

**Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the providence of God. Last time we discussed miracles, which represent an extraordinary example of God's governing his creation. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to discuss today?**

Dr. Spencer: I want to briefly discuss God's eternal decrees. We already examined God's decretive will, which is simply whatever actually happens, in Sessions 84, 85 and 86. But I want to take some time to relate God's decrees to his providence. In their book *A Puritan Theology*, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones note that "Providence is not the same as God's predestination or eternal decree, but rather is the execution of that decree within the time and space of His creation."<sup>1</sup>

**Marc Roby: Perhaps we could summarize what we have said before by saying that God's eternal decrees are, essentially, his overall plan for creation, while God's providence is his preserving and governing his creation to bring that plan to fruition.**

Dr. Spencer: And Wayne Grudem says much the same thing in his *Systematic Theology*. He writes that God's "providential actions are the outworking of the eternal decrees that he made long ago."<sup>2</sup> When we first started discussing God's providence we noted, in Session 89, that it is purposeful. He governs his creation for the purpose of bringing about the end he decreed from before the beginning. In Isaiah 46:9-10 God tells us, "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please."<sup>3</sup>

The Bible begins with the words, "In the beginning God ..." and then it goes on to tell us his purposes for creation, to tell us about the fall and how we may be saved. And, along the way, it tells us about our proper role as God's image bearers in creation and gives us numerous examples of his providential governing of his creation to instruct and encourage us.

**Marc Roby: And it is very important to emphasize that while God has decreed all things from before the beginning, he also made man with a degree of free will. Our actions have real consequences for ourselves and for others and we make real decisions for which we will be justly held accountable.**

Dr. Spencer: That is a critically important point. Many people throughout history have either wrongly rejected the doctrine of God's eternal decrees because they think it eliminates man's freedom, or they have wrongly concluded that how they live and what they do doesn't matter. But the proper biblical understanding is that God has ordained both the end to be achieved and

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<sup>1</sup> Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 163

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 332

<sup>3</sup> All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

the means to achieve that end. And he has chosen to use us as secondary agents with a degree of freedom and responsibility to accomplish his purposes.

**Marc Roby: In other words, God’s eternal decrees and his providence do not negate human responsibility.**

Dr. Spencer: Not at all. I think Wayne Grudem is right to deal with this subject in the chapter on God’s providence in his *Systematic Theology*.<sup>4</sup> God has ordained all things that happen, but he has also ordained the means to achieve those ends, and most importantly from our perspective, he has created us as moral creatures with a degree of free will who can be justly held accountable for our actions.

**Marc Roby: Now, when you say that we have a “degree” of free will, you are emphasizing the fact that our freedom is constrained, right?**

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We talked about this in Session 84. We do not have absolute freedom in the sense of being able to make any and every decision. That is incompatible with making intelligent, as opposed to random, choices. My freedom is constrained by my nature because what I decide to do in any given situation depends on what I believe to be right or wrong and by what things I enjoy or don’t enjoy, or perceive to be worthwhile or not and so on.

**Marc Roby: Which means, as we pointed out before, that since God knows us perfectly, he can predict exactly what we will do in any and every situation and can, therefore, ordain whatever comes to pass without negating our freedom.**

Dr. Spencer: And, in addition, it means that what I do really does matter. Since God chooses to work through secondary agents, I may very well be his ordained means for bringing about a particular result. The fact that he ordained the result does not in any way detract from my free agency in producing it. Grudem gives a great biblical illustration that our choices matter even though God has ordained the outcome.

**Marc Roby: What example is that?**

Dr. Spencer: It’s Paul’s shipwreck while he is being taken to Rome. In Acts 27:24 Paul tells the men on the ship that God had revealed to him that they would all survive, but that the ship would be lost. Then, in Verse 30 we read that some of the sailors lowered a life boat and were preparing to abandon the ship. In response, Paul tells the centurion and soldiers in charge, in Verse 31, that “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” As a result, the soldiers cut the ropes attached to the life boat and let it float away.

The relevant thing for our present purposes is that even though God had revealed to Paul that everyone would survive, he told the centurion that “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” Note the word “cannot” – it expresses an impossibility. The sailors had to stay with the ship or what God had revealed to Paul could not come true.

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<sup>4</sup> Grudem, op. cit., See Section E. starting on pg. 333

**Marc Roby: That is a very interesting point.**

Dr. Spencer: Grudem draws the right conclusion from it. He wrote, “Wisely, Paul knew that God’s providential oversight and even his clear prediction of what would happen still involved the use of ordinary human *means* to bring it about. He was even so bold to say that those means were *necessary* ... We would do well to imitate his example, combining complete trust in God’s providence with a realization that the use of ordinary means is necessary for things to come out the way God has planned them to come out.”<sup>5</sup>

**Marc Roby: That is a very clear example of the fact that what we do really does matter. And it isn’t just our actions that matter, our prayers do as well. In James 5:16 we are told that “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”**

Dr. Spencer: Prayer is definitely one of the means that God has ordained to accomplish his purposes. It isn’t magic, but it definitely matters. God knows what we are going to pray before we do, so it isn’t that we are telling him something he doesn’t know, or making a request he isn’t already aware of, but it is still true that it is a means he has ordained.

**Marc Roby: Of course there are other purposes for prayer as well. For example, it helps us to stay humble and to be consciously aware of our dependence on God.**

Dr. Spencer: Sure, prayer does serve other purposes as well, and we can’t presume upon the answer, it may be “no”. But, nevertheless, prayer does have real efficacy in bringing about events. It is important to note however that we shouldn’t *just* pray if there are things we have it within our power to do to help a situation. Consider Joshua as an example.

**Marc Roby: You mean the Joshua who succeeded Moses and led the Israelites into the Promised Land, right?**

Dr. Spencer: That’s the one. When the Israelites had first entered the Promised Land and were preparing to attack Jericho, God told them, as we read in Joshua 6:18-19, that after he caused the walls to come down and the people went up into the city, they must not<sup>6</sup> take any of the silver, gold, or articles of bronze and iron for themselves. These were to be considered sacred to the Lord and if anyone took any of them, they would make the Israelites liable to destruction.

**Marc Roby: Which is exactly what happened. After conquering Jericho, the Israelites attempted to conquer Ai and were routed by the men of Ai.**

Dr. Spencer: And because of that rout Joshua and the people were afraid and we’re told in Joshua 7:6-9 how he responded. He “tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. And Joshua said, ‘Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by

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<sup>5</sup> Grudem, op. cit. pg. 336

<sup>6</sup> The word “not” was left out of the original transcript by error. Corrected on 4/19/19

its enemies? The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?”

**Marc Roby: God’s response was probably not what Joshua was expecting.**

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure that it wasn’t at all what he was expecting. He was pouring out his heart in prayer, but he wasn’t *doing* what he should be doing. God had told them that if they took some of the forbidden items the Israelites would become liable to destruction, so Joshua should have been investigating to see who had violated God’s prohibition. Even heartfelt prayer is never to be used as an alternative to action when we have the means at our disposal to do God’s will.

**Marc Roby: And so we read, in Joshua 7:10-12, that “The LORD said to Joshua, ‘Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies’”.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, God was not pleased with Joshua’s prayer. He told him to gather the people and find out who had stolen some of the items, which they did. It turned out that a man by the name of Achan had stolen a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels. Only after the Israelites obeyed God and destroyed Achan, his family and all he owned, did God bless them again.

**Marc Roby: I’m sure that episode brought a greater fear of God to the people and made them far more careful to obey his commands.**

Dr. Spencer: And, in keeping with our current topic, I’m also sure that Joshua learned that he needed to do those things that were in his power and in God’s will rather than just crying out to God for help. There is nothing wrong with prayer, and Joshua certainly could and should have prayed for God to give him wisdom and to show him why the Israelites were defeated, but it is false piety to expend great energy crying out to God when he has already told us what he wants us to do.

**Marc Roby: That reminds me of the quote you read at the end of Session 91 from *A Puritan Theology*, it said that “Stephen Charnock warned that pride uses means without seeking God, and presumption depends on God while neglecting the means God provides.”<sup>7</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that’s a great quote. We want to avoid both pride and presumption. We should seek God and pray, but we must also do the work he has given us to do using the means he has provided. Grudem points out three additional points of application for the doctrine of God’s providence.<sup>8</sup> He first notes that God’s providence should cause us to not be afraid, but to trust in

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, op. cit., pg. 170

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, op. cit., pg. 337

God. If we have done what it is within our power to do, it is right for us to not worry about the outcome, but to leave it up to God.

Marc Roby: We have a great example of that in 2 Samuel 10:12 where the commander of King David's armies faced a difficult situation and he said, "Be strong and let us fight bravely for our people and the cities of our God. The LORD will do what is good in his sight."

Dr. Spencer: That is a wonderful example of this principle.

The second application Grudem makes from this doctrine is that we should be thankful for every good thing that happens to us. They are all under the control of our great sovereign Lord and King. In Psalm 103:2-5 we read, "Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

Marc Roby: God is wonderful to his people. And I would add that even when bad things happen to us, we can give thanks to God for his promise in Romans 8:28 that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, good point. Grudem's third point of application is that there is no such thing as luck or chance, a point we already made in Sessions 88 and 89. We can be confident that God is in charge, which means that all we have to focus on is walking in obedience and doing what he calls us to do. We can leave the results up to him.

Marc Roby: That is a great comfort. Are we done with discussing God's providence?

Dr. Spencer: We are. And we are also finished with theology proper. We certainly may come back to it, but I think we've covered all we need to for now.

Marc Roby: Perhaps it would be good to remind our listeners that we are going through the six loci of classical reformed theology. A locus is a central point or focus of something, so the six loci are the six main headings under which we can organize all of systematic theology. Those six loci are: 1) Theology proper, which means the study of God; 2) Anthropology, which means the study of man; 3) Christology, which means the study of Jesus Christ the Redeemer; 4) Soteriology, which means the study of salvation; in other words, how sinful men can be saved; 5) Ecclesiology, which means the study of the church; and 6) Eschatology, which means the study of last things; in other words, of the final eternal state of everything. So, I assume we are going to move on then to examine biblical anthropology next time?

Dr. Spencer: That is the plan.

Marc Roby: Very good. Then I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org), we'd love to hear from you.