

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's omnipresence, which means that he is present everywhere. We ended last time by reading a few verses from Psalm 139, in which the psalmist poetically expresses God's omnipresence by declaring to God, "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."<sup>1</sup> So, Dr. Spencer, how do you want to proceed with this topic?

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin by reminding everyone that we have to guard against thinking of God in terms of spatial dimensions at all. When we speak of God's omnipresence, we aren't saying that God is so huge that he won't fit in this universe, what we are saying is that he cannot be described by spatial dimensions at all. God is a Spirit as we are told in John 4:24. And, as a Spirit, he is present everywhere in our universe in his totality all the time. We aren't told exactly what spirits are, and we probably couldn't understand it anyway, but they are not physical. They are not confined to the four dimensions of space and time that we experience, although they can certainly interact with us in space and time.

**Marc Roby:** God's omnipresence is a concept that blows the mind, and Psalm 139 probably describes it as well as it can be expressed.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. Sometimes poetry can express a complicated idea better than simple prose. But, we are still to exercise our minds and to do the best we can to understand the nature of God as he has chosen to reveal it to us. It may help us gain a better understanding of God's omnipresence to realize that it is related to his eternity and immutability, both of which we have already discussed.

**Marc Roby:** How so?

Dr. Spencer: We noted last time that God's eternity can be called his infinity with respect to time and his omnipresence can be called his infinity with respect to space. And we noted in Session 58 that God's immutability implies his eternity. One way to see that is to realize that we experience the passage of time precisely because we change. I have forgotten some things I used to know and I've learned some things I didn't used to know. I don't remember what happened in the past perfectly and I don't know what will happen tomorrow and so on. If none of those changes and limitations were true, then we would cease to experience time the way we do now.

The English puritan theologian Stephen Charnock explains the connection between God's eternity, his omnipresence and immutability well in his large volume called *The Existence and Attributes of God*. He writes, "As eternity is the perfection whereby he has neither beginning nor

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end, immutability is the perfection whereby he has neither increase nor diminution, so immensity or omnipresence is that whereby he has neither bounds nor limitation.” (English updated)<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: It is interesting that all three of these attributes are described negatively. Eternity is the lack of a beginning or end, immutability is the lack of change, and omnipresence is the lack of boundaries.**

Dr. Spencer: That is interesting. When we are discussing God’s incommunicable attributes, we often have to use negative terms. It is easier to say what he is not than it is to say what he is because God is unique. We usually describe things in terms of other things, and when you have a being that is unique in his essence, you lose that ability to some extent. As God himself says in Isaiah 40:25, “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?”.

If a person is unique simply because he is the largest, or oldest, or smartest, or strongest or whatever, we can still describe him easily in terms of other people. Differences like that are only quantitative as we discussed last time. But God is unique in his essence, the difference is qualitative, not quantitative. And, as a result, we often end up using negative statements to describe his incommunicable attributes. When it comes to his communicable attributes, we can use positive statements and make comparisons, although we have to resort to superlative statements. So, for example, we have knowledge and God has knowledge, so there is a point of comparison. But God’s knowledge is exhaustive and perfect, and ours is not. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century theologian Charles Hodge has an interesting discussion about this in dealing with how we classify the divine attributes.<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is useful in understanding the problem inherent in trying to describe God. I also noticed that Charnock referred to God’s “immensity or omnipresence”, which seems to indicate that he uses those two terms synonymously.**

Dr. Spencer: They are often used as near synonyms. The difference between immensity and omnipresence is one of perspective and I think it will help us to read what Charles Hodge said about this. He wrote that God’s “immensity is the infinitude of his being, viewed as belonging to his nature from eternity. ... His omnipresence is the infinitude of his being, viewed in relation to his creatures. He is equally present with all his creatures, at all times, and in all places.”<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is helpful. The idea that God is equally present with all his creatures at all times and places reminds me of what Moses said to the Israelites just before he died, which was also just before they were to cross over the Jordon to take possession of the Promised Land. He wanted to encourage them and in Deuteronomy 31:8 he said to the Israelites, “The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”**

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, Two Volumes in one, Baker Books, 1996, Vol. I, pg. 367

<sup>3</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. I, pg. 375

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 383

Dr. Spencer: That is a great encouragement for God's people. And that same idea, that God will never leave nor forsake his people, is stated twice by Moses in Deuteronomy 31 and is then repeated by God in speaking to Joshua to strengthen him in Joshua 1:5. It is also used as a request by King Solomon in his prayer of dedication for the Temple in Jerusalem in 1 Kings 8:57 and is then quoted in the New Testament in Hebrews 13:5. But we must also remember that God is not only present to bless his people, he is also present to punish his enemies, which is terrifying.

**Marc Roby: And yet, hell is often portrayed as being a place where the sinner is shut out from the presence of God.**

Dr. Spencer: It is often described that way. But what is meant is that those in hell are shut out from God's merciful and beneficent presence. He *is* present in hell, but he is present there to pour out his wrath on those who have rejected him. We are told in Hebrews 10:31 that "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." And the reason why it is terrible is stated in Hebrews 12:29, where we read that our "God is a consuming fire." Revelation is even more terrifying. In Revelation we read several times about a lake of burning sulfur. Now this is a figurative description of course, not a literal one, but sulfur burns at over 800 degrees Fahrenheit, so the imagery is certainly terrifying.

Hell is an unpopular topic, but the Bible is very clear in its teaching about hell because God wants to warn us about the eternal consequences of rejecting him.

**Marc Roby: Of course, most non-believers would deny that they have rejected God. They would claim that either he has never shown himself to them or that he doesn't exist, or something like that.**

Dr. Spencer: I'm quite sure that you're right about that. But the Bible tells us the truth in Romans 1. In Verses 18-21 Paul writes that "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

This truth is extremely unpopular, but it is simple. The Bible is telling us that everyone knows in his or her heart that God exists, but people suppress that truth and because of that God gives them over to futile thinking and foolishness, particularly with regard to the things of God.

**Marc Roby: And Psalm 14:1 tells us that "The fool says in his heart, "There is no God.""**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. To be a fool in the biblical sense does not mean that you aren't intelligent in worldly matters, it means that you have denied the existence of God; your Creator, Sustainer, Judge and the only self-existent, necessarily-existent, completely independent being in existence. You can be a fool biblically and win a Nobel prize in physics.

That is why Paul goes on in Romans 2:5-8 to write, “because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.”

**Marc Roby: A most terrifying thought. To experience the wrath and anger of God Almighty and to know that it will never end and there is no escape.**

Dr. Spencer: It is absolutely terrifying. But I think it is important for us to discuss here because while God is present everywhere, he is *not* present everywhere to bless everyone. Stephen Charnock wrote that “there are several manifestations of his presence; he has a presence of glory in heaven, whereby he comforts the saints; [and] a presence of wrath in hell, whereby he torments the damned”.<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, as you noted earlier, he is a consuming fire.**

Dr. Spencer: And he knows absolutely everything. So the people in hell will know that they are being justly punished. They will know that they did, in fact, reject God in this life. They chose to focus on earthly riches and pleasures rather than God. And, if they heard the gospel, they will have the added guilt of knowing that they rejected God’s offer of grace.

**Marc Roby: We are told about that in 1 John 5:10, which says that “Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.”**

Dr. Spencer: There is truth in the saying that the only people who go to hell are those who chose to go. But don’t misunderstand what that means. I’m not saying that anyone is given a simple choice between everlasting punishment and everlasting bliss with no other difference. If that were the case, I can’t imagine anyone choosing punishment.

But the choice is between standing on your own in the judgment, in other words, trusting in yourself, verses acknowledging that you are a wretched sinner deserving of wrath and acknowledging Jesus Christ as the only Savior and Lord, in which case you become a bond-slave to Christ. That is what it means for him to be Lord. He now has an absolute claim to your obedience in thought, word and action. So, although you cannot in any way earn your salvation, it is a free gift, it nonetheless costs you everything because receiving this gift makes you recognize that you are a dependent creature who is totally under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

**Marc Roby: We should point out that those who have not surrendered to Christ as bond slaves are not free, they are slaves of sin and Satan.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. The choice is *not* between autonomy and the lordship of Christ. Autonomy is an illusion. Those who think they are autonomous are being deceived. Paul tells us

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<sup>5</sup> Charnock, op. cit., pg. 370

in Romans 6:16, “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” When we are outside of Christ we can only sin, so we are slaves of sin. But, don’t think that Satan has to force people to sin. We all start off with a sinful nature, so that is our natural proclivity. All Satan has to do is provide the opportunities and make suggestions, we quite naturally take care of the rest ourselves. The paradoxical truth is that it is only when we surrender to become slaves of Jesus Christ that we experience true freedom.

**Marc Roby: And what a glorious freedom that is! But it seems that we have once again gotten off topic. We were discussing God’s omnipresence.**

Dr. Spencer: I’m not sure that we have been off topic. It is important to make the point that no one will escape God’s presence, his omnipresence is not always a pleasant thing. He will either be your Savior and Lord and, therefore, your greatest joy, or he will be your worst nightmare. But no one can avoid him. He created all things, he sustains all things and he will judge all things.

**Marc Roby: OK, so we have been on topic then. What Scriptures can you adduce to show that God is omnipresent?**

Dr. Spencer: The classic verse is Jeremiah 23:24, which asks a couple of rhetorical questions. We read, “Can anyone hide in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.” The obvious answers to these rhetorical questions are that no one can hide from God, there are no “secret places” he cannot see, and yes, God “fills” heaven and earth in the sense that he is present everywhere.

**Marc Roby: That makes me think of Ephesians 1:22-23, which ascribe this incommunicable attribute of omnipresence to Jesus Christ. Paul wrote that “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great statement, which also provides evidence for the deity of Christ. Another good passage is Acts 17:27-28 where we read that God “is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.” Which is again a poetic way of saying that God is everywhere. Also, in King Solomon’s prayer of dedication to the Temple in Jerusalem he asks and answers his own question about God; we read in 1 Kings 8:27, “will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

**Marc Roby: That is a great verse. We need to remember that God is not some stone or wood idol. The temple in the Old Testament was not a place for God to dwell in the normal sense of that word, it was just a building. But its purpose was to remind the people of God and his law and to provide a place for them to come and worship him.**

Dr. Spencer: Stephen Charnock makes an interesting comment on this verse, specifically about the statement that “The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain” God. He writes that as

God's "power is not limited by the things he has made, but can create innumerable worlds, so can his essence be in innumerable spaces; for as he has power enough to make more worlds, so he has essence enough to fill them, and therefore cannot be confined to what he has already created."<sup>6</sup>

Marc Roby: All very true, and impossible to grasp fully. And I think we are out of time for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pg. 376