

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 showed that as God's children, we are to imitate God, glorify God and seek to please him. Dr. Spencer, at the very end, you mentioned that because we are God's children, we can endure suffering in this life knowing, as Paul wrote 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."¹ How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: I first want to finish the discussion about suffering and hardship. Every human being endures hardships of various kinds. Some much worse than others of course, but it is safe to say that no one goes through this life without any troubles at all. We live in a sinful world and the consequences of sin are everywhere.

Marc Roby: Yes, that's certainly obvious.

Dr. Spencer: But what is not obvious is that a Christian can and should react completely differently than an unbeliever to trouble or suffering of any kind. Unbelievers do not all react to hardship the same way of course, some of them angrily rail against the unfairness of life, some of them indulge in self-pity and some endure with a stiff upper lip, stoically dealing with the trouble as best they can. I'm sure we could come up with many more descriptions of how people respond to trouble. And we must admit that some unbelievers handle troubles quite admirably.

But a Christian has a huge advantage in dealing with any of life's problems, large or small. Because he is God's adopted child and he knows that God is in control of all things, he can know for certain that God is disciplining him for his good.

Marc Roby: That is a great difference. Any good father disciplines his children as a part of teaching them how to live an upright and productive life and avoid trouble in this world.

Dr. Spencer: And God does the same with his children. In Hebrews 12:5-6 we are told, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." Which is a loose quotation of what we read in Proverbs 3:11-12, "My son, do not despise the LORD's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the LORD disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in."

Marc Roby: Of course, knowing that discipline is for our good doesn't make it any less painful.

Dr. Spencer: No, of course not. The writer of Hebrews makes exactly that point. He goes on to say, in Hebrews 12:11, that "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."

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Marc Roby: And, of course, righteousness simply means doing what is right.

Dr. Spencer: That is a common definition and often sufficient, but I think we need to be more complete in describing what we mean here. Many unbelievers also live decent, moral lives; but they do *not* possess the righteousness that is spoken of here. The great 20th-century English preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote that “*Righteous* means the quality, the kind of life that was lived by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. ... No one can really live the Sermon on the Mount until they are born again”.² We noted last week that J.I. Packer said the Sermon on the Mount contains three general principles for Christian conduct, which you noted in your opening statement. As Christians, we are to imitate God, glorify God and seek to please God.

Marc Roby: OK, I see your point; even when an unbeliever does something that is, in itself, good, his motive for doing it is never to imitate, glorify or please God, and so the act is not righteous in the fullest sense.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly my point. In Ephesians 1:3-6, the apostle Paul wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

God chose us to be holy and blameless in his sight. Or, as it says in Romans 8:29, to be conformed to the likeness of Christ, our older brother. Who, we are told in Hebrews 1:3, “is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being”. In other words, God disciplines us so that we will be made more and more godlike in our behavior, which is fitting for us as his children.

Marc Roby: And, therefore, we can agree with what Peter wrote in 1 Peter 4:13, “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And I want to close our discussion of God’s discipline of his children by quoting what Paul wrote in Romans 5:1-5. He said, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Marc Roby: That is wonderful beyond description. We have peace with God. We are justified and we are also his adopted children, disciplined for our good, that we may share in God’s

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in Christ; Volume Three, Children of God*, Studies in 1 John, Crossway Books, 1993, pg. 12

holiness; therefore, we can rejoice in sufferings. What else do you want to say about the doctrine of adoption?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the next point I want to make is that although we are God's adopted children and we can reasonably call Jesus Christ our older brother, we also need to carefully guard the distinction between ourselves as adopted children and Christ as the only begotten Son of God. And since this session of the podcast will be released the day before Christmas, it is entirely appropriate to spend some time considering Christ's special place as God's Son.

Marc Roby: I can hear one possible objection to what you've just said though. Earthly parents who adopt children usually go to great lengths to ensure that there is no difference between how they treat their natural children and their adopted children. Some people might say it would be proper for God to do the same.

Dr. Spencer: I can imagine that objection being raised, but it is easily handled because the adoption analogy breaks down at this point. There is no ontological difference between natural children and adopted children in this life.

Marc Roby: And by ontological difference, you mean there is no difference in their fundamental essence.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Adopted and natural children in this life are both human beings. Whereas, Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. The Creator/creature distinction makes it impossible for us to be sons of God in the same sense that Jesus Christ is. He is the *eternal* Son of God. We discussed Christology, the study of Jesus Christ, in Sessions 111 through 124, but in view of Christmas, and to make the point that our being adopted children is fundamentally different from Christ being the only-begotten Son, we should talk about it now as well.

Marc Roby: Do we see this difference between Christ as the eternal Son and believers as adopted children spoken of in the Bible?

Dr. Spencer: We don't see it explicitly spelled out, but it is there. For example, John Murray makes a very important, if somewhat subtle, point about how Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene right after his resurrection. She was distraught because the tomb was empty, but then Christ appears to her and she undoubtedly grabbed hold of him. In John 20:17 we read that Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Murray notes that "the distinctness of the relationship to the Father is jealously guarded by our Lord. He does not say 'I ascend to our Father' but rather 'I ascend to my Father and your Father and my God and your God.'"³

Marc Roby: That is an interesting point. And I agree it is subtle, you could easily just think that Jesus was using a somewhat poetic way of speaking.

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 138

Dr. Spencer: But it wasn't the only time Jesus was careful in this regard. When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he did *not* say, "Pray with me, our Father in heaven ...". No, in Matthew 6:9 we read that he said, "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'" and so on. Murray again points out this distinction.⁴

Marc Roby: That is again interesting. Of course, there is another reason that Jesus could not have prayed what we call the Lord's prayer along with his disciples, he never sinned. So, it would make no sense for him to pray for forgiveness.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. But the point still stands that Jesus carefully guarded the distinction between himself as God's only-begotten Son and us as God's adopted children. John Murray points out that Jesus "never included the disciples with himself or himself with the disciples in a common relationship designated 'our Father'. He never approached the Father in prayer with the disciples and said 'our Father'."⁵

Marc Roby: The fact that he never did that does speak volumes.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. Independent of the fact that we are God's children, there is an unbridgeable gulf between Jesus as our sinless Savior and us as God's adopted children in the process of being conformed to his image. We see this clearly in 1 John 3:8-10, which say, "He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

Marc Roby: Yes, the difference is obvious. We were born sinners, children of the devil, but Christ was born and remains sinless and he became incarnate to destroy the devil's work. And, as a result of his redeeming sacrifice, we can be born of God and be adopted as God's children.

Dr. Spencer: And we also see the difference clearly in Hebrews 2:9-11, which say that "we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers."

Marc Roby: Yes, the difference again is obvious. And we must praise God! Jesus suffered death for us so that we could be brought to glory. He is the author of our salvation and willingly suffered for us. And then, he is not ashamed to call us brothers. Amazing!

⁴ Ibid, pg. 139

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, Vol. 2, pg. 232

Dr. Spencer: It is incredible to say the least. As the text says, he is the one who makes men holy and we are among those who are made holy. In the Greek that second verb is a present passive participle and it might be better to translate it as we are *being* made holy. It is a process and we who have been born again are in the midst of it. But it was all made possible by the life and death of Jesus Christ. We tend sometimes to focus on the sacrifice on the cross, which is certainly proper since it is the single most important event in the history of the world. But as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we also need to realize that what theologians call his humiliation began with his being born as a human being, not with his crucifixion.

Marc Roby: When you consider his eternal nature as the second person of the holy Trinity, it is astonishing to try and fathom the humiliation involved in being born as a human being.

Dr. Spencer: Paul tells us about that in a famous passage in Philippians. And the passage also speaks again about our need to emulate Jesus Christ. The passage is a bit long, but I want to read the whole thing.

In Philippians 2:1-11 we read, “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Marc Roby: How wonderful. Christ was, and is, by nature God. But he humbled himself and took on the nature of a servant and was obedient even to the point of giving his life on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins.

Dr. Spencer: And we are to be like-minded Paul says. He also says that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus; in other words, humble and completely obedient to the will of the Father. But because of Christ’s unique role as the eternal Son, the unique God-man, God has exalted him to the highest place. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Marc Roby: There is another wonderful passage that speaks about the preeminence of Christ. In Colossians 1:15-22 we read that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him

to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation”.

Dr. Spencer: That is an incredibly rich passage. It speaks of Christ as the firstborn, which doesn't in any way imply that he is a created being. It is referring to his status and position. He is the Lord of creation. The passage itself rules out any possibility of Christ being created because it says that “by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him”. The apostle piles up expressions to make it impossible to miss his point. Jesus Christ is the Creator.

Marc Roby: As John wrote in John 1:1-3, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that passage also emphasizes the point that Jesus is God, the Creator, and it says it using language that harkens back to Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” One more passage that clearly tells us Jesus is the Creator and that also tells us he is the Savior, is Hebrews 1:1-3, which say that “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

Marc Roby: Praise God! Jesus provided purification for *my* sins.

Dr. Spencer: And for mine, and for all of those who will believe in him. At this time of year we need to remind ourselves that the baby in the manger in Bethlehem was infinitely more than a human baby. He was, and is, the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Judge of all things. He is God. We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ on that day. And there will be no second chances. If you do not bow the knee in this life and confess him as Lord, you *will* bow the knee then and declare he is Lord, but then you will be cast out into eternal darkness and torment.

Christmas is a wonderful time, but it is also a dangerous time when people can be very sentimental and sappy about Christ. He humbled himself and was obedient and if we are his brothers and sisters we will do the same thing. He bore our sins on the cross and endured the wrath of God that we deserve. He completed that work to the glory of God, and we must complete our work as well. And so, I wish all of our listeners a very merry Christmas. May Jesus truly be your Savior and Lord and may he grant you an obedient faith.

Marc Roby: And I join you in wishing everyone a blessed Christmas. Let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would love to hear from you.