

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's communicable attributes. Dr. Spencer, we ended last time by briefly discussing the fact that God did not need to create this universe. Is there anymore that you want to say about that?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there is. In his systematic theology, Wayne Grudem lists God's Freedom as one of his communicable attributes and he defines it in the following way: "*God's freedom is that attribute of God whereby he does whatever he pleases.*"¹

Marc Roby: And his definition is completely biblical since we are told in Psalm 115:3 that "Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him."² But I think we should perhaps head off a possible objection at this point. In Session 85 we made the point that God's will is not absolutely free, in other words there are things that he cannot do. And, in fact, we discussed God's will of disposition and noted that his perfection constrains him to do some things that don't, in and of themselves, please him. I can easily imagine one of our listeners thinking that there is a problem reconciling those statements with this definition of Grudem, that God does whatever he pleases.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, there does *appear* to be a problem there. For example, we read in Ezekiel 18:32, "For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!" And yet people clearly die, not just temporally, but in the ultimate sense of being sent to hell. It is therefore reasonable to ask whether Grudem is right when he says that God does whatever he pleases.

I think however, that this only appears to be a problem until you look at it more carefully. Grudem's statement is correct, but we need to realize that, ultimately, what pleases God most is to do what is perfect. And as we pointed out in Session 85, the perfect goal for this universe must be the goal that God has revealed to us, which is the manifestation of his own glory. And it must be true that to perfectly manifest that glory God has to send some people to hell, even though, in and of itself, that does not please him.

Marc Roby: I think this goes along with the idea that even God can't make a square circle. Some desirable things are mutually contradictory. In this case, God chose the greater good of making his glorious justice manifest in judging some people.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's right. And Grudem goes on in that section to make clear that what he has in mind is that God has no *externally* imposed constraints on his being or actions. Nothing in creation in any way constrains God. The only constraints he has are the result of his own perfect nature; they are internal.

Marc Roby: Which is, of course, very different from us.

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 216

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Dr. Spencer: It is as different as you can possibly imagine. This is a communicable attribute and we do have real freedom of will, but not absolute freedom. Our wills are strictly constrained by the will of God. It is completely impossible for any human being, or even for all of humanity acting together, to change even the tiniest detail of God's decrees. What he has decreed will, without any doubt at all, take place.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of Proverbs 19:21, which tells us that "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I also think of Proverbs 21:1, which says that "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases."

Marc Roby: That verse presents a great analogy. The water in a stream still does exactly what it naturally does, it follows the path of least resistance as it moves under the influence of gravity. And yet, we can direct the water where we want it go by how we shape a ditch or a canal.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great analogy. And not only is the heart of every individual king in God's hands, but in Psalm 2 we read about *many*, if not all, of the kings of earth coming together to oppose God. In Verses 2-6 we read, "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break their chains,' they say, 'and throw off their fetters.' The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, 'I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.'"

Marc Roby: Which is speaking about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Of course. God laughs at the greatest power man can muster. He has decreed that Jesus Christ redeem a people for himself, to be his eternal treasured possession, and so it will be.

Marc Roby: Praise God for that.

Dr. Spencer: Indeed, we should praise God for that. If men, or Satan and his demons, or any combination of powers were able to thwart God's plans, then we could never trust in his promises. We are not able to keep all of our promises, even if we intend to. For example, I may promise to take my grandson to play golf on Saturday and then I may get sick or even die on Friday and not be able to fulfill my promise. But nothing can prevent God from fulfilling all of his promises, as well as all of his threats.

Marc Roby: And so, the next attribute that Grudem examines is God's omnipotence.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it goes hand-in-hand with his freedom. Grudem writes that "*God's omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will.*"³ We have already used the term omnipotence a number of times in these podcasts, but this is a good definition of it. We discussed in Session 85 that it does not mean that God can do anything, which is why Grudem only says that it means that God is able to do all his holy will.

³ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 216

Marc Roby: And the Bible clearly tells us that this is true. For example, when God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child in their old age, Sarah laughed because she thought this was clearly impossible. She had been past child-bearing age for quite some time. But we read the Lord's answer in Genesis 18:14, "Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son."

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, she did have a son in the next year. We also read that God said to the prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 32:27, "I am the LORD, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" And when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to have a child even though she was a virgin, he said to her, as we read in Luke 1:37, "For nothing is impossible with God."

Marc Roby: And when Jesus told his disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved, they were troubled and asked, "Who then can be saved?" To which Jesus replied, in Matthew 19:26, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Dr. Spencer: And, clearly, by "all things" in that verse Jesus does not mean things that are logically impossible or things that violate God's own nature. We have to be intelligent when we read the Bible, no less so than when reading books by human authors. As we discussed when we talked about hermeneutics, the word "all" does not always mean "all" in a completely exhaustive sense.

God's omnipotence describes his awesome power. And Grudem then notes that "God's exercise of power over his creation is also called God's *sovereignty*." God is the Sovereign Lord over his creation and he rules it with mighty power. He is the eternal King.

Marc Roby: Grudem then closes his discussion of God's attributes by looking at what he calls the "summary" attributes.

Dr. Spencer: And he tells us why he calls them summary attributes. He wrote that "Even though all the attributes of God modify all the others in some senses, those that fit in this category seem more directly to apply to all the attributes or to describe some aspect of all of the attributes that it is worthwhile to state explicitly."⁴

I like that statement because it reminds us of God's simplicity. He is not composed of parts and we dare not think of his attributes that way. They all work together all the time. We list them individually as an accommodation to our own inability to think about God on a higher plane.

Marc Roby: And the first of these summary attributes that Grudem lists is God's perfection, which we have already discussed a number of times in dealing with the other attributes.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we have mentioned God's perfection a number of times, precisely because it is so important. Grudem defines it this way: "*God's perfection means that God completely*

⁴ Ibid, pg. 218

*possesses all excellent qualities and lacks no part of any qualities that would be desirable for him.*⁵

Marc Roby: We have previously noted Matthew 5:48, where Jesus tells us to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Dr. Spencer: And in the Old Testament there are a number of places where we are told that everything God does is perfect. For example, in Psalm 18:30 King David writes, “As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.” The Hebrew word translated as perfect in that verse means to be complete, or without blemish or defect.⁶

John Frame ties this idea in with the fact that God is the ultimate standard in many ways,⁷ which is something we have discussed. We have, for example, mentioned a number of times that God is the ultimate standard for truth, and in Session 73 we noted that he is also the ultimate standard for what is good. We judge all other things as being true or good based on how they compare with God.

Marc Roby: And that leads us to the next summary attribute Grudem presents, which is blessedness, which means to be happy in a very deep and meaningful way. He cites 1 Timothy 6:15 where Paul calls God, “the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords”.

Dr. Spencer: Grudem goes on to define this attribute by writing that “*God’s blessedness means that God delights fully in himself and in all that reflects his character.*”⁸ We have noted before that for a human being to delight in himself more than anything else would be incredibly arrogant and unseemly. But the same is not true of God.

I like how Grudem puts it. He wrote that “It may at first seem strange or even somewhat disappointing to us that when God rejoices in his creation, or even when he rejoices in us, it is really the reflection of his own excellent qualities in which he is rejoicing. But when we remember that the sum of everything that is desirable or excellent is found in infinite measure in God himself, then we realize that it could not be otherwise: *whatever* excellence there is in the universe, *whatever* is desirable, must ultimately have come from him, for he is the Creator of all and he is the source of all good.”⁹

Marc Roby: That is a great statement. And he quite properly backs it up by quoting James 1:17, which says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.” And he also quotes 1 Corinthians

⁵ Ibid

⁶ See Vine, W.E., Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, 1996, pg. 176 or Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pg. 403

⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002, pp 405-409

⁸ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 218

⁹ Ibid, pg. 219

4:7, where Paul writes, “For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, we are no better than anyone else, and we have nothing good that we have not received from God, so we should not boast in ourselves. We need to remember that we are creatures. God takes pleasure in us, but it is to some extent analogous to the pleasure an artist takes in a painting or sculpture he has made. The pleasure is in the artist’s accomplishment and his abilities, it is not pleasure brought about by the canvas, or the paints or the marble themselves.

Marc Roby: That analogy has clear limitations though. Obviously, God has created sentient beings with some degree of free will and he takes pleasure in our willing obedience to his commands.

Dr. Spencer: Very true, but let’s move on. The next summary attribute that Grudem lists is beauty. He writes that “*God’s beauty is that attribute of God whereby he is the sum of all desirable qualities.*” King David wrote, in Psalm 27:4, “One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple.”

Marc Roby: What a glorious thought that is. To see God face to face. We are told in 1 John 3:2, “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Dr. Spencer: And John Murray argues, I think successfully, that the apostle is speaking of God the Father when he writes that “we shall see him as he is.”¹⁰ In Revelation 21 and 22 we are told about heaven, and in 22:3-4 we read, “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face”. What a glorious future we have. To be able to see God as he truly is.

Marc Roby: That is an amazing thing to think about. And that brings us to the last summary attribute that Grudem presents, the glory of God.

Dr. Spencer: And, as Grudem himself notes, this is not really an attribute of God in the normal usage of that term. We have used the term glory a number of times in these podcasts without stopping to define it because I think most people have a reasonable sense of the meaning of the term. In one sense it refers to praise, honor, or fame. And, as Grudem says, it “describes the superlative honor that should be given to God by everything in the universe”. We have noted multiple times that the Bible tells us God’s purpose in creation is the manifestation of his own glory. The great Puritan William Perkins defined God’s glory as “the infinite excellency of his most simple and most holy divine nature.”¹¹

¹⁰ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 310

¹¹ Quoted in Beeke, Joel R. & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pp 120-121

Marc Roby: But there is another meaning of the term as well. It can just mean brightness.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, and it is biblical. The Bible certainly talks about the glory of God in that sense. But, as Grudem notes, in that sense God's glory is a created thing, it is "the *created* light or brilliance that surrounds God as he manifests himself in his creation."¹² We see this, for example, when the angels announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds. In Luke 2:9 we read that "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."

Marc Roby: It is amazing to consider that God promises us that we will share in his glory. We read in Romans 8:17 where the apostle wrote, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a wonderful promise. And it is not the only place we see that promise. We also read in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that "we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." And later in that same letter, in 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul wrote, "For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."

Marc Roby: I can't wait for that day. But we should emphasize that our glory is a reflection of God's glory. The only glory we have is by virtue of being created in his image.

Dr. Spencer: And we are to live for the praise of his glory as Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:12. And Jesus showed us how we can bring glory to God. In John 17:4 Jesus said to the Father, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." And in Ephesians 2:10 we are told that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Therefore, it is really very simple. The way we glorify God is by obeying him and doing the work he has prepared for us to do.

Marc Roby: Are we now finished with God's attributes?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we could spend the rest of our lives on them and not exhaust them, but we are done with what I hope is a reasonable short summary of them, yes.

Marc Roby: Very well. Then let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we'll do our best to respond to them.

¹² Grudem, op. cit., pg. 221