

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. In our session last week, we finished our discussion of justification, the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Dr. Spencer, you said we would start a discussion of the next item in the order of salvation, which is adoption. So, how would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: I want to remind our listeners that salvation is a general term that refers to the whole process by which God saves us. It begins in eternity past, before creation, and results in the final gathering of all the perfected saints in heaven in their glorified bodies to worship God and enjoy fellowship with him and each other forever. The *ordo salutis*, or order of salvation, is a list of the steps that are involved in that process. Some of them occur in sequence in time; for example, saving faith precedes justification. While other items in the list are only part of a logical sequence; for example, justification and adoption are not separated in time.

I should add that we are using the order as given by John Murray. He lists the elements in the following order: effectual call, regeneration, repentance and faith, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification.¹

Marc Roby: Alright. How would you like to begin the discussion of this wonderful doctrine of adoption?

Dr. Spencer: Well, at the end of our session last week, I noted that while we are justified by grace alone through faith alone, a true saving faith will always result in good works. But then I also noted that none of our works are ever completely good, they are all tainted by sin. It is only children of God that have their tainted "good works" accepted by God. They are accepted, in other words, because of our relationship to God.

In John 1:11-13, the apostle tells us that Jesus, "came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."²

Marc Roby: Many people would respond to that by saying that everyone is a child of God.

Dr. Spencer: And that is true in the sense that we are all creatures made by God. The Bible does speak of this, but rarely. For example, when the apostle Paul spoke before the Areopagus in Athens, which was a court that had a right to censor religious views³, we read in Acts 17:27-29 that he said God, "is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are

¹ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, (See Session 144 for discussion of the order)

² 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.™.

³ Zondervan, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Zondervan, 1976, Vol. 1, pg. 299

God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man's design and skill.”

But that is not the sense in which John is speaking about God being our father in John 1:11-13, which is obvious since he said that Jesus gave us “the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.” If he intended to include all human beings in this statement, he certainly would not have said that we were *not* born of natural descent, nor of a human decision or a husband's will.

Marc Roby: So, John is speaking about a deeper relationship with God than exists just because he is our Creator. But he does say that Jesus gave this right to become children of God to those who have been “born of God.” So, is this just a different way of describing those who are born again, in other words those who are regenerate, who are truly Christians?

Dr. Spencer: The answer to that question is yes and no. It is true that all genuine Christians are God's children in the sense John is using that expression. But it is *not* true that being children of God is equivalent to being born again, or even equivalent to being justified. Wayne Grudem expresses this well in his *Systematic Theology*. He wrote that “In regeneration God gives us new spiritual life within. In justification God gives us right legal standing before him. But in adoption God makes us members of his family.”⁴

Marc Roby: Wow, what a glorious privilege that is! To be counted as members of God's family.

Dr. Spencer: It is an indescribably great privilege. In fact, in his book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, John Murray calls adoption “the apex of grace and privilege.”⁵ And he makes a statement similar to the one I just quoted from Grudem. Murray wrote that “By adoption the redeemed become sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty; they are introduced into and given the privileges of God's family. Neither justification nor regeneration expresses precisely that.”⁶

The important point here is that adoption puts us into a new relation with God. When God regenerates us, he grants us new hearts that enable us to respond to the gospel call in repentance and faith. And then, when he justifies us, he is acting as the Judge of the universe and declares us not guilty because we are united to Christ by faith. But, in adoption, he brings us into his family, which is an even greater blessing.

Marc Roby: And Murray mentioned that we are given the privileges of God's family. What are those privileges?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly one of, if not the, greatest privilege is that we can relate to God as our heavenly Father. In 1 John 3:1-2 we read, “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 736

⁵ Murray, *op. cit.*, pg. 134

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 132

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.”

John expresses his surprise at this amazing love of God; it staggers the imagination that we should be called children of God. And, ultimately, we will see him as he is. Children see their parents in a different way than anyone else sees them.

Marc Roby: I'm afraid that's not always a good thing.

Dr. Spencer: Not with human parents it isn't. We are all sinners and our children see more of our sin than other people typically do. But with God, who is perfect, the more you get to see and know the more blessed you are. And the benefit isn't just that we will see him as he is when we get to heaven, we also have wonderful benefits here and now. We have a real relationship with God that an unbeliever cannot have. And, like all relationships, it means there is two-way communication; God speaks to us, and we speak to God.

Marc Roby: We need to be careful when we talk about God speaking to us though. Many people throughout history have done terrible things claiming to be doing what God told them to do.

Dr. Spencer: Well, that's without a doubt true. Which is part of why God gave us his Word in writing. As we have noted before, the Bible is the only infallible communication we have from God. Personal communication is always going to be subjective, and therefore, subject to error. We must never think that God is telling us anything that is contrary to his written Word.

Marc Roby: When you refer to personal communication from God, are you talking about God speaking to you directly in normal language, like another person would?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I certainly don't rule that out. I've never experienced that myself, and I don't think most people have. But I do know people who have experienced it and I believe they are telling the truth. But it is far more common, I think, for God to put thoughts in our minds or to guide our thinking as we prayerfully consider some question.

This communication is subjective of course and unbelievers will write it off completely and say it is our imagination, but I have experienced it many times. For example, as I'm trying to figure out how to deal with some issue or I'm working on a sermon or a podcast or whatever, it will often happen that after I have prayed about it God will direct my thoughts to a particular passage of Scripture or will enable me to see some connection I was missing before.

Marc Roby: Yes, I've had the same experience.

Dr. Spencer: And I think you would agree that there are times when you are aware that it is *not* just your natural reasoning process. It is God planting a thought in your mind.

Marc Roby: Yes, I do, indeed, agree.

Dr. Spencer: For example, I've had times where God planted a thought in my mind and it was not at all apparent to me exactly how that thought applied to the situation at hand, so it is impossible to see how that thought could be entirely my own. But because I was confident it came from God, I took time to explore it and, after some work, discovered how it perfectly fit the

situation I was dealing with. I've had that happen even in dealing with completely secular things like my research in electrical engineering when I was still a professor.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of Romans 8:14 where we are told that those who are being led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. How else does God communicate with us?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the next two verses in Romans 8 give us an answer to your question. In Romans 8:15-16 the apostle Paul wrote, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." This is speaking about a very powerful, albeit subjective, thing. It isn't constant, but there are times, I think most often in prayer, worship or serious trouble, when a Christian is given a sure sense that he is God's child. God's Spirit speaks to us. Not in words, but with a certain knowledge that we are loved by God. A friend of mine described one such time as receiving a hug from God. That may sound sappy, but I think it is good description. And it can be a very, very powerful experience.

Marc Roby: Paul mentions in that verse calling God "Abba, Father", which is a very familiar form of address.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the word "Abba" comes straight from the Aramaic, which was the common language in Palestine at the time of Jesus, and is a very significant word. To call God Abba would have been blasphemous to a 1st-century Jew. James Boice wrote that "The early church fathers ..., who came from Antioch (where Aramaic was spoken and who probably had Aramaic-speaking nurses) – unanimously testify that *abba* was the address of small children to their fathers. ... *abba* means: daddy."⁷

Marc Roby: It is shocking to be told that we can call God, who is the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of all things, daddy!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. But it is very important because it speaks about our new relationship to God as his adopted children. And so, not only does God speak to us, but we can speak to him, and not as a stranger or even a friend, but as a young child coming to his dad. We can come to God in prayer and speak to him about anything. In fact, we have to remember that he knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our inmost thoughts. We have no secrets before God, so we must be completely honest at all times. But what a great privilege it is to come before him and call him daddy. This relationship assures us that he hears our prayers as a father hears the requests of his children.

Marc Roby: Which doesn't imply that he always grants our requests.

Dr. Spencer: No, he doesn't always grant our requests, just like a wise father won't always grant his children's requests. Because we don't always ask for what is best. When I was very young

⁷ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 447

there was a sitcom on television called *Father Knows Best*. Well, that isn't always true with an earthly father, but it most certainly is true of our heavenly father.

Marc Roby: Now, that brings up a common question. In John 14:14 Jesus told his disciples, "You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." How would you explain that verse given the fact that God sometimes says "no" in answer to our prayers?

Dr. Spencer: That's a good question. And while I don't want to get sidetracked with a lengthy discussion about prayer, it deserves at least a short answer. You have to notice that Jesus said we may ask for anything *in his name*, and he will do it. So, we have to ask ourselves what it means to ask for something in Jesus' name. To do something in the name of another person means to do it with their authority or approval or at their request.⁸ And Jesus always did the will of the Father, so to pray in Jesus' name means, in part,⁹ that we are seeking to know and to do the Father's will. If we truly ask for what the Father wants us to ask for, then it will, in fact, be done. Jesus was telling the truth.

Marc Roby: Alright, that makes good sense. Do you want to say anything more about prayer?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Prayer is not just for us to ask God to do things for us. We are to spend time worshiping him, meditating on his character and his works, confessing our sin and seeking forgiveness, giving him thanks for his manifold blessings and so on. God knows our every thought, so prayer is not necessary for him to know our needs, but it is necessary for us to be fully aware of our dependence on God. Prayer is a wonderful time for a Christian. It is a time to shut out all competition from the world outside and focus exclusively on God. We have to humble ourselves and seek his will and his power to do what is right. And prayer is also the means that God has ordained to accomplish many things.

Marc Roby: Which is why we are told in James 5:16 that "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Dr. Spencer: And that is literally a true statement. Since prayer is the means God has ordained to bring some things about, it is truly effective. Think of food for example. God has ordained that we need to eat to survive. Now he could certainly keep us alive without our eating if he chose to, but he has ordained food as the ordinary means. So, just as food truly is what nourishes our physical bodies and gives them energy to live, so prayer is truly effective in bringing about many things that God wants to have happen.

Marc Roby: What other privileges do Christians enjoy as children of God?

Dr. Spencer: We are joint heirs with Christ. And if you stop for a moment and ask yourself what that means you will start to see the incredible magnitude of the truth it entails. Christ is God. He is the Creator of all things. Everything belongs to him. And so, everything belongs to us as his brothers and sisters.

⁸ Grudem, *op. cit.*, pg. 379

⁹ It also certainly points to the fact that we are dependent upon Jesus and united to him by faith.

When Jesus tells us about the final judgment, he said, as we read in Matthew 25:34, “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’”

Marc Roby: Now that is wonderful to contemplate. There is an eternal kingdom prepared for God’s children.

Dr. Spencer: The New Testament speaks about our inheritance a number of times. In normal usage, an inheritance is something you receive after someone dies, but in this case it refers to what we will receive after we ourselves die. James Boice also notes that our relationship to God as our heavenly Father gives us privileges and he says that “Some we have now. Some pertain more fully to the life we will enjoy in heaven. These latter privileges are described in Scripture as our inheritance.”¹⁰ He then cites some great verses to indicate how precious this inheritance is. For example, we read in Hebrews 9:15, “For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.”

Marc Roby: Who can possibly grasp that? The inheritance is eternal, which must mean that we will enjoy it forever.

Dr. Spencer: That is a proper deduction for sure. Also, in Ephesians 1:18 Paul wrote, “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints”. We learn from this verse that our inheritance is glorious and it is rich. We also learn that this inheritance is not just for us as individuals, we receive it in the saints – we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Marc Roby: So it isn’t just our relationship to God that is changed when he adopts us. We also have a new relationship with all other believers.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true, and very significant. Our earthly relatives are important and we have a special obligation to them and, usually, also have close relationships with them. But for a Christian, fellow believers are eternally related, which is infinitely more important.

Marc Roby: Well, I think we need to stop for today and take up any other privileges you want to discuss next week. Let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We appreciate hearing from you.

¹⁰ Boice, op.cit., pg. 445