

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We have finally finished our discussion of the order of salvation, or *ordo salutis*. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we have come to the end of our treatment of soteriology and I have a few things I want to discuss to wrap up this topic. Let me begin by quoting what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3. He said, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified”.¹ And this, in a nutshell, is describing the whole process of salvation. We are being saved, which means we are being sanctified, or made holy, or set apart for God.

The Greek word translated as sanctified in that verse is ἁγιασμός (hagiasmos), which means sanctification or holiness. It is the same word that is used in Hebrews 12:14 where we are told to, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.”

Marc Roby: And in Ephesians 1:4 we are told that God chose us in Christ “before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Dr. Spencer: And that verse uses a Greek word with the same root as the one in 1 Thessalonians and Hebrews. The ultimate purpose of creation is the manifestation of God’s glory, and the proximate purpose with regards to us is that we be made holy so that all believers together, as the body and bride of Christ, will bring glory to God and live with him forever in the new heaven and the new earth.

Marc Roby: Which is why the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins, in Question One, by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” And answers by saying, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And the reason I wanted to remind us of God’s purposes in salvation is that I think modern Christians often forget, or have never been taught, the central importance of holiness. Modern churches often emphasize the love of God and the fact that we are saved by grace to the exclusion of the repeated calls in the new Testament to put sin to death and walk in holy obedience. Many professing Christians erroneously think that being saved means that God has freed us from any obligation to obey his laws.

Marc Roby: Which is almost the exact opposite of the truth. God has freed us from sin so that we are *enabled* to keep his laws! Ephesians 2:10 says that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. Christians are to be obedient to God’s laws. Not to earn salvation, but because we are new creations as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 and because we are thankful for

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what God has done and desire to live in a way that pleases him. But the focus of a true Christian is not on this life, it is on eternity.

Marc Roby: And in the famous Sermon on the Mount, we read in Matthew 6:19-20 that Jesus said, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

Dr. Spencer: He said that because this life is short and full of troubles, but eternity never ends. So all that is really necessary in this life is that we come to know Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior.

As we noted last week, it is only when Christ comes again that believers will receive their glorified bodies and begin eternity as perfected saints in God’s presence in the new heaven and the new earth. This life is just the beginning. If we have been born again, God has begun the process of making us holy and fit to be in his presence. He is, in a sense, finishing his work of creating creatures made in his own image.

Marc Roby: Now that is a strange thing to say. Most would say that God completed his work of creation back in the Garden when he made Adam and Eve.

Dr. Spencer: Well, yes and no. He completed the initial creation and, as we read in Genesis 1:31, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.” But man was not yet ready to spend eternity in God’s presence because, although Adam and Eve were perfect, without sin, they were still able to sin. Theologians use Latin phrases to describe this condition. Adam and Eve were both *posse non peccare*, meaning they were able to not sin, and they were, simultaneously, *posse peccare*, meaning they were able to sin.

After the fall however, unregenerate people can only sin, they are *non posse non peccare*, not able to not sin. They have a sinful nature.

Marc Roby: Which is the doctrine of total depravity that we have covered before. And people often object to this doctrine because they look at themselves and others and say, “I don’t see that we sin all the time, we do many good things in life.”

Dr. Spencer: And that objection comes from a misunderstanding of sin. Sin is not just lying, stealing, murdering and so on. Sin is, first and foremost, rebellion against God. It is a rejection of his rule. So even when an unbeliever does something that outwardly conforms to God’s law he sins because he is not doing it in obedience to God’s law but rather, because he himself thinks it is the right thing to do. Most people only think that they have sinned if and when they do something they themselves regret having done.

With a proper understanding of sin however, we see that unbelievers can only sin because they never act in obedience to God. Truly good works must be done in deliberate conformity to God’s law, by the power of God’s Spirit and for God’s glory. And when a person is born again, he is again made able to not sin, he is *posse non peccare*. He now has a desire and ability to keep God’s law.

Marc Roby: Although he is also still able to sin, just as Adam was.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And that's why I said that God, in one sense, is finishing the work of creating men and women in his image. Once we get to heaven, we will no longer be able to sin, we will be *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. In other words, we will be better off than Adam and Eve were prior to the fall.

Marc Roby: That's a wonderful thought.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. As we read in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." Or we could say, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 15:49, that "just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven."

Marc Roby: And that is the goal of our salvation. To be completely sanctified, or made holy so that we can be with God forever. I'm reminded of the great promise that we are given in 1 John 3:2, where the apostle says, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will 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."

Dr. Spencer: That is what is often called the beatific vision, to see God as he is. And it goes along with being made like him. As I said, it is important for us to keep this ultimate goal in mind or we run the risk of reducing Christianity to some kind of moral renovation or self-help program that is focused solely on making this life a little better. God's ultimate goal in the salvation of his people is far grander than making life a little better. It is nothing less than making us perfect and perfecting this world as well. Salvation is not just for human beings.

Marc Roby: Now, what do you mean by that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, in Romans 8:19-22 the apostle Paul wrote that "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time."

Marc Roby: That is a difficult passage to understand.

Dr. Spencer: It is, but it is important for us to realize that the new earth will be fundamentally different. It isn't a matter of just doing away with pollution, or stopping global warming or any of the other environmental or social causes that so animate people. As Paul says, the creation was subjected to frustration. This is referring back to Genesis 3:17-19, where we are told that God told Adam that because of his sin, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."

Marc Roby: That passage implies that prior to the fall man's work in the garden was not painful toil, but pleasant. It didn't take a lot of sweat to produce enough food to eat.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the picture I think. We aren't given specifics, but I think it is clear that prior to the fall there weren't any pests that devoured the plants man needed for food and there weren't any diseases or droughts that destroyed the plants either. The soil was fertile and readily yielded its fruits. And it is important to note who cursed the ground. The Rev. P.G. Mathew in his commentary on Romans notes that it was God.² Paul wrote that the creation was *subjected* to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the *will of the one who subjected it*.

Marc Roby: And that was God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. God cursed the creation as part of man's punishment. The earth was made for man, so when man sinned the earth was cursed as part of the curse on us. But when Christ comes again and God makes a new heaven and a new earth, the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God as Paul wrote.

Marc Roby: That is amazing, but it doesn't give us much in the way of detailed information.

Dr. Spencer: No, it doesn't. But independent of our not knowing the details, we can say that the new earth will be a wonderful place. Not only will we have no more sorrow or crying or pain or dying, but the rest of creation will also be free of all disease, destruction and decay.

Marc Roby: Praise God!

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed! The ultimate goal of our salvation is impossible for us to truly imagine at this time. Sin, pain, frustration, decay and death are such an integral part of this fallen world that it boggles the mind to try and picture the world without them. But that is our hope in Christ.

Marc Roby: And a glorious hope it is. What else do you want to say about salvation?

Dr. Spencer: I want us all to realize that if we are walking in true faith, we have nothing to fear in this world. We may suffer great physical pain and we may suffer great emotional pain. Wars will come. Disease will come, persecution will come, and death itself will come. But none of these can do us any ultimate harm. If we have a proper, eternal perspective, it will give us a great ability to have joy even in the midst of great trials and to persevere in those trials.

Paul spoke about the comfort we receive from the knowledge of our eternal destiny. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18 he wrote, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

² P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pp 591-592

Marc Roby: That is difficult for us to do though – to fix our eyes on what is unseen.

Dr. Spencer: It is very difficult at times. We need to pray. We need to study the Word of God. In fact, the Word of God is essential for our sanctification. We read in John 17:17 that Jesus prayed to the father, saying, “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”

Marc Roby: That does make the importance of God’s Word clear. There is nothing more important than what the Word of God says.

Dr. Spencer: The Word of God is of first importance – and hence the reason for these podcasts.

But getting back to the passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul continued in 2 Corinthians 5:1 and wrote, “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.” And then, a few verses later, in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8, he wrote, “Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful way to put it. When we die we go to be home, and to be home with our Lord and Savior and all the other saints.

Dr. Spencer: And this isn’t just some feel-good story that we tell ourselves. It is reality. The Word of God presents us with truth. We should not, in fact we *must* not be focused on this life. It is not for this life that God is saving us. It is for our eternal home. And so notice how Paul puts it. He says that as long as we are at home in the body – by which he is referring to our present fallen, decaying bodies – he says that as long as we are here, we are away from the Lord. Now this must be understood properly of course, because we also know that in a very real, but non-physical way, God is with us all the time.

Marc Roby: Which reminds me of Paul’s wonderful statement in Romans 8:38-39, where he declares that “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Dr. Spencer: And that is as true as it is wonderful and comforting. But it is also true that it will be far better to be with him in heaven. And so in the passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul is focusing on the fact that we gain something when we die. Death is not to be feared by a Christian, it is gain.

Marc Roby: And Paul said exactly that in Philippians 1:21. He wrote, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Dr. Spencer: And he went on in Philippians 1:22-24 to say, “If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

Now that is amazing, just think about that for a minute. Paul is saying, in essence, that his continuing to live is for the benefit of others and is not what would be best for him!

Marc Roby: That is amazing faith.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is incredible faith. But now I want to put together the things we've just read. We learned from 2 Corinthians 5:8 that for a Christian to die is to be at home with the Lord. And from Philippians 1:21 we learned that to die is gain. And then, from Philippians 1:23, we learned that to die is better by far.

Marc Roby: Those are three amazing statements about death for a Christian.

Dr. Spencer: But we can say even more. In Psalm 116:15 we are told that "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints." And in Revelation 14:13 the apostle John tells us, "Then I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'" And, finally, we are told in Isaiah 57:2 that "Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death."

Marc Roby: OK, that is again amazing. Those verses tell us that the death of a Christian is precious, it is blessed, and that when Christians die they will rest from their labor, and they will enter into peace.

Dr. Spencer: Truly we, as Christians, have nothing to fear from death. We are saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. And with that, we are done discussing soteriology, the doctrine of salvation.

Marc Roby: That is wonderful. And I look forward to moving on to a new topic next week, but first let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.