

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 made the point that with regard to eschatology, the most important application for a Christian is to be sure that we are ready at any time to meet our Lord. To make this point, we quoted from 2 Peter 3:11-12, which say, “Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I promised to start looking at what the Bible does tell us about the end times. I read 2 Peter 3:10 last time, which tells us that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.” And in Verses 12-13 we read, “That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”

Therefore, the first thing we can say for absolute certain is that this present world is destined for destruction. But it will be replaced by a new world. Bible scholars have debated whether this involves a total destruction of the existing earth and then an entirely new creation, or whether it involves a renovation.<sup>2</sup> But I don’t think it matters to us which is right.

Marc Roby: Well, either way, we have God’s promise that believers will spend eternity in that new heaven and the new earth, so I agree that it doesn’t matter exactly how God will bring that about.

Dr. Spencer: And, as we went to great lengths to point out last time, the apostle’s purpose in this section was to exhort us to holy living here and now. As we saw in the intervening verses, which you read at the opening of this session. In fact, with regard to people who want to spend time thinking about what exactly is meant by the heavens being consumed by fire and so on, John Calvin wrote, “Mischievous then, are those interpreters who consume much labour on refined speculations, since the Apostle applies his doctrine to godly exhortations.”<sup>3</sup>

Marc Roby: I like that quote! Calvin calls it mischievous to engage in that kind of speculation when the purpose was clearly to call us to be very careful how we live in this existing world.

Dr. Spencer: And that is why I began where we did last week. I think Calvin’s comment can be applied to many of the detailed and complicated speculations that have been made regarding the end times. I want to be clear that I am *not* saying there is no value in trying to understand the

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 798

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, pg. 420, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. XXII, Baker Books, 2009

revelations given to us in the more difficult and symbolic sections of Scripture. But we need to be careful to not get carried away and overstate the importance of the details. The primary importance is to cause us to be watchful and ready and to know that we have a glorious future that awaits us. As Peter says, we are to live holy and godly lives.

**Marc Roby: And as Christ said, we are to take up our cross and follow him.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is exactly the same point. And the bottom line is that I don't need to know where I am going as I follow Christ, or exactly what will happen. I only need to know that God is good, that he loves me and that he is in complete control. But, with that said, he has graciously given us some information which we will take a look at, but the main purpose is to guide our behavior now. We simply need to trust and obey.

**Marc Roby: Alright. So, without trying to get too much out of these verses in Second Peter, we can at least say that we know there will be a new heaven and a new earth and that they will be the home of righteousness.**

Dr. Spencer: In other words, there won't be any sinners there. The only way we can live in the new heaven and the new earth is if we have been made perfect by God. In Hebrews 12:23 we read about the spirits of righteous men made perfect who are with God even now. And, when Christ returns, all of his children will receive their glorified bodies as well, as we discussed in Session 238.

**Marc Roby: I certainly look forward to being made perfect. And God has a lot of work to do to get there.**

Dr. Spencer: He has even more work to do in me! And we should all be able to say that in all honesty because we know our own sins better than we know those of anyone else.

**Marc Roby: The great apostle Paul himself said that he was the worst of sinners. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst."**

Dr. Spencer: And he was being honest when he said that because he knew his own sins better than those of anyone else. But getting back to the fact that we can only be in the new heaven and the new earth if we are made perfect, let's take a look at what we read about the atoning sacrifice of Christ in Hebrews 10:14 because it will illustrate a very important aspect of the Bible's teaching about the end times. We are told there that "by one sacrifice he", which is referring to Christ, "has made perfect forever those who are being made holy." Note that it says he "has made perfect". In the Greek, the verb is in the perfect tense, which means that it describes an action that is already completed. The Rev. P.G. Mathew explains in his commentary that "Not only did Christ make us perfect, but we are also perfect now, and we shall be perfect in the future. This is speaking about justification."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> P.G. Mathew, *Muscular Christianity*, Grace & Glory Ministries, 2010, pg. 226

Marc Roby: That verse could be confusing if you don't realize, as Rev. Mathew notes, that it is speaking about our justification, which means our legal standing before God, rather than our actual, intrinsic righteousness, which is definitely not perfect in this life.

Dr. Spencer: But the verse also says that we are "being made holy". In the original Greek, the verb used there is a present participle, it describes a work that is continuing. In other words, it is not yet complete. This is speaking about our own, intrinsic righteousness, which is being increased through the process of progressive sanctification and which will be complete only we die and are perfected by God.

Marc Roby: That makes good sense. You said this verse would illustrate an important aspect of the Bible's teaching about the end times. What aspect is that?

Dr. Spencer: It illustrates what Robert Reymond calls eschatological dualism. He writes, "that is to say, in one sense the kingdom of God has come; in another sense the kingdom of God is yet to come."<sup>5</sup>

Marc Roby: That does sound very familiar. We didn't use the term eschatological dualism, but we certainly discussed the fact that the kingdom of God is, in one sense, already here, while in another sense it is yet to come.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we did discuss that in Session 237. Eschatological dualism is just a fancy theological term for the same concept. But this concept is coming up again because it is very important in understanding the biblical texts about the end times. In the Old Testament, the references to the end times do not separate out the first and second comings of the Messiah. God revealed his plan progressively over time, giving more and more information as his people lived prior to the time of Christ, and then he gave his final written revelation to us during the life of Christ and his apostles. Reymond wrote, "What the Old Testament had not clearly distinguished chronologically but had represented more as a single though complex unit, Jesus now distinguishes by speaking of the kingdom's arrival first in grace and later in judgment with cataclysmic power and great glory."<sup>6</sup>

Marc Roby: Can you give us an example of some of the Old Testament teachings about the end times?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In Isaiah 65:17-18 we read that Lord said, "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy."

When we read passages like this in the Old Testament, we have to realize that at that time the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth was confined to the Jewish nation, even though there

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<sup>5</sup> Reymond, op. cit., pg. 994

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

were numerous places in the Old Testament where the Jews were told that God's blessings would come to others as well.

Marc Roby: Well, for example, way back in the book of Genesis, when Abraham showed that he was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, we read in Genesis 22:16-18 that God said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

Dr. Spencer: That is a classic passage in this regard. Paul even quoted it in his letter to the church in Galatia. In Galatians 3:8 we read, "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.'" And there are many other places where the same idea is present. For example, in one of the passages in Isaiah speaking about the Messiah, or Christ, as the coming servant of the Lord, we read in Isaiah 49:6 that God says to him, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

Marc Roby: I think that is enough to establish that even in the Old Testament salvation was pictured as ultimately being offered to every nation. So, getting back to the statement in Isaiah Chapter Sixty-Five about creating a new heaven and a new earth, you said we needed to remember that the earthly manifestation of God's kingdom was confined to the nation of Israel. Why is that important?

Dr. Spencer: Because he specifically mentions Jerusalem in that passage. And there are other Old Testament passages that might also be thought of as only applying to the Jewish nation. But we must remember that although salvation comes through the Jews – Jesus was Jewish after all ...

Marc Roby: ... and the entire sacrificial system pointing forward to Christ's sacrifice was given specifically to the Jewish people too.

Dr. Spencer: As was the law of Moses, the Ten Commandments. But even though that is all true, Paul tells us in Romans 9:6-8, "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." And by children of the promise, Paul ultimately means God's elect from every nation.

Marc Roby: Yes, I see your point. Some prophecies in the Old Testament that refer to the restoration of the nation of Israel actually have ultimate application to God's eternal kingdom.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly my point. In Chapter Fourteen of Zechariah, for example, we read about God raising up Jerusalem to rule the world. Zechariah 14:2 begins with God saying, "I will gather all the nations to Jerusalem to fight against it" and then in Verse 3 we are told that "the LORD will go out and fight against those nations, as he fights in the day of battle." As you go

through the chapter you see Jerusalem being victorious over all the earth. But this is not speaking about the earthly Jerusalem as the capital of the Jewish nation, it is speaking about the ultimate victory of God's kingdom.

**Marc Roby: And that explains, in part, why the Jewish people at the time of Christ expected a political Messiah. They were anticipating the Jewish nation rising up to rule the world.**

Dr. Spencer: That was a common misunderstanding at the time, yes. But getting back to the point Raymond made, he said that "What the Old Testament had not clearly distinguished chronologically but had represented more as a single though complex unit, Jesus now distinguishes by speaking of the kingdom's arrival first in grace and later in judgment with cataclysmic power and great glory."<sup>7</sup> In other words, in the New Testament we have the revelation that the end times began with Christ's first coming. We are right now in what the Bible refers to as the last days.

For example, in Hebrews 1:1-2 we are told, "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."

**Marc Roby: Yes, I think many Christians often forget, or don't even know that fact. When they read about the last days, they think in terms of the time right before Christ returns.**

Dr. Spencer: And we are in that time! So, in a sense, they aren't wrong. But in reality, they are very wrong if they think of the last days as being off in the future. So, for example, when we read in 2 Timothy 3:1 that "There will be terrible times in the last days", or in 2 Peter 3:3 that "in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires", we must realize that these statements are applicable today just as much as they are to the future.

**Marc Roby: And realizing that certainly makes those passages far more important for us. They aren't just some warning about a future situations, they are a warning for us right here and now.**

Dr. Spencer: Which is what was intended. They were a warning to the people at the time they were written too. We have a very explicit statement about this in 1 John 2:18, where John wrote, "Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour."

**Marc Roby: Yes, that is quite explicit. He says plainly, "this is the last hour"!**

Dr. Spencer: This idea of the kingdom of God already being present, but not yet being here in its fullness is very important. And it, no doubt, caused problems for the Jews at the time of Jesus. Even Jesus' personal disciples had a difficult time grasping what was being taught at first. We see that clearly in Chapter Twenty-Four of Matthew's gospel.

**Marc Roby: Where Jesus discusses the signs of the end of the age.**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Dr. Spencer: Yes.

Marc Roby: Well, I very much look forward to discussing that, but we are almost out of time for today, so perhaps we should put that off until next week.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's a good idea. But let me summarize the main points we have made today. The Old Testament tended to view history as divided into two ages, the first of which would end when the Messiah came and the great Day of the Lord occurred, which would then inaugurate the second age, where God's kingdom appears in all its splendor. But in the New Testament, we find out that the second age actually comes in two stages. We are already in the first stage, which began with the first coming of Christ to accomplish salvation and to make the free offer of the gospel available to everyone. The second stage will begin when Christ comes again in judgment and will continue for all eternity. Therefore, we are in the last days now, while we await Christ's second coming. The new creation has already begun and every true Christian is part of it.

Marc Roby: As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Dr. Spencer: Exactly.

Marc Roby: Well that is something to ponder between now and our next session. But now let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to [info@whatdoesthewordsay.org](mailto:info@whatdoesthewordsay.org). We'd love to hear from you.