

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 quoted Louis Berkhof, who 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."¹ And then we examined how eschatology answers the questions left open by our study of theology proper and anthropology. Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: By moving on to the question left unanswered by our study of Christology, which Berkhof said is "how the work of Christ is crowned with perfect victory".² The apostle Paul wrote about this victory at the end of Chapter Fifteen of his first letter to the church in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 he wrote, "When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."³

Marc Roby: And, of course, in speaking of victory, the existence of an enemy is implied. So death here is being personified as the enemy of mankind.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We must remember that death is *not* natural to this creation. It is the result of the curse imposed for man's sin.

Marc Roby: I think a good many professing Christians today do not accept that fact. They view the story of the fall in Genesis as some kind of metaphor and think, along with the unbelieving atheists of the world, that death is just the natural end of life in this universe.

Dr. Spencer: And, in one sense, believing that death is natural is perfectly understandable. We have all grown up in a world ruled by death. Every living thing we know of grows old and dies. And we are taught from the earliest years in of school about the cycle of life and death. The idea that plants and animals die to feed others and then provide nutrients back to the soil as they decay and so on. And we certainly should marvel at this amazing cycle, which was created by God. There are differences of opinion among theologians as to whether or not animals died before the fall of man.⁴ But independent of whether they did or didn't, it is still true that God created the amazing cycles that define life and death in our present fallen world.

¹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 665

² Ibid

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⁴ e.g., see Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science – A God-Centered Approach*, Crossway, 2006, pp 120-122 and W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 274

Marc Roby: Now wait a minute here, you just summarized the arguments for saying that death is natural. That seems contrary to your purpose.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I summarized the arguments because we have to admit the obvious. But, as Christians, we must not allow ourselves to overrule the clear teaching of the infallible Bible with fallible knowledge gained from observations of this fallen world. No one alive has ever examined what the creation looked like prior to the fall, nor do we have any writings outside of the Bible that tell us about that world. Therefore, the Bible is the *only* place we can learn anything about what the world was like prior to the fall. And the Bible is absolutely clear and unequivocal that the death of human beings is punishment for sin. If you go back and look at it carefully, it does *not* say that death came to the animals or plants as a result of man's sin, so that point is debatable. But the fact that human death is the penalty for sin is an incredibly important point in the Christian faith, you cannot take that away and have a biblical faith at all.

Marc Roby: Yes, Paul did write in Romans 6:23 that the wages of sin is death.

Dr. Spencer: And as we have discussed before, that means both spiritual and physical death. But, praise God, when someone is born again, that person is made alive spiritually. God has ordained that Christians must still experience physical death, but that is not the end of existence. Our souls will be perfected and then will wait for the second coming of Christ, at which time everyone will be given a new body.

Marc Roby: Alright, well we've wandered off topic a little to discuss the fact that death is not a natural part of creation. We should probably get back to the fact that death is viewed as our enemy.

Dr. Spencer: And when we do that, we will see that Christ has, in fact, won a great, final and absolute victory over death. Although we must point out that this victory is not for everyone, it is only for those whom God has chosen for eternal salvation.

Marc Roby: Although everyone dies, believers as well as unbelievers.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we all experience physical death, but that is not the end. For believers, their physical death leads to eternal life. That is what Paul was speaking about in 1 Corinthians Chapter Fifteen. When Jesus was speaking with Martha just before raising Lazarus from the dead, we read in John 11:25-26 that Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" We have eternal life in Christ. Our physical death does not negate that fact.

And even unbelievers do not cease to exist when their body dies, but they enter into eternal death. In Revelation 21:8 we are told that "the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."

Marc Roby: But, praise God, in Revelation 2:11 Jesus said, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

Dr. Spencer: And so we see that Christ did, in fact, win a victory over death. And this victory is the most amazing victory that can possibly be imagined, so it does, in fact, answer the question of how the work of Christ is crowned with *perfect* victory.

Christ’s victory is perfect for many reasons. For example, it is perfect because it is final and irrevocable. There is no possibility of future conflict. The book of Hebrews explains to us more than any other book of the Bible how Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrificial system. And in that book the phrase “once for all” is used with regard to Jesus’ atoning sacrifice four times. For example, in Hebrews 10:10 we read that believers, “have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” And in Romans 6:10 the apostle Paul wrote about Jesus’ death, saying, “The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.”

Marc Roby: And it is certain that the book of Revelation presents us with a picture of the final state of all things. We read in Revelation 20:10 that “the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” In other words, this judgment and punishment for the devil and his followers is final. And in Revelation 22:5 we are told that the saints in heaven “will reign for ever and ever.” And therefore, the heavenly reward for believers is also final.

Dr. Spencer: When you read the book of Revelation it is all worded in such a way that there can be no doubt as the finality of it. Those who are saved will spend eternity in heaven, with no pain, no sorrow, no death. And those who go to hell will suffer for their sins forever. That is the first reason that I would say Christ’s victory is perfect. But it isn’t the only reason I would say that.

Marc Roby: What other reason would you give for the perfection of this victory?

Dr. Spencer: That it perfectly glorifies God in every way. It speaks of God’s amazing wisdom and power, of his justice and mercy, of his holiness and love. The more you think about the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the more amazing you realize it was. It is the central truth of all Christianity.

Marc Roby: And it is a truth for which all true Christians praise and thank God, but it is also a truth that we cannot possibly fully comprehend. Charles Wesley said it well in the chorus of his hymn *And Can It Be That I Should Gain*. He wrote, “Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?”⁵

Dr. Spencer: Yes, let me read a couple of quotes from the great book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* by John Murray. He wrote about the punishment of unbelievers, whom he refers to as the ‘lost’ and said, “The lost will eternally suffer in satisfaction of justice. But they will never

⁵ Trinity Hymnal, Revised Edition, Great Commission Publications, 1990, #455

satisfy it.”⁶ In other words, even after being in hell for 10,000 years, their debt to justice will still be there. It is impossible for them to ever pay the infinite debt they owe for sinning against an infinite God. But Murray then writes that “Christ *satisfied* justice. ... He bore our iniquities. He bore the unrelieved and unmitigated damnation of sin, and he finished it.”⁷

Marc Roby: Jesus cried out from the cross “It is finished!” as we read in John 19:30. And given that he paid the debt we owed, we can only praise God for his incredible mercy and love!

Dr. Spencer: And Murray goes on. He wrote, “That is the spectacle that confronts us in Gethsemane and on Calvary. ... this is the explanation of the most mysterious utterance that ever ascended from earth to heaven, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ ... Here we are the spectators of a wonder the praise and glory of which eternity will not exhaust. It is the Lord of glory, the Son of God incarnate, the God-man, drinking the cup given him by the eternal Father, the cup of woe and of indescribably agony. We almost hesitate to say so. But it must be said. It is God in our nature forsaken of God.”⁸

Marc Roby: That is an incredible quote. And Murray is trying to describe something that is truly beyond complete description or comprehension; that the eternal Creator God should suffer in our place to satisfy his own perfect justice.

Dr. Spencer: And God did it because of his perfect love. We should be very careful to avoid the horrible mistake that many people make of somehow pitting God’s justice against his mercy and love. God is justice. He is love. He is mercy. He defines these things, he doesn’t conform to some external standard, he *is* the standard. His justice *cannot* allow him to simply ignore our sin or leave it unpunished. But his love *will not* allow the people he has chosen to save to go to hell. And we can’t pay the price we owe – it is impossible for man. Therefore, in God’s infinite wisdom and love he solved the problem by sending the second person of the holy Trinity, the eternal Son of God, to become man. And Christ then lived a perfect life of obedience in order to be our perfect representative. And then, ultimately, to offer himself as the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins.

Marc Roby: Paul says in Romans 3:25-26 that “God presented [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. ... he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

Dr. Spencer: What incredible love and wisdom. God the Father loved us enough to give his Son for us and God the Son loved us enough to die for us. And, in addition to paying the penalty we owe, so that our debt is gone, God counts us as righteous in Jesus Christ. He is our representative. He is the second Adam. We are united to him by faith and in him we are made holy and blameless and are justified in God’s sight. That is a perfect victory. The enemy is

⁶ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 77

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

completely vanquished. Not only are our guilt and punishment taken away, but we are also made new creations in Christ and begin the work of removing sin itself.

Marc Roby: Paul wrote in Romans 6:4 that “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

Dr. Spencer: And Paul also wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” Christ’s victory is complete. It isn’t just a victory over death, which is the result of sin, it is a victory over sin itself. Satan is completely defeated. His plan to destroy man is a total failure.

Now, we must admit that we don’t see our victory over sin fully in this life, Christians do still sin. But in definitive and progressive sanctification God starts the work that he completes when we die.

Marc Roby: And, as you’ve noted in a previous session, that occurs in stages as well. When we die our souls are immediately perfected, and then when Christ comes again we will receive our glorified bodies.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we will! Christ’s work was perfect. Our condemnation and guilt are gone now, and in our final, ultimate state as glorified saints in heaven our sin will be gone too. God has dealt with the problem of sin comprehensively and permanently.

Marc Roby: Are there other ways in which Christ’s victory is a perfect victory?

Dr. Spencer: I’m sure there are many ways we could mention. But let me just give one more. The victory that Christ won on our behalf is perfect in that it is absolutely certain and secure. In Romans 8:32 Paul asked a rhetorical question, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

Marc Roby: And the answer is obvious. It is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If God is willing to give his own Son to save us, he is surely willing to give us anything else that we need.

Dr. Spencer: And Paul goes on to ask, in Romans 8:35, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?”

Marc Roby: And the answer again is obvious. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Jesus himself told us about our security as his followers. Speaking specifically about his followers in John 10:28-29 he said, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Marc Roby: That is doubly secure to say the least.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is. And at the end of the great commission, in Matthew 28:20, Jesus promised us, saying “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Marc Roby: That is great comfort. If Jesus is with us, we cannot fail to make it home.

Dr. Spencer: No, we can't. John Murray said "That is the security which a perfect atonement secures and it is the perfection of the atonement that secures it."⁹ We could say much more about this topic, but I think that is enough to show that a study of eschatology clearly answers the question left open by Christology; namely, how the work of Christ is crowned with perfect victory.

Marc Roby: And we, as Christ's disciples, will also be crowned with perfect victory in the end. In 2 Timothy 4:8, near the end of his life, Paul wrote that "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

Dr. Spencer: We have a glorious inheritance awaiting us. We should all long for the appearing of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And we must all seek to be filled with his Spirit and to walk in obedience, persevering to the end. If we do that, we are told in 1 Peter 5:4 that "when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

Marc Roby: That is a glorious thing to look forward to. And I also look forward to continuing our examination of eschatology, but we're out of time today, so let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer you.

⁹ Ibid, pg. 28