

**Marc Roby:** 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 and we are in the midst of discussing conversion, which is repentance and faith. Dr. Spencer, in our session last week we emphasized the fact that true, saving faith has content. The object of saving faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to go back to what we were discussing at the end last time. We had noted that we shouldn't try to give an exact list of doctrines that must be believed in order to be a Christian. We said the real issue was one of trust. And we had mentioned that a child can have true, saving faith with a very limited understanding of doctrine.

**Marc Roby:** I remember all of that. What point do you want to make from it?

Dr. Spencer: Well, considering the faith of a child is a great way of recognizing why we don't want to try and give an exact list of necessary doctrines. There are many doctrines of the faith that are very hard for adults to explain in any meaningful way – for example the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ – so we certainly can't expect a young child to have a solid intellectual understanding of these things. What we do expect is that the child sees his need for a Savior, and that he trusts that Jesus Christ is that Savior, and that he believes what the Bible says, even though he can't understand it all.

**Marc Roby:** Of course, no adult understands it all either.

Dr. Spencer: In a way that is precisely my point. We don't necessarily look for a certain level of knowledge or intellectual understanding, what we look for is a receptive heart to the level of knowledge a person possesses about Christ.

So, for example, what level of knowledge did the thief on the cross have when he was saved?

**Marc Roby:** Well, I would have to say that no one knows the answer to that.

Dr. Spencer: And I would agree. But it is certainly possible and, in fact, likely, that he knew very little. He may have simply heard that Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah, and that he had performed some miracles. We know that at first this thief joined with the other thief in hurling insults at Christ because, for example, we are told in Mark 15:32 that "Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him."<sup>1</sup> But then something happened to the one thief and he changed his tune completely.

**Marc Roby:** Yes. He was born again.

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Dr. Spencer: That's exactly what happened. In God's amazing eternal plan this thief had been chosen from all eternity to be saved. And here on the last day of his miserable life, hanging on a cross in great pain, he was given a new heart and new mind. And because of having been regenerated, he all of a sudden realized from what he had personally witnessed about Christ that the things he had heard were true. We don't know, but we can imagine that it was when Christ prayed for those who were crucifying him. We read in Luke 23:34 that Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

**Marc Roby: That would certainly be an amazing thing to hear Jesus say.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would. But, in any event, independent of exactly how God brought it about, this thief was able to see for the first time that his own sins deserved judgment from God and that his only hope was this Messiah hanging on the cross next to him.

**Marc Roby: I can't imagine what must have been going through his heart and mind. He had to have a lot of questions he would have liked to ask and a lot of things that he didn't fully understand.**

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure he did. And all of us have questions as well, things we don't understand. But with his new regenerate heart, he did understand that he needed salvation and he trusted in Christ to save him. We read in Luke 23:40-41 that when the other thief continued to insult Christ, this newly born-again thief rebuked him, saying, "Don't you fear God, since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." And then, in Verse 42 we read his plea for mercy and his confession of faith. He looked at Jesus and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Saying "remember me" was a plea for mercy, and speaking about Christ's kingdom was a confession that Jesus Christ is, in fact, what the signs placed on his cross by Pilate said, the King of the Jews.

**Marc Roby: And this thief had also proven his faith by the good work of rebuking the other thief.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, you're right about that. God has work for every single one of his chosen people to do. This man didn't have long, but he did the work he was assigned. And he has been with Christ in bliss for nearly 2,000 years.

**Marc Roby: That is a glorious thought.**

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. But it also illustrates why we shouldn't try to give a precise or exhaustive statement of what doctrines must be believed in order to be saved.

It is equally important, however, that we don't jump into the other ditch and say that it doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere, or anything silly like that. This thief trusted in Christ and believed the information he did have. People who reject the gospel when it is presented to them are not born again, even if they call themselves Christians. We can still look for a credible confession of faith as we noted last week.

We are saved by faith alone, but not by just any faith someone might have. It must be faith in the true and living God and his plan of salvation revealed in the Bible.

**Marc Roby: Can you give us an example of a faith that does not save?**

Dr. Spencer: I can do better than to give an example of faith that doesn't save. I can give an example of a completely useless faith, or to be more accurate, a so-called faith. In his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, James Boice gives a great example using the famous book by Norman Vincent Peale called *The Power of Positive Thinking*.<sup>2</sup>

**Marc Roby: Well, I'll have to confess that I've never read that book, although I have certainly heard about it many times.**

Dr. Spencer: And I have to make the same confession, I've never read it either. Nevertheless, Boice points out that Peale ends the book by saying "so believe and live successfully."<sup>3</sup> In Boice's analysis of the book, he says the object of faith doesn't really seem to matter to Peale. Faith itself is seen as some great powerful thing all in itself.

**Marc Roby: Now, that is a strange view, but I have to admit I've heard a number of things over the years that sound very much like that.**

Dr. Spencer: And so have I. And J. Gresham Machen also talked about this view in his book "*What is Faith?*". He wrote that "The whole trouble is that faith is being considered merely as a beneficent quality of the soul without respect to the reality or unreality of its object; and the moment faith comes to be considered in that way, in that moment it is destroyed."<sup>4</sup>

**Marc Roby: That's an interesting statement. What does Machen mean by saying that faith is destroyed?**

Dr. Spencer: When Machen says that faith is destroyed when it is thought to be beneficent independent of whether or not its object is real, I think he means that when faith is thought of this way, then *real saving faith* is not possible.

The young man we spoke about last week, who said he was a Christian even though he didn't believe in the most basic tenets of the Christian faith, is a good example of a useless or vain faith, a faith that has been destroyed. People with such faith will find out in the most awful way imaginable how useless their faith is when they come face to face with Christ on the day of judgment and hear him say to them, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" as we read in Matthew 7:23.

**Marc Roby: We could say that such faith is not just useless, it is, quite literally, damning. It sends you to eternal hell.**

Dr. Spencer: That is the terrifying truth. Therefore, although we don't want to come up with a formal statement of the minimal doctrinal knowledge required for true, saving faith, we nonetheless must stand firmly with Jesus and declare that real faith has content. It is the truth that

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<sup>2</sup> J. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pp 409-410

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Machen, *What is Faith?*, The MacMillan Comp., 1925, pg. 174

will set us free, not a lie. True faith has an object. And, as we have seen, the object of real saving faith is the person and work of Jesus Christ. If he is not truly who he said he was and if he didn't do what the Bible says he did, our faith is useless.

**Marc Roby:** Well, that makes me think of what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:16-19 in defense of the doctrine of the resurrection. He said there, "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

Dr. Spencer: And indeed we are to be pitied more than all men if Jesus Christ is not our Savior and God's promises about eternity are not true. As Paul said, such faith is futile, it serves no useful purpose. Believing in a lie is never a good thing, nor is mere wishful thinking. But, praise God, he is truth and his Word is true.

In Hebrews 11:1 we read that "faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." And we must ask the question, "What is it that we hope for?" And in the context of this verse the answer is clear; our hope is for the promises of God to be fulfilled. Just a few verses before this we read, in Hebrews 10:36, "You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

**Marc Roby:** And, of course, the preeminent promise of God to his people is eternal life. We read in John 6:40 that Jesus himself said, "my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Dr. Spencer: And what a glorious promise that is. When Jesus was speaking to Martha just before raising her brother Lazarus from the dead, we read in John 11:25-26 that he said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die."

**Marc Roby:** Those are difficult statements for people to understand.

Dr. Spencer: Well, they are impossible to understand if you have a materialist worldview. In fact, if you think this material universe is all that exists, the statements are completely nonsensical; how can you possibly live even though you die? How can you never die? These things are impossible in a purely materialist universe. You need a proper biblical worldview to understand them.

Unless Christ comes again first, we will all die someday. But death is not a cessation of existence, it is separation as we discussed in Session 104. When we physically die, our spirits will be separated from our bodies. But that is a temporary state. The Bible clearly teaches that at the end of history every person will be united again with his or her physical body, although the body will be different. It will be suited to our eternal state, whether that is heaven or hell.

**Marc Roby:** And we will all spend eternity in one of those two places.

Dr. Spencer: That is the truth as presented to us in the Bible. So, when Jesus said that "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies", he simply meant that if we have saving faith in

Christ, then when we die physically, our spirits will immediately go into the presence of God and we will then spend eternity with him. First in our spirits and then, later, in our resurrection bodies. And that is true life. That is eternal life. So, what Jesus said is completely true, we will live – in the fullest sense of that word – even though we die in the sense of having our spirit separated from this physical body.

**Marc Roby: I can't think of a more wonderful promise than that.**

Dr. Spencer: Neither can I. But we must notice that the promise is conditional. Jesus said "*He who believes in me will live, even though he dies*". When those who do not believe in Jesus Christ die, their spirits immediately go to hell. Then, when their bodies are united to their spirits at the end of the age, they will spend all of eternity in hell, in torment.

**Marc Roby: And I can't think of a more terrifying threat than that.**

Dr. Spencer: Nor can I. But God's threats are just as sure as his promises. And notice that the difference between the two groups of people, those headed for hell and those headed for heaven, is faith in Jesus Christ.

**Marc Roby: OK. We have said that true saving faith has content, and I think it would be good for me to summarize the content we have gone over so far. First, we must know the bad news that we are headed for hell and can't save ourselves. Second, we must understand that Jesus Christ came and died to pay for my sins. And third we must understand that God has promised us eternal life in Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: That's all true, although we need to again be clear to point out that even a child's understanding of these things can be sufficient for salvation. Adults have a difficult enough time thinking about eternity, but for children that concept is completely beyond them. Nevertheless, they can understand very early on that they have done things wrong and deserve punishment, but that Jesus loves them and allowed himself to be punished in their place. They can also understand, to some degree at least, that there is a reward awaiting all those who faithfully serve Christ and punishment for those who reject him.

**Marc Roby: All right. We understand that a child can be saved without an adult-level understanding. We have also seen that the thief was saved with minimal understanding, but what does that tell us about what a typical adult must believe in order to be saved?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, I think the reason it is important to realize that a child's understanding can be sufficient for salvation is that it helps us focus on the main element, which is trust. A child knows his father and mother for example. That doesn't mean he knows all about them and what they have done, or are capable of doing, it means he knows them as people who love him and take care of him. And saving knowledge of Jesus Christ is similar. Berkhof wrote that "All true saving faith must contain at least a minimum of knowledge, not so much of the divine revelation in general as of the Mediator and His gracious operations."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 504

Marc Roby: Perhaps we could say that it isn't that we have to possess some minimum level of knowledge *about* Christ, but we must know him personally as our Savior and Lord.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's a good way of putting it. An adult will, of course, have a greater understanding, but the underlying issue is the same; do you know Jesus? Do you see that you have a problem? Do you see that Jesus is able and willing to solve your problem? In other words, do you trust in Jesus Christ himself? And do you believe whatever level of revelation you have been given about this Christ, in other words, do you trust the Word of God to be true.

Marc Roby: Well, we have established that saving faith has content, in other words, information. But the important issue is not so much the extent of our knowledge, but rather it is our response to the knowledge we possess. If we respond by believing God's Word and trusting in Christ, we will be saved.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's a reasonable summary.

Marc Roby: And it is also a reasonable place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We will do our best to respond.