

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attribute of goodness. Dr. Spencer, last session was a theodicy, which is a defense of the goodness and omnipotence of God given the fact that evil exists. But there is a related question we did not discuss that I suspect a number of our listeners may be wondering about, which is this, "How did evil first enter into creation?" In Genesis 1:31 we read that when God finished his work of creating, there was no evil present because, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Spencer: Well, not only was all that God created very good, but this is also a very good question. It is also one of the hardest questions you could ask. The Bible doesn't tell us a great deal about the origin of sin, but as we consider the topic we must carefully guard against a couple of very serious errors, as Wayne Grudem points out in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>2</sup>

Marc Roby: What errors are those?

Dr. Spencer: The first one is the error of blaming God for sin. Deuteronomy 32:4 tells us, "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." And in James 1:13 we are told that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone". In light of these Scriptures, and many others, it would be absolute blasphemy to think that God is the author of sin.

Marc Roby: Yes, I agree, which is why the presence of sin is so puzzling. What is the second error we need to guard against?

Dr. Spencer: It is to think that God was not able to prevent sin. In other words, to think there is some equally powerful evil force at work in creation.

Marc Roby: Sort of the like the dark side of "the force" in the Star Wars movies.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would be sort of like that *if* it existed, which of course it does not. God is absolutely sovereign over all creation, which includes Satan and his demons and everything else, and God is completely good.

As we discussed last time, God allowed sin to enter into his creation because it allowed him to more fully demonstrate his multifaceted glory. But the key word in that sentence is "allowed". God was not the creator of sin, but he is absolutely sovereign over sin. He could have prevented it and he is able to prevent every single instance of sin that has ever occurred or ever will occur.

Marc Roby: That is a difficult notion to accept given some of the truly evil things that have been done throughout history. It is frightening to think, for example, that God allowed the Holocaust.

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 492

Dr. Spencer: I agree completely, which is why we have to think very carefully and biblically or we will get into trouble. If God were not absolutely sovereign over everything that happens in this universe, we could never trust that he would be able to make his promises come true. In addition, his promises would then be lies and he would be a liar. These are absolutely unthinkable heresies. The only answer I can give, which comes from the Bible as we discussed last time, is that God allowed sin into creation for his own greater glory. But that does not mean that he is responsible for it, or that he approves of it in any way, or that he cannot control it.

**Marc Roby: Which is, again, why something like the Holocaust is so hard to reconcile with God's goodness.**

Dr. Spencer: It is. But, as we labored to show last time, you need to realize that God's purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory and that there is an eternal reality that awaits all people and all angels. In that eternity there will be no injustice. Everyone will be treated either with perfect justice, or perfect mercy. In light of this eternal reality, a Christian's troubles here are easy to deal with – even the most severe troubles we can imagine. Which is why the apostle Paul wrote, in 2 Corinthians 4:17, that “our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

**Marc Roby: That's an amazing verse on two accounts. First, that Paul could call our troubles “light and momentary” given some of the terrible troubles he himself experienced. And secondly, it is amazing to consider what our eternal glory will be like if it far outweighs any possible trouble in this life.**

Dr. Spencer: It is hard to imagine, but it is true. We again have to reckon with the fact that eternity is infinitely longer than this life. Let me give an analogy to help us grasp this truth.

**Marc Roby: Yes, please do.**

Dr. Spencer: Think of someone who gets cancer when he is 10 years old and he is told by the doctor that he will certainly die within a year if it isn't treated. But if he undergoes radiation and chemo-therapy for six months it can most likely be cured.

**Marc Roby: That is a very unpleasant thing to consider, especially in somebody so young.**

Dr. Spencer: I chose that age deliberately, as you'll see. Now let's further suppose that this young boy goes through the treatments. That will be an extremely miserable six months. But let's further assume that the treatments are successful and he goes on to live a healthy life and die at the ripe old age of 95. That is 85 years past the date when he was told he had cancer, and 84½ of those years were healthy and happy. The six months of misery amounts to less than 0.6% of those 85 years. I think we would all agree that it was worth it in the end.

**Marc Roby: Yes, I have to agree with that statement.**

Dr. Spencer: OK, so now think about eternity. Even if God calls me to be one of those who suffer for Christ in this life, it doesn't matter if I suffer for 1 year or 100 years, it is literally zero percent of the time I will spend in heaven.

**Marc Roby: I see your point. And, of course, suffering can also produce beneficial results in this life.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes it can. I think we have all experienced or heard about a situation where some painful trial produced a good harvest in terms of either leading someone to saving faith, or driving someone away from some besetting sin, or in just making them a better person. God also frequently uses troubles to cause his people to stop trusting in themselves and this world and to look to him in humility and prayer.

In Romans 5 Paul says that we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God and then adds, in Verses 3 through 5, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

**Marc Roby: That verse also fits with Romans 8:28, which says, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”**

Dr. Spencer: It fits with that verse very well. And I can personally testify that I am a better person for having gone through the pain of needing and then having two hip replacements. For example, I am more thankful, less proud and more compassionate toward others.

And our greatest joy in heaven will be contemplating the glory of God, so if our misery in this life helps in any way to make that glory manifest, either directly because we suffer for the name of Christ or just by making us better people, and therefore better witnesses for Christ, just imagine the eternal joy we will receive from knowing that.

**Marc Roby: I have to admit that makes it easier to see how sufferings could be considered inconsequential by Paul. Although they may still be terrible to endure in this life.**

Dr. Spencer: They can be terrible, and God knows that. All suffering, ultimately, is the result of sin. And God is not pleased that sin exists. In fact, in Ezekiel 33:11 we read that God commanded the prophet, “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’” This verse, and others, tell us clearly that God does not take pleasure in the fact that sin must be punished. But because he is infinitely holy and just, it must still be punished. God cannot act contrary to his own perfect nature. So, I’m going to borrow a phrase from John Murray and say that allowing sin was a “consequent absolute necessity” for God.<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby: I think that phrase from Murray needs some explanation.**

Dr. Spencer: What I mean is that allowing sin into his creation, while certainly not something that in itself brings any pleasure to God, was absolutely necessary as a consequence of his having

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<sup>3</sup> Murray uses this phrase in to speak of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ (John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 12).

decided to create anything. Because God is perfect, his creation is perfect. And that means that the purpose for that creation is the best possible purpose, which we have noted is the manifestation of his glory. And the full manifestation of his glory must include his holiness and just wrath in addition to his love and mercy. Now I'm drawing a deduction at this point, rather than stating something that Scripture tells us clearly, so I could be wrong. But if sin did not have to exist to accomplish God's perfect purpose, I don't believe he would have allowed it since sin, in itself, something that God hates.

**Marc Roby: I am going to meditate on that thought for a while.**

Dr. Spencer: And I hope our listeners do as well. The more we think about God and what he has done and his revelation to us in his Word, the more we see how our own views have to change. That is why Paul commanded us in Romans 12:2, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Paul isn't suggesting that we are able to "test" God's will in terms of passing judgment on it, that would imply that we are greater than God, which is patently absurd. But he means that to the extent our thinking is transformed we will be able to "test and approve" because we will have come into conformity with God's perfect will.

**Marc Roby: And, of course, being conformed to the likeness of Christ, who is God, is the purpose for which we were predestined, called, justified and will be glorified as Paul wrote in Romans 8:29-30. And that conformity will certainly include our thinking.**

Dr. Spencer: And our understanding of what is good, since God is the ultimate standard for what is good.

**Marc Roby: I can see you're trying to get us back on our topic, which isn't a bad idea. But my question about the origin of sin still stands. You've argued, and I think successfully, that we need to avoid the ditches on both sides of the road; that is, the ditch on one side of thinking that God created sin and the ditch on the other side of thinking that he's not able to prevent it. But you haven't yet addressed how it came into this world, which was originally declared to be "very good".**

Dr. Spencer: Well, as I said at the outset, that is an extremely difficult question, and God has not chosen to reveal much of the answer. God has told us that the original creation was very good, as you just noted, so we know that there wasn't any sin present in the beginning. God has also told us about Satan coming and tempting Eve, and through her Adam, to get them to sin. We can conclude from that passage that Satan himself had already become sinful. So, there was a fall of Satan and his demons that occurred before the fall of man. Grudem has a good discussion of this in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>4</sup> And there are also some passages in Scripture that speak about Satan's fall.

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<sup>4</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pp 412-414

Marc Roby: The first one I think of is 2 Peter 2:4, where we are told that “God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment”.

Dr. Spencer: Another New Testament reference is Jude 6, which says, “the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.”

These two verses tell us clearly that there were angels who sinned and that God judged them. The fact that they are in dungeons, or darkness and chains, does not mean that they have no influence on this world, but rather that God has absolute control over them.

Marc Roby: And a good example of that is seen in Job 1:6-12, where we read of Satan receiving permission from God to test Job.

Dr. Spencer: And in Luke 22:31 Jesus told the apostle Peter that Satan had asked to sift him as wheat. But in the next verse, Luke 22:32, we have that wonderful statement of Jesus “But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

Marc Roby: I can only imagine that after Peter had denied Christ three times and then Christ was crucified this statement must have provided great comfort, although I’m sure Peter didn’t understand at that time exactly what Christ meant. In fact, Peter must have felt like his faith had failed.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But the wonderful thing is that Christ didn’t say “And *if* you turn back, strengthen your brothers.” He said “*when* you turn back”. Christ’s prayers are always effectual, and that should provide great comfort to all Christians because in his great high priestly prayer we read, in John 17:15, that Christ prayed to the Father about his people and said, “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.”

Marc Roby: That is very comforting indeed.

Dr. Spencer: And that statement, along with Satan having to ask permission to sift Peter and the story of Job, show that God allows Satan and the other fallen angels to operate in this world for a time. In fact, in Ephesians 2:2 Satan is called “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.” So, we know that Satan and some other angels fell and are under God’s judgment, that they are allowed to oppose God’s people in this world for a time, but they are completely under God’s authority.

Marc Roby: Which is good news, because Jesus told us, in John 8:44, that Satan was “a murderer from the beginning” and he is “the father of lies” and the New Testament consistently portrays him as the mortal enemy of God’s church. But what about the fall of Satan himself?

Dr. Spencer: There are at least two passages in the Old Testament that many good theologians think refer to Satan’s fall. One is in Isaiah 14, where the prophet is speaking about the King of Babylon, and the other is in Ezekiel 28 where the prophet is speaking about the King of Tyre. In both cases the descriptions of the kings go beyond what could reasonably be said about any

human king, so many theologians think that the prophets were weaving together descriptions of the human kings with the fall of Satan from heaven. This weaving together of human and heavenly events that are related in some way is not uncommon, as Wayne Grudem points out.<sup>5</sup>

In any event, these passages, if they do apply to Satan as many think they do, tell us that he became proud and wanted to take his place on the throne of heaven.

**Marc Roby: Yes, in other words, he failed to humble himself and take account of the Creator/creature distinction, which we have pointed out numerous times is central to a proper understanding of who we are.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And he used the same temptation that caused him to fall to snare Adam and Eve. Notice what he said to Eve. After contradicting God and saying that she would *not* surely die if she ate the forbidden fruit, he then said, in Genesis 3:5, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

**Marc Roby: It's ironic that he should tell them, "you will be like God" since Adam and Eve had been created in God's image. So, in one sense, they already were like God, and their listening to Satan actually resulted in that image being terribly distorted.**

Dr. Spencer: It is ironic. But it is also clear that Satan was implying they would be like God in some deeper sense than just being made in his image. He may not have been implying that they would become gods themselves, but it was something close to that. Also, as we noted earlier, our final destiny as God's children is to be conformed to the image of Christ.

John Murray made an interesting observation in this regard. In writing about the sanctification of believers, he wrote that "likeness to God is the ultimate pattern of sanctification. The reason why God himself is the pattern should be obvious: man is made in the image of God and nothing less than the image of God can define the restoration which redemption contemplates. ... [but] it must not be thought that likeness to God is absolute. There is a sense in which to aspire after likeness to God is the epitome of iniquity."<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is very interesting. So we know that Satan fell from his exalted place because of pride. He rejected the fundamental Creator/creature distinction that we must always keep in mind. I think that provides a reasonable answer to the question I posed at the beginning, but it also raises another one, which we will have to wait for next time to deal with because we are out of time for today.**

**Let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), and we'll do our best to respond.**

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<sup>5</sup> Grudem, *op. cit.*, pg. 413 (he cites Ps 45 as an example)

<sup>6</sup> John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, Vol. 2, pg. 306