

**Marc Roby:** We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. In our session last week we finished looking at the marks of a true church. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to discuss our covenant relationship with God. In a very real sense, Christians do not choose to be Christians, nor do they choose to be in the church. God chooses whom he will save and God places us in his church. We are the people of God, called *out* of the world and *assembled together* at God's command to do his work for his glory.

**Marc Roby:** I should point out that your statements about God choosing us and not the other way around are based on the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election and irresistible grace, all of which we have discussed at length before.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, those doctrines are the basis for my statements. And I will remind our listeners that there are full indexes by topic, scripture verse and reference, available on our website at [whatdoesthewordsay.org](http://whatdoesthewordsay.org).

But the important issue I want to get to today is that God doesn't just call us to save us from hell, he calls us *into* a covenant relationship with him. This began, of course, in the Old Testament. John Murray points out that "Any inquiry as to what the New Testament means by the church (ἐκκλησία) cannot be biblically conducted without taking into account the Old Testament background and preparation."<sup>1</sup> And Murray cites several Old Testament passages that speak about the day of the assembly as being important. He says that "The assembly is the covenant people of God gathered before him".<sup>2</sup>

So, for example, in Deuteronomy 9:10 we read that Moses said to the people as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land, "The LORD gave me two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God. On them were all the commandments the LORD proclaimed to you on the mountain out of the fire, on the day of the assembly."<sup>3</sup>

**Marc Roby:** And this passage is referring back to God giving Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Those commandments were written by God himself on two stone tablets.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And these commandments are sometimes referred to as the tablets of the covenant. For example, in Deuteronomy 9:9 we read that Moses said, "When I went up on the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD had made with you, I stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I ate no bread and drank no water."

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 321

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> 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](http://www.zondervan.com) The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

**Marc Roby: In other words, the Ten Commandments were the document describing the conditions of the covenant God established with his people.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. And they are not describing what theologians sometimes call the covenant of works. They are a part of the covenant of grace, which is again a term theologians use, it is not in the Bible. It is important for Christians to understand that the Ten Commandments are a part of the covenant of grace because there are a lot of people today who seem to think that they were done away with when Jesus Christ came to earth and redeemed his people. The covenant of works, however, refers to the covenant God made with Adam, not the Ten Commandments.

**Marc Roby: We read about the covenant God made with Adam in Genesis Chapter Two. In Genesis 2:9 we read that “the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” And then, in Verse 17 we read that God told Adam, “you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”**

Dr. Spencer: That is the covenant of works, yes. The idea is simple. If Adam had obeyed – and we should note that the covenant was made with Adam before Eve was created – in any event, if Adam had obeyed, he would have had eternal life with God in Paradise. Adam had the tree of life available to him.

**Marc Roby: But, as we know, Adam failed to keep this covenant. In Genesis 3:6 we are told, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And Eve is there because in between the time God gave the command to Adam and the fall, God had created Eve to be the perfect helper for Adam. But in Chapter Five of the book of Romans, Paul makes it clear that Adam was the one responsible for the fall, he never mentions Eve. Adam was the representative for the human race.

In Romans 5:19 Paul tells us that “through the disobedience of the one man”, which is referring to Adam, “the many were made sinners”. We have noted before that Adam was our federal head under the covenant of works. And we see that because of this violation of the covenant, the covenant curse was imposed on Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:22-23 we read, “And the LORD God said, ‘The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.’ So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken.”

**Marc Roby: That is a horrible consequence, but it also shows tremendous grace on the part of God. He didn’t immediately destroy Adam and Eve.**

Dr. Spencer: No, he didn’t. They did immediately die spiritually and become subject to physical death, so the warning God had given was accurate. But there was also great grace. We see the first statement of the covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15, where God promised a Savior. This is

called the protoevangelium, or first gospel. We read that God said to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”

**Marc Roby: And that offspring, who would crush the head of Satan, is none other than Jesus Christ.**

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. But the point I have been making is that the Ten Commandments are a part of this new covenant of grace, not a part of the covenant of works. This will become perfectly clear if we go on a little further with the history of God’s people. I am only interested here in tracing the covenant of grace God has made with his chosen people, so I’m going to skip over a vast amount of material. In fact, I’m going to jump all the way to Abraham.

**Marc Roby: That is quite a jump. It skips over Noah and God’s covenant with him after the flood for example. And perhaps we should note that all people, whether they are Christians are not, relate to God through a covenant. Unbelievers are still under the covenant of works and will suffer the due punishment of eternal death if they don’t become partakers of the covenant of grace by faith.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s a great point. But getting back to the covenant of grace specifically, Abraham is the next important figure in understanding the covenant of grace, which is the covenant that establishes God’s relationship to the true church. In fact, in Galatians 3:8, Paul wrote that “The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’”

**Marc Roby: And Paul was quoting from Genesis 12:3 where God told Abraham, who was still called Abram at that time, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. In Genesis 12:1 we see the call of Abram, we read, “The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’” And Abram did as God commanded. And then, again skipping a great deal of important material, God came to Abram at a later time, while Abram and Sarai still did not have any children, and promised him that he would have a son and, in fact, descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky<sup>4</sup>. Then, in Genesis 15:6 we read an incredibly important verse, “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” God then had Abram go through an extensive ritual to establish the covenant with him and, in Verse 18 we read that “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land ...’”.

**Marc Roby: And we know from the subsequent history that God tested Abram’s faith in this promise of a son. Abram and Sarai didn’t have a son for quite some time.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. God waited. When Abram was ninety-nine and Sarai was ninety God instituted the covenant of circumcision and renamed Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah.

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<sup>4</sup> See Genesis 15:4-5

Circumcision was the sign of the new covenant God instituted with Abraham, which is a part of the covenant of grace. Only after establishing this covenant sign did God provide Abraham and Sarah with a son, Isaac.

**Marc Roby: And the name Isaac means, “he laughs”. It was given to him because both Abram and Sarai laughed when God promised them a son at such an old age.<sup>5</sup>**

Dr. Spencer: It is an amazing thing and we can understand the reason for their laughter. But God is able to accomplish his will. We should never doubt his promises. And Paul uses this covenant promise to Abraham and his faith in God’s ability to keep the promise as an example of justification by faith, which is how all true members of God’s church are saved.

In Romans 4:18-25 we read, “Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness.’ The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

**Marc Roby: Hallelujah! That is a glorious description of the gospel message of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And it explains why Abraham is called the father of all believers in Romans 4:11, 12 and 16. And before I look at another passage dealing with this, I must remind our listeners that Abraham and Sarah’s son, called the son of the promise, was named Isaac. And Isaac had Esau and Jacob as his sons. Jacob was then renamed Israel and his sons are the twelve patriarchs of the Jewish tribes. With that reminder, we can look at what Paul says about Abraham’s descendants in Romans Chapter Nine, the great chapter where he deals with the doctrine of election.

After speaking of his anguish that not all Jews are saved, Paul says in Romans 9:6-8, “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.”

**Marc Roby: Yes, that passage puts the lie to the expression you sometimes hear about Muslims, Jews and Christians all being children of Abraham who worship the same God.**

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<sup>5</sup> See Genesis 17:17 and 18:12

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. Arabs and Jews are both *natural* children of Abraham, but as Paul wrote, “it is not the natural children who are God’s children”. The true children of Abraham are those who believe in Jesus Christ as is clearly stated in Romans 4:11-12 where we read that Abraham, “is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised,” in other words, non-Jewish believers, “in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised”, in other words Jewish believers, “who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

**Marc Roby: And therefore, the true, or invisible church, is made up of *only* the true, or we could say, spiritual, descendants of Abraham.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes. And so, clearly, the covenant God made with Abraham was part of the covenant of grace. And now I want to go back and show that the Ten Commandments are also a part of the covenant of grace as I said I would.

**Marc Roby: Please do.**

Dr. Spencer: The Ten Commandments were made with God’s chosen people after they were brought out of Egypt. When God established his covenant with Abraham, we read in Genesis 15:13-16 that he told Abraham his descendants would live in a foreign land for four hundred years and be enslaved and would then be brought out with great possessions. And this is exactly what happened. Jacob and his children ended up in Egypt, where they were enslaved until God led them out in the great Exodus under Moses.

In fact, we see this event explicitly tied back to the covenant with Abraham. In Exodus 6:5 we read that God said, “I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant.” Then God brought them out of Egypt.

**Marc Roby: Which is in itself an amazing story illustrating God’s awesome power and love for his people.**

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And we are told why he brought his people out. Several times God has Moses tell Pharaoh to “Let my people go, so that they may worship me.” This is the church. We are called out of the world for the purpose of worshiping God. Which includes all of life. Living for God’s glory in our day-to-day lives is worship. And the Ten Commandments are, in essence, the summary of God’s covenant with his people. They contain the moral law.

**Marc Roby: And that moral law was not abrogated when Christ came and died on the cross to fulfill the law as we have noted before. The ceremonial law was abrogated because it served to point to Christ, and the civil laws specific to the Jewish nation are no longer in effect, but the moral law still applies to God’s people.**

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. J.I. Packer wrote the following: “God’s covenant with Israel at Sinai”, which, of course, refers to the mountain where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, “took the form of a Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, that is, a royal covenant imposed unilaterally on a vassal king and a servant people. Although that covenant required obedience to God’s laws under the threat of his curse, it was a continuation of his covenant of grace (Exod. 3:15; Deut.

7:7-8; 9:5-6). God gave his commandments to a people he had already redeemed and claimed (Exod. 19:4; 20:2).”<sup>6</sup>

**Marc Roby: And, of course, the church today is made of those who have been redeemed from their bondage to sin and Satan by Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in Galatians 3:13 that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us”.**

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the point. The true church, the invisible church if you will, consists of those people whom God has chosen from all eternity to save. He sent his Son to redeem us from our sins and he has called us out of the world into a covenant relationship with him. It is all God’s work. We don’t truly choose to be Christians or members of God’s church, we are chosen by him. Only because he chose us are we able, in turn, to have faith in Christ and join the church.

**Marc Roby: And what is the significance of the fact that we are in a covenant relationship with God?**

Dr. Spencer: Well, to answer that question we must first note that it is not a covenant between equals. As Packer noted, it takes the form of a suzerainty treaty between a mighty suzerain and a vassal and it is imposed on the vassal. We don’t get to negotiate the terms of this covenant. God establishes them and we are obligated to keep them. God alone is the Creator and we are just creatures. He is the Lord and we are his slaves. That is the word used in the New Testament as we have noted before.

For example, in Romans 1:1, the translation we are using says that Paul wrote, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God”. But in the Greek the word rendered here as servant is δοῦλος (doulos), which should be translated as slave. A servant *chooses* to work as a servant, a slave does not. God’s grace is irresistible as we have discussed before. If he has chosen from all eternity to save you, you *will* be saved. He accomplishes his purposes. And this has important implications for how we, as Christian, ought to live.

**Marc Roby: Well, I think we’ll have to wait until next week to look into those implications because we are out of time for today. Therefore, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We enjoy hearing from you.**

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<sup>6</sup> J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pg. 88