

Marc Roby: Well then, we are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. More specifically, we are discussing the *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation. We have been speaking about the first item in this order, the effectual call. Dr. Spencer, what else would you like to say about this call?

Dr. Spencer: I want to read a quote from John Murray. He wrote that “The sovereignty and efficacy of the call do not relax human responsibility but rather ground and confirm that responsibility. The magnitude of the grace enhances the obligation.”¹ In other words, those who think that the fact that God is sovereign in election, calling and regeneration somehow negates human responsibility are wrong. The reality is that the sheer magnitude of the grace involved in God’s having chosen, called and regenerated us *increases* our obligation to obey. And this obligation to obey does not end with our repentance and faith.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of Ephesians 4:1, where the apostle Paul wrote, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”²

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is a very challenging statement. Who can be worthy of such a calling? This new life begins with repentance and faith, but the obedience is to continue throughout all of life and beyond.

Murray also points out that this calling is a high, holy and heavenly calling,³ which is a biblical statement. Paul wrote in Philippians 3:14, “I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” I’ve quoted from the American Standard Version here because it uses the phrase “high calling”, which is also used in the King James Version that Murray was referring to. And we see that the calling is holy by looking at what Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:8-9, “But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life”. And, finally, we see that it is a heavenly calling in Hebrews 3:1, where we are told, “Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.”

Marc Roby: Well, the fact that this is a high, holy and heavenly calling makes Paul’s admonition to live a life worthy of this calling even more challenging.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly does. No one can live the Christian life in his or her own strength. The Christian life is impossible to live unless you are empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote in Romans 8:14 that “those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” And, as the Rev. P.G. Mathew points out in his commentary on Romans, the original Greek for this verse is

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 92

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³ Murray, op. cit., pg. 91

better translated as, “For those who are being led by the Spirit of God, they and they alone are the sons of God.”⁴

Marc Roby: And praise God for the Holy Spirit’s leading.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. As I said, no one could possibly live the Christian life without the Spirit.

Marc Roby: And so, are we ready to move on to examine the next item on the order of salvation?

Dr. Spencer: We are.

Marc Roby: Very well. The next item in the order is regeneration.

Dr. Spencer: And because of the intimate connection between the effectual call and regeneration we have already mentioned regeneration a number of times while looking at the effectual call. In speaking of regeneration itself, Murray wrote that “God effects a change which is radical and all-pervasive, a change which cannot be explained in terms of any combination, permutation, or accumulation of human resources, a change which is nothing less than a new creation”.⁵

In a similar vein, the great Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock wrote that regeneration “is a universal change of the whole man. It is a new creature, not only a new power or new faculty. This ... extends to every part ... [It] is as large in renewing as sin was in defacing.”⁶

Marc Roby: And that immediately makes me think of 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul wrote that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Dr. Spencer: And that new creation starts with new birth, or regeneration. We are entirely passive in our new birth, just as we were in our physical birth. We play no determining role in our conception, gestation or birth. We are the passive object. And it is the same with God’s election, calling and new birth.

Marc Roby: I’m always amazed when someone misses the obvious importance of the metaphor Jesus used. In speaking about our need to be born again Jesus was quite clearly indicating that we play no active role.

Dr. Spencer: That clearly was his point. So I want to take a few minutes to look at the verses where Jesus tells us about the new birth. In John 3:3 and 5, Jesus says to Nicodemus, beginning with Verse 3, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” And then in Verse 5 he said, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.” The question I want to address is, “What did Jesus mean when he said we must be “born of water and the Spirit”?”

⁴ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 536

⁵ Murray, op. cit., pg. 96

⁶ Quoted in Beeke, Joel R. & Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012, pg. 474

Marc Roby: Well, there is fairly widespread agreement that being born of the Spirit refers to new birth, which is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit as you said before.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But there have been differences of opinion about what is meant by being born of water. Some take that to refer to either natural human birth or baptism, but I think those views are almost certainly wrong.

Marc Roby: What do you think it refers to?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let me quote from John Murray again because I think his analysis of this verse is clear and correct. He wrote that "Jesus did not say baptism; he says water. ... Now what religious idea would we expect to be conveyed to the mind of Nicodemus by the use of the word "water"? Of course, the idea associated with the religious use of water in that religious tradition and practice which provided the very context of Nicodemus' life and profession. ... the religiously symbolic meaning of water, pointed in one direction, and that direction is purification. All the relevant considerations would conspire to convey to Nicodemus that message."⁷

Marc Roby: It makes good sense, and is exegetically sound, to say that if we want to understand what Jesus meant, we must take into account that he was speaking to a particular person and that person had a specific background and life experience. In the case of Nicodemus, we are told in John 3:1 that he was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Dr. Spencer: And given that background, I think that Murray's analysis is obviously correct. Nicodemus would never have thought of natural birth or Christian baptism, which hadn't been instituted yet anyway. He would have thought of the Jewish ritual of purification. Wayne Grudem makes the same argument in his *Systematic Theology*.⁸

Marc Roby: We should probably provide a bit of background and point out that at the time of Jesus, the idea of bathing in water had great symbolic significance in terms of moral cleansing.⁹ And this significance goes way back in the Old Testament.

We even see it directly linked with the Old Testament prophecy about being given a new heart. In Ezekiel 36:25-26 we read that God said, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

Dr. Spencer: That background is very relevant. There are a number of places in modern Israel, like Qumran and Masada, where you can still see the ancient pools used for ceremonial washings.¹⁰ The mention of water would almost certainly have conveyed that meaning to

⁷ Murray, op. cit., pg. 97

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, see footnote 7 on pg. 702

⁹ E.g., see *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (in five volumes), Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 4, pg. 957 entry on Purification, and pg. 958 in entry on Purity, 1b. Water

¹⁰ Ibid, Vol. 1, pg. 490 in entry on Bath

Nicodemus. Murray then goes on to say that “The characteristic sin of the pharisees was self-complacency and self-righteousness. What they needed was to be convinced of their own pollution and the need of radical purification. It is this lesson that the expression ‘born of water’ would have conveyed most effectively.”¹¹

Marc Roby: That is a strong argument. And it reminds me of what Paul wrote to Titus, where he also associated washing and new birth with each other. In Titus 3:4-5 we read, “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”.

Dr. Spencer: That does solidify the connection. We can also look at what Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:25-27, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Notice that we are to cleanse our wives by “washing with water through the word”. This is clearly speaking about moral, not physical, cleansing, and it again uses this metaphor of water, but it connects it with the Word of God. The Word of God is this cleansing “water”.

Christ himself also linked the Word with cleansing. In John 15:3 we read that he told his disciples, “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” The Word of God shows us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. And it then reveals Jesus Christ to us as the only Savior. We need this information to be saved. The Word then shows us how we can live in a way that pleases God.

Marc Roby: The role of the Word of God in bringing about new birth is also explicitly mentioned by Peter. In 1 Peter 1:23 we read, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great verse. And I think that when you look at all that we have said, it is clear that when Jesus told Nicodemus that “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit”, he was making the point that we need to be cleansed of our sins and the “water” that accomplishes that cleansing is the Word of God applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Murray wrote, “Regeneration must negate the past as well as reconstitute for the future. It must cleanse from sin as well as recreate in righteousness.”¹²

Marc Roby: Very well, what else would you like to say about regeneration?

Dr. Spencer: That it is a completely sovereign work of God, primarily God the Holy Spirit. Theologians say it is a monergistic work of God, simply meaning that God alone is active in it. After telling Nicodemus that he must be born again, Jesus went on to say, in John 3:8, that “The

¹¹ Murray, op. cit., pg. 97

¹² Ibid, pg. 98

wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Marc Roby: I find it interesting that in the original Greek, the word translated in this verse as “wind” is πνεῦμα (pneuma), which is the same word translated as Spirit in the earlier verses.

Dr. Spencer: That is interesting, and I’m sure the double meaning was not lost on Nicodemus, but it is clear from the context that the translation here is correct. In any event, Murray points out the significance of this statement. He wrote, “The wind is not at our beck and call; neither is the regenerative operation of the Spirit. . . . the Spirit’s work is mysterious. [This] All points up the sovereignty, efficacy, and inscrutability of the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration.”¹³

Marc Roby: But you mentioned in our last session that the Father is also involved in the work of regeneration.

Dr. Spencer: I did, and I said that based on the Scriptural evidence. For example, in Ephesians 2:4-5 we read that “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.” Now the sentence clearly speaks of God and Christ as two distinct persons, which tells us that God in this verse refers to God the Father as is common in the New Testament. So the verse says that God the Father made us alive when we were dead in transgressions, which is a clear reference to regeneration. Paul says almost exactly the same thing again in Colossians 2:13, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ.”

Marc Roby: Those are clear statements that the Father is involved.

Dr. Spencer: And Wayne Grudem uses them, along with others, to support his conclusion that “both God the Father and God the Holy Spirit bring about regeneration.”¹⁴ Now I think it is still clear that the Holy Spirit is the primary agent in our regeneration, but these verses show that the Father is involved as well.

Marc Roby: What else would you like to say about regeneration?

Dr. Spencer: That the Word of God is used in bringing it about; as we have discussed, we must be born of water and the Spirit, and the cleansing water is the Word of God. You could, perhaps even should, consider this to be part of the effectual call, rather than regeneration proper, but it bears pointing out that the Puritans referred to the Word of God as the instrumental cause of regeneration, meaning that the Word is the instrument used to bring it about.¹⁵ We see this, for example, in James 1:18, which says that the Father “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” We also see this in 1 Peter 1:23, where we read, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” And finally, let me quote from the apostle Paul.

¹³ Ibid, pg. 99

¹⁴ Grudem, op. cit., pg. 700

¹⁵ Beeke & Jones, op. cit., pg. 473

He wrote, in Romans 10:17, that “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”

Marc Roby: And that makes sense since the Word of God is where we learn of both our need for a Savior and God’s provision of a Savior in Jesus Christ. Regeneration is what makes us able to respond to the gospel offer with repentance and faith, but the response could not occur without knowing about our need and the offer.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right, the Word of God is essential for salvation. We also need to remember that the gospel offer will not be refused by anyone who has been regenerated. We spoke about the doctrine of irresistible grace in Sessions 130 and 131, but it good to remember that when God changes our nature, our positive response to the gospel call is made certain.

We see this clearly in Romans Chapter 9. After Paul has explained God’s sovereign election of some people to be saved, he then anticipates an objection that will come from sinful men and writes, in Romans 9:19, “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’” This objection would make no sense if Paul were not teaching that God is absolutely sovereign over our salvation. But, as we have said before, he doesn’t force anyone to accept or reject the gospel. Unregenerate people will always, without exception, willingly reject the gospel and regenerate people will always, without exception, willingly accept the gospel.

Marc Roby: Are we finished with the topic of regeneration?

Dr. Spencer: Not yet.

Marc Roby: Well, we are, however, out of time for today, so we’ll have to finish this up next time. Therefore, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we’ll do our best to answer you.