

Marc Roby: We are interrupting our study of systematic theology to deal with a significant current event; namely the corona virus pandemic.

As we come together to record this podcast, President Trump has declared a national emergency, virtually all professional and collegiate sporting events have been cancelled for at least the next few weeks, and almost all concerts and other public gatherings have been cancelled in the United States and many other countries as well. Most schools are closed and some major cities have told people to stay home entirely. In addition, the stock market has been on a wild roller coaster ride for about three weeks and the Dow Jones Industrial Average currently sits more than 31% below its peak from just over a month ago. All in all, this is a very troubling time for many people, and so the question arises, “How should a Christian respond to circumstances such as these?” Dr. Spencer, how would you answer that question?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as always, a Christian should turn to the Word of God and prayer to understand how to respond. In other words, we prayerfully meditate on God’s Word, specifically asking the Holy Spirit to show us through the Word what we should do. And when we do that, at least one thing becomes crystal clear.

Marc Roby: What is that, that becomes so clear?

Dr. Spencer: That a Christian should not be anxious. We know God and that knowledge should give us confidence and peace. For example, look at Psalm 55, which is a lament that was written by King David, in Verse 22 we read, “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.”¹ The apostle Peter was most likely thinking of this verse when he commanded us, in 1 Peter 5:7, to “Cast all your anxiety on [God] because he cares for you.”

Marc Roby: Well, that sounds easy, but it is hard to do at times.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly can be difficult. But if we spend some serious time in prayer and meditating on the Word of God it *is* achievable. This is an example of how systematic theology is very important. If our faith is built on the mushy foundation of feelings or the fatally flawed foundation of the modern health and prosperity gospel, then our faith will fail when we experience serious trials. And even if we have real faith, but have not studied God’s Word, trials will cause our faith to falter, although God will not allow it to fail completely. But if we have a solid faith based on new birth, real repentance and an intelligent understanding of the Word of God – in other words, an understanding of systematic theology – then we can overrule our natural, emotional response and be filled with confidence, hope and joy even in the midst of great trouble.

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Marc Roby: And that is why we do this podcast. Our goal is to help Christians to develop a better understanding of systematic theology.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And if we have an understanding of systematic theology, then in times of trouble we will be able to stand. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:14, “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves”.

Through prayer and meditation on the Word a mature Christian can, in essence, give a sermon to his own soul and command himself to respond correctly to any situation.

Marc Roby: Very well, given our current circumstances, what would you say to your soul in this sermon?

Dr. Spencer: The first thing we must always remember is that God is in control. In Isaiah 45:7 God says, “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.” We have to remember that nothing that happens is outside of God’s sovereign control. Jesus told his disciples, in Matthew 10:28-29, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.”

His point was clear. We shouldn’t fear anything in creation because creation is completely under the control of God. Even seemingly insignificant details like the death of sparrow are under God’s control. Therefore, God is the only one we should fear.

Marc Roby: Mentioning insignificant details makes me think of a passage in Luke that is very similar to the one you just quoted from Matthew. After saying that God does not forget about the sparrows, Christ says in Luke 12:7, “Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” Telling us that God has numbered the hairs on our heads is a clear indication that God knows every detail in creation.

Dr. Spencer: And more than just knowing every detail, God controls every detail. He created, he sustains, he governs and he will judge. We still make free decisions of course, but God orchestrates everything that happens. And that includes the corona virus and the stock market.

Marc Roby: That is hard for people to accept because they think God can’t possibly be in control of unpleasant circumstances. After all, the thinking goes, isn’t God entirely good?

Dr. Spencer: And the biblical answer is of course that yes, God is entirely good, and he is also sovereign. If he weren’t sovereign, then we couldn’t trust any of his promises. We could never be sure that he had the ability to keep them. But he does have the ability because he created this universe and it is entirely under his control. Therefore, a proper understanding of the Bible must include realizing that God is in control of everything, even seemingly bad things that happen. We have to be humble enough to realize that we often can’t see God’s purposes in allowing what we think of as bad things to happen.

Marc Roby: One classic biblical illustration of this is found in the life of Joseph. His brothers, out of jealousy, sold him into slavery in Egypt. After Joseph spent years as a slave and then even

as a prisoner in Egypt, God orchestrated events so that Joseph rose to be second only to Pharaoh himself. Then, many years later, when there was a great famine, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food and had to come face to face with him. They didn't recognize him and he didn't reveal his identity at first, but he did eventually. Later, when their father Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were worried that he would exact revenge on them. But we read in Genesis 50:19-20 that "Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.'"

Dr. Spencer: That is a classic example. We can't see or understand all of God's reasons for doing the things he does, but we can know for certain that he is sovereign and that he is good. And, knowing those things, we can trust him, most especially when we don't understand a particular series of events.

And there is an even more amazing example of this in the New Testament.

Marc Roby: You must be speaking of the crucifixion itself.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, you're right. Here is the most wicked thing ever done by man. Men crucified the Lord of glory. And yet, we read about the disciples praying in Acts 4:27-28 and they said to God, "Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Marc Roby: That is astounding to consider. God had ordained this most wicked act.

Dr. Spencer: And out of that great sin came the redemption of God's people. The greatest good ever accomplished for men came out of the worst sin ever committed by men.

Marc Roby: I think that clearly establishes that God is able to bring good results out of terrible circumstances. What else would you say to yourself in this sermon?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the second thing I would say to myself is that we need to remember what Paul wrote in Romans 8:28. He said, "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." This verse is universally true, it is not suspended when we go through some trial that we don't understand.

Marc Roby: It requires faith to accept the truth of that statement when we are troubled.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it does for sure. But if we remind ourselves that God created all things and then remember things like the story of Joseph and the crucifixion of Christ, we can clearly see how God has used terrible events to bring about good ends in the past and that he has the power to do so again in the future. Therefore, we can trust his promises.

But we do need to notice that Romans 8:28 does not say that in all things God works for the good of everyone, it only says he does so for those who love him. We need to make our calling and election sure. We need to be certain that we are among those who love God.

Marc Roby: And if we do, then we can claim his promises for ourselves.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And in Jeremiah 29:11 God tells us, "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful promise. What else would you say in this sermon to yourself?

Dr. Spencer: I would remind myself of the purpose of life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 Paul tells us, "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." This is a familiar verse, but we need to think through the application of it to a situation like this.

If I am to do everything for the glory of God, then obviously I am to glorify God in how I respond to troubles.

Marc Roby: The people who know us will certainly take note of how we respond. Our colleagues, neighbors, friends and family are watching all the time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, they are. If you identify yourself as a Christian, and we all must, then people definitely keep watch. And our response to trouble can either glorify God or demonstrate that our faith is really a powerless façade. If we stand around the coffee machine at work and moan and groan with everyone else about how much money our 401K lost this past week and talk about how worried we are about the possibility of catching the virus, we prove that our faith makes no real difference in our life. Our so-called Christianity only matters for an hour or so on Sunday mornings.

Marc Roby: And that is not a Christianity that God accepts.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. Because it isn't real. If our claim to being a Christian is real, it means, as we have been discussing recently, that we are united to Christ by faith. We are adopted children of God. We know that this life is short and that we are just on a journey to a better place. This world is not our home. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord as Paul tells us in Romans 8:39, and that includes the corona virus, or a financial collapse, or anything else that might happen.

Marc Roby: Even death itself.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, even death itself. If God calls us home it is gain for us, although it may be difficult for our loved ones. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Now, we really must have an eternal perspective to properly evaluate the troubles in this life.

Marc Roby: Alright. To summarize what you've said so far, your sermon to yourself would begin with the following three points: first, God is in control. He is sovereign over all things. Second, God works all things for the good of those who love him. And third, the purpose of life is to glorify God.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, but the third point contains a bit more. We must ask *how* we are to glorify God. And Jesus himself gave us the answer. In John 17:4 he was praying to the Father and said, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." In other words, we glorify God by our obedience.

Marc Roby: As you noted earlier, we can only lay claim to God's good promises if we love him. And Jesus told us in John 14:15 that "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, this is the essence of true love for God. True love for God must be based on a proper understanding of the Creator/creature distinction. He is the Creator and we are his creatures. He made us for a purpose and if we truly love God, we should do our very best to fulfil that purpose. And the wonderful truth is that this is also our greatest joy. We were made in God's image for the purpose of ruling creation in his stead and in so doing bringing him glory. And when we do our best to fulfil that purpose, we also find our greatest joy.

That is why the answer to the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is that "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

Marc Roby: I think most people can remember the joy they have had when they did something really well, something which pleased their parents, or a teacher or a boss.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. That is our greatest joy in life; to be doing that which we were made to do and to do it well. Obedience brings joy. Disobedience brings depression.

And so, we come to the final point of the sermon I would give myself, which is also where we began. You asked me what is the first thing that would be clear after we spent time praying and meditating on the Word of God about our current troubles and I said it was that we should not be anxious.

Marc Roby: And I can clearly see that that is a reasonable conclusion from the sermon you would preach to yourself. When we take into account the first two points; namely the fact that God is fully in charge and that in all things he works for the good of his people, well, we should be comforted and should not be anxious.

And then, when we consider the third point, that our purpose in life is to glorify God, which means to obey him, and we look at his command to not be anxious but to cast our cares on him, well that should finish the job. We not only have good cause to not be anxious, but our sovereign Lord commands us to not be anxious.

Dr. Spencer: That is the right conclusion. In Philippians 4:6-7 the apostle Paul commands us, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This is both a command and a glorious promise. Paul assures us that if we go to God in prayer, with thanksgiving, and present our requests to him, then he will give us the peace of God. In other words, the peace that God himself possesses.

Marc Roby: That is a staggering thought.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. But this explains how Christians can be at peace in situations that are absolutely hopeless in a purely human sense.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of the apostle Paul in prison in Philippi.

Dr. Spencer: That is a great example of a Christian being at peace in trying circumstances.

Marc Roby: In Acts Chapter 16 we read about Paul and Silas being in prison together there in Philippi. We are told that they were severely flogged, put in an inner cell in the prison with their feet in stocks. And yet, in Acts 16:25 we read that “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

Dr. Spencer: That is clearly a peace that transcends all understanding. And we know that God used this situation to bring about the salvation of the Philippian jailer and his entire household.

Marc Roby: That is amazing.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is. When we have real faith and it shows in our having peace in times of trial, that is a great witness to those around us. We will then often have opportunities to explain *why* we aren't distraught about the drop in the stock market or the threat of the corona virus or whatever. Not only will we glorify God by behaving this way, but we will, like Paul and Silas, enjoy the peace that passes all understanding ourselves. We have nothing to fear from the corona virus or anything else in this world.

If we are God's children, then he is for us and he will watch over us. That doesn't mean that our 401K might not suffer tremendously, or that we won't get sick and die. But it does mean that we will spend eternity in heaven with God, worshipping him and enjoying fellowship with him and with each other forever.

Marc Roby: Would you like to say anything else before we close for today?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. When we pray, we should always remember to pray with thanksgiving for all the good things that God has done for us. And it is also good to pray for others. First because prayer is powerful, but also praying for others helps to give us proper perspective. At a time like this we should, for example, pray for wisdom for our leaders, God's protection for people in the medical profession, God's protection and mercy for the most vulnerable people in society and for those whose jobs are adversely affected. We should also, as always, pray that God be glorified and use the situation to save people.

Marc Roby: That's a great reminder of our privilege and responsibility as Christians to pray for others. I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to answer you.