

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 eschatology of Jesus Christ himself. He taught that there is a sense in which the kingdom of God has already come; for example, in Matthew 12:28 we read that Jesus said, “if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”¹ And yet, there is also a sense in which it is not yet here. For example, in Matthew 6:10 Jesus taught us in the Lord’s prayer to request of the Father, “your kingdom come”, which would make no sense if God’s kingdom were already here in the fullest sense. **Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?**

Dr. Spencer: Let me first remind our listeners that this dual nature of the kingdom – the idea that it is already here, but not yet in the fullest sense – is referred to eschatological dualism. And then, before we move on, I’d like to add to what you just said. Part of the reason the kingdom of God is a difficult topic is that it refers to the rule of God as we noted in Session 237, and while that rule is a present reality in the hearts of believers, even believers do not obey God perfectly. And while God is sovereign over all things, at this time he allows Satan to rule the world as we are told in 1 John 5:19, where we read that “We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.”

Marc Roby: Although, as we have pointed out before, Satan is fully under God’s control. He can do nothing outside of God’s permission.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. But God’s kingdom is not fully visible at this time even though he is now, as always, completely sovereign. In the ultimate manifestation of God’s kingdom, the believers in heaven will be perfectly obedient to the will of God, there will not be any sin. While, at the same time, Satan and all of his followers will be in hell, experiencing the wrath of God.

Marc Roby: And those are the only two eternal destinies possible. Which is why the gospel is so important. As Jesus said in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, very true, and very important. But getting back to the topic of eschatology, at the end of our session last week I said that it wasn’t only in the teaching of Jesus that we saw this eschatological dualism, it appears throughout the New Testament. And you then asked me for some examples. So I’d now like to move on and provide those examples.

Marc Roby: Very well, where would you like to begin?

Dr. Spencer: Let’s begin with the teaching of the apostle Peter. The idea that the kingdom of God is already here is absolutely clear in a number of things he wrote. For example, in 1 Peter 2:9 we are told, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to

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God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Note that Peter says we have *already* been called out of “darkness”, it isn’t something that will happen to us in the future. And to understand this statement fully, we need to also look at Colossians 1:13 where Paul tells us that God, “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves”. Note that in that verse Paul contrasts the “dominion of darkness” with the “kingdom of the Son”, whereas Peter had contrasted the darkness with the light. Putting the two statements together, we could say that we have been called out of darkness into God’s kingdom.

Marc Roby: Which necessarily requires that God’s kingdom be a present reality in some sense.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. It is here now in the sense that God rules in believers by his Holy Spirit. Peter also goes on in the next verse, 1 Peter 2:10, to say that “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” Notice the clear statement of change; *once* you were not, *now* you are, *once* you had not, *now* you have. We are *now*, at this very moment, the people of God, which means we are in his kingdom. There are many other statements in Peter’s writings to this effect, but that is enough to show that he clearly speaks about the kingdom of God as a present reality.

Marc Roby: Alright. And what examples can you give of Peter speaking about the kingdom of God as something that is not yet fully here?

Dr. Spencer: Well, let’s look at 1 Peter 1:3-5, where Peter wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

That passage actually shows both aspects. We have already been given new birth and are shielded by God’s power, both of which are only true of members of God’s kingdom. But, at the same time, we are waiting for “the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.” And in 1 Peter 5:4 he wrote that “when the Chief Shepherd appears,” which is referring to Jesus Christ, “you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” We have not yet received that crown, but we will.

Marc Roby: Okay. Those verses do clearly show that Peter had the same dualism in his teaching. The kingdom of God has come, but not yet in the fullest sense. Would you like to give any other examples of dualism in the New Testament?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Let’s look at a couple of statements from the apostle John. In 1 John 3:14 he wrote that “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death.” To have passed from death to life refers to our being brought into God’s eternal kingdom. And in 1 John 3:2 we read, “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.” Notice that this verse has both

aspects. First, we are *now* children of God, and what we *will be* has not yet been made known, but we *shall be* like him.

Marc Roby: Those verses are clear. But there is also a slight difference, John is speaking about the reality of the kingdom of God in an individual believer's experience. We are *now* already children of God, but what we *will be* has not yet been made known. That is speaking about us as individuals.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, you're absolutely right. Theologians sometimes speak about individual eschatology as distinct from general eschatology.² And there is a dualism in both. When an individual believer is regenerated, he becomes a member of God's family. He is a new creation Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, but he is not yet perfected. Sin still dwells in him. And in terms of general eschatology, the kingdom of God has come in power and is present in the witness and actions of individual believers and the church as a whole, but it is not yet fully here because the visible church is always a mixture of true and false believers, and because even the true believers are not yet perfect.

Marc Roby: Alright, that makes good sense. And I fear that I pulled us off topic just a bit. You were showing that this idea of eschatological dualism is evident throughout the New Testament.

Dr. Spencer: But you pulled us off topic in a good way. I think it helps to realize that there is both an individual and a general way of viewing eschatology.

But, getting back to the topic of dualism, if any of our listeners are interested in diving into this topic in more detail, I strongly recommend the treatment in Robert Reymond's theology.³ But, having looked at the eschatological dualism in both Peter and John, I want to move on to the apostle Paul. His writings add more information to our picture of the end times.

Marc Roby: And Paul is also, arguably, the most important of the New Testament authors. The Holy Spirit certainly used him to write more of the New Testament than any other single person. But what did his writings add to this idea of eschatological dualism?

Dr. Spencer: Paul gives us much more detail about what happens to us as individual believers, and he integrates this into the existing Old Testament view of history. As I noted in Session 243, the Old Testament tended to view history as being 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 the New Testament gives us additional revelation to show us that this second age actually comes in stages. The first stage began when Jesus Christ became incarnate.

² e.g., see L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, where Part Six, The Doctrine of the Last Things, is broken up into two sections, one on individual eschatology and one on general eschatology

³ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, see pp 1040-1047

Marc Roby: It would make sense that Paul, who called himself a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil 3:5), would want to explain how the additional information given to us by Christ fits into the Jewish view derived from the Old Testament.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does make perfect sense. And Robert Reymond wrote that “Paul came to the conclusion under the Spirit’s guidance that while the present evil age obviously continues (Gal 1:4), the kingdom of God of the Eschaton must already be a present reality (into which his people have been brought, Col 1:13) even if the world cannot see it (see Mark 4:11-12).”⁴ Reymond cites Galatians 1:4 to show that Paul understood that we were still in the present evil age. In that verse, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ, “gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age”. And then, to make the point that Paul saw the Eschaton – meaning the last days – as a present reality, he cites Colossians 1:13, which we have already quoted. It says that Jesus “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves”.

Marc Roby: And I assume that Paul also understood and taught about the eschatological dualism we have been discussing; that the last days are here in one sense, but not yet in the fullness of the last day of judgment.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Paul definitely taught the same dualism. In addition to Colossians 1:13, which I just read, we can also look at 2 Timothy 1:9-10, where Paul wrote that “This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” We see here that Jesus has already destroyed death and brought life and immortality, in other words he has brought us eternal life. We have it as a present reality. And yet, in speaking about his own coming death, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:8 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.” Notice that the crown *will be awarded* to Paul *on that day*. The final day of judgment has not yet come.

Marc Roby: Alright, you also said that Paul gives us more detail about what happens to us as individual believers. What were you referring to?

Dr. Spencer: I was referring to the fact that Paul clearly speaks about there being three stages to our individual eschatology. We’ve actually spoken about this already. In Session 238 I noted that we can say our salvation comes in three installments, which is really the same thing. The first, or present state is that of a believer. We are new creations. Paul 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!”

Marc Roby: Yes, you mentioned that verse a few minutes ago.

Dr. Spencer: And it bears repeating because it is an incredibly important verse and we need to be careful to take note of what a radical statement it makes. It puts the lie to the idea, which is

⁴ Ibid, pg. 1011

common today, that a person can become a Christian and not have any big change in his life. That is simply not possible. It is phony Christianity. If a person is born again, he is a *new creation*! That is a radical statement. As we have seen in other verses already, if you are born again, you *were* under the dominion of darkness, but you are *now* in the light. You *were* in Satan's kingdom but you are *now* in the kingdom of God.

Marc Roby: I agree that the radical nature of that statement is often overlooked. And Paul makes a number of other statements that are equally radical. In Ephesians 2:1-2 he wrote, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient." But then, in Ephesians 2:4-5 Paul said, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ".

Dr. Spencer: Yes, those statements are every bit as radical. The change that takes place when a person is born again is a change from death to life. Paul is, of course, speaking about spiritual death and life, but it also has an eternal, physical meaning because, prior to being born again, we were objects of wrath, destined for eternal death in hell. Whereas, once we are born again, we are objects of mercy, destined for eternal life in heaven.

Marc Roby: Hallelujah!

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. So, in Paul's writings, the first stage of our individual eschatology begins with our regeneration here in this life. The second stage then begins with our physical death.

Marc Roby: At which time our souls are perfected and brought into God's presence as we see from Hebrews 12:23, where we read about the spirits of righteous men made perfect who are with God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. And, of course, not all Christians will go through this second stage. Those who are still alive when Christ returns will be immediately transformed. Not only will their souls be perfected, but they will simultaneously receive their new resurrection bodies.

Marc Roby: And that must be the third and final stage of our individual eschatology. We will be fully glorified in body and soul and made ready for our eternal dwelling in the new heaven and the new earth.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Paul tells us about this in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, where he wrote, "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." And to say they have fallen asleep is clearly a euphemism for having died. But Paul goes on to say that "According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For 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: Paul certainly indicates in that passage that both Christians who have already died and those who are still alive when Jesus comes again will all be “caught up together” with the Lord.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, and we get a more complete picture when we combine this with what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, where we read, “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

Marc Roby: And as before, when Paul says we will not all sleep, he is referring to physical death.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And he says that we will *all* be changed, in a flash! The dead will be raised and then they, along with those who are still alive, will be changed. When you look at those statements in context in that chapter, you see that Paul is talking about our receiving a new, imperishable body. He calls it a “spiritual” body, by which he does *not* mean that it is immaterial. But rather, he means that it is imperishable and glorious, fit for eternal existence in heaven with God.

Marc Roby: Very well. I think you have made a solid case that the entire New Testament teaches us an eschatological dualism. There is a sense in which the kingdom of God is a present reality, and there is a sense in which it is a future hope. And there are, in general, three stages to the individual believer’s experience of God’s eternal plan.

This looks like a great place to finish for today. So, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we will do our best to respond.