

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the doctrine of God's eternity. Dr. Spencer, we ended last time by noting that God does not experience time in the same way we do, although he certainly understands how we perceive time. How do you want to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to express this in a different way to help us grasp it a bit better. God's experience of time is not just greater than ours in some quantitative sense, it is qualitatively different than ours.

Marc Roby: What do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: A quantitative difference is one that is not fundamentally different in kind or essence, but is different only in amount, or quantity. So, for example, there is a quantitative difference between how fast I can run and how fast Usain Bolt can run; for those who don't know he is the current world record holder for the 100 m dash. The difference there is admittedly quite large, but it is still just a quantitative difference. We are both human beings and we are both men, he's just a whole lot faster than I am. But, if you compare me with a Cheetah, now there is both a quantitative and a qualitative difference. The Cheetah is not only much faster than I am, but it is also qualitatively different from me. It is a four-legged animal, not a human being.

Marc Roby: Alright, how do you relate that to what you were saying about God's experience of time?

Dr. Spencer: Let me use an example. I experience time differently than my grandchildren do, that is a quantitative difference. If you tell me that I have to wait a few weeks for something, that doesn't seem very long to me. But if you tell my grandchildren that they have to wait a few weeks, that seems like a very long time to them. We need to guard against thinking that the difference in how we experience time and how God experiences time is just quantitative.

That might be the impression you get when you read in Psalm 90 Verse 4 that "a thousand years in [God's] sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in the night."¹ But we have to remember that this expression is not meant to be taken literally, it is figurative language that is pointing to some reality. And when we look at everything else the Bible says we realize that the reality is not just that God is much older than us and doesn't think of a thousand years as being all that long, the difference is much deeper than that. We gave some of the other Scriptures last time and I don't want to repeat them, but God experiences time in a way that is fundamentally different than we do, which means that it is impossible for us to truly grasp it.

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Marc Roby: And so the best we can do is something like the definition we quoted from Wayne Grudem last time, which says in part that “God has no beginning, end, or succession of moments in his own being, and he sees all time equally vividly”².

Dr. Spencer: That is about the best we can do. But it is very important for us to meditate on that a bit, as we should with all of God’s attributes. It helps us to be humble and to gain a greater awareness of the vast gulf that separates us, as creatures, from God, who is our Creator. But now I want to turn our attention to the last line of the definition we quoted from Grudem. He added “yet God sees events in time and acts in time.”

Marc Roby: What do you want to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: I want us to know for certain that God understands completely how we experience time. And even though his experience of time is fundamentally different, that does not prevent him from interacting with us in time. We see this clearly in many ways. For example, the mere fact that God gave a command to Adam to not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden shows that God clearly understood that Adam had not yet done so and that God was giving him a command that limited what was lawful for him to do *in his future*, even though in God’s view the fall had already occurred.

Marc Roby: That does clearly show that God understands how we experience time, but it also highlights once again how difficult it is for us to grasp God’s knowledge of future events.

Dr. Spencer: It does highlight that difficulty. And there are professing Christians who do not believe that God can know the future. But, as we have noted a number of times, a Christian’s ultimate standard for truth must be the Bible, and the Bible clearly tells us that God knows the future. You quoted from Isaiah 46:9-10 last time, and the verses bear repeating. God speaks through Isaiah and says, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come.”

Marc Roby: Those verses certainly rule out believing that God doesn’t know the future.

Dr. Spencer: It definitely does rule out that view. And it isn’t just those verses. There are many places in the Bible that speak about future events. For example, when we discussed extra-biblical evidence that corroborates the Bible we mentioned the prophecies Isaiah made about Cyrus, the king of Persia. We find those in Isaiah 44 and 45. We discussed those at some length in Session 20, so I won’t repeat them here. In that same session we also looked at some Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. And we limited ourselves to Old Testament passages that are attested to in the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are known for certain to have been written before the time of Christ, so there is no chance that they have been modified.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 168

Marc Roby: That was a fascinating session. And it might be good to remind our listeners that all past sessions, with their full transcripts and references, are on the whatdoesthewordsay.org website.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good reminder. And we could add that they can request a free copy of the book *Good News for All People* if they go to the website.

But, getting back to the Bible telling us about future events, if you think about it for just one minute, the entire Christian faith makes no sense if God cannot tell us about future events! The whole point of the faith is that we are all sinners, deserving God's judgment, and he has told us, most explicitly in Hebrews 9:27 that "man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment". And the whole message of the Bible is that there are only two possible outcomes at that judgment: either we will stand on our own and be condemned to an eternity in hell, or we will have surrendered to Jesus Christ in this life, in which case he will own us as his possession and we will go to spend eternity in heaven.

Marc Roby: I like that idea!

Dr. Spencer: So do I. And we are told in 2 Peter 3:13 and in Revelation 21:1 that there will be a new heaven and a new earth; which implies that this earth will be destroyed as we are told in 2 Peter 3:10, where the apostle wrote that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

Marc Roby: Now that will be global warming on steroids!

Dr. Spencer: That's a fair description. But it is also a very serious matter. The entire Christian faith is predicated on the truthfulness of the biblical view of history. As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." The Christian faith is not focused on this life. It is focused on the life to come.

The biblical view of history is linear; time and space and this universe had a beginning, and this universe as we know it will have an end. And there is a purpose to that history. The purpose is for God to gather together and perfect all those whom he has chosen to be part of his eternal kingdom. Everyone else will go to hell. Starting with those who have never heard the gospel, because they still had sufficient evidence to know that God exists and yet they did not seek him, and including those who outright reject the gospel and, finally, also including those who falsely claim to be Christians.

Marc Roby: That is very serious indeed.

Dr. Spencer: And none of this makes any sense unless God knows the future with absolute certainty. Which, if you think about it for a minute, also means that he has control over the future. We will discuss that more in a later session, but it is a logical necessity; if there is anything outside of God's control, then he cannot know for certain what will happen.

Marc Roby: I think we have established that the Bible teaches us that God does know the future.

Dr. Spencer: There are many verses we could cite to support that fact, but it isn't necessary. If anyone seriously doubts it, they can go back and listen to some of our earlier podcasts and they can just read the Bible for themselves. It is filled with statements about the future.

Marc Roby: If we say that God knows the future perfectly, does that exhaust what he knows that we don't?

Dr. Spencer: Definitely not. God also knows about events that *would* happen if things were different. For example, in 1 Samuel 23:9-13 we read about David seeking God's counsel when he was being pursued by Saul. He was in a walled city at the time, called Keilah, which could be trap. And when he hears that Saul is coming for him we read, in Verse 12, that "David asked, 'Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?' And the LORD said, 'They will.'" As a result, David left the city, so the citizens never did surrender him.

Then, to give an example from the New Testament, in Matthew 11:22-23 we are told that Jesus said, "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day." Which clearly states that God knew what *would* have happened if circumstances had been different. This is, again, a logical necessity if God is able to tell us the future with absolute certainty.

Marc Roby: We've spent several minutes now proving that God knows the future and all possible events as well, but you were talking about the fact that God sees events in time and acts in time. Do you have more to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I do. In Galatians 4:4-5 we read, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons." This statement clearly shows that God understands and acts in our time frame. Otherwise, the statement "when the time had fully come" would make so sense.

Marc Roby: Good point.

Dr. Spencer: Another example is seen in Acts 17:30-31. We read there that "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead." And this passage speaks explicitly about God acting in the past, but *now* doing something different, and about his having "set a day" in the future when he will do something else. That should be more than sufficient to show that God understands and acts within our experience of time.

Marc Roby: I agree. Are we done with discussing God's eternity?

Dr. Spencer: We will be as soon as I mention that God's eternity is sometimes also called his infinity with respect to time.³

Marc Roby: Alright. Let me summarize what we have said. We have been speaking about the doctrine of God's eternity and have established that God does not experience time the way we do. For him the distant past and the distant future are known just as immediately as the present is. And yet, he understands how we experience time and he acts in time to bring about his eternal purposes. What attribute would you like to discuss next?

Dr. Spencer: I want to talk about God's omnipresence.

Marc Roby: Which means that he is present everywhere.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Just as there is no time which is somehow more vivid in God's sight, so there is no particular place that is more immediately experienced by him. And just as God's eternity is sometimes called his infinity with respect to time, so his omnipresence can be called his infinity with respect to space. Charles Hodge wrote that "The infinitude of God relatively to space, is his immensity or omnipresence; relatively to duration, it is his eternity."⁴ That language is a bit outdated, but I think the point is clear.

Marc Roby: That is an interesting connection, and I think it highlights that we have much the same type of difficulty in understanding the doctrine of God's omnipresence as we did understanding his eternity.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, it is very much the same difficulty. Especially when we specify that we don't mean that God is just so big that our universe cannot contain him. If that were what we meant, then we could only say that a tiny part of God's being is present here on earth. But that is not at all what the Bible teaches. In order to be clear in our discussion, let's again use the definition that Wayne Grudem gives for this attribute. He defines God's omnipresence by saying that "God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with his whole being, yet God acts differently in different places."

Marc Roby: That definition is again pretty difficult to digest.

Dr. Spencer: It is difficult, but as we have noted before, we should expect God to be difficult to understand and, in fact, impossible to comprehend fully. We are only finite creatures and simply don't have the mental horsepower necessary.

Marc Roby: I can certainly identify with that statement!

Dr. Spencer: You're in good company. Not only do you and I not have sufficient brain power, but all of the human beings who have ever lived put together, including Einstein and other geniuses, would not have a fraction of the necessary power to fully comprehend God.

³ Ibid, pg. 168

⁴Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. I, pg. 385

Marc Roby: That makes me feel a little better about it. But we are very nearly out of time for today, so what would you like to say about God's omnipresence to set the stage for our next session?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to read the first twelve verses of Psalm 139. They actually speak about God's eternity and his omniscience – which means that he knows all things – as well as his omnipresence. They are a great comfort to a true Christian, but should be terrifying to anyone who does not believe. The psalmist, who is King David, writes, “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.”

Marc Roby: That is a marvelous passage. And I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, we'd love to hear from you.