

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing our examination of eschatology, the doctrine of last things. At the end of our session last week, we started to look at five important points that the apostle Paul makes regarding the resurrection of the dead, found in Chapter 15 of First Corinthians, and we covered the first two of those points. The first is that the resurrection of the dead is a fact. And the second is that our resurrection bodies are very different from the bodies that we have now; they will be imperishable, glorious, and powerful. Dr. Spencer, what are the other important points that Paul makes in that passage?

Dr. Spencer: Well, the third important point is that when Christ returns, believers will inherit the kingdom of God. In 1 Corinthians 15:50 Paul wrote, "I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."¹

Paul goes on to say that our resurrection bodies are imperishable, and given the context of the entire discussion, it's clear that what he is saying is that we will, in fact, inherit the kingdom of God when we are fully glorified.

Marc Roby: And we can't do that in our present bodies.

Dr. Spencer: No, we can't. Our existing bodies get sick, get injured and are getting older and they will eventually die. We must be given glorious new, imperishable bodies in order to be in the new heaven and the new earth with God. And the sad fact is that those who have rejected Christ will also receive new, imperishable bodies. Their bodies will be so constructed as to be able to endure the wrath of God forever.

Marc Roby: That's terrifying to say the least. But God's chosen people will inherit the kingdom of God, which is an utterly incomprehensible statement. And it agrees with what we read elsewhere. In Romans 8:15-17 Paul wrote that "you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Dr. Spencer: That is incredible, but it will be absolutely wonderful. And we are heirs of an eternal kingdom because death will have been defeated, which is the fourth important point Paul makes in this passage. In 1 Corinthians 15:53-54 we are told that "the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 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.'"

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Marc Roby: Hallelujah! There will be no more death. And we could add that there will also be no more crying, or pain or sorrow of any kind. Our final, eternal state will be glorious beyond imagination.

Dr. Spencer: That it will. And the fifth point Paul makes is an ethical one; in other words, it says something about how we should live our lives here and now. In 1 Corinthians 15:58 he draws a conclusion, writing, “Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” To say that our labor in the Lord is not in vain is a litotes, a figure of speech that uses the negative of a contrary statement to emphasize the positive. In other words, our labor in the Lord will *always* be fruitful. Whenever we are doing the work God wants us to do, we cannot fail to accomplish his will. Therefore, we should be encouraged to be serious about living a life of obedience.

Marc Roby: That statement immediately makes me think of Ephesians 2:10, where Paul tells us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we’ve made this point before, but it bears repeating. Our lives have a purpose. As the answer to the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” And we glorify God by doing the work he has prepared for us to do. We know that because Jesus Christ himself said, in John 17:4, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”

Marc Roby: And if that is how Christ glorified the Father, it stands to reason that the same is true for us.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. The apostle John wrote about the last judgment in Revelation 20:12-13, saying that “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.”

Marc Roby: Those verses say twice that the dead will be judged according to what they had done. Can you explain to our listeners how we are to interpret that statement in light of the fact that the New Testament also clearly teaches that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in the work of Jesus Christ alone?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I can. And that’s a good question because we know that we must interpret Scripture by Scripture. God does not contradict himself.

Marc Roby: Yes, the principle that we should use Scripture to interpret Scripture is the first rule of hermeneutics, the science of how to properly understand and interpret the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And in the case at hand, the judgment John is speaking about in these verses from Revelation 20 is not the determination of whether we go to heaven or hell. That

determination is based on God's electing love, which always issues forth in his elect being born again and then repenting and trusting in Jesus Christ. That is what John is speaking about when he mentioned the book of life; that is the book that contains the list of all of God's elect.

But with that said, there are different levels of reward in heaven and different levels of punishment in hell and those are determined based on our works. In addition, if we don't have any good works, then any claim we make to being born again is false. New creations will always produce good works. Those are what is referred to here when John said that people were judged according to what they had done.

Marc Roby: And we do see other references to our being judged according to our works. For example, in 1 Peter 1:17 the apostle wrote, "Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear."

Dr. Spencer: That principle is also taught by the apostle Paul. In Romans 2:6, he wrote that "God 'will give to each person according to what he has done.'" And he was quoting from Psalm 62:12 when we wrote that. But we must remember that this is *not* speaking about our justification. Justification is by grace alone.

We also see both God's sovereign grace and our good works together in another passage from Revelation as well.

Marc Roby: I assume you are speaking about the wedding feast of the Lamb?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I am. In order to understand the verses I'm going to read, we also need to remember two things: First, Jesus Christ is called the Lamb of God because the lambs sacrificed for the Jewish Passover clearly pointed to Jesus Christ as the ultimate, once-for-all efficacious sacrifice. Second, the true church, comprising all of God's elect, is called the bride of Christ. With those two facts in mind, let me read Revelation 19:6-8, where John wrote, "Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: 'Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.' (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)"

Notice that fine linen was *given* to the bride, who is the church. This is speaking about our being justified based on God's electing love, which issues forth in our being born again and then having saving faith in Jesus Christ. But, at the same time, we are told that the fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints. These are the good works that all true believers produce in thankful response to God's work of salvation. These works are not meritorious in themselves, they are always tainted by sin. But God graciously accepts them.

Marc Roby: The idea that God gives us the ability and desire to do good works and that yet we must really *do* them is also taught in Philippians 2:12-13, where Paul commands us, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

Dr. Spencer: That is the same idea. God works in us, beginning with regeneration, but then continuing with the work of the Holy Spirit in guiding and empowering us in our progressive sanctification. But at the same time, it is truly we who must obey and do the good works God has called us to do. And the last verse of 1 Corinthians 15, which we read a few minutes ago, encourages us in that work by promising us that it will never be in vain.

Marc Roby: Which is a great contrast to work done without any reference to God.

Dr. Spencer: It is a great contrast indeed! The whole book of Ecclesiastes is written to explore the meaning of life apart from God. And the overall conclusion of what life means apart from God is clearly stated in Ecclesiastes 1:14 where the teacher who wrote the book proclaims, “I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Marc Roby: That conjures up a great mental image, doesn't it? Chasing after the wind is about as futile as anything you can imagine.

Dr. Spencer: It is completely futile. And I like the King James Version wording in Ecclesiastes better, rather than saying everything is meaningless, the King James says that everything is vanity. If you have an atheistic worldview, there is nothing in life that has any eternal significance or meaning. We can argue about the best way to live in order to have the most pleasure possible in this life, but there is no transcendent purpose, no absolute standard for what is good, and ultimately nothing we do matters in the end. We will all die and cease to exist and the universe will eventually run out of gas, so to speak, and die as well.

Marc Roby: So, eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow you'll die!

Dr. Spencer: That's pretty well sums it up. But the truth is that God *does* exist and life has great meaning. And what we do in this life matters eternally.

Marc Roby: Alright, we've covered the five important points made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. What else do you want to say about Christ's second coming and the end of the world?

Dr. Spencer: There are a number of things that we can be certain about regarding the end times and I'd like to give a list of some of them, which is loosely taken from J.I. Packer's book *Concise Theology*.² We've already noted a few of these before, but they all bear repeating and it's good to list them all together. The first is that we can be certain that we *don't* know when Christ will return. The Bible is clear about that.

Marc Roby: Well, Jesus himself said that “No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father”, as we read in Mark 13:32.

Dr. Spencer: And the fact that we can't know the time should cause us to live carefully. In the very next verse, Mark 13:33, Jesus said, “Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.” And Jesus drives the point home by telling a short parable about the owner of a

² J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pp 251-252

house going on a trip and leaving his servants in charge of the house. They don't know when the owner will return, but they must keep watch and be ready so that he doesn't find them sleeping.

Marc Roby: Yes, it usually doesn't go well for a servant whose master find him sleeping on the job.

Dr. Spencer: Which was precisely Jesus' point. We need to keep watch and be sure that we are busy doing God's work. We see this same point about doing God's work made in a different way in Acts 1:7-8, where we read about Jesus' ascension into heaven after his resurrection. He is speaking to his disciples and we read that Jesus said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Marc Roby: In addition to telling them, and us, that we can't know the time of his return, Jesus tells us the major task he has given us to do, which is to tell the world about him. And, praise God, he tells us that we will receive power from the Holy Spirit to carry out this task.

Dr. Spencer: And the very next verse, Acts 1:9, tells that "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight." Which leads to the second thing we know about Christ's second coming. It will be visible to all. The people there at his ascension all saw him ascend into heaven, it was not done in secret. And two verses later, in Acts 1:11, we are told that two angels spoke to them, saying, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." Which means Christ's return will be visible also.

We are also told that "every eye" will see Christ's return in Revelation 1:7. John is speaking of Jesus in that verse and he says, "Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen."

Marc Roby: Alright. Jesus' second coming will be visible. What else do we know?

Dr. Spencer: The third thing we know for certain is that all believers will be with him in glory. For example, in Colossians 3:4 Paul wrote that "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." Paul also wrote, in Romans 8:18, that "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."

Marc Roby: And elsewhere Paul speaks about receiving a crown of righteousness. In 2 Timothy 4:8, as he was approaching the end of his life, the apostle wrote, "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: And a crown of righteousness is part of our glory. We will be perfected in every way.

But moving on, the fourth thing we can know for sure is that we, along with God, will be victorious over all of his and our enemies on that day. In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 we read, "God

is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.”

Marc Roby: That is an encouraging passage. Christians are promised they will have trouble and persecution in this life, but when Christ comes again, he will be victorious.

Dr. Spencer: And note that it says he will be glorified *in* his holy people. We will be victorious with him. Paul wrote in Romans 16:20 that “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.”

Marc Roby: I like the idea of Satan being placed under my feet.

Dr. Spencer: So do I.

Marc Roby: Very well. I think we had better wait until next week to get to the other things we can know for sure about Christ’s return. For now, let me remind our listeners that they can send questions or comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to answer you.