

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, last time we finished discussing the doctrine of unconditional election, which says that God chooses whom he will save based on his own good pleasure and not any merit in us. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I would like to take some time to examine how we, as believers, should respond to the biblical doctrine of God's unconditional election. We know how an unbeliever will respond; he will cry out that it isn't fair. But as we've indicated, we all *deserve* God's wrath. It would be perfectly fair for God to condemn us all. The amazing thing is that he chooses to save anyone. And so, the question remains, how should a believer respond to this doctrine?

Marc Roby: Well, it seems obvious that we should respond with great thanksgiving and praise!

Dr. Spencer: And, I would add, all the more so because God's election is *not* conditioned on anything we have done or will do or, in fact, anything we can do. Once we realize that our new birth is a free gift from God, totally undeserved – in fact, given in spite of the fact we deserve condemnation – then we should be filled to overflowing with thanksgiving and praise.

Marc Roby: And that makes me think of the phrase in Ephesians where Paul speaks about the praise of God's glorious grace. We read in Ephesians 1:4-6 that God chose us in Christ “before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”¹

Dr. Spencer: And Paul repeats the same idea just a few verses later. We read in Ephesians 1:11-12, “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.”

The ultimate purpose of creation is the manifestation of God's glory and the saving of his people is a marvelous part of this work and a great contributor to that glory.

Marc Roby: And it is also an incomprehensibly great blessing for us who are saved!

Dr. Spencer: Well, that is certainly true. And the doctrine of unconditional election is also a great comfort to believers. In Romans 8:28-30 the apostle Paul wrote, “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. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

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Marc Roby: That is comforting. Paul writes in the past tense even though our glorification is still in the future. He is letting us know that it is absolutely certain.

Dr. Spencer: And the first verse of this passage, Verse 28, where Paul wrote, “we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose”, should provide tremendous comfort for all of God’s children.

Let me quote the theologian Wayne Grudem. He wrote the following about these verses; “If Paul looks into the distant past before the creation of the world, he sees that God foreknew and predestined his people to be conformed to the image of Christ. If he looks at the recent past he finds that God called and justified his people whom he had predestined. And if he then looks toward the future when Christ returns, he sees that God has determined to give perfect, glorified bodies to those who believe in Christ. From eternity to eternity God has acted with the good of his people in mind. But if God has *always* acted for our good and will in the future act for our good, Paul reasons, then *will he not also in our present circumstances* work every circumstance together for our good as well?”

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful conclusion, and a great comfort. But the apostle Paul goes on in that chapter to say even more about the comfort this provides to us.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, he most certainly does. In fact, he begins right way by asking the question we are dealing with now, in Romans 8:31 we read, “What, then, shall we say in response to this?” In other words, given God’s amazing plan of salvation and the certainty we have that all whom he has predestined for salvation will be called, justified and ultimately glorified, how should we respond? And he begins his answer by asking a rhetorical question, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

Marc Roby: And the obvious answer to that question is that no one can successfully oppose us. And then Paul goes on to draw another wonderful and comforting conclusion in Verse 32. He writes, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a great and logical deduction. In God’s unconditional election he chose us to be saved. But that salvation, while free to us, was unbelievably costly to God. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, had to become a man and die for us. And, as Paul correctly reasons, if God didn’t spare his own Son, we can be confident that he will give us everything we truly need for life and godliness. God never leaves work unfinished.

And so Paul goes on at the end of Romans 8 to ask some more rhetorical questions and to conclude that we who are in Christ are more than conquerors and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Marc Roby: And we need that comfort given the trials and tribulations that come with this life in a fallen world.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. I don’t want to go off track too far from discussing soteriology, but it is obvious to anyone who looks at this life honestly that we have many troubles. God does

not promise his children a trouble-free life. Quite the opposite. We read in John 16:33 that Jesus himself told us, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” And that is why we who are in Christ are promised that we will overcome the world as well.

In his commentary on this passage at the end of Romans Chapter 8, the Rev. P.G. Mathew notes that Paul lists seventeen enemies that Christians face; hardship, persecution, famine, danger, death and so on. But, as Paul wrote in Romans 8:37, “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” Rev. Mathew notes that “Troubles make us trust only in Christ. We hope not in this world but in the world to come. Sufferings for Christ’s sake cause the things of this world to grow strangely dim. These sufferings focus our spiritual eyes on Jesus.”²

Marc Roby: That is great encouragement. As God’s children we know that even the troubles and pain we go through in this life have a good purpose.

Dr. Spencer: And it will all be used by God to redound to his greater glory. But there is one more thing I want to say about how we should respond to the doctrine of unconditional election.

Marc Roby: Alright, what is that?

Dr. Spencer: It should be a great encouragement to us to share our faith.

Marc Roby: You usually hear people say that this doctrine discourages evangelism. So I think you need to explain that comment.

Dr. Spencer: It’s actually quite simple. If everyone has the power to either accept or reject the gospel message, then I can easily be afraid that my evangelism will fail to bear fruit. And, not only that, but it may be that my inept presentation is the reason someone doesn’t put his faith in Christ. Just think about how terrible that would be to have to live with.

Marc Roby: I’d rather not. I don’t want to be responsible for someone else’s eternal damnation.

Dr. Spencer: Nor do I. But the doctrine of unconditional election gives me confidence to tell others about Christ. My witnessing absolutely matters, God has ordained the means as well as the end. But at the end of day, I can be absolutely confident that all those whom God has chosen will, in fact, come to true saving faith. We are the means, but any success we have is not based on our own efforts, it is based on God’s eternal election.

Marc Roby: I see your point. And it sounds like we are done discussing the Christian’s proper response to the doctrine of unconditional election. Before we move on, perhaps I should briefly summarize the points we’ve made so far with respect to soteriology.

Dr. Spencer: I think that’s a good idea, so please proceed.

Marc Roby: Very well. We have shown that man’s greatest need, in fact his only real need, is for salvation, because every human being will, after this short life, spend eternity in either heaven or hell. Secondly, we have shown that because all men are sinners and enemies of God, they will

² P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 705

not and, indeed, cannot, accept his offer of salvation until and unless God causes them to be born again. Thirdly, we have shown that God sovereignly chooses whom he will save, not based on anything in them, or anything he foresees they will do, but solely based on his own free sovereign will.

Dr. Spencer: And if we go back to the acrostic TULIP, which to remind everyone stands for the biblical doctrines of Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace and Perseverance of the saints, we have now covered the first two of these; Total depravity and Unconditional election. But rather than cover them in the order they appear in the acrostic, I now want to move on to examine Irresistible grace.

Marc Roby: Which we have briefly mentioned before. It is the doctrine that says that we cannot resist God's saving grace. In other words, if he causes us to be born again, we will necessarily respond in repentance and faith.

Dr. Spencer: That is the doctrine. When Paul dealt with the objection to the biblical doctrine of unconditional election, he wrote in Romans 9:19, as we read last time, "One of you will say to me: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?'" The expected answer is, of course, that no one can resist God's sovereign will. So, this verse expresses the idea of the irresistible nature of God's efficacious call.

We also see irresistible grace in the verse we read earlier today, Romans 8:30, "And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." It is clear that Paul is spelling out an unbreakable chain of events. If God has predestined us for salvation, he *will* call us. And if he calls us, we *will* be justified and glorified.

Marc Roby: And, of course, Paul is not listing every step in the process here. As I'm sure we will discuss in more detail later, justification, for example, is based on conversion, in other words on our having repented of our sins and placed our faith in Jesus Christ. And our repenting and believing can only occur if we have been born again, or regenerated. So it is evident from these verses that God's call is effectual in bringing about our regeneration.

Dr. Spencer: That's exactly right. Jesus gave us a great illustration of God's effectual call when he called Lazarus forth from the tomb. Lazarus had been dead for several days and yet, when Jesus called, "Lazarus, come out!" He came out of the tomb still wrapped in the grave clothes.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a great illustration.

Dr. Spencer: This doctrine of irresistible grace is not something new with the Protestant Reformation either. It goes all the way back to St. Augustine. Let me quote the 19th-century theologian Charles Hodge; "Augustine, holding as he did that man since the fall is in a state of spiritual death, utterly disabled and opposite to all good, taught that his restoration to spiritual life was an act of God's almighty power; and being an act of omnipotence was instantaneous, immediate, and irresistible."³

³ C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, vol II, pg. 712

Marc Roby: That certainly makes sense. As we have said before, dead people don't make themselves come alive.

Dr. Spencer: In fact, one of the arguments Hodge uses to support this doctrine, which is a very strong argument I might add, is that the metaphors used in the Scriptures are important. He wrote that "As the blind could not open their own eyes, or the deaf unstop their own ears, or the dead quicken themselves in their graves; as they could not prepare themselves for restoration, or cooperate in effecting it, so also with the blind, the deaf, and the dead in sin. The cure in both cases must be supernatural."⁴

Marc Roby: And we see all of these metaphors in the Bible. For example, in John 12:37-40, the apostle speaks about the unbelief of some of the people and says, "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: 'Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.'"

Dr. Spencer: That is a very common metaphor. In fact John is quoting from Isaiah 6:10 where God commands the prophet to "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Marc Roby: It is a paradoxical truth that the same gospel message brings life to some and hardens others against it.

Dr. Spencer: And it is precisely because of sinful man's depraved condition. I'm sure some of our listeners have heard the analogy that the same sunlight which softens wax also hardens clay. The different responses to the sun's heat are caused by the inherent differences in the materials.

Paul speaks about this in his second letter to the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 he speaks about the different responses people have to the gospel. And he wrote, "For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" Note that we are to God always the aroma of Christ. There is no ambiguity or difference in the message itself. But this one message is the smell of death to those who will not, and indeed cannot accept it because of their sinful natures. While to those who have been born again it is the fragrance of life.

Marc Roby: And Hodge also spoke about the metaphor of being dead. He said that the dead cannot "quicken themselves", which is an old-fashioned way of saying bring themselves back to life. And we see the metaphor of death most famously in Ephesians 2:1 where Paul tells the

⁴ Ibid, pg. 692

Ephesian believers that “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”, referring to their lives before they were regenerated.

Dr. Spencer: And he keeps the same metaphor going when he says in Verses 4-5, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

Marc Roby: Well, I’m sure there is more to say about the doctrine of irresistible grace, but I think it will have to wait for our next session. Let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we’ll do our very best to answer.