

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's will. Dr. Spencer, in our previous discussion, you made the point that God truly desires that all people be saved, and yet he does not in fact save everyone because to do so would not serve his ultimate purpose of making his own glory manifest as well as the universe we live in does. Doesn't this leave you open to the charge of somehow limiting God's options?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I'm not limiting God's options, but his options *are*, in fact, limited. God is not free to do absolutely anything. We mentioned this briefly before when we were discussing God's Sovereignty and man's free will in Session 65. For example, we are told in Hebrews 6:18 that "it is impossible for God to lie".<sup>1</sup> But there are many other things God cannot do.

Marc Roby: I think John Frame has a useful discussion on this topic in his book *The Doctrine of God*.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he does. He lists six kinds of actions that God cannot perform.<sup>2</sup> First, he cannot perform logically contradictory actions.

Marc Roby: Like making a square circle.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And Frame makes an important point in this regard. When we say that there are things God cannot do, this is not to say that there is a weakness in God. God cannot do things that are logically contradictory because, as Frame says, "The laws of logic are an aspect of his own character."<sup>3</sup> We could reasonably call logic one of God's attributes, although that is not normally done. It is not a weakness that God is unable to go against his own character.

Marc Roby: What else does Frame say that God cannot do?

Dr. Spencer: He cannot do anything immoral.

Marc Roby: And, certainly, no one could rationally consider that a weakness. It is, in fact, a great strength. As you noted a moment ago, he can't lie. And James 1:13 tells us that "God cannot be tempted by evil". What else does Frame say God cannot do?

Dr. Spencer: He cannot do things that are appropriate only for creatures, like celebrating a birthday. He can do these things in the incarnate person of Jesus Christ, but not in his deity. But this inability is again an indication of his strength, not a weakness. He also cannot deny his own nature as God by, for example, ceasing to be God. God can't commit suicide.

Marc Roby: Well, that seems pretty obvious, and certainly can't be thought of as a weakness. What else?

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<sup>2</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pp518-521

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pg. 518

Dr. Spencer: God can't change his eternal plan. In a sense, to do so would be to deny his nature as the perfect, unchangeable God.

Marc Roby: Okay, I believe that is five things, but you said Frame listed six, so what is the last one?

Dr. Spencer: The last one is more interesting, although it sounds silly at first blush. It is the age-old question of whether or not God can make a stone so large that he can't lift it.

Marc Roby: Okay, I'll be honest and say that that does sound downright silly at first blush.

Dr. Spencer: Well, I'll admit that I was surprised when I read in Frame's book that philosophers have written about this question fairly recently. The problem of course, is supposed to be that if God can make such a stone, then he can't lift it and is therefore not omnipotent. And, on the other hand, if he can't make such a stone, then he again is not omnipotent. The question is an attempt to show that God's being omnipotent is somehow a logical contradiction.

But I don't think it presents a serious challenge to the idea of God's omnipotence. We have already said that God's omnipotence does not mean he can do anything, and we have already listed five kinds of things he can't do. Frame suggests that this one fits into the category of God not being able to do things that are appropriate only for finite creatures. We, for example, are certainly capable of making things too heavy for us to lift without machines, just think of a bus or truck, or even an automobile.

Marc Roby: That is obviously true, but it is also true that we can't create anything out of nothing, meaning no pre-existing matter, which is the kind of creating God has done.

Dr. Spencer: You're right, and Frame doesn't address that point. He uses the human example simply to show that the question does not fit into the category of logically contradictory actions. I'm not going to spend any time to get into the fine points of logic that I assume must be involved in the philosophical discussions about this question. I would simply say that since God can create this universe out of nothing, and is also capable of destroying it in an instant, it is pretty clear to me that he can't create a stone too heavy for him to lift. But that is not a sign of weakness, nor does it challenge his omnipotence. It is, rather, a sign of his unlimited power.

Marc Roby: I completely agree. It's amazing the lengths people will go to sometimes to try and disprove the existence of God. They really don't like the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, all holy and just God judging them at the end of their life.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But, as we're told in Romans Chapter 1, they are suppressing the truth because in their heart of hearts they know that God exists.

Marc Roby: We got onto this topic of things that God cannot do because you were answering my challenge that you might have left yourself open to the charge of limiting God's options when you argued that God didn't create a universe without sin, even though such a universe would please him, because such a universe would not accomplish his main goal of making his own glory manifest as well as this one does.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Even God is limited by his own perfect, unchangeable, eternal, holy nature. He can't die, he can't lie and he can't do anything that contradicts his own nature. We've argued before that he is perfect and all he does is perfect. We are told in Deuteronomy 32:4 that "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."

**Marc Roby: We also read in 2 Samuel 22:31 that "As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless."**

Dr. Spencer: And, perhaps most famously, in Matthew 5:48 Jesus himself told us, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." There are other Scriptures we could cite as well, but it is clear that God is perfect and all he does is perfect. Therefore, when he chose to create this universe for the manifestation of his own glory, that was the best possible purpose for creation.

**Marc Roby: We have made that argument before, in Session 75. And since we are talking about God's will, there is one more verse I would like to cite about God's perfection because it tells us specifically that his will is perfect. In Romans 12:2 we are commanded, "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."**

Dr. Spencer: That is a great verse for our present purposes. And the point I'm trying to make is that in accomplishing that purpose, even God is limited. Not by weakness, but by his perfections. Because all that he does is perfect, he was constrained to create the perfect universe to accomplish his perfect purpose, even if there were some things about that universe that he himself didn't like.

**Marc Roby: Now that's a difficult concept to wrap your brain around.**

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But I think that it is a necessary conclusion based on what we are told in the Bible. So, let's get back to the verse that started this whole discussion and state our conclusions.

**Marc Roby: You mean 2 Peter 3:9 of course, where we read that "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's the verse. And the problem we have been addressing is, if God wants everyone to come to repentance, then why don't all people repent, trust in Christ, and be saved? And the answer is that this verse is speaking about God's will of disposition as we saw last time. In other words, it is telling us something real and true about the nature of God, he does not take pleasure in the fact that people sin, refuse to repent and, as a result, go to hell. And yet, he is the one who sends people to hell. He does this because it is necessary to accomplish his overall purpose for creation.

**Marc Roby: And, again, we struggle to grasp and accept this truth because it implies the necessity of evil and of eternal hell.**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. But, as we have noted before, what I like doesn't have any bearing on what is true. I don't like the fact I'm growing old. I don't like the fact that I get sick. There are all kinds of things I don't like that are, nonetheless, true. The astounding thing is that we can conclude from 2 Peter 3:9 combined with the obvious fact that not everyone repents, that there are some things that God doesn't like, but which are, nonetheless true.

**Marc Roby: But, as you have been careful to point out, this is not because there is any weakness in God.**

Dr. Spencer: No, it is definitely not because of weakness. There doesn't need to be any weakness or imperfection in order to be constrained. God is constrained by his own nature, which includes his perfect mercy and love, but also his perfect justice and wrath. As human beings we understand the idea of being constrained by things outside of our control. And even in our case it is not always a sign of weakness or imperfection. I've spent most of my life as an engineer and engineers deal with constraints all the time. Some of those constraints are caused by our limitations, but others are not.

**Marc Roby: It seems like the really important question would be then, which constraints are fundamental and therefore, insurmountable.**

Dr. Spencer: That is an important question, and for us it isn't always easy tell which is which. I've seen a number of technological advances in my lifetime that were at one time considered fundamentally impossible. So I'm not about to go out on a limb and say which specific constraints are fundamental and which are due to our own limitations, but it would appear, for example, that travelling faster than the speed of light is impossible. And, to be far more mundane, it is almost certainly impossible to build a comfortable, quiet car that uses water for fuel, goes 1,000 miles on a tank of water, and costs only a \$1,000 to build.

**Marc Roby: And the point we've been making is simply that even God is constrained in some ways, but not because of any weakness or imperfection in him. In fact, his constraints are the result of his perfections.**

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Theologians talk about God's decretive will, which is those things which God has decreed will happen. And his decretive will is not the same as his will of disposition, which is those things that God would like, at least in some sense, to have happen. You could truthfully say that God decrees some things that he doesn't like.

**Marc Roby: John Frame says something very similar. He notes that "there are some good things that, by virtue of the nature of God's plan, will never be realized."<sup>4</sup> And that "God's broad intentions for history may exclude the blessing of a world existing without any history of evil."<sup>5</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: Frame also gives an important warning. He notes that "God's will is, of course, one; but since it is complex, some have distinguished different aspects of it – different 'wills.' We

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pg. 530

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

should be careful with this language, but it does make it easier for us to consider the complications of our topic.”<sup>6</sup>

Marc Roby: That’s a good warning. We always have to keep in mind God’s simplicity – that he is not made up of parts. We can talk about his will of disposition or his will of decree as a way to help us to understand, but we must not think there are different parts of God that are somehow in conflict with each other.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely true. God has one will and he has one overarching purpose for creation, which is the manifestation of his own glory. But there are also a number of other purposes that we could say are subordinate to his overarching purpose. Foremost among those subordinate purposes is his redeeming a people for himself.

Marc Roby: And these people comprise the church, the body and bride of Christ. They are those who have been chosen from before the creation of the world as we read in Ephesians 1:4, which says, “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And all of those whom God has chosen either have been or will be called, regenerated, sanctified and glorified. We read an abbreviated description of this process in Romans 8:30, which says that “those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” To achieve this goal, God has given man his revelation, which tells us how we should live.

Marc Roby: And theologians refer to that as God’s revealed will.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. Although Frame prefers to call it God’s preceptive will, which refers to his precepts, or commands. There are other names used as well, but I don’t want to get into all of them at this time. The main point here is that God has revealed to us what we are to do. And he doesn’t tell us everything we might like to know, but he has told us what we need to know.

Marc Roby: We see the difference between God’s decretive will and his revealed will clearly in Moses’ statement to the Israelites on the plains of Moab, to the east of the Jordan river, just before he died and Joshua led them into the Promised Land. He was going over the laws God had given them and in Deuteronomy 29:29 he told them, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

Dr. Spencer: And “The secret things” refers to God’s decretive will, those things which he has foreordained should come to pass, which is also sometimes called his secret will. And notice that Moses says they “belong to the LORD our God”, meaning that we often don’t know them until they come to pass and, since they belong to God, we aren’t to pry into them. But then there are the “things revealed”, which “belong to us and to our children forever”. This is God’s revealed

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

will, or his preceptive will, and Moses gives us the reason for God's giving it to us; it is so that "we may follow all the words of this law."

**Marc Roby:** And we should take a moment to point out that it is great mercy on God's part that he has given us this revelation.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we should all take time to meditate on God's amazing goodness and mercy to us. But before we finish for today there is a major difference between God's decretive will and his preceptive will that we should point out. Let me quote from John Frame again. He correctly states that "God's decretive will cannot be successfully opposed; what God has decreed will certainly take place. It is possible, however, for creatures to disobey God's preceptive will – and they often do so."<sup>7</sup>

**Marc Roby:** But, praise God, he also decreed, from before the creation of the world, to send a Savior to redeem his people. We read about that in 1 Peter 1:18-20, "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake."

Dr. Spencer: That is wonderful. And it shows that God was not surprised by the fall. He planned all of creation and all of history before anything in this universe existed. He knew Satan would fall. He knew Adam would fall. He had it all planned. As you just read, Jesus Christ "was chosen before the creation of the world". And what was he chosen to do? He was chosen to become incarnate, to be born to a virgin, to live a perfect sinless life and then to die a horrible death on the cross as a substitute for us. All of this was according to God's decretive will.

**Marc Roby:** That's astounding. And I look forward to continuing our discussion of God's perfect will next time, but now it is time to 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 to them.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg. 531