now to get into that topic at the moment, but I mention it as a further example of how we need context to properly understand something written in a culture that is so foreign to our own.

Marc Roby: And this whole discussion highlights the fact that we must let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: It is a great illustration of that fact. It is also an illustration of the argument we have made a number of times that we must study *all* of Scripture. In drawing all of these connections, we have cited passages from Leviticus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hebrews and Romans, and we could easily have cited others as well.

Remember that James Boice broke the principle that Scripture should interpret Scripture down into two principles: unity and noncontradiction.³ That is why Murray said, in the quote I gave a few minutes ago, that there is unity of revelation and that unity includes both the Old and New Testaments. You cannot understand either fully without the other.

Marc Roby: Very well, I think we've illustrated how important it is to know something of the historical context in order to understand the prophets, and that we should focus on what the

² John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pp 172-173

³ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 91

prophets were saying to the people at the time, while understanding that some of what they say may have even greater meaning for us in the light of our greater revelation. What else do we want to say about interpreting prophecy?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to make a few brief comments about a related genre, the apocalyptic sections in the Bible.

Marc Roby: I think it would be useful to point out that that word “apocalyptic” comes from the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις, which means revelation and is the first word in the original Greek version of the book we call Revelation. It is a particular type of prophetic writing,

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a type of prophetic writing that uses a lot of symbolic imagery to tell us something about future events. The books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation all contain apocalyptic material.

There have, over the years, been a lot of silly ideas put forward about how to interpret modern events in the light of these prophecies. Jim Bakker said last year that he thinks Revelation 9:7 is speaking about Apache helicopters⁴, and many people over the years have said that different passages in Daniel and Revelation refer to modern Russia or China. I’m not going to take time to go through any of these in detail, I just want to point out that they miss the main point being made by the prophecies in the Bible.

Marc Roby: They are also often linked with some prediction about the time of Christ’s return, which we are specifically told we cannot know in Matthew 24:36.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. We must remember that the prophecies were not written specifically to us here in the 21st century. They were written to the people thousands of years ago. They do, of course, have importance for us too, but that importance is not tied up in our being able to determine when Christ will return, or to satisfy our curiosity about future events. In his book *Interpreting the Bible*, Mickelsen points out that even “the future aspect of the prophet’s message was meant to instruct, to reprove, to correct, and to encourage by exhortation. ... the message of the prophet was meant to induce holy living and a spontaneous loving obedience to God.”⁵

Marc Roby: Given that we are not to use this material to try and determine when Christ will return again, how does some of the admittedly difficult imagery we find in the books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation instruct us?

Dr. Spencer: I think we can learn many things from these books. For example, in a sermon our own pastor, Pastor Mathew, gave on Daniel 5 he noted that the theme of the book of Daniel “is that God Most High reigns. In other words, God is sovereign over all and does what he pleases, not what men or nations or political leaders please.”⁶ Similarly, in his commentary on the book of Revelation, Joel Beeke wrote that “God controls Satan so that he cannot ultimately harm believers, but is an instrument for the destruction of the wicked – that is the theme of Revelation

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP6YJgiMN8I>

⁵ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pg. 288

⁶ P.G. Mathew, *The End is Coming*, available at <http://www.gracevalley.org/sermon/the-end-is-coming/>

[Chapter] 9.”⁷ And, in his commentary on the book of Revelation, Derek Thomas wrote that “In the end, the goal is worship: of God, of Christ, by the church here on earth as well as in heaven.”⁸

Marc Roby: Those are all very general conclusions.

Dr. Spencer: And deliberately so! I have no intention of treading on the very thin ice of getting into the details of parts of these books. But, my point is again that we need to stay focused on what God would have us, and believers in all ages, learn from these books.

Marc Roby: I agree it is wise to stick to the major points in some cases, and we are out of time for this week anyway. I would again like to encourage our listeners to email their questions and comments in to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

⁷ J. Beeke, *Revelation*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2016, pg. 272

⁸ Derek Thomas, *Let's Study Revelation*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003, pg. xiv