

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attribute of goodness.

Dr. Spencer, at the end of our last session, you said that we need a proper biblical perspective to understand how a completely good and omnipotent God can allow evil into his creation. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to spend more time on the topic of evil and its relation to the goodness of God because it is an extremely important and difficult topic.

I noted last time that many people in history have argued that the existence of sin and suffering prove that God must either not be good, or not able to prevent evil, in other words, not be omnipotent. I also pointed out that that argument is wrong because it assumes the unbiblical, that is to say, incorrect, idea that the purpose of creation is, or should be, to maximize our pleasure in this life.

Marc Roby: Perhaps we should mention that a defense of God's goodness and omnipotence given the fact that evil exists, that's called a theodicy.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I think it's good for people to know that term. And that is exactly what I want to do today. I want to explain, or justify, how it is possible for evil to exist in a universe ruled by an all-powerful, or omnipotent, and all-good, or omnibenevolent, God.

Marc Roby: You noted last time that a proper biblical perspective requires us to recognize that God's purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory and that we also need to recognize that there is an eternal destiny for human beings. In other words, this life is not all there is.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's right, this life is definitely not all there is and we'll deal with that more in a minute. But first, let me say a little more about the first of those two points, God's purpose.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: We spoke in both Sessions 2 and 67 about God's purpose in creation, but it would be good to give just a couple of Scriptures at this time to support the claim that his purpose is the manifestation of his own glory.

Marc Roby: I agree, what Scriptures would you like to cite?

Dr. Spencer: Let's begin with the prophet Isaiah. God spoke through the prophet about his redeemed people, meaning the church, and in Isaiah 43:6-7 we read that God said, "I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."<sup>1</sup> There are many other verses as well that tell

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us God's purpose in creation and redemption is the manifestation of his glory. But to give just one more example, Psalm 19 famously begins, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." (Psalm 19:1)

**Marc Roby: I think it is also helpful to remember one other thing you said before, that there is no better purpose for creation than the manifestation of the glory of God. He chose the best possible purpose.**

**Now, returning to the second point, that this life is not all there is, it's also pretty easy to come up with Scriptures that support the idea that human beings have an eternal destiny.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the first one that pops into my mind is the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew.

**Marc Roby: Where Christ describes the final judgment.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And after separating the sheep from the goats and telling the goats that they must depart from him, he ends, in Verse 46, by saying, "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." And the same exact Greek word for eternal is used in both places in that verse, which makes it clear that it is exegetically impossible to believe in eternal heaven and deny the existence of eternal hell.

So, getting back to your statement that this life is not all there is, we can go further and say that that is, in fact, a gross understatement. When compared with eternity, this life is, quite literally, nothing. There really is only one important question to answer in life, and that is, "Where am I going when I die?" The Bible tells us that there are only two possible places. I will either go to eternal hell and suffer for my sins, or eternal heaven and live in bliss forever in the presence of the perfect God.

**Marc Roby: Of course, not everyone is going to agree that those are the only two destinies.**

Dr. Spencer: I'm well aware of that, but those are the only two destinies described in the Bible, which is the infallible Word of God, so I'm confident that that is the truth. And I would point out that even people who *say* they believe that we simply cease to exist when we die frequently speak and act in ways that make it clear they know it isn't true.

**Marc Roby: Yes, especially when someone close to them dies.**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely, that is the most common time. You will often hear them say something like, "Aunt Mary will be very pleased to see you graduate" or whatever. But, of course, if Aunt Mary is dead, and if people simply cease to exist, then Aunt Mary can't possibly know that someone is graduating, let alone be pleased by it.

**Marc Roby: I've certainly heard people say many things that would indicate they know there is some mode of existence beyond the grave.**

Dr. Spencer: And not only do they know that, but they also know there will be a judgment. That is one of the major reasons people fear death. They know they will be judged, and they aren't confident it will go well for them in that judgment.

Marc Roby: Although most people flatter themselves and think they aren't really all that bad. They might admit that they deserve a mild rebuke for some things they have said or done, but they don't believe they have done anything deserving of real wrath.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And there are two reasons most people think they will get a passing grade. First, they grade themselves on a curve, in other words, they compare themselves to other people. But God doesn't grade on a curve. Jesus commands us in Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Marc Roby: That is definitely not grading on a curve. What is the second reason people think they will get a passing grade?

Dr. Spencer: It's because they only consider external sins, not sins of the heart. So, since most people have never murdered, or raped or committed grand theft or anything like that, they assume that they are relatively good. And, of course, they may actually *be* good in a relative sense. But there are two problems with that view.

Marc Roby: What problems are those?

Dr. Spencer: First, as I mentioned, they are ignoring the heart. We are told in 1 Samuel 16:7 that "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." And in Hebrews 4:12 we read that "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

Marc Roby: That's a problem for us.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a serious problem. And Jesus illustrated just how serious that problem is when he told the people in Matthew 5:27-28, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Now many men can truthfully say that they have never committed the physical act of adultery, but how many can say that they have never once looked at a woman lustfully?

Marc Roby: I'd rather not answer that question.

Dr. Spencer: I think you just did. And, of course, adultery isn't the only sin for which this applies. We are also told that unholy anger is committing murder in the heart and so on. When you apply the true standard, even most law-abiding people do not do very well.

Marc Roby: Alright. You said that there are two problems with the view that we really aren't all that bad; what is the second one?

Dr. Spencer: The second problem is even more serious. It is that we misjudge sin itself. The worst sin of all isn't something I do to other people, it is my attitude toward God. If I don't

consciously give him thanks for life and material blessings, and if I don't live to please him, I am insulting the living God, my Creator. Even if I murder someone, the worst sin involved is *not* what I did to that person. The worst sin involved is that in murdering the person I rejected God's law and his authority to command me to not murder. And, even worse, if I live as though I am independent and he doesn't exist, that is a huge insult to God. Rejecting the sovereign Creator and Lord of all is a very serious offense, it is an offence that deserves God's wrath.

**Marc Roby: That makes perfectly good sense. In fact, the Bible tells us that anything not done in obedience to God and for his glory is sin.**

Dr. Spencer: That's true. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 we are famously told, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." And the Greek verb in that sentence is in the imperative mood, so it is a command. And in John 14:15 Jesus told us that "If you love me, you will obey what I command." We can conclude therefore, that any disobedience is a lack of love for God, which is most certainly a sin because Jesus told us in Matthew 22:37-38 that the greatest commandment is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Therefore, anything that is not done in conscious obedience to God and for his glory, is sin.

**Marc Roby: That is a very convicting, but true, statement. But we were justifying God's goodness given the presence of evil. How does this all tie back into that topic?**

Dr. Spencer: It ties back in in at least two ways. First, because there is an eternal destiny awaiting every human being, we can't judge what is good in any meaningful ultimate sense by looking at what happens just in this short life. And secondly, if we recognize that the worst sin is not murder, or any thing like that, but rather is rejecting the sovereign God who made us, then we will understand that we all deserve punishment. And if we then receive what we deserve, that is certainly just and we must agree that is good. And when we consider those to whom God has granted repentance and saving faith, we see that they receive mercy, rather than justice, and spend eternity in heaven. And certainly we must agree that is also good.

**Marc Roby: I think everyone would agree that bringing people to heaven is good. I'm not sure many people are willing to accept that hell is good, although the fact that guilty sinners deserve God's wrath certainly argues that it is. But I suspect that many people would ask why God can't simply show mercy and forgive. After all, God commands us to be merciful and to forgive others.**

Dr. Spencer: That's a great question, and we dealt with it in Session 24. I pointed out then that God cannot forgive sin without the penalty being paid because he is the judge of the universe. If I steal from someone who happens to be a judge, he can forgive me on a personal level. But, if the case comes before his court and I am found guilty of the crime, as judge he cannot simply say that he forgives me. Justice demands that I be punished and he must abide by the laws of the state and sentence me appropriately. As Judge of the universe, God must do what is just and right, and the just and right penalty for sinning against God is death—eternal death.

Marc Roby: That helps. And it is also important to remember the fact you pointed out in Session 72, that people in hell do not repent and seek God's forgiveness, but continue to hate him and rail against him in their hearts, which actually increases their guilt every day.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. When you put all of this together, you realize that hell *is* good. It is not pleasant, but it *is* just and fair and right. And so, in a deep sense of the term, it is good.

Marc Roby: But, at the same time, God does show mercy to some and save them. And that brings up another problem for many people. It seems unfair for God to choose some people to be saved while leaving others to suffer for their sins.

Dr. Spencer: That is a very common complaint. You're speaking about the doctrine of divine election, and we dealt with that doctrine back in Session 15, but we must say a few words again here. The basic problem is that we *think* we want to be judged based on our own effort. That somehow sounds fair to us because in terms of dealings with other human beings that *is*, in general, fair. But, as I noted a minute ago, when we consider the true nature of sin, and we judge the heart and not just the external actions, we find that we all have a serious problem. We are all sinners in need of a Savior. As Paul wrote in Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". So, if we think more carefully, we will recognize that we don't really want to be judged fairly, or justly, we want mercy.

Marc Roby: And, of course, by definition mercy is not something we deserve, so God is not under obligation to show mercy to anyone.

Dr. Spencer: No, he isn't. It would be completely just and fair for God to send all of us to hell. The huge surprise, the great mystery and amazing demonstration of God's love and mercy is that he chose to save anyone at all. Especially when you consider the cost.

Marc Roby: Which was the sacrifice of Jesus Christ himself.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And we find ourselves right back at John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." And this is good in the most profound possible sense of the word, even though perishing in this verse refers to eternal hell. And notice that it is only those who believe who will not perish. In fact, just two verses later, in John 3:18, we read that "whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Refusing to believe in Jesus Christ is the most serious sin a person can commit it is, ultimately, the sin that sends you to hell. In 1 John 5 the apostle tells us about God's testimony about Christ and he says in Verse 10 that "Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. 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.

Marc Roby: Calling the perfectly holy and just Creator a liar is a terrible thing. And I think we have made a good case for the fact that the existence of hell is actually good, given the fact that evil does exist.

We got onto this topic because of the importance of having an eternal perspective in understanding the presence of evil. Can we go back now and tie it all together somehow? Why is it good that God allowed evil to enter his creation?

Dr. Spencer: Because it allowed a more complete manifestation of God's multifaceted glory. Without allowing evil to enter creation God would not have been able to demonstrate his just wrath against evil, nor would he have been able to demonstrate his astounding merciful love in redeeming some people. I don't think we can understand it fully, but you have to consider the finished product so to speak. Years ago I read something very profound that is relevant to this topic in, of all places, a devotional my wife and I were reading with our children when they were young.

**Marc Roby: What was that?**

Dr. Spencer: The author used the analogy of a cake to illustrate Romans 8:28, which says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Now I don't remember the story in detail, but it went something like this; a child had asked the mother about something that wasn't good, and questioned whether God was good for allowing such a thing. The mother's response in the story was great. She asked the child, "Do you like chocolate cake?" And, like most children, the child responded, "Of course." And then the mother said, "Well, do you like to eat flour?" And he said, "No." Then the mother asked if he liked to eat baking powder, and he said no. Then she asked if he liked to eat salt, and he said no. Then she asked if he liked raw egg and he said no. But she then told him that all of those things were used in making chocolate cake.

**Marc Roby: That is a great illustration. The ingredients may not be good in and of themselves, but the final result is good.**

Dr. Spencer: And so it is with God's works. We do not know enough or have a wide enough perspective to properly judge his works. We know that evil exists and we know that evil is not good in itself. In fact, it is the opposite of good. But we know that God is not the author of evil and God is good. In fact, he is the standard of good. He is absolutely, perfectly and immutably good. And he is omnipotent. Therefore, we can conclude that the presence of evil was necessary for the accomplishing of God's perfect eternal plan for creation, which is good.

**Marc Roby: And I think that is a good place to end for today – pun intended. I want to remind our listeners that they can email any questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We will do our best to answer.**