

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 the entire New Testament teaches an eschatological dualism; the idea that the kingdom of God is already a present reality and yet is not here in its fullness. We also saw that the apostle Paul taught that there are three stages to our individual, or personal eschatology. The first stage begins when God regenerates us and we become new creations, which occurs in this life, and then, when we die, our souls are perfected, which is the second stage. Then, finally, when Christ returns, all believers, both those who are still alive at that time and those who have died and had their souls perfected, will be given their resurrection bodies and will be ready for eternity with God. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to say a little more about Paul's view of eschatology. And I want to begin by looking at a passage that shows the entire sweep of salvation history, starting before the creation of this universe and ending in the coming, final state of all of God's elect children.

Marc Roby: What passage is that?

Dr. Spencer: Ephesians 1:3-10. It begins in Verse 3, where Paul wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."¹ Notice the present reality of the kingdom of God in this verse. God *has blessed us*; it is a present reality for believers. Paul then goes on, in Verse 4, to say, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

Marc Roby: Now that is an astounding statement. God chose to save his elect people *before the creation of the world*.

Dr. Spencer: And this is not speaking about God looking into the future and seeing who would believe. It is speaking about divine election. God *chose* us. He didn't just look into the future and see who would have faith in Christ. Paul makes that clear in the following sentence, which begins at the end of Verse 4 and goes on through Verse 6. It says that "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." Note that his predestination was *not* done in accordance with mere foreknowledge, it was, rather, done in accordance God's pleasure and will, and Paul says that God has *freely* given these to us. They are not something we receive because we chose to believe. Rather, we choose to believe because God first chose to save us and then caused us to be born again.

Marc Roby: Yes, that all goes along with what Paul wrote in Romans 9:10-13 about Jacob and his brother Esau. Paul wrote, "Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose

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in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, ‘The older will serve the younger.’ Just as it is written: ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

Dr. Spencer: It’s hard to imagine how Paul could have stated the doctrine of unconditional election any clearer. God simply *chose* to love Jacob, which resulted in his eternal salvation, while simultaneously *choosing* to hate Esau, which resulted in his eternal damnation because *all* men are sinners and worthy of damnation and will be justly sent to hell unless God saves them. And Paul was quoting from the Old Testament here. In Malachi 1:2-3 we read, “‘Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ the LORD says. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated’”. We may not like this, and many shrink away from teaching this doctrine, but it is the clear teaching of God’s infallible Word.

And getting back to the passage in Ephesians Chapter One, Paul goes on in Verses 7 and 8 to say that “In him”, meaning Jesus Christ, “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.”

Marc Roby: Which again speaks about the present stage of our individual eschatology. In Christ we *have* redemption through his blood. It is our present possession if we have been born again. God has lavished the riches of his grace on us. It has already been done.

Dr. Spencer: That’s exactly right. And then the passage concludes by speaking about the future, when God’s kingdom will be revealed in its ultimate glory. In Verses 9 and 10 we read, “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

Marc Roby: Praise God! All things will be brought under the explicit and obvious rule of Christ.

Dr. Spencer: We are also told about this in Philippians 2:9-11. After telling us about the great humility of Christ and his obedience in going to the cross, Paul draws a conclusion, writing, “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 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: Everyone will confess Jesus is Lord. Either in this life as the result of being born again, or in the next life before being condemned to eternal hell.

Dr. Spencer: And we see in this passage from Chapter One of Ephesians the full sweep of salvation history as I noted. Before God created this universe, he knew that man would fall. In fact, it was part of his eternal plan. Although God is not the author of sin, he did allow for it in his plan. And God looked, so to speak, at all of the human beings who would ever live, seeing them all as sinners deserving of wrath, and chose to save some. Then, in time, he sent his eternal Son to accomplish redemption and he then also sends his Holy Spirit to each of his elect children, at just the right time, to cause them to be regenerated, which results in their repenting of their sins and trusting in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Marc Roby: And, as we have noted before, those believers who existed prior to the incarnation of Christ trusted in the promise of the coming Messiah, even though they didn't have all of the added revelation that we have now as we look back on the greatest event in all history; the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the chosen Christ of God.

Dr. Spencer: And those believers who are saved after the time of Christ, believe in him with greater revelation, but it is the same faith. It is, at its core, a simple trust in God. And in every single case it is brought about because of God's electing love and regenerating power.

And we are presently living, as we have said, in the last days. Which began when Christ came to earth as Jesus of Nazareth. That brought the kingdom of God to earth in a tangible way. The kingdom is made manifest in the church. As Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:9, believers, "are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Marc Roby: And then, when Christ returns again, that will usher in the second stage of the last days.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Christ's second coming is what Robert Reymond calls the triggering mechanism. He wrote that "For Paul, as for all of the biblical writers, the 'triggering mechanism' and beginning point for this future complex of events, this collective eschatology, is the bodily, visible, public return of Christ".² And he went on to say that "The return of Christ (with its concomitants, namely, the resurrection of the dead, the last judgment, and the final state) is the focal point of Paul's teaching on future eschatology and it must be every Christian's as well. *No other problems, queries, doubts, disagreements, diversities of viewpoint, unresolved questions, and controversies respecting the relation of other events to the advent of Christ in glory can be permitted to set this one great fact aside or blur its significance and centrality for the Eschaton.*"³

Marc Roby: That is a sweeping statement, but it agrees with what we have been saying. The details that many people like to argue about are not of fundamental importance. The most important thing for us as Christians is that we must live our daily lives in light of the fact that Jesus Christ *will*, in fact, return again and there *will be* a resurrection of the dead, a final judgment and then a final, eternal, destiny for every single human being who has ever existed.

Dr. Spencer: That is the most important thing, yes. As we have said a number of times, the Christian faith is not primarily about this life. It is not a self-help program or a social-justice program. It is not about making life in this present evil age better. Although it certainly helps with all of those things, those are simply ancillary benefits. The primary purpose of Christianity is to deal with man's fundamental problem of sin and the resulting alienation from God. It looks

² Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed., Zondervan Academic, 1998, pg. 1022

³ Ibid, pp 1022-1023

forward to the next age, which will be eternal and unchangeable, in which all people will live either in eternal heaven or in eternal hell. And this is all for the glory of God.

Marc Roby: And we should certainly strive to do all that we can to make sure we are headed for heaven.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. And in speaking about Christ's second coming, Reymond goes on to write that "This knowledge gives us personal comfort concerning both our own future and the future of those who have already died (1 Thess. 4:13ff). It also gives us an ethical perspective to live expectantly and carefully (1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:11-12; 1 John 3:2-3). Such is always the by-product of the resurrection hope. It makes for godly living (1 Cor. 15:56-58)."⁴

Marc Roby: And this final point is the one we have made several times. Independent of a believer's view about the details of Christ's second coming, the primary purpose of the biblical teaching is ethical. It is so that we will live godly lives here and now.

Dr. Spencer: And that is why when we began our study of the second coming of Jesus Christ in Session 242, we quoted 2 Peter 3:11-12, where the apostle asked the most important question. In light of the coming end, he asked "what kind of people ought you to be?" And then he gave his answer: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

But let's go back to the quote from Reymond for a minute and look at what else he said. The first thing he mentioned was that this knowledge about the end times gives us personal comfort concerning both our own future and the future of those who have already died.

Marc Roby: Although we must note that this comfort regarding those who have died is *only* comfort concerning those who have died as believers in Christ.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's true. When our unbelieving family and friends die, there really is no comfort concerning their final estate, other than to recognize that God is just and good and then to rest in his will and not dwell on what has happened to them.

Marc Roby: And it should also spur us on to be more active in evangelism!

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. But when people we know die in faith, there is great comfort given by the doctrine of last things. The comfort does not depend on our exact view of what happens in the end, but it is simply based on the fact that we know that believers who have died have gone to their eternal home. And we know that it is a blessed place. They have no more pain, no misery of any kind, only completely unfettered and inexpressible joy. And it will never end.

Marc Roby: That is a glorious thought indeed, and extremely comforting.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is a great comfort. And it is not just wishful thinking or saying nice things about the dead for the sake of the living. It is the truth.

⁴ Ibid, pg. 1023

Reymond cites a passage from Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul wrote, "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. 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. Therefore encourage each other with these words."

Marc Roby: That's wonderful. Paul says that what he is writing is according to the Lord's own word. In other words, he is simply relaying to them what Christ himself taught. And the essence of the teaching is that all believers will be together with the Lord forever.

Dr. Spencer: And that finally brings us to the last topic I want to address in our examination of eschatology. I want to look briefly at what the Bible says about the end of this world. In addition to the passage I just read from 1 Thessalonians, there are other passages that deal with this topic and we have looked at a few of them already, but not from our current perspective. For example, in 1 Corinthians Chapter Fifteen, Paul wrote extensively about the resurrection from the dead.

After reviewing the basic gospel message, Paul makes five important points in that chapter.

Marc Roby: And what is the first?

Dr. Spencer: That the resurrection from the dead is a fact. Our faith is not primarily for this life. And Paul bases his argument on the fact that Christ himself was raised from the dead. In Verse 14 of this chapter Paul wrote that "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." And then in Verse 17 he said, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." And in Verse 19 he wrote that "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."

Marc Roby: Well, Paul's first point is certainly clear as can be. The whole Christian faith would be pointless if there is no resurrection. But praise God that he goes on in Verse 20 to say, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

Dr. Spencer: And Paul's referring to Christ as the firstfruits is an expression that points to the fact there will be a harvest to follow. And the harvest is composed of all believers. Paul says that explicitly in Verses 22-23, where he wrote, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him." When Paul says that *all* will be made alive, he means all of those who belong to him as he states explicitly in the next phrase. Paul is not teaching universal salvation, but he does tell us clearly that when Christ comes again, all those who belong to him – in other words, all true believers – will be raised up with him.

Marc Roby: And he emphasizes the importance of this fact again in Verse 32, where he wrote, "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

Dr. Spencer: Which goes along with and explains his earlier statements about our faith being useless if there is no resurrection. And so that is the first important point Paul makes in this passage.

And his second point is that our resurrection body will be very different. He says in Verses 42-44 that “The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

Marc Roby: That is very different from our current bodies, which Paul calls our “natural” bodies. The new spiritual, or perhaps we could say spirit engineered, body will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful.

Dr. Spencer: And one last thing about this body, it will be like Christ’s. In Verse 49 Paul wrote that “just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man,” which refers to Adam, “so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” Which, of course, refers to Christ.

Marc Roby: That is truly wonderful, and I look forward to hearing the other important points Paul makes in that passage, but we are out of time for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We enjoy hearing from you.