

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of eschatology, the doctrine of last things. In our session last week, we discussed the kingdom of God, which is here now in the sense that God rules his people by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to first note that the study of eschatology should provide great comfort and encouragement to believers. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, “Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”¹ Paul then went on to discuss the resurrection of believers and concluded the section, in Verse 18, by saying, “Therefore encourage each other with these words.”

Marc Roby: Well, certainly, it is a great comfort to know that our physical death is not the final word.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, for a believer that should be a great comfort. But quite the opposite is true for an unbeliever. They should hope that physical death *is* the final word or, better yet, they should turn to Christ in repentance. But for believers the Bible is full of great comfort as we think about death. We read in Psalm 116:15 that “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” What this means is that God watches over our death just as he watches over our life. Charles Spurgeon commented on this verse, saying that believers, “shall not die prematurely; they shall be immortal till their work is done; ... The Lord watches over their dying beds, smooths their pillows, sustains their hearts, and receives their souls.”²

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful picture of God himself comforting us in death and then taking our souls to be with him.

Dr. Spencer: And the Bible provides much more comfort to believers. The apostle Paul tells us in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” And then in Verse 23 he says, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”. And, in 2 Corinthians 5:8 he wrote that “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Then, 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, in Isaiah 57:2 the prophet tells us that “Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.”

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² C. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2016, Vol. 3, pg. 71

We learn seven things from these verses about the death of a believer: it is precious in God's sight, it is gain, it is better by far, it is to be at home with the Lord, it is blessed, it is to be at peace and we rest from our labor.

Marc Roby: All of that is wonderful to say the least. And when you contrast that with the horrors of eternal hell, it makes it obvious why nothing is more important than to be certain of our salvation and to share the gospel with others.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the biblical view of eschatology should bring great comfort to believers and it should motivate them to evangelize, but it should drive unbelievers to despair. We should comfort one another with these words as Paul wrote.

But now it is time to dive into the topic itself. Louis Berkhof wrote that eschatology, "is the one locus of theology, in which all the other loci must come to a head, to a final conclusion. Dr. Kuyper correctly points out that every other locus left some question unanswered, to which eschatology should supply the answer. In theology [proper] it is the question, how God is finally perfectly glorified in the work of His hands, and how the counsel of God is fully realized; in anthropology, the question, how the disrupting influence of sin is completely overcome; in Christology, the question how the work of Christ is crowned with perfect victory; in soteriology, the question, how the work of the Holy Spirit at last issues in the complete redemption and glorification of the people of God; and in ecclesiology, the question of the final apotheosis of the Church."³

Marc Roby: Perhaps we should say that the word apotheosis means the perfect form of something. So, by speaking about the final apotheosis of the Church, Berkhof means its ultimate glorified state in heaven.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the word is uncommon and that is what Berkhof means. And I want to look at eschatology by looking at how it answers the questions left unanswered by the other five loci. Let's begin with theology proper, the study of God. Berkhof says the question left unanswered in that locus is how God is finally perfectly glorified in the work of His hands, and how the counsel of God is fully realized. Now this sounds like two separate questions the way Berkhof stated it, but it really isn't. God has a plan for his creation, which was made according to his own perfect counsel, and that plan is to glorify himself in creation.

Marc Roby: That makes me think of answer to the seventh question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which states that "The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass."

Dr. Spencer: And whatever God has decreed will happen, will, in fact, happen. His decretive will is also called his secret will. He has not revealed to us everything that will happen, but he has already determined it all. And his decretive will for creation details everything that will ever take

³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 665

place. Therefore, we could rephrase Berkhof's question by asking, "How is God perfectly glorified in his creation?"

Marc Roby: And how would you answer that question?

Dr. Spencer: The short answer is that God will be glorified by having ordained and then accomplished everything necessary to achieve the final state of creation, which includes both eternal heaven and eternal hell.

In Romans 9:22-24 the apostle Paul asks two shocking rhetorical questions. He wrote, "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory — even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?"

Marc Roby: Those questions are shocking to people because they are rhetorical. Paul is actually saying that God *did choose* to show his wrath and make his power known by bearing with patience a certain group of people who, we are told, are the objects of his wrath and are prepared for destruction.

Dr. Spencer: In other words, we can say that hell exists for the manifestation of God's wrath and power. We can also say that it will make his justice manifest because Paul tells us in Romans 3:25-26 that "God presented him", meaning Jesus Christ, "as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, ... at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." Sin must be punished. The justice of God demands it. Therefore, those who do *not* have faith in Christ, which means that he has not paid for their sins, must pay the penalty for their sins themselves. And that penalty is eternal death because they have sinned against an infinite God. Therefore, hell exists for the manifestation of God's perfect justice, wrath and power.

Marc Roby: And people don't like that.

Dr. Spencer: But Christians should. If you think about for a few minutes, you can see that you would not want an eternal, omnipotent God who was in any way unjust. God simply cannot wink at sin and ignore it. It must be punished. That is what is right, and we all know that if we are honest with ourselves.

But the passage in Romans 9 also presents us with the other eternal reality; heaven exists for the display of God's wonderful mercy. And we can add that it displays his amazing love as well.

Marc Roby: Yes, John 3:16 immediately comes to mind as proof of that statement; "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Dr. Spencer: We can also say that heaven again displays God's great power because he is able to regenerate dead sinners, in other words cause them to be reborn, and he is then able to sanctify them and bring them to be his perfected saints in heaven. And the whole plan of salvation displays God's amazing wisdom. He solved the problems that are insoluble for man; namely,

how can a sinner, who is dead in his sins, be brought to life? And, how can rebellious sinners be justified in the sight of a holy and just God? How can their sins be atoned for? No man could ever solve these problems.

The final, eternal state of this universe, which includes eternal hell and eternal heaven, will redound to the glory of God. And every human being, saved or not, will acknowledge this fact. We are told in Philippians 2:10-11, “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: Praise God!

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. We could go on and show how the final state of this universe glorifies God in other ways, but I think that is enough to give a bare-bones answer to the question.

Marc Roby: Okay. That leads us to the second locus of theology, which is anthropology, the study of man. Berkhof said that the question left unanswered in anthropology is: “How the disrupting influence of sin is completely overcome”. How would you answer that question?

Dr. Spencer: In order to answer this question fully, we have to look at the whole plan of salvation, which we discussed at length under the locus of soteriology. But we must also extend that plan of salvation to the ultimate salvation of sinners. Remember that we said salvation has three tenses: we have been saved, we are being saved and we will be saved. All three are true, but obviously in significantly different ways.

We have been saved in the sense that we have been born again and thereby enabled to repent and believe on Jesus Christ. We are united to Christ by that faith and on the basis of our union with Christ, our sins are counted against him and his death on the cross paid the penalty we owed. In addition, we are given his perfect righteousness, which is needed to be justified in God’s sight.

Marc Roby: And you just described the glorious double transaction we have mentioned many times, and which Paul clearly explains in 2 Corinthians 5:21, where he wrote that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Dr. Spencer: And because of that great transaction, we are legally justified in God’s sight. But we are not yet perfect in ourselves. We still have sin in us, so we are not yet saved from our sins in the fullest sense. Therefore, during this life, God works in us by his Holy Spirit to enable us to put our sins to death more and more. Paul speaks about this in Colossians 3:4-6, where he admonished us, saying, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.”

Marc Roby: This clearly says that we will appear with Christ in glory.

Dr. Spencer: And then Paul draws a conclusion from that truth, we must put to death whatever belongs to our earthly nature; in other words, our sins. And then he reminds us that it is because

of sin that the wrath of God is coming. There is a complete antithesis between sin and righteousness. You cannot be a mixture of the two and go to heaven. Our sin must be completely removed.

Marc Roby: The process of progressive sanctification corresponds to the present-tense statement that we are being saved. But our sin is never completely removed in this life.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. Which is why we also need the future tense. In Hebrews 12:23 we are told that when we come into the presence of God we have also come into the presence of "the spirits of righteous men made perfect," from which we learn that when a Christian dies, his spirit is immediately perfected. The last vestiges of sin are completely removed.

Marc Roby: That is wonderful to say the least.

Dr. Spencer: But it isn't the final word. We are disembodied spirits at that point, but man was created with a spirit and a body. So God promises to redeem us fully as well, in spirit *and* in body. And all believers will receive their new, glorified bodies at the same time. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 Paul wrote about the second coming of Jesus Christ and said that "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."

Marc Roby: Hallelujah! That is an amazing thing to look forward to.

Dr. Spencer: We can say that our salvation comes in three installments, or stages. First, we are born again, which produces both definitive and progressive sanctification in this life as we have discussed before. Then, when we die, our souls are perfected. And then, when Christ returns, we will receive our glorified bodies. Only then are we fully prepared for eternity in heaven with God.

Marc Roby: And it will certainly redound to God's glory that he is able to take wretched sinners and turn them into glorified saints.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the end of all things will bring God great glory and the wonderful news is that we will also be glorified! And so we have seen how eschatology answers the questions left open by our studies of theology proper and anthropology. But we still need to look at the questions left open by soteriology and ecclesiology.

Marc Roby: And we will have to wait until next time to do that 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. We enjoy hearing from you.